CHILDREN WITH HOPE – A VISIT TO THAILAND

Rev Fr Marcus Stock

The following is a brief account of a recent visit to Thailand which I made during the last two weeks of January 2009. My visit was made in three capacities: firstly, as a Trustee of the Thai Children's Trust, to visit as many as possible of the various charitable projects which the Trust supports; secondly, as the Director of Schools for the Archdiocese of Birmingham, many of whose schools are busy raising funds to help support the Hsa Thoo Lei School in Mae Sot; thirdly, as the Parish Priest of Sacred Heart & St Teresa's Church in Coleshill, which supports the orphanage in Rayong for children who are HIV+.

Schools of Hope

One of the large refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border

My stay in Thailand began with several days being spent in the area around Mae Sot in the north west of the country. Here I visited refugee camps and villages, schools, orphanages and 'children's boarding houses'. Nothing could have prepared me for what I was to see and hear in those places. Up to that point I had been largely ignorant of the plight of so many people now living as refugees in Thailand who had fled, and continue to flee, from the brutal military dictatorship that holds sway in Burma (now officially known as Myanmar).

Currently, there are more than 600,000 refugees living in refugee camps or provisional compounds in Thailand. Inside Burma, there are almost a further 2 million internally displaced persons. These people are forced to hide from military attacks in remote areas of the country's jungle region; many of them are suffering from malnutrition and have no access to medical care or education.

The conditions in which the people live in the refugee camps and villages have to be seen to be believed.

One of the children's 'boarding houses' at the Umpium Refugee Camp

My visit included a day at one of the largest of the refugee camps three hours north of Mae Sot, called 'Umpium'. The 'boarding houses' which are 'home' to so many of the orphaned children are often no more than a shed on stilts constructed in bamboo, the children sleeping in cramped rows on a bamboo platform above a mud floor which opens directly to the outside. When it rains the camp becomes a mud quagmire, with pools of stagnant mosquito-filled water forming beneath where the children lay. The roofs are made of rush or, more commonly, mud soaked large leafs.

My time in Mae Sot with the refugees enabled me to meet a wonderful people who have won my heart; a people who are oppressed yet live with great dignity, poor in material goods yet rich in kindness and generosity; displaced from their homeland yet preserving their proud history. This people are the 'Karen'.

The children's boarding house 'kitchen' (above) & eating area (below)

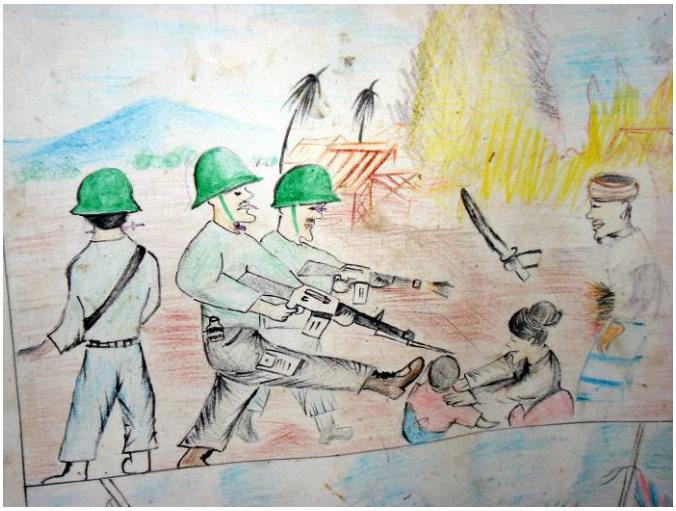
Children at Hsa Thoo Lei performing a vigorous and captivating traditional Karen dance to honour our visit

In events occurring largely unnoticed by the international community, an intense and brutal civil war has been devastating the border areas of Burma since 1962. The current military junta in Burma, the 'State Peace and Development Council' (SPDC), is ruthlessly oppressing and attempting to eradicate the cultures and traditions of more than 136 ethnic groups living within the country's borders. The Karen is one of the largest of these ethnic groups.

Only a couple of weeks before my arrival, a coalition of Burmese army forces and their allies, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), had begun a major offensive against Karen villages. These soldiers are acting with incredible brutality; men are being tortured to death and women systematically raped. Recently, in one of the villages a 7 year old girl was raped and then killed. These troops have even crossed the border, planted landmines and attacked people in the refugee camps in Thailand itself; only in January, three DKBA soldiers were arrested in the Thai refugee camp of No Po.

There are also many Karen people living in dire conditions in refugee villages which are outside of the 'official' refugee camps. As illegal immigrants in Thailand, they are living in humiliating conditions and are in constant fear of being deported because they have not been given official refugee status. The only way they can earn any money is by toiling in one of the many sweatshops located along the Thai-Burma border or falling prey to exploitation in the sex trade. The military government of Burma is clearly attempting to destroy the individual identity of the Karen people. Their history and language is being suppressed as the SPDC bans all schools in the Karen State from teaching their own language and history.

