

Thailand-Myanmar CROSS BORDER BULLETIN

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Celebrating World Refugee Day

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Kawkareik, Kayin State

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UNHCR Senior Protection Officer





All photos: Celebrating World Refugee Day 2016
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Celebrating World Refugee Day 2016



1. Team building activities between UNHCR staff and refugees
2. A traditional performance in Umpiem camp
3. A student in Nupo camp reading a poem about refugees to the audience
4. A traditional performance as part of the celebration in Nupo camp
5. Children enjoying the UNHCR photo booth in Ban Don Yang camp
6. A girl in Ban Don Yang camp smiling as she talks to UNHCR staff
7. Blessing in Tham Hin camp
8. Children dancing and singing in Umpiem camp
9. Mae La camp residents celebrating the event at the football ground
10. A group of young refugees performing traditional bamboo dance in Tham Hin camp
11. A friendship volleyball match between refugees and UNHCR/NGO staff
12. Karen ladies waiting for the opening ceremony in Tham Hin camp

World Refugee Day Event

Mae Hong Son Town

22 June 2016

At Hong Son Suksa Auditorium

World Refugee Day has been a key event where both UNHCR and NGOs work together to raise awareness and highlight the situation of refugees to the Thai population. This year, UNHCR Field Office Mae Hong Son together with Mae Hong Son based NGOs organized the event at the Hong Son Suksa Auditorium Hall, where representatives of refugee communities, students and Thai authorities participated. The Mae Hong Son Governor came to officially open the event and visited the exhibition booths of UNHCR and NGOs, where the agencies' activities and refugee-made products were presented. The event gave the opportunity to the Thai public to appreciate the rich culture of refugees in the region through traditional performances by Ban Mae Surin and Ban Mai Nai Soi camp residents. It was also an opportunity for Thai students from Hong Son Suksa school to see the advancement of the winner dance group from the Karenni's Got Talent, the project initiated by COERR. Apart from the performances on the main stage, desks were also set up at the agencies' booths for any interested attendees to write messages of encouragement from the host community to the refugee community. The students were also given quizzes to test their knowledge about refugee issues and information. Students gave positive feedback about the exchange, saying that it was the first time that they had been exposed to a refugee camp. The solidarity felt between the students and refugees came out clearly through messages shared by the students such as, "we will be by your side" or "Love Refugee 😊". At the end of the event, all attendees lit candles as a symbolic gesture of illuminating hope for refugees.





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1. Students lit up candles for refugees as part of the celebration in Mae Hong Son
2. Messages from students to cheer up refugees' spirits
3. A dance group from the Karenni's Got Talent competition
4. Refugee's HOPE illumination
5. Karenni dance group performing on stage



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Mental Wellness

Ban Mai Nai Soi and Ban Mae Surin camps



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Supporting the mental health of refugees has been identified as a priority over the past few years by the International Rescue Committee Thailand (IRC). According to CCSDPT health NGOs, mental health challenges remain a growing issue in all of the Thai-Myanmar border camps. In Ban Mai Nai Soi and Ban Mae Surin camps, mental health disorders are prevalent, yet remained essentially hidden, until the IRC psychosocial program was fully established in 2010. The most common major mental health issues can be linked to a general feeling of hopelessness, uncertainty, depression and lack of motivation. Despite the efforts of organizations to develop livelihood alternatives that aim to give people a sense of purpose and a small income, reports of depression, anxiety and uncertainty persist.

The IRC and its camp-based partner, the Karenni Health Department (KnHD), have increased access to mental health and psychosocial services for camp residents. The IRC focuses on Psychological Screening & Diagnostic Services for common psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and severe mental health disorders such as psychosis and schizophrenia, as well as referrals to the Thai public hospitals for the treatment of complicated severe mental health disorders not suitable to be managed in a camp setting.

While IRC-trained medics oversee and monitor psychological drug treatments, the (camp-based) Psychosocial Counselors provide equally important non-drug interventions, such as individual counseling; family counseling and support; behavior therapy such as stress management and relaxation techniques training and yoga; art therapy; referrals to other agencies in the camps; and basic material support, if necessary. Ti Reh, a KnHD Psychosocial Counselor, states, "For me, it is a fulfilling experience working in this program and to see clients get better over time, and that they can return to a normal life."

