

## Mae La Refugee Camp

It is hard to find another example of where 50,000 have fled their homeland to escape persecution, been held at the border by their neighbour for what has become decades, and then been largely ignored by the International Community. This, however, is what has happened in Mae La refugee camp, north of Mae Sot on the western border of Thailand.



In 1984, the first of the Karen minority arrived in the area in search of safety from the Burmese army who, under instruction from the military government, were embarking on a campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Karen population of 7 million. As well as economic hardship, the migrants were fleeing rape, murder, torture, the plunder of their land & livelihood, and forced labour.

The Thai government, sympathetic to the Karen's plight allowed a growing number across the border but due to economic & diplomatic pressures were hesitant to let them travel any deeper into the country. The result – a new town has spawned, complete with schools, shops, churches, water & sewage systems. But this community is defined by poverty, devoid of ambition, awash with alcohol and drugs, and built upon fear.



As we approached the outskirts of the camp, a checkpoint guard nodded and waved us through dismissively. Considering the camp is a restricted zone to foreigners, the ease of our passage was surprising. Once inside the perimeter, the monstrous scale of this refugee camp became suddenly apparent. Looking left, a mass expanse of huts were dotted from the road to high up the hill and as far down the valley as I could see. Dozens of houses deep, the camp stretches along the highway for 17km.

In nearly 40 degree heat we zigzagged through the camp for four hours and still only covered half the area. En route we stopped at one of Mae La's 40 schools, a church where a group of 50 teenagers were having choir practice, and at a number of my guide's friend's houses. Everyone I met had their own remarkable story. Some fled to the camp when their villages were destroyed; others escaped from the hands of the Burmese military whilst being forced to carry equipment and supplies. Maybe the sorriest stories came from an increasing number who have never known anything different to life in the camp.



Getting around Mae La isn't easy. To be sure-footed is real a bonus as rocky paths can incline as steep as 60 degrees and numerous trenches are navigated by a single plank of wood. A constant influx of new arrivals from Burma have led to mass overcrowding so these walkways are often intercepted by someone's house – I was very aware that the invasion of privacy throughout my journey was just normality here. We finished at my guide's family

house where his parents, 3 sisters and their 4 children live in a two bedroom shack.

Most families living in the camp have between 6 & 8 children. With water and rice rations provide by the Thai Burma Border Consortium it is often seen as prudent to have many children. This along with a deep mistrust of the poor quality contraception available has seen the population swell rapidly and now nearly a third of all residents are under the age of 12. Along with the vibrant playground this has created for youngsters of all ages, it has also put overwhelming pressure on space, charity-funded services... and the battle against refuse is rapidly being lost. Roads and paths cut in the dirt up and across the hillside are strewn with litter. Stray & pet dogs roam ankle-deep in these alleyways of garbage.

Mae La residents dream of escape. Unfortunately this often manifests itself in the abuse of home made alcohol and drugs brought in from Burma. After 3 decades many see this as the only way to escape a dark reality. Many will apply until successfully granted a pass to work in Thailand, yet it is no secret that life for migrants is often no better; holding up local agricultural and hotel economies for as little as 20% of the Thai minimum wage. An upsetting number also end up working in Bangkok's sex industry. Deportation back to Burma, and the appalling consequences this could bring, is a real and touted threat that hangs in the air around the camp and is used to



stop rules from being broken. A select few show immense discipline to educate and qualify themselves, and often these individuals use their new-found knowledge and freedom to campaign for the rights of their people.



Very recently new hope has been given to thousands in Mae La as ludicrous laws following 9-11 (branding all Karen citizens as supporters of terrorism) have been lifted. Now a number of countries have opened their doors to the refugees, most notably the US, Canada, Australia and Scandinavia. The UK has shown a disgraceful lack of generosity in this, especially when considering the added historical responsibility that sits on our shoulders: It was our style of ‘divide & rule’ occupation in Burma between 1824-1948 that created the basis for most of the internal divisions that exist today, furthermore, when the Karen minority remained loyal to Britain during World War II (unlike the rest of Burma) a promise of protected autonomy was given as reward. This was then ignored after the war... and subsequently forgotten!

Despite their situation, the attitude of these people (as I found with their countrymen back in Burma) was amazing. The smiles, waves and hospitality portrayed a genuine mix of curiosity and gratitude for visiting their home. For most of my journey I had a gang of children following – the smiling faces changing as I left their ‘part of town’. When I went in any number of houses the tea, water, paper fans and small treats would appear within minutes and the house would slowly fill up as word spread of my arrival in the neighbourhood. Apart from the obvious hardships and utter misfortune of their predicament the people of Mae La remain a joy to be around – command our respect, compassion, and action.



Micah Hampson  
May '07