

SHAN Health Clinic

– Thai-Burma Border –

Last year, the military junta of Burma showed yet again how little it cares for the wellbeing of its people by suddenly raising the price of fuel between 100 and 500 percent. In a country where 95% of people live on less than \$1 a day, it meant that people could not afford to go to work, because of the cost of transport, and could not afford kerosene - used by most people for cooking.

Seeing how much this fuel price hike was hurting the people of Burma the monks, who number in the thousands, took to the streets joined by thousands of ordinary Burmese, in what became known as the 'Saffron Revolution'. The protests in September and October of 2007 were the largest seen in the country since 1988, with over 100,000 people joining in. The crackdown that followed was brutal, with the military government, the SPDC, sending out troops against the people, killing hundreds and arresting thousands.

In May this year, despite having been warned several times that a severe cyclone was approaching Burma, the government took no action to alert the people. The effects were catastrophic, with around 100,000 people killed and millions left without any shelter, clean water, food or access to medical services. By failing to allow aid into the country quickly the Junta put many lives at risk and the effects of the disaster are still being felt.

In the midst of crisis the junta, whilst ignoring the suffering of the people, was busy pushing ahead a referendum on a new constitution that would give them even more power and at the same time ramping up military insurgencies into ethnic regions such as Karen and Shan state.

Since 1996, over 300,000 Shan villagers have been forced from their homes in Burma and many more live as internally displaced people inside their country, while it is estimated that up to 200,000 Shan people have fled to Thailand, and live there in a number of refugee camps near the Thai city of Chiang Mai, or work in Thai cities as 'illegal' and exploited labourers.

These refugee camps are well organised, and the Shan Health Committee has been established to run a number of health clinics in various refugee centres to provide basic services for the Shan people living in exile.



▲ Shan camp harvest celebration lunch

The Project

The Shan Health Clinic provides free medical assistance to Shan refugees who have fled Burma. All 5,000 people living in the camp have access to health care, provided by Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA and our partner, the Shan Health Committee. The clinic is free to all patients; this is crucial in a refugee situation where there is no money to pay for these services.

The Committee has set up a clinic that services a refugee camp in the Mae Fah Luang district, near Chiang Rai. Refugees to this camp have been fleeing the increasing numbers of Burmese troops in southern Shan State, and the subsequent rape, torture, extrajudicial killings, forced labour and land confiscation.

The Shan Health Clinic treats patients with a variety of problems, including landmine injuries, malaria, respiratory tract infections, TB, HIV/AIDS, and ulcers. Maternal and child health is also a focus of the clinic, as is health education.

The clinic is currently expanding to accommodate the growing numbers of patients it is seeing. It is staffed by 26 full-time health workers who are based at the clinic; over half of these (14) are women. In the 6 months to February 2008, the clinic saw 2677 patients, with the most common illnesses being upper and lower respiratory tract infections, skin infections, diarrhoea and other stomach problems. The clinic refers patients to the Thai government hospital for further treatment that is beyond the resources of the clinic.

The clinic has also operates a team of "backpack" medics who treat people in the jungle area around the clinic. These backpack teams are often the only form of medical assistance people who do not live in the camps can access, they treat the sick as they find them, most commonly they treat; landmine victims, women in labour and people with respiratory infections.

The clinic runs educational, nutrition, and vaccination programs, as well as training for medics. In addition, the clinic has a strong focus on the needs of women and children in the camp. Their educational programs focus on pre-natal care, nutrition, HIV/AIDS and family planning, providing information and free contraception to women in the refugee camp.

Medics from the clinic also visit the camp school every few months to talk to the students about personal hygiene, as well as to do minor check-ups. The clinic provides food supplements to pregnant and breastfeeding women, and underweight children, and in the 6 months to February 2008 supplemented the diets of 137 women and 73 children.