In particular, the Art Therapy program has seen great success by providing a creative outlet for refugees and by increasing social support. As reported by one refugee patient,

"I was very interested in drawing since I was young. I joined the painting bags art sessions, provided by the IRC Psychosocial team, and I am very happy meeting friends who have similar interests. I am very satisfied to see the beautiful bags I have created."

At the community level, the IRC provides trainings to CBOs and schools on psychosocial services and referral processes, and conducts awareness-raising campaigns to disseminate mental health information. Efforts are also made to increase access to mental health services; reduce stigma, and to provide short-and long-term mental health care and support.



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As part of its outreach, the IRC also targets elderly camp residents and engages them in activities to promote self-esteem and a sense of purpose, such as small scale income generation activities.

"I was fortunate to join the income generation project from IRC Psychosocial Program, and it was very helpful for me to earn some small money to cover my household expenses from my efforts. I feel very satisfied that I can contribute to my family", notes one refugee patient.

Seinn Seinne Min (Sheila), the IRC Psychosocial Officer describes her work, "I am fascinated working in camps with the refugee psycho-social workers. They are so motivated and compassionate for the residents who need much attention for mental health and social well-being. I am also really satisfied observing the recovery of clients from their mental health challenges, and gradual improvement in quality of lives because of the services we offer."

The IRC Psychosocial program reaches its clients in an empowering and holistic manner. As one refugee patient describes,

"I have been suffering from pain and tension for a long time, but I learned the breathing exercises and stretching exercises from psychosocial workers. I feel much better without pain, and I feel happier."

As for the psychosocial counselors, while the work is challenging, they strive to help their fellow community to live healthier lives. Ban Mai Nai Soi Psychosocial Counselor-in-Charge, Shae Meh, states, "I count myself very lucky for having a career where I can help other people. Seeing the smiles on their faces make me motivated to keep working harder."



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Land Mine Victim Assistance Centre in Kayin

**HANDICAP
INTERNATIONAL**

In March 2016, Handicap International, in partnership with the Myanmar Physically Handicapped Association, opened a Victim Assistance Centre in Kawkareik Township.

Clement Meynier, Inclusion Projects Coordinator at Handicap International, describes the work of the new Centre and explains the challenges faced by people with disabilities.

There are an estimated 7.7 million people with disabilities living in Myanmar, including landmines/explosive remnants of war (ERW) survivors. Although the country ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2011, people with disabilities are still experiencing many barriers, social and physical, to their full participation in society – including in the ongoing democratic transition process and the associated peace building dynamics.

Kayin is among the states with the highest number of mine survivors and people with disabilities in the

country. Some townships, for example Kawkareik Township in southern Kayin, show very high numbers.

Based on our Victim Assistance Centre experience in neighbouring townships (Kyaukkyi, East Bago) and our role as Victim Assistance Technical Group Chair, Handicap International has seen that landmine/ERW survivors in Kawkareik may account for one third of persons with physical disabilities; in some villages this percentage is as high as 75%.

In the most remote villages, mines/ERW accidents have an abnormally high rate of mortality, leaving many victims, widows and orphans isolated. Survivors and victims, as well as adults and children with disabilities from other causes, suffer from a lack of access to basic services.

In particular for mines/ERW victims, the lack of psycho-social and physical rehabilitation services is a major obstacle to engaging in economic and social activities after their accidents. Women in particular express the need for increased and relevant psycho-social support, and all amputees struggle to access appropriate maintenance for their assistive devices.

In partnership with the Myanmar Physically Handicapped Association, Handicap International directly addresses the needs of adults and children with disabilities and mines/ERW victims by supporting: (i) social inclusion at the most local level, (ii) accessibility and mobility ensuring a sustainable prosthesis maintenance system, and (iii) coordination and promotion of Victim Assistance actions.

The implementation of activities is done directly by mines/ERW survivors and persons with disabilities themselves, who are trained as volunteers as part of the work of the Victim Assistance Centre based in Kawkareik city. This network of 20 trained volunteers act as ambassadors of change in the township by:

- Conducting data collection and needs assessments in different areas in the township, with a focus on the most contaminated zones;

- Providing psycho-social support to persons with disabilities and their affected family members, building self-confidence and referring them to appropriate services;

- Repairing prosthesis for users, bringing a rehabilitation service closer to their homes and working stations, thus reducing travelling time to the Hpa-An Orthopaedic and Rehabilitation Centre;

- Fostering inclusion by organizing social events in villages, emphasizing the ability of impaired persons;

- Advocating for a change of practices and policies, transforming persons with disabilities, including landmine/ERW survivors, into actors, rather than objects, of social action.

