

July 2001#2

MESSAGE FROM SWAN

March 2001 marked the second anniversary of the founding of SWAN. In some ways, there was little to celebrate. The past two years have seen a marked deterioration in the situation in Shan State. The central part of the state remains devastated by the massive forced relocation of over 300,000 villagers by the Burmese military regime since 1996. Refugees from this area continue to flow into Thailand, testifying to continuing human rights abuses committed by the junta's troops. Meanwhile, in eastern Shan State, the junta has since 1999 authorized a further mass forced resettlement of over 100,000 Wa villagers from the China border down to the Thai border, displacing local Shans and other indigenous peoples in this area.

Yet, amidst this turmoil, we at SWAN feel heartened by our achievements over the past two years. Apart from our health and education programs along the Shan-Thai border, we have been focusing on training to empower women. The result is a significant increase in the number of Shan women joining local, regional and international forums on a variety of issues. Long deprived of such opportunities, Shan women are finally having their voices heard. We are convinced that women's participation will strengthen the movement for peace-building in our land, and invite our friends all over the world to work together with us towards this aim. □

Women of Strength

Teacher Mary

Her life and work

"I'll continue teaching as long as I live," says 64-year-old Mary Poharn, founder of the "Sweet Home" orphanage in Pieng Luang, a village near Thailand's border with the Shan State of Burma. The orphanage was established in April, 2000. There are ten girls and five boys at her orphanage, which is funded by donations. The parents of the children either died from illness, in the battle fields of northern Burma, or are in Thai jails doing time for drug trafficking, which is rampant along the border.

Mary also provides boarding for an additional three girls and five boys whose parents work elsewhere in Thailand, and she teaches all the twenty-two children in her care every morning during weekdays.

The boarders vary in age from three to fifteen years, and they usually also attend a local Thai school up to primary or middle school level. But after that, they cannot continue their studies in Thai educational institutions because the children are not Thai citizens. Although many of the children were born in Thailand, they have no Thai identification

papers, because their parents were refugees who left Burma many years ago because of the fighting there, and poor living conditions. However, some boys and girls have been issued with so-called “hill people’s” documents, which entitle them to stay in one Thai amphoe, or district.

Mary sympathies with the plight of these children because she herself grew up in an orphanage run by Italian nuns in the town of Loi Lem in central Shan State. “The children I grew up with were of all ages, from toddlers to twenty-year-olds,” says Mary. “Apart from ordinary schooling, including English lessons, we also learnt gardening, sewing and even how to milk cows at a farm run by the convent.” Mother Assunta, one of the Italian nuns at the orphanage, looked after her from when she was a baby and also gave Mary her Christian name. According to a document signed by Mary’s relatives and a Roman Catholic Father from the Sacred Heart Convent in Loi Lem, she was born on 9 October 1937 in a village called Wan Pui near Nam Zarng in southern Shan State. Her parents died when she was only two months old, and her relatives placed her in the care of the nuns at the convent.

From 1950 to 1961, Mary taught English at the convent school, but the situation changed dramatically when the military, led by Gen. Ne Win, seized power in 1962. Two years later, he nationalized all schools in the country, including the convent schools, and most nuns and fathers had to return home, which for most of them was Italy.

Mary got married in 1959 and she and her husband had three children. But the marriage broke up after six years, when she discovered that her husband was having an affair with another woman. “It was awful,” says Mary. “And I could not put up with the verbal abuse of my in-laws who looked down on me, being an orphan.”

But Mary did not give up. She knew that she was a good teacher, and in 1965, she started teaching again in a small village in Lai Hka township in central Shan State. There, she also met her second husband. They were married in 1972, and, the following year, he joined the Shan United Revolutionary Army, or SURA, one of several Shan resistance movements in Burma.

Mary and her family came to Pieng Luang in 1974 through their connections with the SURA. The movement maintained a military camp across the border in Burma, only a few kilometers away, but many of the army families stayed in Pieng Luang on the Thai side. The SURA established a boarding school at Pieng Luang and Mary became one of its teachers. Her specialty was English, which she taught to the hundred or so children at the school.

