

Teaching in a refugee camp on the Thai-Burmese border

Overview of the political situation in Burma

Burma has been in the hands of a military junta since 1967 when General Ne Win took power in a coup. Since that date, the junta has imposed a very strict regime on its population and, while Burma is quite a rich country in terms of natural resources, the majority of the population are living in extremely poor circumstances. The junta is concerned with self-preservation through military force and as a result spends an estimated 60% of its national budget on military and defence. Meanwhile, the sectors of health and education are grossly under-funded, the budget of the Ministry of Health accounted for only 0.8 % GDP in 2006/2007 and while 1.9 % of GDP was spent on education. In 2000, the WHO ranked Burma's healthcare system 190th out of 191 countries surveyed.

Civil rights and freedom of speech are largely abused, and protests and demonstrations by the population have been violently suppressed. In 1988, protests against the economic situation in the country, and the oppression of the government, were crushed and thousands were killed. Aung San Su Kyi, the leader of the opposition, won the first free elections in the country in almost 30 years in 1990. The result of the elections was ignored, however, and in spite of international pressure, she has been under house arrest since 1989. In 2007, thousands of monks lead popular nationwide demonstrations triggered by a sudden hike in fuel prices and concomitant deleterious effects on the social and economic circumstances of the Burmese population. The events, referred to as the Saffron revolution, lead to severe repression from the junta and thousand of monks and civilians were killed or disappeared.

The junta also deals with an iron fist with ethnic minorities struggling for recognition of their cultural identity. In the eastern regions of the country, the Karen National Liberation Army has been engaged in an armed struggle for independence since 1949. The local population are suffering hugely as a result of this ongoing armed conflict, and for instance, from the heavy presence of landmines in the area. Many have seen their villages burned or attacked by government forces and have had to leave everything behind.

The International Rescue Committee estimates that more than 500,000 Burmese are Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) within eastern Burma, while another 154,000 are living in nine refugee camps in western Thailand and at least 1.5 million are dispersed along the border areas.

Access to education for Burmese migrants in Thailand

Most of the Burmese migrants living in refugee camps in Thailand have access to free primary and secondary schools in camp. A very large number of migrants however do not live in camp but are dispersed in various towns and villages along the border. As they have no official legal status in the country, they are not entitled to enter the Thai school education system. Many have created their own schools for which they rely primarily on private donations and on the support of various international or local NGOs. As a result of this precarious financial situation, they are faced with great difficulties in terms of paying rent, maintaining buildings, paying staff salaries and providing basic school equipment for their students. Both the "migrant schools" and the schools based inside the camp receive the support of various NGOs as well as the Karen Education Department in terms of funding, teacher training and curriculum development. Their conditions, however, are still widely underdeveloped, with poorly maintained buildings, little or no pay for teachers, overcrowded classes, poor sanitary conditions, etc.

On top of those structural challenges, teachers are faced with particular pedagogical and social issues such as low attendance, multi-age classes and language barriers. The common languages in school

Teaching in a refugee camp on the Thai-Burmese border

are usually Burmese and Karen. However, Ethnologue estimates that there are currently 111 living languages in Burma. A significant number of these may be present in any one classroom and the teacher may not have either Karen, Burmese or one of the other more popular languages spoken in the class. This can have a serious impact on in-class communication and learning outcomes. Many teachers have no previous qualification or experience, while those who have some experience must adapt to a new curriculum, developed by the Karen Education Department to better reflect the traditions and identity of ethnic minorities and may also be asked to teach their third or fourth language as a subject language.

In addition, the qualification received by students at the end of their second level education lacks formal national or international recognition. This means that students are currently unable to access third level education in Thailand, and face significant difficulties in so-doing in third countries after resettlement. Apart from a limited number of vocational training programs developed by NGOs, there are no third level education opportunities in camps and is little or no opportunity of employment. In those conditions, the motivation and dedication of both teachers and students at the primary and secondary levels is to be commended.

Case Study of the World Education “English Immersion Program” in Umpiem Refugee Camp

Last year I had the opportunity to work with World Education, an American NGO based in Mae Sot on the Thai-Burmese border and working on the development of Education in the region. As well as supporting schools financially and logistically, World Education works on the development of curriculum and teacher training programs, as well as specific third level and vocational training programs in camp for young adults. One of those programs, called English Immersion Program, is based in the Umpiem Refugee camp and caters for 24 students, aged between 17 and 24. For a full year, the students live and study in the school and are responsible for the daily cooking and maintenance of the facilities. The program offers the students an opportunity to develop their English language skills through specific English language teaching, but also incorporates additional subjects such as project management, ICT, teacher preparation and translation and interpretation skills. They also get involved in the improvement of the life of the camp through monthly community projects. Although this program does not have official academic recognition, it has an excellent reputation locally and offers the students a substantial opportunity to join local NGOs or community groups subsequently. Each year, World Education receives a very high number of applications for their programs. The successful applications show a great level of motivation and dedication.

The students come from very different backgrounds and ethnic group. The 24 students I was working with had an impressive 12 different native languages between them. Lack of electricity or running water, poor conditions of the buildings and very limited budget for food and general expenditures were only some of the difficulties faced by the students. As well as focussing on their intensive studies, they have to deal with huge concerns with regards to their legal status and potential resettlement application processes, their own safety within the camp as well as the safety and general well-being of their loved ones in Burma or in other areas of Thailand, with whom they have little or no contact. Many also have to deal with the trauma and psychological aftermaths of their own past experiences. In spite of all this however, the students manage to show incredible dedication in the program. They develop close friendships with their fellow students as well as a positive working relationship with the teaching and organisation staff of the school. The culture of the programme is underwritten by a respect for diversity and of each student’s individuality.