

Burma Refugees Commission

June 2017 Report to Board of General Ministries

A delegation represented by Rev. Dr. Roy Medley, General Secretary Emeritus, ABC; Rev. Dr. Pat Medley, Rev. Joan Friesen, Executive Minister, ABCGI; Ann Borquist (IM missionary); Rev. Dr. Paul (IM Special Assistant) and Gail Aita (ABWM) visited Thailand and Burma during the latter part of February 2017. Rev. Maw San Awng (Jum), Kachin pastor from Indianapolis coordinated a meeting in Rangoon for the delegation with Rev. Samson, General Secretary of the Kachin Baptist Convention.

Dr. Roy Medley had written three very detailed reports and summarized by Florence Li.

Meeting with United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

Roy & Pat, Paul & Gail, Joan and Ann first met with Ms. Ruvendrini Menikdiwela, UNHCR Representative to Thailand, and Peter Trotter, Senior Protection Officer on February 20. Ms. Menikdiwela said the camps are depopulating as people are leaving voluntarily and return to Burma. Many have done so without formal processing by UNHCR and the protections that offer them. UNHCR has processed only about 100 people for repatriation. Apart from clearing out the backlog of those registered for resettlements from the camps, there will be no further massive influx of refugees from the Thai camps. The UNHCR officials fully expect further reductions in the numbers and funding of refugees from anywhere that resettled in the US under the current new administration.

Menikdiwela spoke of the economic development in SE Myanmar and a concern that those remaining in the camps would be left out. They indicated that USAID was having a major conference in Myanmar about development issues. As of June 15, Mr. Trotter will be the field officer for the camps and will be situated in Mae Sot. The Thai and the Burmese government both have agreed to the repatriation and have committed to following UNHCR's lead on this.

While NGOs are shifting their focus and funding to Burma, there are still services in the camps. There has been no reduction in food rations. No malnutrition. The US is underwriting the majority of food and medical aid. In regards to mines, land ownership and citizenship, UNHCR acknowledged those are remain as issues that they are working on. As for family reunification, people can proceed with application once when they returned to Myanmar.

With regard to Malaysia, the response was that the Chin were assimilating well, setting up businesses, etc. However, they were not sure about access to medical and educational services. They pointed to the fact that Malaysia had recently shipped refugee aid to Burma as a sign of the good will of the Malaysian government.

Visit to the Chin State

Roy & Pat, Paul & Gail, Joan, and Ann visited Falam and Hakha. The delegation accompanied by Rev. Francis, associate general secretary of Chin Baptist Convention started from the airport at Kalaymyo to Falam. The road continues to be in bad condition, yet, there were far more work crews and machinery visible than before. While the heavy work of excavation done with modern

earth moving machines, most of the paving itself done by hand. Houses are perched overhanging the steep drop of the mountainside supported by pylons of rough timber driven into the slope. Some are 20 or more feet above the slope at the cliff side of the house. For these homes, only a rough wooden gangplank connects them to the flat roadside. Pigs, stored firewood, and outhouses are often beneath the houses. Rice brought into the hills by truck. Pigs and chickens raised by nearly every family in pens near their homes and serve as staples of protein.

Aside from majority Baptist, there are Pentecostal, Adventist or Roman Catholic Church. One sees occasional Buddhist pagodas that almost non-existent before, were built by the invaded central army to the Chin State in the effort to "Burmanize" the ethnic peoples with intention to wipe out their language, customs and Christian faith.

The Chin Baptist Convention is composed of associations that are language based. The Chins have developed many dialects due to their previous long isolation from one another in the rugged mountains. Falam and Hakha are the two major cities in the north. Each of these is the headquarters of their associations while a smaller Tiddim speaking association also exists.

Rev. Joshua, Treasurer of the Falam association hosted the delegation. Rev. Joel, the new General Secretary of Hakha Baptist Association, Rev. Dennis who had served as GS of CBC, the treasurer and several associates hosted the delegation in Hakha.

