

Lifeline to a better future

Education offers hope to refugees in Thai border camps

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Through education, young Karen refugees in Mae La Camp, in Tak province, in the north of Thailand, can wake up every day with hopes for a better future.



Fourteen-year-old Saypah Htoo dreams of becoming a doctor and wants to return to Burma and help people. "I like studying," said the Grade 7 (Mathayom 1) student. "It's a chance I never received in Burma," she added. "But I don't think I can return [to Burma], because I can't even leave this camp."

Saypah Htoo travelled with her aunt to the Tak camp eight years ago when she was only six. Her parents died when she was very young.

Scores of refugees who fled the oppression in Burma over the past 12 years have sought sanctuary in nine refugee camps along the Thai-Burmese border.

Karen students at Mae La Camp study in classes that teach up to Grade 10.

They are not allowed to leave the camps, and face arrest and deportation if they do so. Of an estimated 120,000 registered refugees, 30 percent are children between the ages of 5 and 17.

Mae La Camp has a registered population of 33,000, of which approximately 12,000 are children between the ages of 5 and 17. It is the largest refugee camp on the Thai-Burmese border and covers an area of 1,150 rai (184 hectares).

Sixteen-year-old Nai Liay Paw said, "I miss my parents and I cry a lot, but at least I have a chance to study here."

She left her parents behind in Burma four years ago when she was brought to Mae La by neighbours.

"I know I can't return to my home country but I hope to become a doctor, so I can help my people here," she said.

Education in the nine camps is offered up to Grade 10 (Mathayom 4). Education certificates awarded in camp schools are not valid outside the camp as the camp-based curriculum is neither aligned with nor accredited by any outside education system. However, negotiations are underway with the Thai Ministry of Education to gain accreditation for camp-based education programmes.

"I feel like a bird in a cage and I am fed up," said Saw Gay Moo, 36, the headmaster of the camp's High School One, who has lived in Mae La for 15 years.

"We want freedom, but it's not happening yet, so this is the time for refugees to prepare themselves through education. All people should have the right to an education, and with an education and freedom, we can live a better life," the headmaster said.

The Karen Education Department, a community-based organisation that administers primary and secondary schools from Grade 1 through Grade 10 (Prathom 1 through Mathayom 4), recruits and trains teachers and ensures standards and cohesion in the delivery of education across seven camps, in which the majority of the population are of Karen ethnicity. The Karenni Education Department (KnED), another community-based organisation, runs two other camps, where Karen populations are in the majority.



Hairstyling courses are frequently offered to residents of the camps.

Without freedom of movement, refugee students are unable to pursue their education past Grade 10 (Mathayom 4), or look for a job in Thailand.

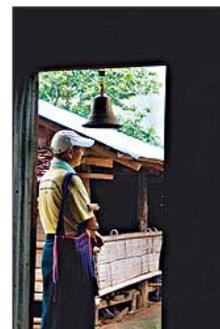
"My only hope in life is to see our children love their studies," said Lerkoe, 73, a school headmaster in Mae La Camp.

"With an education, I hope they can become community leaders, doctors, nurses and teachers so that they will be able to help camp residents in later generations," added Lerkoe, who has been residing in the camp for 18 years.

Various non-formal education opportunities are offered, such as lessons on language skills, sewing, hairstyling, cooking, small-engine repairs and agriculture.

Although refugees are not allowed to work outside of the camps, a limited number of opportunities to earn supplementary income exists through work in restaurants, engine-repair shops and hair salons in the area. In addition, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees funds vocational training in seven Karen camps.

"Every day when I wake up in the morning, I'm worried about the future," said Pudi, 25, a Karen refugee living in Mae La Camp. "But there's not much I can do at the moment except seek an education to look after my life," he said.



Mae La Camp's secretary to the Education Committee, Stuart De Than, 70, has lived in the camp for 24 years. He often contemplates the future of the students and residents in the camp.
PHOTOS BY ROJANA MANOWALAILAO/ UNESCO

Pudi, a camp resident for nine years, is currently undergoing automotive-repair training and hopes that he will get permission to work in a factory, or to set up his own auto-repair shop.

Nattaya Laroob, a Thai teacher from the Ministry of Education's Office of Non-Formal Education and Informal Education said, "This is not a detention site. They are in a safe place away from danger and fear. [But it may be a burden to the Thai authorities] if the refugees were allowed to go out [of the camp] as there is still a likelihood that they will commit crimes or get into danger."

English and Thai languages are taught in the seven Karen camps to adults.

"I see no future, so if I stay in the camp, I need to study as many languages as possible," said 21-year-old Nai Nai.

Over 30,000 Burmese refugees have left Thailand since 2005. Most go to the US. Kohpa, a father of four, and a resident in Mae La Camp, believes an education will give his children a greater chance of resettlement in a third country. "With an education, there's hope," he said.

(According to Burmese culture, many people have no first or last name in the Western sense, and many people have a singular one-syllable name. Therefore, for some persons quoted in this article, no surname is given. - THE EDITOR)

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Karen students walk home in Mae La Camp after a busy day in school.

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