



With you

● UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Bangkok Office newsletter, Year 1 : 2009. Volume 1



Children at Mae La refugee camp in Tak province : Photo by UNHCR/R. Arnold

The **UNHCR** is among the world's leading humanitarian agencies and currently assists 33 million refugees and displaced persons around the world.

Join us to improve the quality of life of refugees in Thailand



A Stream of Help for Nargis Victims

In early May 2008, Cyclone Nargis slammed the Irrawaddy river delta region, leaving 2.4 million people homeless. More than 140,000 people were left dead or missing.

The natural disaster dealt a severe blow to many Burmese, who were already suffering from political pressure which drives many to flee to neighbouring countries.

With the readiness of more than 70 officers posted in Myanmar and a stockpile of relief supplies for refugees in Thailand, the UNHCR in conjunction with the United Nations was able to set up temporary shelters and provide food supplies to some 250,000 cyclone victims.

After a lengthy negotiation with the Myanmar government, the first convoy of trucks laden with relief aid left Thailand for Myanmar in late May, followed by cargo planes from Dubai to Rangoon. Relief supplies comprised 88,000 rubber sheets, 117,000 blankets, 113,000 mosquito nets, 50,000 pots and pans, 100,000 cans of foods and 400,000 bars of soap.

Ma Chawi, a 43-year-old farmer from Gan Gayi Zu village, is among the 250,000 who received UNHCR help. When the cyclone came ashore, she and her husband were busy selling rice in a nearby market. When they got back to their village, which

was badly hit, they found the dead bodies of their parents and two daughters lying under a boat. Luckily, their son survived. The three went back to where their home used to be, but lived under a rubber sheet, with blankets, a mosquito net and cooking utensils provided by the UNHCR.

“One rubber sheet is enough for the three of us. We don’t need to worry about where to sleep any more,” she said.

They made good use of the multi-purpose rubber sheet - to protect them against the scorching sun and pounding rain, and to collect rainwater for drinking now that the village pond had been damaged by the cyclone.

“Villagers said they must wait eight months for Vetiver grass to grow high enough for roof-making. Before the rubber sheets arrived, they had to run for shelter under pouring rain due to roof leakages. Mosquito nets are of great help,” said Miew Taki Yo, a UNHCR information officer who toured the cyclone-ravaged areas.

A stream of help from foreign and neighbouring countries, like Thailand, is still not enough. As of October 31, 2008, or six months afterwards, the UNHCR reported that many widows and children were still waiting for help.

Goodwill Tents for Earthquake Victims in China



1. Working against the clock to sew tents for the victims. Photo by UNHCR/J. Song
2. Veerapong Vongvarotai, UNHCR Regional representative for China and Mongolia, hands over 11,000 tents to the Chinese foreign affairs ministry. Photo by UNHCR/J. Song
3. A retiree stands near what is left of his house - door frame and a front wall. Photo by UNHCR/J. Song

On May 12, 2008, an earthquake measuring eight on the Richter scale struck China's Sichuan province, killing 88,000 people and leaving 4.8 million people missing or displaced.

Although the UNHCR's main mission is to assist refugees, this natural disaster was too devastating to ignore. Financial assistance of US\$60,000 was immediately sent to the Chinese government (US\$50,000 from the agency and US\$10,000 from the pockets of staff).

"I was shocked to see the damage so severe. We contacted the Chinese government right away to offer help to the victims," said Veerapong Vongvarotai, UNHCR regional representative for China and Mongolia.

Later, on May 19, the Chinese government asked the UNHCR for temporary shelters. With our best efforts, 15,000 tents, worth US\$3.4 million, arrived 10 days later (with US\$2 million funding from the UN's central fund for immediate assistance). The first batch of 10,000 tents arrived in Sichuan province on June 1 and another 4,000 tents went to Gansu province on June 23. As a result, 75,000 victims of the earthquake were provided with shelter. This was the biggest cooperation between the UNHCR and the Chinese government in more than 30 years.

"Our team visited a relief supply distribution center at Chengdu, the capital city of Sichuan province, which was hit by an after-shock registered at 6.3 on the Richter scale. Staff worked days and nights to help people in trouble. The effective supply distribution is very impressive," said Veerapong.