Although the army presence was never as violent as that experienced in the Karen, Kachin and Shan states, many youth and younger adults left the Chin State during the period of its greatest presence. They fled mainly to Malaysia and to India states that border Chinland and to Delhi. Thus, vacant homes and sign of the depopulation indicates every family has relatives resettled overseas, the third countries. The UN declared that due to the reduced military presence in the Chin State, Chins are considered "economic refugees" and were no longer to be resettled.

Since Daw Aung San Su Kyi's new ruling party, the military presence is reduced and lesser strong efforts to "Burmanize" the Chins. However, the political climate is still fragile and hopes for the reforms in government and the constitution are fading. The Chins are one of the ethnic groups that have signed the ceasefire as part of the political process towards a nationwide ceasefire and peace accord between the central government and the armed ethnic groups. The representatives of all the ethnic groups in March will continue to refine their negotiations with the central government. The two chief concerns and conditions for peace have remained constant: 1) Federalism, meaning that each state will have a degree of autonomy. 2) The amendment of the constitution to amend and/or remove portions that privilege the military's role in governance.

Overall, the visit to the Chin State have three main concerns:

- 1) The diminishing hope for reaching agreement with the central government on political reforms and the return of military rule and violence;
- 2) The plight of the Chins in Malaysia portrayed to be much darker than described by the UNHCR representative in Thailand. There are great poverty of those in Malaysia, inaccessibility of education and medical care as major issues. If people have no UN registration card, they are subject to detention and deportation. They have no security.
- 3). Dislocation of people by the landslides still occurred two years ago.

Funds from ABCUSA World Relief Committee should be provided and explore what CBCUSA is also contributing to this effort. The overall scope of relief will far exceed ABC capacity and can only sustain by government and NGO internal and external intervention.

Visit to the Karen State

Joan Friesen, Roy & Pat went with Rev. Dr. Saw Sampson, General Secretary of the Karen Baptist Association north of Rangoon to the village of Toungoo that is the seat for three Baptist associations. The countryside is flat and fertile with rice paddies. Houses constructed of timber and bamboo mats. Water buffalo and bullocks abound, as draft animals to prepare the fields for planting and pulling high-wheeled carts are the major forms of conveyance. The villages are a mixture of old and new. Many of the traditional homes have small solar panels whose energy is stored in batteries and even satellite dishes. Chickens, pigs and dogs freely wander among the houses. Other than traditional agriculture and house shops in the larger villages, there appear to be few other vocational opportunities. The local people confirmed this repeatedly.

The area the delegation visited is under KNU authority and is accessible only by narrow dirt roads. They left unimproved on purpose to thwart any land-based assault by the central military. This is the land that was fought over before the ceasefire and that conflict produced many IDP's. A school supported by the Karen churches for IDP children and youth in grades seven and up. Classrooms and dormitories built with the aid of NGO's, but operational funds are scarce. The area near the school serves as a training ground for strafing and bombing. The teachers talked about how the students have been traumatized by the battles that led to their families being driven off their lands. For a good number, their families have been displaced since 1975. The KNU has resettled some in a village but most have not been so fortunate.

When the delegation probed the folks about comments by UNHCR in Bangkok that camp residents were leaving the camps in Thailand because of the growing number of jobs in the southeast of Burma, they all strongly denied that this was the case as far as they knew. Another core narratives repeated of distrust of the military and the central government and a growing despair about the peace process and amending the constitution to provide for federalism and to lessen the role of the military in governance.

Meetings with church leaders of the three associations and the issues expressed included:

- Lack of spiritual maturity leading to inner-church conflict,
- Aggressive evangelism of Baptists by Pentecostals,
- Difficulty in serving remote churches especially during the rainy season.

Each association have vigorous programs to educate those called to pastoral ministry up to a Bible school education. Approximately 50% of their clergy are women and all pastors are bi-vocational with no salary from the churches. Both male and female laity and pastors are trained but they are limited by the agricultural work that never ceases and by the rainy season. Because the area is religiously mixed with Christians, Buddhists and traditional animists they place a high value on mission and evangelism. They also offer social and development services through Christian centers.

