Language and Life-skills Training: Empowering Burmese Refugees in Thailand

Mae Sot, Thailand

Davis Projects for Peace

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“"The education and empowerment of women throughout the world cannot fail to result in a more caring, tolerant, just and peaceful life for all."” - Aung San Suu Kyi

BACKGROUND:
In 2012, the prospects of Burma, politically referred to as Myanmar, became dramatically more positive when Burmese activist and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Aung San Suu Kyi began peace negotiations with the government and President Obama became the first American president to visit the nation. Despite what appears to be progressive in the media, however, a great deal of Burma’s population still lives in extreme poverty and the repressive government continues to use violence to enforce policies. The Eastern regions are considered the poorest and most vulnerable; nearly 60 years of unrelenting civil war has resulted in the destruction of 3,600 villages in the region since 1996, along with it, 446,000 internally displaced peoples living in the Eastern states and many fleeing for Thailand. A majority of the minority ethnic groups never receive formal schooling, and with no English or computer skills, job prospects are slim. Burmese refugees are common targets for exploitation since they often do not speak Thai and many are tricked into slavery with promises of a better life.

Access to health information as well as employability and job security are ways to combat human trafficking. In Mae Sot, a hub for Burmese refugees, computer skills and English language skills are in high demand but there are few organizations that provide this type of training because the Thai government refuses to fund schools where the Thai language is not taught. Heavenly Home Orphanage, managed by a couple from Singapore, provides food, shelter, and education to 69 Burmese children. Though many of their students are considered illegal immigrants and the school does not receive any government funding, a single couple, as well as 7 other staff and volunteers, have been working to protect and promote the lives of these orphans. We intend to partner with them to add a public health component to their curriculum. Because many refugees do not receive formal schooling until reaching Thailand, concepts of health and wellness are largely cultural rather than based on scientific reasoning. Having a basic understanding of immunology, nutrition, and first aid can make a huge difference for a poor family in Mae Sot who may not be able to afford health care.

In addition, employability is particularly important for women because life in Thailand can be harsh. Many women, including extremely young girls who remain in the refugee camps are married young and the conservative nature of their cultures encourages women to have as many children as possible, whether they can afford it or not. Leaving the refugee community to pursue a career can result in being exploited and paid little or nothing. Some women are even trafficked into other parts of Thailand for domestic and sexual slavery under the guise of a legitimate job. In an interview, a Burmese woman who was forced into domestic slavery in Bangkok stated that her unlikely key to freedom was her ability to write her Mae Sot address in English. Learning English provides an opportunity to rise above their repressive conditions as well as to go back and help improve conditions for others, encouraging peace in Thai refugee camps and ultimately, in Burma, where many refugees still hope to return to during their lifetime.

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6 Physicians for Human Rights.
OBJECTIVES AND PURPOSE OF THE LIFESKILLS CLASSES

1) To discuss valuable knowledge about nutrition, preventing illness, and basic health and wellness: allowing students to prioritize and understand their own health while decreasing the influence of cultural misconceptions which may be present regarding this topic.

2) To invoke continuing dialogue about human rights, health and wellness, leadership and empowerment in refugee camps while creating a sustainable, cost-effective program which can easily be repeated every summer to continually promote education, awareness, and ultimately peace in Thai refugee camps and ultimately in Burma.

3) To empower students at Heavenly Home Orphanage with English speaking, reading, and writing skills to increase employability.

IMPLEMENTATION:
Because there are few resources at Heavenly Home Orphanage, April-June is devoted to preparing materials and lesson plans. Teaching will occur Monday-Friday with younger children and on the weekends with the older children who go to school on weekdays. The first week will be used solely for assessment of the needs of the children. Sesa will arrive June 30th and work for two weeks before Tenzin arrives. She will relay information to Tenzin who can bring any supplies that are needed which were not previously accounted for. There are 24 children under 5 years old at the home and the rest of the children go to school from Monday to Friday. We will focus on learning Basic English words and phrases and help prepare the children for reading. The older children will learn about puberty, nutrition, and sanitation. They will also complete human rights projects at the end of the program to educate their classmates about a topic of their choice. This will introduce and reinforce good research methods and computer skills. The total duration of the program is 8 weeks, though it will be split, with Sesa and Tenzin each spending an intensive two weeks independently working with the students.

SUSTAINABILITY AND FUTURE IMPACT:
The theme of this project is “Each one Teach one,” so detailed notes of the original teaching model, instructions for making materials, and a core group of faculty who are trained on the material, will ensure the same information will be taught throughout the school year. The students will be challenged to reach out to their own peers and spread the information they learn in class to the greater community. After each week, we will conduct an anonymous survey in which students and faculty will help provide feedback and identify areas where improvement can be made. The last week will be spent analyzing evaluations and conducting daily meetings with the selected team of teachers and volunteers who will continue to teach the material at Heavenly Home Orphanage. The team of teachers and long-term volunteers will be trained and be held accountable to Heavenly Home to ensure the effective execution of the integrative classes in the future. Throughout the summer, we will be developing partnerships with organizations and human rights workers all over the country of Thailand and in the United States to gain support and collect donated supplies that the border schools can use. We will apply for additional funds to set up an endowment so that the project can be expanded to employ nurses and health educators to work inside the schools and support subsequent instructors who will be trained in the model we have created through Heavenly Home.

PERSONAL BACKGROUND AND QUALIFICATIONS:
Sesa and Tenzin are research partners for the Berger Institute of Work, Family, and Children at Claremont McKenna College where they have been conducting research on the socioeconomic situation in the volatile Thai-Burma border area under the supervision of the institute director. Both have previously studied in Southern Asia, have extensive teaching experience with ESL students and immigrants, and have human biology expertise. Both students plan to attend medical school after graduation.