"This is a great tent. Thanks everyone for helping us," said Chin Lifu, 62, from Chiang city, as he signed a form to receive the UNHCR tent. Simply-built brick homes in his city were mostly destroyed and the death toll topped 400, with 16,000 others displaced. Chin lives with his 88-year-old father, and his elder and younger brothers. Fortunately, when the earthquake struck the whole family were out working in a paddy field. Only one cousin was seriously injured, and his house was reduced to the ground. Before receiving the tent, the family lived in a temporary shelter made of pieces of wood, covered with a plastic sheet.

Amid the misery, friendship blossomed. The Thai government and its people also lent a helping hand.

"Thailand is increasingly becoming a great help to UNHCR works, and we are touched by the good will Thai people have towards earthquake victims and refugees around the world," said Veerapong.



Santi Siritheerajesd

A Smile From Refugees...is a Reward for my Hard Work

For the past decade, areas in Tham Hin village in Thailand's Ratchaburi province and Ton Yang village in Kanchanaburi province have been turned into temporary shelters for refugees from the Thai-Burmese border, who have fled infighting and killing stemming from politics. The refugees - male and female, children and the elderly - live in a cramped space. Each day, they cook distributed food supplies and wait for a chance to return home or resettle in a third country. Today's life is no different from that of yesterday. The world of the refugee stands still.

Santi Siritheerajesd, a UNHCR official who has been working for the refugees for more than six years, has used his best endeavours to move their world forward. The smile of happiness and the hope of resettlement is a great reward for him.

"I first worked as a legal advisor at an international law firm, then I moved to work as a legal advisor for the Bangkok refugee center," he said. "I later took a volunteer job as an assistant to the protection unit of the UNHCR regional office in Bangkok. I spent the next two years working for the Jesuit Refugee Service Thailand. I am currently working for the UNHCR field office in Kanchanaburi. Our office works with the Thai government in taking care of and protecting refugees in temporary shelters in Tham Hin village in Ratchaburi province and Ton Yang village in Kanchanaburi province.

"The UNHCR mission is to coordinate with the

public sector and private agencies, as well as the refugee committee and refugee communities, in protecting and assisting refugees in the areas of education, medical services, public health and legal and justice proceedings in cases where the refugees become the victims of abuse or crimes. We also ensure good understanding of the UNHCR role among public agencies at both the district and provincial levels."

The field work is demanding, and Mr Santi has to travel for much of the time to visit the shelters.

"At present, Thailand is home to 120,000 war refugees in nine temporary shelters in four provinces," he said. "Most of them are minorities or those fleeing attacks or severe human rights violations by the Myanmar government. They fled to Thailand and were designated to temporary shelters. They received limited education. The monthly food ration comprises of mostly dried food, without meat or vegetables. Such restrictions have resulted in deteriorated living conditions. Stress and pressure trigger abuse. Sexual abuse is the main problem among the refugees."

Witnessing hardship and fully understanding the problems inside the camps have inspired Santi to give his all to help every refugee start a new life.

"The goal of the UNHCR is to protect the refugees and offer lasting solutions to their problems," he said. "The best international solution



1. Children smile brightly at UNHCR officers.

Photo by UNHCR/R.Arnold

2. Santi Siritheerajesd, right, at work in a refugee camp.

3. Photo by Santi Siritheerajesd.

4. Living conditions in a refugee camp. Photo by UNHCR/R.Arnold

5. A child in Mae La refugee camp in Tak province.

Photo by Santi Siritheerajesd

6. A girl born and raised in a camp. Photo by UNHCR/R.Arnold

is to send the refugees home on a voluntary basis when the situation there is peaceful and safe. Another solution is to integrate them into the country of asylum. The last is resettlement in third countries. Thailand adopts the last strategy. The US welcomes the highest number of refugees. Some refugees move to Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Ireland and Scandinavian countries.”

The UNHCR has made consistent progress, with tens of thousands of refugees able to start their lives anew.

“Many liken our job to merit-making as we are devoted to helping others. I think it is true. When we look at how the refugees - children, female and the elderly - lead their lives, I have no second thoughts about why I choose to work here. Refugee problems are complex and we cannot do away with all of them. But if we can ease the suffering of the refugees and make their lives a bit easier, I am satisfied with the job done and can even forget the troubles or the trip I have been through.”

“The concrete success is when the refugees get treated. Many have resettled and begun new lives. They have no compensation for us, just a frank smile and a warm hug. For me ... that is happiness right there, not what we get but to see them happier.”