The Victim Assistance Centre is supported by UNICEF. It is the central component of a project which aims at improving the social participation and access to basic services for landmines/ERW victims as well as adults and children with disabilities due to other causes.

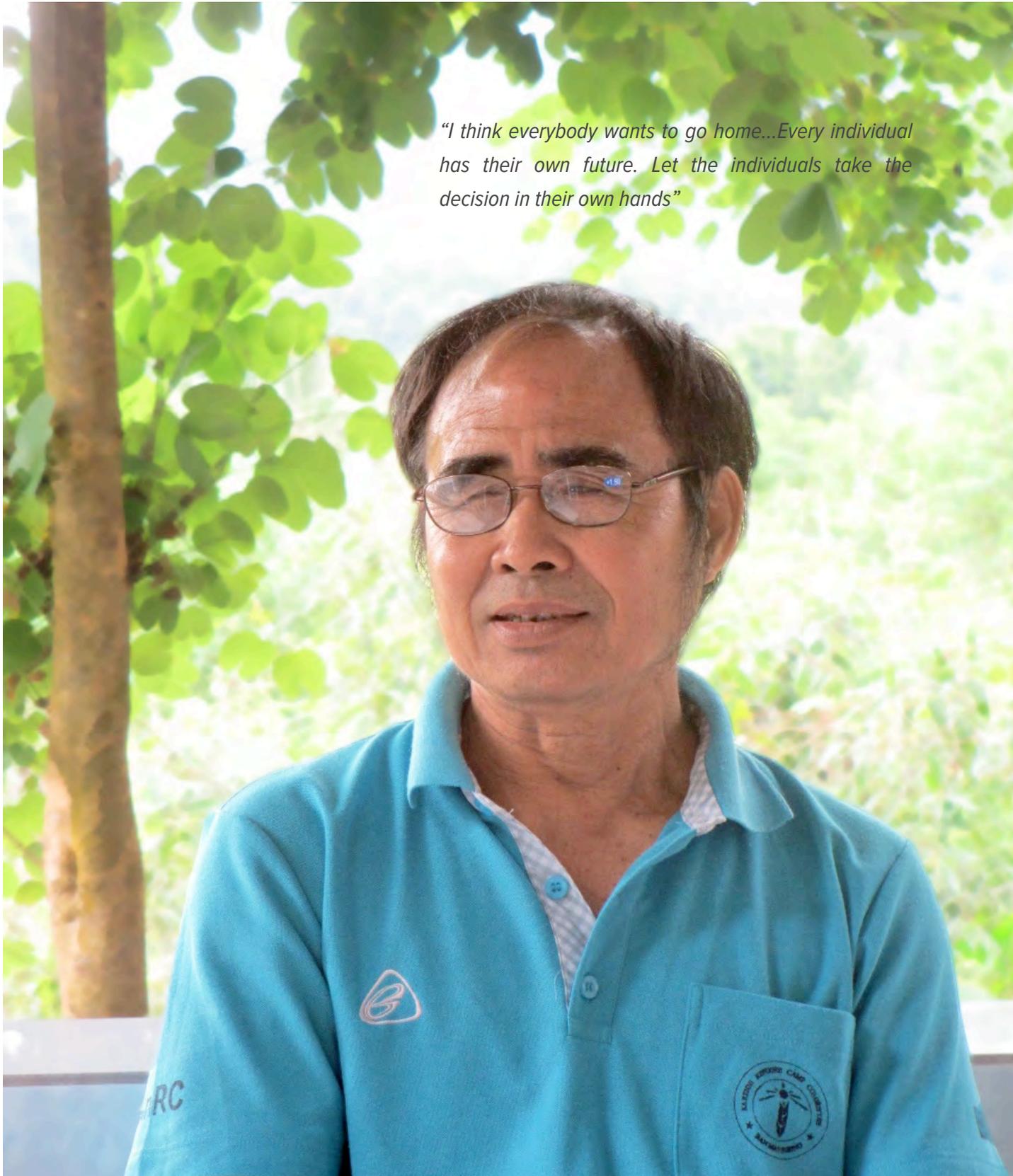


EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

Saw Mahn Saw

Karenni Refugee Committee Chairperson

“I think everybody wants to go home...Every individual has their own future. Let the individuals take the decision in their own hands”



FOR MANY DECADES, KNRC CHAIRPERSON SAW MANN SAW HAS FACED SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES TOGETHER WITH DISPLACED PERSONS FLEEING FIGHTING AND POLITICAL PERSECUTION FROM MYANMAR. IN AN EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH UNHCR, HE SHARED HIS INSPIRING MESSAGE OF STRENGTH AND HOPE FROM ONE GENERATION TO THE NEXT.