Meeting with Kachin Baptist Association

Maw San Awng (Jum) coordinated a meeting in Rangoon with Rev. Samson, General Secretary of the Kachin Baptist Association, joined by David Tegenfeldt, the son of former ABC missionaries to the Kachin who now works for an NGO in Burma. Roy and the delegation heard of the continued fighting in the Shan State that abuts the Kachin State and the growing number of IDP's that result from the ongoing violence. Comments highlighted the deep distrust of the military and growing dissatisfaction with the central government in Naypyidaw under Daw Aung San Su Kyi.

Findings

The delegation felt this was a sobering trip with the following findings:

The issues related to repatriation of those remaining in the camps including land rights, citizenship and security and uncertainty have not been adequately addressed.

The UNHCR was adamant that there will not be another registration for resettlement in a third country. They will remain a feature of the political landscape for several more years requiring the ongoing support of other nations and the NGO community.

The situation in Malaysia remains difficult for those who fled there. Those who work are subject to wage fraud. Those without UN issued identity cards and even those with them are subject to arrest and placement in detention camps. Social services such as education and medical care are limited at best and usually nonexistent for them. They are not being integrated into Malaysian society.

The wave of hope that accompanied the election of Aung San Su Kyi is quickly fading among the ethnic peoples who overwhelmingly supported her election. According to some, she is not open to any significant degree of federalism and has caricatured the ethnic political groups as a barrier to negotiated peace. The military seems to have, as firm a grip on power as in the past and it is resistant to any change in the constitution that would lessen its role in governance.

Roy stated that it is important that the ABC continue its advocacy and support for those who have immigrated to the US, those yet in Thailand and Malaysia, and those within Burma including IDP's. Together with the Baptist Churches in Myanmar and our partner conventions whose roots are among the refugees here, we have an important voice. This tragedy will not be resolved soon. Our commitment to prayer, partnership, relief, development and advocacy are vital. We cannot solve the issues at play but we can stand in Christian solidarity with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Burma Refugees Commission responded to the delegation trip.

Burma Refugees Commission had a conference call on April 25, 2017. We discussed the delegation's trip and took it seriously that the advocacy work within the Commission must continue and information of this visit has to share with ABC entities. The Commission members are planning to make an advocacy trip to the U.S. State Department in D.C. in the fall and seek more clarity of which department and personnel have the responsibility under the new

presidential administration. The ethnic leaders (Saw Ler Htoo, Duh Kam, Jum Maw) agreed to gather more information to Florence and to create a document for the advocacy purpose.

Last but not the least, Leslie Turley via Ann Borquist reported that students from the Kawthoolei Baptist Bible School and College in Mae Lae Camp were not allowed to move around or stopped being re-entered back to the camp for their mission works. School supplies supported by IM development project and external partners could not reach to the bible school. Leslie was in touch with Peter Trotter who is now residing at Mae Sot, the nearest town outside the Mae Lae Camp. Rev. Saw Ler Htoo was in touch in Rev. Robert Htwee, the refugee camp committee key liaison between the Thai government and camp committees. Peter's response was that the Thai military commander is tightening up their rules and policy on camp activities. The Bible School is exploring an alternative site to conduct classes as new school year began in April. Leslie is working closely with Ann Borquist to monitor the situation.

Your prayers for Burma are appreciated.

Submitted by:

Rev. Florence Li
June 2017

Burma Refugees Commission members include:

Biak Hlei Mang – Chin Baptist Association of North America
C Duh Kam – Executive Minister, Chin Baptist Churches USA
Florence Li – National Coordinator for Intercultural Ministries, Asian Ministries, ABHMS
Joan Friesen – Executive Minister, ABC of Greater Indianapolis
Maw San Awng (Jum) – Kachin Baptist Church of Indianapolis, IN
Paul Aita – International Ministries Special Assistant
Ronald Charles Nunuk – National Coordinator for Burma Diaspora Communities in U.S.
ABHMS
Sandra Hasenauer – American Baptist Women's Ministries
Saw Ler Htoo - National Coordinator for Burma Diaspora Communities in U.S., ABHMS
U Myo Maw – Burmese Churches Association of North America
Roy Medley – General Secretary Emeritus, American Baptist Churches (Roy will converse with Rev. Dr. Lee Spitzer, new GS of his role in the Commission)