



# Mae Sot Education Project

## Newsletter

# December 2015

[www.maesot.ubishops.ca](http://www.maesot.ubishops.ca)

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## WHAT NEXT? OUR PARTNERS CONSIDER THE FUTURE

In the wake of the November election in Myanmar (yes, we will now call it Myanmar, at least most of the time), many wonder what lies ahead, both for the country as a whole and for the more than one million people who have been displaced and/or who now live as migrant workers in Thailand. In the pages of this newsletter we share with you some of our Burmese school friends' optimism and hope as well as their skepticism and uncertainty. Many have similar messages for us. If there is repetition here, perhaps it is because we need to hear what they are saying more than once.



*Eh Kho, Naw Naw and Yawla around the lunch table*

### A lunchtime conversation with friends at BHSOH

In mid-November, we sat down with Yawla, school manager, Eh Kho, a teacher (and former teacher trainer), and Naw Naw, the assistant school manager at BHSOH to discuss some of the educational challenges Burmese people are facing. Eh Kho explained the plans to move a local, NGO funded Teacher Preparation Centre from Mae Sot to a new location near Mandalay in Myanmar. Other teacher training projects are also moving "inside". "Education is the life blood for the body. The government likes to control it," he said, adding that there are many teacher training colleges in Myanmar but they

are all instruments of government propaganda. His view was that if teacher trainers move inside, they may have difficulty controlling their programs. Yawla made a similar observation about the curriculum: "The Burmese curriculum is also full of propaganda. Curriculum is very very important and will need to change."

Both expressed concerns about the peace process in Karen State. As Eh Kho said, "Leaders sell minerals – the country's resources – to foreign corporations. They are signing contracts that even Daw Aung San Suu Kyi cannot undo. Other contracts are signed but not going ahead because of land mines. From their perspective, the cease fire is more about opportunistic mineral extraction and trade than about peace. Corporations have taken over land where Karen villages once stood, and people are still afraid of the military."

Like others to whom we spoke, Yawla, Naw Naw and Eh Kho worry about the future for migrant schools. Even with core funding from two sources, BHSOH has no extra money for repairs on the trucks that shuttle kids to school each day. They would like to collect a fee once each semester, but only about half the parents of the 270 children at BHSOH can make a financial contribution to the school. Parents with more than one child have even more trouble. For the 30 boarding children, there is no one the school can ask for fees.

## Some big dreams...and a long road

Mai Nyi Nyi, a 13 year old Payaung boarding student at Hsa Mu Htaung Learning Centre, came to Mae Sot when he was much younger. His uncle brought him from Shan State after he crushed his leg in an accident and was unable to receive care there. At the Mae Tao Clinic in Mae Sot, his leg was repaired (with the help of a steel pin), and he stayed to go to school. Now he looks forward to returning to his family. He wants to become a doctor and to help his people. Given that there is presently fighting between the government and ethnic groups in Shan State, he talks of going back to fight. However, he knows that he must be patient and think long-term if he wants to achieve his real goal.



**Mai Nyi Nyi** **Daw Htet Htet Aung**

Mai Nyi Nyi's mentor and school headmistress, Daw Htet Htet Aung (who is also our oldest migrant school friend in Mae Sot) said this: "The NLD is elected. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is very smart and a good woman. She will try to improve education and health first, but with our government, we don't know. They trick us. It is not that sure. People worry about it. The process is very slow." Like many we spoke to, Daw Htet Htet Aung wants to give the situation five years. For the Karen who whose villages were destroyed during the long years of conflict, "it is better to stay here...They have no land to go back to."



**Mo Mo Oo, Tun Tun Win, Yadanar with MSEP volunteer Emily**

### A simple clear vision

At Pyo Khinn Learning Centre, we spoke with three Muslim students. All come from families in which one child attends school while their siblings have to work in the market in order to help parents make ends meet. Tun Tun Win wants to be a policeman and little Yadanar a nurse. Mo Mo Oo expresses her very simple aspirations very categorically: "We want to be good people, and we want to stay in Thailand." Of Myanmar, she asks with a quizzical expression, "What would we do there?" Another adds, "I don't have money, but my school has a big heart, and we are happy at school. We like English and are interested to learn." That is enough for now.

## Behind a sweet façade, some real worries

Aye Chan Mae is a 16 year old student at Parami Learning Centre whose parents are migrant workers in Bangkok. She has attended the school for 10 years and lived in the school boarding house for six of those years along with her younger brother and sister. For her Parami means education and friends, but more, a home effectively. She has enjoyed football (soccer), traditional Karen dancing and sewing. Her teacher, former MSEP volunteer and project committee member, Megan Irving describes her as a young woman with "a really kind heart. A little shy, she leads in a quiet way. If we need help, she will help."



Aye Chan Mae has one more year left at Parami after which she will be faced with tough decisions regarding the future. She tries to imagine the possibilities. She would like to go to university but not in Myanmar. Whatever she does may involve leaving Parami and her siblings. Megan says that helping students find the next step is hard. "They don't always know the choices or what they want. Yet what they decide can determine their and their family's future." The school tries to show students the options – which include a small vocational program run by the community based organization Youth Connect. However, all of the "post-ten" educational programs are very small and have rigorous application processes.

**Former MSEP volunteer Megan with Aye Chan Mae**

## **BMTA - working to support the migrant community and keep migrant education afloat**

One of our partners this year is the BMTA or Burmese Migrant Teachers Association. Naing Naing Htun, BMTA Secretary, helps us transfer and keep records for donations to a number of schools. Sumon is BMTA's Education Coordinator. She is also a former teacher at Hsa Mu Htaw Learning Centre who went on to become a university graduate and a recent winner of a USAID award for her work on gender-based violence. Both struggle to help schools at risk of closing due to growing donor fatigue.