Mr. Saw Mann Saw, thank you very much for speaking with us today.

Can you introduce yourself to the readers?

My name is Saw Mann Saw. I am working as the Chairperson of the Karenni Refugee Committee (KnRC). This is my second term. I was born in 1949 in a small village called Khin Gyi Village in Taungoo, three miles from the main town. I have four siblings: two older sisters, two younger brothers, and I am in the middle. My father used to be a farmer and my mother used to work as a midwife at the military hospital. When I was young, I was a curious boy, and I spent most of my time exploring the environment outside of my house.

The civil war was already on-going when I was born. Due to the war that started in 1949, I moved to two or three different places during my childhood. When I was one year old, my family moved to Chauchi, Po Thoung Sut village, Kayin State. I stayed there for eight years. In 1958, I moved to Taungoo. The conflict between certain ethnic groups together with the Burma Communist Party against the Myanmar Government forced many people like me to flee from their homes for their safety and security.

In 1975, after I completed the tenth grade, I left Taungoo and joined the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) on the Thai-Myanmar border, where I became a member of the KNPP from 1976 until today.

What is your main responsibility as KnRC Chairperson?

My responsibility as Chairperson of KnRC is to oversee all KnRC activities. KnRC is the committee in charge of coordinating and working together with UNHCR, Thai authorities, NGOs and Camp Committees to ensure the systematic and fair distribution of all services to Karenni refugees.

What inspired you to work for the refugee community?

Many elements. In fact, at first I did not intend to work at KnRC, but, I am here because of the need of the community. My inspiration came from my experience in getting to know our people along this border. Refugees here face difficulties and many disadvantages compared to other communities.

What is your goal in life? Have you achieved it?

I cannot say that I have achieved my goal at present. But one thing I've done while I am here is to closely work with the NGOs and the Thai government for the improvement of the situation of our people. I try to act as an example for the younger generation by being punctual and by carrying out my duties. I would like to encourage younger people to gain knowledge by reading and also to value the importance of time by making good use of their time. I would like to teach the younger generation of our community about the importance of discipline and manners. I want our people to try their best when facing any situation that may be presented to them. I hope that in the future, we will all be able to return to Myanmar, peacefully and voluntarily.

What is your main concern when working with the community and with partners?

I think that language is important when we communicate with each other. So, when I work with community and partners, the main concern for me is the language barrier.

What are your thoughts about the current dynamics in Myanmar? Do you think that it is moving in the direction you expected? What still needs to be done?

Politics in Myanmar is very complicated. I think that the political situation is moving forward, but very slowly. I think that trust, goodwill and respect for each other is the key to the reform process.

What is your hope for the refugee community in the future?

I think that everybody wants to go home. The home we will go back must be peaceful and secure. If repatriation takes place, I hope that the process will be implemented according to voluntariness, safety and dignity.

Are there anything you would like to share with the readers?

Every individual has their own future. Let the individuals take the decision in their own hands. Thank you very much.

A Visit to Nan Kyaing Lay, Kayah State

Surrounded by lush green mountains, Shadaw is one of the smallest towns in Kayah State. In the evening, one can see Karenni women wearing their traditional attire after returning from the forest with the basket full of firewood they collected. It is also common to see women weaving at home. Life is quiet. Nature is green. And water is fresh and clean. Everything is very natural in Shadaw township. If we wander a few steps outside of the town, one can see different kinds of birds that make this forest their home.

Some refugees originating from Shadaw recently returned back home to start their new lives. UNHCR visited one of the villages in Shadaw which is known as Nan Kyaing Lay. Nan Kyaing Lay is a village located in the northern part of the long Shadaw-Kadugyi road. Nan Kyaing Lay, known by some as Daw Le Khu, is a new returnee village where many people from Shan State and other remote villages in Shadaw have settled. UNHCR visited the village in late 2015 and was able to provide support to the community through a livelihood project run by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC).

