

## Report to the World Relief Committee

Dear Friends:

### **THAI BORDER CAMPS**

Our team was not able to visit the camps themselves due to restrictions. We had received reports from the camps from a very recent visit of American Baptists led by Duane Binkley and we met with 3 representatives from the camps who came to Bangkok.

We also met with two officials from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees in Bangkok and with our US Charge d'Affaires in Bangkok and US Ambassador Mitchell in Yangon to discuss the future of the camps. These discussions were quite helpful. We learned several important things:

- Neither our State Department nor the UNCHR supports forced repatriation of persons in the camp back to Burma.
- Currently the Thai military regime is applying no pressure for repatriation
- Relief aid to the camps is shrinking, nonetheless, as International NGO's and some governments are switching their efforts to Burma.
- The USAID has increased its support of the camps fourfold in the past two years to help make up for the deficit created by others shifting support to operations in Burma
- Minimum conditions that both the UNHCR and US State Department see for return of camp refugees to Burma include a durable nationwide ceasefire; clearing or marking of land-mines; adequate support for resettlement back to Burma and clarity around issues of relocation and land ownership. Clearly repatriation will not occur anytime soon.
- The US is no longer accepting refugees for resettlement based upon a group status as members of one of the ethnic groups in conflict with the military. The last call for resettlement to America under that category was given in late 2014. Now anyone in the camps seeking resettlement will be processed only on the basis of family reunification or individual proof that a person's life is threatened
- There were thousands who came forward in response to the last call and it will take two to three years to process them all. So we can expect to continue to receive large numbers of refugees over the next two to three years.
- We also learned that the UNHCR is no longer resettling Chins who have fled to Malaysia. Because the Union government of Burma and the Chin National Front have a ceasefire in place, the UNHCR now counts them as economic refugees and hence, unqualified for resettlement. The focus is now on refugees from the Kachin and Shan states where fighting continues.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- The ABCUSA Commission on Refugees from Burma receive continued funding for their work given the fact that we will continue to receive large numbers of refugees from Burma for the next two-three years
- ABC carefully monitor the issue of repatriation through the Commission and be prepared to offer appropriate relief and development assistance through the Myanmar Baptist Convention when repatriation begins.

## KACHIN STATE

Thank you so much for the \$5,000 emergency grant for the Kachin Baptist Churches for their relief work with Internally Displaced Persons (IDP's). There are over 100,000 such people and their numbers are growing. Just yesterday, Feb 21, word came of new hostilities in the Shan state with 90,000 new refugees.

On February 7 and 8, I was able to visit 5 refugee camps in the Myitkyina area which are heavily supported by the Kachin Baptist Convention. These IDP camps have been in existence since 2011 when the Burmese military unilaterally broke the ceasefire with the Kachins and began military assaults against their villages.

The camps are built within Baptist Church compounds to provide added security for the refugees, the great majority of whom are Baptists. The five we visited house a total of approximately 3500 people. The quarters are built in traditional Kachin style and are small 10x10 rooms for a family which conjoin one another shoulder to shoulder in long rows with narrow dark alleys running between that serve as the kitchen area. Cooking is over wooden fires which means extreme vigilance is needed. If a fire should break out it would engulf the entire area in but a few minutes because everything is made of tinder-dry bamboo.

There was good sanitation in each camp with access to wells for clean water thanks to the help of several international NGO's like UNICEF. Relief supplies come from different sources including the Baptists of Burma. Nurses regularly visit, though at one camp we were told that the government assigned doctor refused to visit the camp and insisted that anyone sick come to him which meant a half hour's travel. Education is through the public schools, but there is little in the way of pre-school education for the many children who populate the village.

Trauma (PTS) is clearly an issue for many. One camp director indicated that it is especially hard for the children and teens who witnessed great violence in many cases and were whisked away from their homes in a flight for their lives from shelling and rifle fire. I did see several elders who were clearly victims of nervous breakdowns attributed to the trauma of losing everything by the villagers.