While in an ideal world, Burmese migrant kids would attend Thai schools, Naing Naing Htun says that it is simply impossible. Whatever the advantages of accredited education (which includes ID documents), the linguistic, logistical, and social challenges of sending their children to Thai schools are simply daunting for many migrant parents. They feel more at home with the Burmese, migrant-friendly informal system. In addition, however, many living at the subsistence level pull their kids out of schools at the age of 12. Thus educating parents and encouraging their involvement in the schools through Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) is an important part of BMTA's work. For Sumon, some of that educational work focuses on women's empowerment. There are many problems to address: "Women do not realize they are facing violence and discrimination. They don't realize that shouting at kids is abusive, and they don't understand the importance of knowing and respecting the laws of the community where they are living." BMTA is also working to keep schools at risk of closing open and staffed with teachers. Facilitating teacher training is part of that work. However, migrant teachers' salaries have fallen in many schools to less than what a field worker makes. Without money to pay rents and utilities, salaries are the first to go, and it is hard to keep even poorly trained migrant teachers under such circumstances.

Finally, the BMTA is encouraging both Thai and Myanmar governments to recognize migrant education, stressing the benefits to both countries of an education that teaches Thai, Burmese and English. It is also working with the Myanmar government to facilitate transfer certificates for youth who want to return to Myanmar and promoting access to nonformal education programs (NFE) in both Myanmar and Thailand for youth who have missed out on schooling and want to catch up. Clearly, BMTA's work is both multifaceted and essential to migrant education.



*Naing Naing Htun and Sumon*



*Myat Linn Aung with his students*

### **A young man who deserves a bit more...**

Myat Linn Aung is teaching grade 5 science and math at BHSOH. His students are lucky to have him. He used to be a student at the school. However, last year, he completed a rigorous GED (General Education Diploma) preparation program and then passed the American exam. In theory it gives him access to a university education. However, he has no money and needs a scholarship. Lacking the good fortune to land one, he has joined the migrant school staff, a pattern we have seen more than once. Teacher salaries in migrant schools run from 2500 B to 3,500 B a month. At 26 baht to the Canadian dollar, it will take him a while to save the money needed to fund the education he seeks.

# MEASURED OPTIMISM AND HEALTHY SKEPTICISM



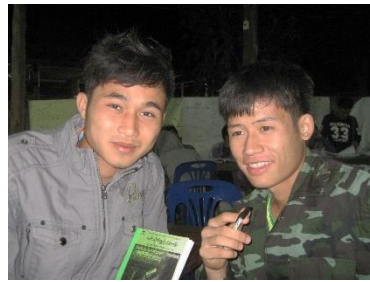
**Nyan Soe,**  
artist and  
Democratic  
Voice of  
Burma (DVB )  
journalist

“Change is coming but it will take ten years – maybe longer. The government has to change, but the people, they too have to change.”



**Naw Tha Zin,** Head  
of Hle Bee  
Learning  
Centre and  
EC member  
for BMWEC

“Last year enrollment at the school fell. Some families are going back. That is okay. This year, enrollment is back up (to 395). As long as there are migrant children here who need school, I will stay.”



**Two Karen students at Kaw Tha Blay College, a rural, Canadian-funded project north of Mae Sot**

Hser Htee (left) and Myo Set (right) both want to return to Karen State and help their people build a government and society there. Hser Htee wants to work in the government and Myo Set hopes to be a translator. They have high hopes.

For a very interesting and timely 16 minute video on educational challenges facing youth in the refugee camps on the border at this time of change, see: *Recognize our Education, Realise our Dreams* at <https://vimeo.com/127328703>

**Ko Ye, Chair of the Board of Directors for Min Ma Haw Education Foundation, the best GED-prep. program in Mae Sot**



“Our donor would like us to move to Burma. We do not feel this is a good idea at this time. Maybe

in a year, or maybe with one school there and one here.” The environment for volunteers is still better in Thailand and the school has more freedom to operate according to its own priorities. Min Ma Haw is a very small program but has prepared many Burmese students for university education over the last 12 years. It has been indispensable to the migrant community in serving this particular need.



**From all of us at MSEP, a warm wish for peace in 2016 & deepest thanks for your continued support!**



## *Who we are and what we do*

The Mae Sot Education Project (MSEP) is a community project based on the campus of Bishop's University and Champlain College – Lennoxville in Sherbrooke, Quebec. Since 2004, we have provided assistance to six schools for migrant and refugee youth from Burma/Myanmar whose access to education depends on support from the international community. In recent years we have also worked with other schools. Each year we select a group of young people from our campus to go to Mae Sot for six months. While there, they provide practical assistance to teachers and enrichment activities for children in the schools. They learn about the situation of displacement experienced by the Burmese people in Thailand as well as about the challenges for the Thai community in coping with a large population of refugees and migrants. Finally, they share their experience with Canadians.

The Project Committee is made up of members of the community, faculty from Bishop's and Champlain, and former youth volunteers with the project. Currently, members are: Catherine Isely, Judy Keenan, Angie

Petitclerc, Mary Purkey, Garry Retzleff, and Marjorie Retzleff, as well as former volunteers Barbara Rowell (2005) and William Bryson (2014).  
**Contributions to the project are always welcome and tax receipts are issued.** To make a donation electronically, here are the links: <http://www.ubishops.ca/gift> or <http://www.crc-lennox.qc.ca/community/foundation>. Remember to indicate that your donation is for the Mae Sot Education Project. Or, donate by cheque at our project address: Box 67, Champlain College – Lennoxville, Sherbrooke, QC J1M 2A1. Be sure to include the name of the Foundation and MSEP on your cheque.