



Tham Hin camp's ice-cream man returns to a warm welcome in Tanintharyi Region, Myanmar

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After spearheading the voluntary return from Tham Hin camp on 25 November 2016, Tun Tun Win and his family are settling back in Myitta town in Tanintharyi region, Myanmar. The children are back in school while their father plans to start a business selling what he knows best -- ice-cream and roti.

MYITTA, Myanmar, November 9 – When Myanmar refugee Tun Tun Win told his friends that he wanted to return to Myanmar, many thought he was crazy. After all, life in Thailand's Tham Hin refugee camp was not bad: He made ice-cream for a living, his wife Sai Na worked for a community-based organization and his four kids were all in school.

We still had some concerns, but we decided to return because Myanmar is our home. We want to re-establish our life at home, he said when they approached the UN Refugee Agency early this year to discuss their plans.

One of their concerns was the lack of information on Myitta town, where they planned to return to join Sai Na's family. In response, UNHCR shared with them more information about the town, such as the security situation, social services and livelihood opportunities available there.

They also organized their own go-and-see visits which helped to ease their concerns. In March this year, Tun Tun Win traveled to Myitta to meet his wife's relatives and to assess the situation for himself. "It's much better now," he observed. "Our relatives said the same. Before, they were afraid of everything. Now they can walk freely."

A few months ago, Sai Na also passed by her village on a work trip. While she seemed worried about limited livelihood opportunities there, she was determined to return: "We expect to face difficulties upon return, but life in the camp is also difficult."

During the first protection counseling session in March, UNHCR informed them about the conditions that should be met before the agency could support their return. The family agreed for UNHCR to share their information with the Myanmar Government, which sent a delegation to visit the camp in early September. After checking the family's MOI-UNHCR documents, the delegation issued them with a Myanmar Certificate of Identity (Col) which is a form of travel document valid for two months. They also had an opportunity to directly ask the government officials some questions, such as how their children could enter school upon return.

Our children were very small when we left Myanmar so they don't remember anything about home, but we talked to them and they are willing to follow us back to Myanmar and stay as a family, said Sai Na about her three girls and one boy, between the ages of 6 to 13 years.



Tun Tun Win and his family are ready to start a new life back home in Myanmar ©UNHCR

UNHCR encouraged them to obtain education certificates and any other relevant records for their children. They were also referred to the camp clinic run by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) to get any medical records and medications that they might need.

On 21 October, UNHCR provided further counseling to the family and reconfirmed their decision to return. They received details of the cash and material assistance to be provided on the day of departure, the schedule and transportation arrangement, as well as UNHCR's reintegration support in Myanmar.

Thai Immigration officers also visited the camp where they conducted immigration procedures in order to simplify the border-crossing process. Handicap International (HI) provided mine risk education, while IRC instructed the family on how to use the water and sanitation kit that they were provided, together with mosquito nets.

On 25 October, after much anticipation, the family of six was ready to depart. They received their documents, the cash and non-food assistance before they were transported by UNHCR and IOM to the Phu Nam Ron/Htee Kee border crossing point. There, the two governments organized a departure/reception ceremony before the family was escorted back to Myitta town on the same day. In addition to the assistance provided in Thailand, they also received cash assistance from the Myanmar government.

Tun Tun Win, Sai Na and their children are now staying temporarily with relatives in Myitta town. They intend to build their own house on a small plot owned by her family.

After presenting their education certificates issued by the Karen Refugee Committee Education Entity (KRCEE), the children were able to enter school without much difficulty. Today, all four children are attending the government-run school in Myitta town.

The next step was to regularize their legal status in Myanmar. While Tun Tun Win and Sai Na thought they had misplaced their national ID, fortunately their relatives had kept their old documents with them. The couple has now begun the process of applying for a Household List and identity documents.

Life in Myanmar may not be easy, but with the assistance provided, we plan to open a small shop around Myitta town, said Sai Na, adding that they will sell ice-cream and roti.

Her husband added with a smile, "My dream is to get rich through the business and support my children's future."

The couple requested that UNHCR follow up on their situation in Myanmar as an example to other refugees in Tham Hin camp. Sai Na noted that many people in the camp want to return, but lack confidence.

Talking about peace in the camp does not help; returning to Myanmar and proving it yourself is more important. We should do our best wherever we are. It is better if the place is our home country, she said.

UNHCR continues to work closely with the Thailand and Myanmar governments, IOM, NGOs, CBOs, KRC and KnRC, donors and other stakeholders to ensure that up-to-date information is provided to refugees on the voluntary repatriation process. UNHCR Protection teams are always available to counsel any refugees who are interested in return, and they are encouraged to approach UNHCR and the Voluntary Repatriation Centers (VRCs) in each camp where they can receive more information.



The family members share a meal together at home ©UNHCR

For more information, contact:

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