The five camps that we visited are all in government controlled areas. There are many such camps and IDP's outside any camp in the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) controlled areas. I am deeply concerned for those in the KIA area because the government refuses to allow relief into these areas. The Kachin Baptists are often able to bypass the military stop points in order to bring in some aid, but it is very little compared to the need.

Drugs are a well-documented problem of major proportions now afflicting the Kachin State.

While in the Kachin State, I was privileged to address over 1,000 people who had come to Myitkyina to greet us. Banners proclaimed welcome to the General Secretary of ABCUSA and his team. In the moving opening service the leaders of the Kachin Baptist Convention washed the feet of the ABCUSA delegation. They were joyfully surprised when I, in turn, requested fresh water to be brought and I knelt before their General Secretary to wash his feet. Each day, we preached or taught and prayed as we encouraged the churches and their leaders. On Sunday we were sent to several churches in the area, and I had the privilege of preaching in one of the IDP camps. The day that we left, many came to the airport creating a welcoming line along both sides of the road for quite a ways. Probably the most moving and difficult moment for me as we departed was the moment that a young mother thrust her baby towards me to be

blessed and as I laid hands on the baby to pray for him, she burst into body-wracking sobs. I will carry the picture of her tear-filled face and her fears for her son's future with me.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) ABC continue to provide support for these camps as ongoing hostilities create yet more refugees.
- 2) ABC partner with David Tegenfeldt and Rev. Dr. M Tu Hkawng of Kachin Theological College and Seminary in support of their efforts to provide alternative after-school programs for children and teens that focus on peace-building and trauma reduction
- 3) ABC work with Myanmar Baptist Convention and the Kachin Baptist Convention to fund effective drug prevention and rehabilitation efforts
- 4) ABC support development of alternative crops to cut dependence on the growing of poppies

## CHIN STATE

I was accompanied on this visit to the Southern Chin State by Rev. Dr. C. Duh Kam, Executive Minister of the Chin Baptist Churches USA; Rev. Dr. Paul and Gail Aita, Special Assistants to Stan Murray for Burma and Rev. Yan Naung of the Chin Baptist Convention. In December, 2013, I visited the northern Chin state. In each instance I was the first American Baptist to be present in the Chin Hills in over 50 years in the northern part of the state and 60 years in the southern part. I cannot tell you the joy that filled the people as they greeted us in each visit after so many years of absence. In instance after instance I was told, "You, our spiritual father, have returned." Like Paul, we traveled great distances to encourage the churches planted in the midst of daunting circumstances who love the Lord and serve him faithfully.

The Chin Hills are the Appalachia of Burma in that the Chin State is the poorest region of Burma. As a native of Appalachia I was struck by the incredible similarities between the mountainous Chin State and the Appalachian region of the US in the 50's and 60's. Both are marked by rugged mountainous terrain. One 70 mile segment of our journey took a full 8 hours to traverse because of the road which was in some places little more than a logging trail scraped into the side of the mountains. Isolation- small hamlets of 5-6 houses alongside the road were often half an hour to an hour apart by jeep. Lack of infrastructure- I have commented upon the roads already, but in addition few areas had electricity and almost none access to phones or internet, and clean water was always an issue. Poverty- the overwhelming majority of the Chin people live on a slash-and-burn agriculture. This is especially true in the southern Chin state. Medical and Education- because of the remoteness and isolation of the villages and hamlets, education and medical care are difficult with the Baptist churches sponsoring some boarding schools in larger areas so children from the more isolated hamlets might attend schools in the larger villages.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

ABC partner with the Chin Baptist Churches USA, the Myanmar Baptist Convention and the Chin Baptist Convention in support of development projects for the Chin Hills. There are several needs:

- support for the Baptist sponsored boarding schools
- support for Union Theological College and Seminary in Matupi and Chin Christian College in Hakha

- support for economic development in both northern and southern portions of the Chin State that offers farmers alternative practices to slash-and-burn agriculture for additional sources for food and income, and clean water where needed
- support for orphanages run the churches
- placement of ABC volunteers for development work