One individual though, herself a Karen refugee, has worked tirelessly for her people by giving the children living in the camps and villages a future – through education. Her name is 'Naw Paw Ray'. The largest and most advanced of the schools that Naw Paw Ray has founded is Hsa Thoo Lei, with over 700 pupils; many of these are orphaned children or children whose parents are still in Burma. What these children have seen, no parent would want their child to witness. Most of them walked into Thailand across the mountains, some under fire, others after escaping from slavery as 'porters' for the Burmese military, or seeing their villages raided by troops, with friends and relatives shot dead.



A picture painted by one of the children in the camps, revealing what they have seen

The contribution Hsa Thoo Lei and the other small schools make to the children's welfare and safety is essential. School uniforms help the children to avoid arrest and forced repatriation. Repatriated children can be forcibly enlisted as soldiers, as porters, or simply sold into the sex trade. The children learn Thai and English, essential to obtaining a career or enabling them to leave Thailand for a new life abroad.

Class at Hsa Thoo Lei School

Hsa Thoo Lei School costs just £70,000 per annum to run - the most phenomenal value for money available. But finding funding for the school has been difficult and tenuous. Last year, many of the children were unable to eat except when funds became available. Following my appeal to them last September, over half of the schools in the Archdiocese of Birmingham took up the challenge to help the Thai Children's Trust to assist the Hsa Thoo Lei School. Their great generosity is already making a very real and positive impact on the lives and welfare of extremely disadvantaged children and young people; their help provides food and the basics needed for their education.

There are some 40 other smaller schools operating in the remote refugee villages and camps in the Mae Sot border area. Many of these smaller schools have 'children's boarding houses' in which the children live and sleep when not in school; they provide a home to orphan children and to children whose families live in the more remote refugee camps where there is no formal education available nearby.

Children relaxing after school in their boarding house at one of the small and remote refugee schools

In Mae Sot, I also visited a small home for orphaned refugee children who are HIV+ and another home for refugee mothers and their children who are both HIV+. Their status as refugees makes it even more difficult to meet their particular needs and reflects the multiple difficulties that so many of the refugees living along the Thai-Burma border have to face. The Thai Children's Trust is working with the home to improve conditions, attend to their needs and co-ordinate help with other agencies working in Thailand.

Children of Hope

Happy children at the 'Baan Tharn Namchai' Orphanage in the Khao Lak region

Following my days in Mae Sot, I flew down to southern Thailand to make a brief visit to an orphanage called 'Baan Tharn Namchai'. This home is for children who are victims of the Tsunami which devastated the Khao Lak region in Thailand on 26 December 2004. Led by the inspiring Khun Rotjana, the orphanage provides outstanding facilities for the now obviously very happy and flourishing children in its care. It is a real success story and portrays in a powerful manner how the sustained help that the Thai Children's Trust has provided can transform the lives of children who have been traumatised at such an early stage in their personal journey through life.

I then flew back to Bangkok and travelled down to Pattaya and Rayong (about two hours south of Bangkok) to spend the rest of my stay visiting some of the other projects which are supported by the Thai Children's Trust. Too numerous to mention here, I would like to concentrate on just two of the projects both of which owe their foundation to the charismatic and energetic leadership of Fr Giovanni Contarin, a priest belonging to the Order of St Camillus.

The first is one that my parish in Coleshill has supported since 2005; it is an orphanage and independent living centre located in Rayong which provides a home and education for over 60 children and young people who are HIV+. All of these children were born HIV+, they all need antiretroviral drugs and a strict daily medication and diet in order to stay healthy. But, as well as special medical care and support, they need an education, a childhood and love. Many of them were rejected by their families or communities because of their illness. Part of the work of the Centre is to fight this stigma and to help the children feel loved and valued.

Children and staff at the Camillian Orphanage in Rayong

Fr Marcus and Fr Giovanni with some of the children and staff at the Camillian Home for People with Disabilities'

The second and most recent project is a new 'Camillian Home for People with Disabilities'. This home, established by Fr Giovanni on the southern edge of Bangkok, is the first of its kind in south-east Asia; a Centre where children who are disabled and HIV+ are not separated from but live, and are educated with, other children with disabilities who are not HIV+. The other significant feature of this Centre is that it is staffed and managed by adults who are themselves disabled.

The Riches of Hope

Throughout my very intense and packed visit to Thailand, what struck me is the 'hope' which inspires, motivates and sustains children and adults in some of the most difficult living conditions. In the midst of incredible poverty, there is still the aspiration, joy and hope of youth – qualities that the schools and the education they provide both sustain and promote in challenging learning environments. In terms of material goods, buildings and resources, we have so much and they have so little. Yet, when it comes to 'hope', I cannot help but contemplate that the children and young people in those orphanages, schools and refugee camps just might be the richer. Although we have been financially helping them, perhaps they have something even more valuable to offer us.