Though we might not all be able to land a job like Santi, we can play a part in UNHCR work.

“You can send money or other donations to the UNHCR,” he said. “Our budget comes from the UNHCR and direct donations. In an abstract way, just try to understand the refugees. They live in restricted shelters. Some children were born here and never experience the real world outside. I hope society will look at them fairly and kindly. They fled hardship in a search of better lives and feel grateful to our country and His Majesty the King, just like the Thais. The right mindset definitely helps.”





Bangladesh refugees beam as the UNHCR issues them ID cards for the first time.

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) issued ID cards to some 22,500 refugees in the Kutupalong and Nayapara refugee camps in Bangladesh. Issued to every refugee over the age of five, they bear a photo and the refugee's name and details, as well as the distinctive UNHCR logo.

All refugees were thrilled to receive the ID card for the first time. The card not only gives them a sense of identify, but recognises the status of themselves and their families and gives them a taste of human rights.



Beijing Olympics athletes get the chance to give hope to refugees.

The UNHCR and the International Olympic Committee launched the "Giving is Winning" Campaign in the Olympic Village to encourage athletes to give surplus sportswear to refugees in Asia. The campaign was warmly-received. More than 82,000 items were collected and distributed to refugees in camps throughout the region, who received the brand-new clothes.

The "Giving is Winning" initiative was first established at the Athens Olympics in 2004, when more than 30,000 items were collected. The campaign was warmly received and donations have increased.



Over 100 Bhutanese refugees resettle in the United States

More than 107,000 Bhutanese refugees have resided in seven camps in eastern Nepal for 17 years, waiting to be deported home. But 15 rounds of negotiations between Bhutan and Nepal failed to reach a solution.

Eventually the UNHCR managed to send 100 Bhutanese refugees to the United States to begin new lives. They were thrilled. One 16-year-old girl said she had never seen a computer before and going to the US would be a huge leap in her life.

By the close of 2008, some 200 Bhutanese refugees had been sent to third countries and over 10,000 are expected to leave Nepal for resettlement in the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Denmark, the Netherlands and Norway.



Angelina Jolie ends Afghan visit with call for more returnee support

International film star and UN refugee agency Goodwill Ambassador Angelina Jolie has concluded her first visit to Afghanistan, where she saw both the successes and the difficulties involved in return and reintegration.

Jolie travelled to Nangarhar province where almost 850,000 lived in a cramped space. She saw how some 1,400 returnee families have been living in makeshift shelters and tattered tents. They have limited access to basic social services such as health and education and have been unable to return to their homes due to insecurity, land disputes and a lack of economic opportunities.

The actress called on humanitarian agencies to increase assistance to the population and help in their repatriation.

1. Photo by UNHCR/R.Arnold
2. Photo by UNHCR/R.Arnold
3. Photo by Santi Siritheerajesd



Myanmar Refugees

More than 30,000 have already begun new lives in third countries

The world's largest refugee resettlement operation by the UNHCR took place between January 2005 and June 2008, sending 30,144 Myanmar refugees from Thailand to start new lives in third countries. The US welcomed 21,453 refugees, while 3,405 refugees have settled in Australia and 2,605 others began new lives in Canada. The remainder headed to Finland, Ireland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway and the UK.

Most of these refugees fled the fighting and oppression in Myanmar and have taken refuge in camps along the border with Thailand. Many lived there for 20 years, while some were born and married in the camps.

Resettlement is the most desirable option for these refugees, for whom returning home or integrating into Thailand is not possible.

Asia is the region with the largest resettlement operations. In March last year, over 10,000 Bhutanese refugees are waiting to be resettled in the US, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Denmark, the Netherlands and Norway.

Nine Thai camps were to house the remaining 124,000 refugees.

Yes ! I want to help refugees in Thailand today.



Your donations in action:

THB16.66 per day = THB500 per month
= Can pay for a refugee child to attend school for one semester.

THB13.33 per day = THB400 per month
= Can provide refugee children with equipment for life-skills development through sports and play.

What do you get in return?

You will make a real and lasting difference to the lives of refugees in Thailand and the region.

You will receive regular updates on how your money is being spent to help refugees.



The **UNHCR** raises funds in Thailand in May 2008 through credit card donations to improve the quality of life of refugees in Thailand and the region.

Become a UNHCR donor
at office buildings, department stores, hospitals, theatres and other public places.