

Teaching refugees from the heart of darkness.

How would you feel if the army of your country was threatening to attack your own village. How would you feel if there was a possibility that they might torture or kill you and your family? Or if that same army was going to force you into becoming slave labour? What do you think it would be like, having to escape from where you live to seek refuge in a camp in another country, crossing a minefield and a free-fire zone where the army might shoot at you at any time, on the way? What would it be like being a child in that situation? What kind of education could you expect? What would it be like being a teacher in that situation?

Fortunately for me I don't really know what it is like. I am teacher from North-east England and NUT member for twenty years. I have lived all my life in Britain, a country where teaching can be frustrating and depressing at times. However I have never had to experience the kinds of problems mentioned above. But I have met and briefly taught people who know only too well what it is like, having gone through all the experiences and many more terrible events beside. I met them while teaching English in two Karen refugee camps along the Thai/Burmese border; Mae Ra Ma and Umpiem. They are two of the camps which are strung out along the border and are currently home to Karen refugees from Burma.

Why are the refugees there?

Next year marks the 200th anniversary of the abolition of slavery in Britain and its erstwhile empire, the culmination of a long, brave and principled campaign led by William Wilberforce among others. It is nearly 60 years since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was signed in 1948 by world leaders in San Francisco, article 4 of which states that 'no-one shall be a slave', while in 1956 the United Nations Convention Against Slavery was also signed.

Yet, here we are in 2006, a few months away from that anniversary of abolition in 2007 and forced labour is still a daily nightmare for millions around the world. Thousands of those affected are to be found in that particularly bleak heart of darkness, the land commonly known as Burma, which the brutal military regime who rule the troubled land, insist on calling Myanmar. This is a land where in the dry season the hot unforgiving sun beats down on tens of thousands of innocent men, women and children forced into being slave labour on large building projects, while during the monsoon season the heavy rains seem to weep in sorrow for the injustices being perpetrated.

Burma has a population of about 55 million and is made up of a number of different ethnic groups, the largest of which are the Burmans. One ethnic group in particular has been targeted to be slave labour on those huge projects, which include roads and the building of a pipeline to take gas from the Andaman Sea off Burma to Thailand, whose profits will go to the regime and their friends and to Western oil companies, including Haliburton and Total. This ethnic group is called the Karen. It is the biggest ethnic minority in Burma and these people have never been reconciled to direct rule from the rulers of Burma, since the British left in 1948. Consequently, they are the major target for the huge Burmese army known as the tatmadaw, who regularly attack their towns and villages, destroy their homes, schools, churches and other places of worship. They have murdered and raped many Karen civilians. And they have forced tens of thousands of Karens into being slaves, coerced into working without pay on the kind of projects mentioned earlier or as porters for the army.

This is going on as I write this (September 2006). Indeed, in recent months the tatmadaw have launched their biggest offensive against the Karen people in nearly ten years. It was reported by BosNewsLife on Burmanet on 21st March 2006 that Christian Solidarity

Worldwide (CSW), which has investigated the situation in the region, were stating that “an unknown number of civilians were killed and several villages were burned in the latest offensive. The Burmese army “is laying more landmines in the area, and forcing those villagers who have not fled to work as porters for the military,” CSW claimed. The reports seem consistent with a BosNewsLife investigation inside Burma, also known as Myanmar, last year.”

The Karens find that their villages are attacked, their homes, schools and places of worship burnt down and their food stolen. On many occasions villagers have been attacked by the Burmese army. In June 2005, Guy Horton reported to the United Nations, a report which spoke of the Burmese army throwing babies on fires, among many other atrocities. There are other areas of the world, such as Darfur, where people live in desperate conditions, but there truly can't be any people on this planet worse off at present than the Karens.

As a result many Karens have decided that they are unable to live safely in Burma and there are about 150 000 Karens who have fled across minefields and a free-fire zone to the relative safety of refugee camps along the Thai/Burmese border, while many others have fled the violence and human rights abuses for an equally precarious living as migrant workers in Thailand. The health situation for these people is dire, while the young people are often denied the chance of a decent education.

Life in the camps

Life in the camps is very hard. Very few houses have electricity and there is also usually no electricity at the schools in the camps. Only occasionally a generator can be used. This means that there is interactive whiteboard, no video or DVD player and no computers. Even paper and pens can be quite hard to come by. Nor do the children in the camps have the same chances in life as we have.

One person in Mae Ra Ma camp told me that in the camp there was no further education and that “when young people finish high school (there is) no higher education or professional courses.”

Nowhere to go

The people in the camps whom I met and taught were safer in the camps than in Burma as the Burmese army rarely come over the border into Thailand to attack them, (although they have been known to do it). However, for the most part they were stuck in the camps. I saw children of about five years old who had probably been born in the camp and never been anywhere else in their lives. Most of all life for the children and the adults in the camp was boring. One of the most exciting days in the month is salt day. The day salt arrives, people have to go and collect it. Somehow it breaks up the monotony of their everyday lives.

Education in the camps

If you go to the Beamish North of England Open Air Museum in County Durham, then you can visit a mock –up of a County Durham school from Victorian times. This would give you some idea of what the educational facilities at the refugee camps are like. Everywhere it seemed there was the brown dust of the dry season and a deep longing for something better. In the classroom, my students sat with a rapt attention. They had a little paper to write on courtesy of a foreign NGO and always had their own pens. There was an old blackboard and some chalk, which sometimes you could write with easily and sometimes you couldn't. As I mentioned earlier there was no computer, no interactive white board, no video or DVD player and the students who were mostly young adults who wanted to be teachers themselves had

grown up learning most things by rote, a legacy of missionary teachers from the time when Burma was an appendage to the Indian Raj in the British Empire. There was, however, a clock, which was deliberately half an hour late, so giving Burmese time, not Thai time, even though it was Thailand's dusty brown soil the people were marooned on. At night the birds and insects in the rainforest would treat us to their daily symphony, a disorganised and anarchic cacophony.

The Karens are a lovely, brave yet gentle people who deserve a far better fate than life has given them. They are courteous and polite and really value education. They know it is one of the main keys to their escape from their present predicament. They also know that one day the military government in Burma will fall and there will be a free, democratic Burma. They want to work hard so that they are ready for that day.

How can you help?

You can join the Burma Campaign UK, which is working for freedom and democracy in Burma. They are always needing more support from a wide range of people. Please help if you can....

More information at www.burmacampaign.org.uk