UNHCR met one refugee returnee who was working as a nursery school teacher and she told us about her experience coming back to Shadaw. Here is her story.



My name is Benedetta. I am 28 years old. I have two children, and I came back from the refugee camp in Thailand six months ago to Nan Kyaing Lay village together with my family.

When I returned, I had nothing to restart my life. I have my parents in Shadaw and I thought that I might need at least two to three years to be able to reintegrate into the community. But surprisingly, the villagers here invited me to work as a nursery school teacher for the children in this village. We have a self-help nursery school. Government officials visited our village and, next year, we will be able to open a primary school with the budget from the State Hluttaw as initial support from the State authority.

In this village, we are not many. We are about 30 households. We expect that more people will move from elsewhere in Shadaw and perhaps Thailand in a few years' time because of the good location compared to other very remote places.

Since many people moved from different places, including myself, everybody is in the same condition. No one has a good house. For me and my family, we are staying at a neighbour's house, and we are allowed to stay there until they come back. **I feel encouraged that I can live here and try to restart my life together with other community members, although I also understand that I will have to start from the very beginning.**

I had nothing but when I was in the refugee camp. I worked as a social worker, and I tried to save my small income so that I would have something to sustain my family for a certain period when I came back. With the

support that I received from UNHCR through the DRC livelihood project, I now sell some groceries from my home for extra income. We rely on the travelers who pass this road as our customers.



My friend lent me a piece of land where my husband and I can grow sesame. But this year was very unfortunate, as mice destroyed the crops and we were not able to harvest at all. We hope that we can have a better harvest in the future, and we also plan to look for another piece of land where we can work on our own.

We also have a hand-dug well. Water access is still difficult, but we were told that either one social organization or the government will provide the water supply.

In terms of safety, there are places where we can cultivate safely, but we are also aware that there are some areas that will be unsafe because of the landmines.

I applied for family registration and a Citizenship Scrutiny Card (CSC) in Shadaw. My children were also able to get birth certificates.

When I just came back, I did not know what to do. The future was totally unclear. But in these few months' time, I see that I can do something. I feel that my return can be sustainable.



Moving On!

A Farewell Message from Senior Protection Officer



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*May Fong Choong
UNHCR Senior Protection Officer,
Head of Field Office
Mae Sot, Thailand*

I am lost for words to properly express how I feel as I leave UNHCR. I will not say “Goodbye” to the work with refugees, as refugees will always have a special place in my heart. Leaving UNHCR does not mean that I will stop my work with refugees. I shall find every opportunity to advocate for their cause in my own personal way.

Thirty-four years of service with refugees has been the most rewarding and, looking back, these have been amongst the best years of my life. When I first entered UNHCR in 1982 as a three months short-term staff member, little did I know that I would remain in the organization and stay for another 30 years. Refugees have helped me grow personally and professionally. They have taught me resilience in the face of adversity; the value of the human spirit and to take a stance with our beliefs so that we can define who we really are. Along the way, I have forged strong friendships, defying all

odds that come our way. Looking back, I can only think of some of the highlights of my career : the return and reintegration of the Vietnamese Boat People to their homes; the reconciliation of the population in the Former Yugoslavia Republic of Macedonia; expansion of resettlement opportunities for refugees in Africa; the first return airlift of returnees to North-East Somalia, and the issuance of birth certificates to refugee children in Cambodia. There are still many more...

As impermanence is the nature of all things, it’s time for me to move on. I feel very blessed to have been given the opportunity to make a difference in refugees’ lives. May all the refugees at the Thai-Myanmar border operation find a permanent solution, fulfilling their dreams and aspirations.

Information Management Unit Thailand Operation

UNHCR Field Office Mae Sot
34/5 Mae Sot-Mae Tao Rd.,
Mae Sot District, Tak
63110 THAILAND

Contact: imumaesot@unhcr.org

UNHCR Thailand

3rd Fl., United Nations Building
Rajadamnern Nok Ave.,
Bangkok 10200 THAILAND

UNHCR Hpa-An, Myanmar

UNHCR Field Office Hpa-An
Bogyoke, Road, Ward 9,
Hpa-An, Kayin State, MYANMAR

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