In the early 1980s, when the SURA school was closed down, she set up her first boarding house where local children (Thai, Chinese and Shan) could stay. One of her pupils was Charm Tong, who at the age of only seventeen testified at the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva on behalf of SWAN. Charm Tong attributes her success to Mary’s teaching. “She’s a tough lady, and the way she teaches is somewhat old-

fashioned. But she is sincere and very kind, and she does not hesitate to help children in need. And this is the only place along the border where we can learn proper English.”

Charm Tong was only eight when she came to Mary's boarding house. She remained there for nine years together with thirty other children.

Mary is very supportive of SWAN and its activities. She loves making Shan snacks, particularly khaopuk (cakes made from sticky rice) and sending them to SWAN meetings and training courses.

"Even though it's not easy to run the shelter with my limited resources, I'm doing my best to help the children," says Mary. "And, after all," I think they are better off than most other refugee children along the border, who can't go to school at all." She says that she will spend the rest of her life with the children along the border." "If I can help them get a better future. I am happy and satisfied, I get the strength I need in order to be able to carry on." □

Granting the Right to Education

Despite the fact that refugees from Shan State have continued to pour into Thailand during the past few years, they remain unrecognized by the Thai government and must survive as illegal migrant laborers. One of the most serious problems this has caused is the lack of education for their children. Whereas children in Karen and Karenni refugee camps in Thailand are automatically able to attend schools, a large number of Shan refugee children end up receiving no schooling whatsoever. One of the main reasons is the poverty of the refugees, most of whom cannot afford even the minimal charges of Thai government schools. Another reason is the instability of their lives: as illegal workers, they are often moving from one job to another, or fleeing arrest, so cannot enroll their children in any schools. Finally, particularly for older Shan children, it is difficult to start school in a different language.

SWAN has been seeking to address this problem during the past year by arranging informal schooling for Shan refugee communities in various sites along the Shan-Thai border. In each site, SWAN has identified local teachers from amongst the community, and has raised funds to cover the costs of teachers' salaries, teaching materials and stationery for the children.

The informal classes have taken place in orchards, temples, and village-halls. Some of the classes have been arranged during the day, and some during the night. The main subjects taught have been Shan and Thai literacy skills.

In 2000, SWAN was able to support classes in nine different sites in the border areas of three provinces of northern Thailand, providing basic schooling to about 700 children. Many other communities have since requested SWAN to set up similar classes in their

areas, but unfortunately SWAN has not been able to raise sufficient resources to meet the demand. There remain many thousands of refugee children without schooling.

Please help us to grant these children their right to an education.

We are launching a “one baht per person per month” campaign among the Shan community here in Thailand, to support the SWAN programs, especially education programs for children.

SWAN is a non-profit, non-governmental organization dependent on grants and donations. Your support is vital and much appreciated in helping us achieve our aims.

Cheques can be made payable to SWAN

Thank you for your support.

LEARNING TO SPEAK OUT

Interview with a SWAN intern

Muay Ngern was 19 years old when she became an intern with SWAN for 12 months, starting in November 1999. She had finished high school in Shan State and come to stay at the northern Thai border town of Mae Sai before joining SWAN.

Why did you decide to become an intern with SWAN?

I was interested in helping women and children. When I stayed in Mae Sai, I saw so many women and young girls being trafficked from Burma into Thailand. I saw girls as young as 13 being sold to men to be “deflowered.” I couldn’t stand to see this. I hated to even look at the faces of the traffickers. In my heart I thought they were so unfair. I wanted to help the girls, but I didn’t know how.

What kind of things did you do as an intern?

I have learned about office work, and how to use a computer. I have been learning Thai and English. I have been involved in networking with other NGOs, locally and internationally. I have also attended several workshops about human rights, and different issues affecting women. I also helped organize regular meetings among San women.

What did you find most interesting?

SWAN has set up education programs for refugee children along the border, and also provided some emergency assistance for them. I enjoyed being able to help people in this way.

What effect has the experience of being an intern had on your life?

Before, I never dared to express my opinion amongst other people. Now I am not afraid to speak out. Because of my experience, I feel much more confident.

What is your plan for the future?

I want to stay working with SWAN.

I want to help train young people from Burma who were like me, afraid to speak out. People in Burma are living in the dark. If we don't give them the chance, they won't learn anything. There are so many problems for young people in Shan State. There is a lot of drug addiction and drug dealing. Gambling is also rampant.

Would you recommend that other women become interns at SWAN?

Yes, but they should be really interested in the issues SWAN is working on or else it is a wasted opportunity. □

News Briefs

Thai officer rapist gets cut in benefits

Following a petition organized by SWAN for just punishment for a Thai military officer who sexually abused eleven Shan migrant women in July 1999 (see earlier SWAN newsletter), the Thai Ministry of Defence finally gave a reply in August 2000 that they would take further measures to punish the officer. Instead of merely transferring the officer and putting him on probation, they stated they would deprive him of his benefits for one year.

SWAN and other women's groups are continuing to appeal for proper justice in the case.

Women's League of Burma

In December 1999, SWAN jointly founded the Women's League of Burma (WLB), the first umbrella organization for women's groups from Burma. The WLB comprises eleven women's organizations from areas of Burma bordering with Bangladesh, India and Thailand. Its aims are to develop mutual understanding and unity between ethnic women to participate more actively in Burma's movement for democracy and national reconciliation.

The first Congress of the WLB in January 2001 resolved to give priority to women's capacity-building programs, international lobbying, refugee advocacy and peace-building and reconciliation.

“Human Rights in Practice” now in Burmese

SWAN members have translated and produced a Burmese language version of a handbook for women's and children's rights organizations involved in assisting trafficked women and children. This manual is a production of the Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women (GAATW). It is a collaborative and lobbying effort of NGOs to influence national and international policies to promote the rights of women and children. The handbook is now in several languages. □

Pesticides killing Shan refugees

A recent research report on Burmese refugees and the environment in Thailand has revealed that Shan refugees in the northern Thai province of Chiang Mai are facing grave health risks from chemical pesticides .

As Shan refugees have no access to refugee camps in Thailand, they are forced to work as illegal migrant laborers . Tens of thousands of refugees who have fled forced relocation and other abuses in Shan State are employed in agricultural plantations in Chiang Mai province. The intensive commercial cultivation in these areas, particularly in the large orange and lychee orchards, has led to alarming overuse of chemical fertilizers and pesticides.

According to the report, published by the Thai non-governmental organization "Friends Without Borders," Shan refugees living and working in these plantations are exposed to the chemicals by inhaling fumes and by washing in and drinking contaminated water. The report reveals that this has led to numerous deaths over the past few years, particularly from respiratory diseases.

The report deplores the lack of protection for the Shan refugees, and calls on the Thai government to invite the United Nations High Commission for Refugees and non-government organizations to survey, protect and assist Shan refugees in Thailand. □

Shans appeal to international community to join campaign against Salween dam

Braving strict security, migrant Shans joined the demonstrations against the Asian Development Bank in May 2000 in Chiang Mai to oppose the building of a mega-dam on the Salween River in Shan State.

Although the ADB has suspended all loans to Burma since 1987, it is still providing technical assistance to Burma and promoting investment there under the Greater Mekhong Subregion (GMS) development program. Current plans to dam the Salween River are part of the GMS program.

Surveying to build the dam at Ta Sarng, in southern Shan State, continued throughout 2000 by the Thai company GMS, under tight security of troops of the Burmese military regime. The dam site lies in the middle of an area of active Shan resistance, where the regime continues to commit grave human rights abuses against the local population, and where 300,000 villagers have already been forcibly relocated. Refugees fleeing from the prospective flood zone have described massacres of up to 60 villagers, including women and children, as the military continues to depopulate the area.

The plans for the dam, which at 188 metes will be the largest in Southeast Asia, remain shrouded in secrecy. Developers are clearly hoping that investment for the project can be

secured before the full controversy surrounding the dam, which will have devastating social and environmental impacts on millions of indigenous peoples, is brought to public attention.

With no avenues of protest open inside Burma, Shans are seeking to voice their opposition to the dam in regional and international forums. Apart from the protest at the ADB meeting, Shans, including one SWAN member, also joined a meeting in Thailand in June 2000 to set up the first regional network to fight dams and protect rivers in East and Southeast Asia.

For more details see: www.orchestraburma.org □