

Libraries for Refugee Camps —The Shanti Volunteer Association

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What Refugees can Bring to Refugee Camps

The Shanti Volunteer Association (SVA) was established in 1980 during the exodus of refugees from Cambodia. Since its inception, the organization has emphasized the library project, providing library services to Cambodian refugees from 1980 to 1991 and to Laotian refugees from 1985 to 1992 in Thailand. In the year 2000, SVA began implementing the project for refugees fleeing to Thailand from Myanmar.

People usually associate aid with the provision of food, water, health care, sanitation, and shelter. Why, then, does SVA place such importance on library services for refugees? In answer to this question, let me recount one episode. When we first began mobile library activities in a camp for Cambodian refugees in 1980, one of our staff members was walking through the camp with a Cambodian picture book called *The Rabbit That Ate Bananas*. A woman suddenly snatched the book from his hands and began shaking uncontrollably, fighting to hold back her tears. It turned out that she had written that book. When she had lived in Phnom Penh, she was the renowned author of close to twenty picture books. She had been forced to flee her homeland, however, after the Pol Pot regime took over Phnom Penh in 1975 and began implementing its book-burning policy. Along the way, she discarded first one book and then another, finally parting with the one she held dearest. She barely escaped to the refugee camp with her life.

Refugees are forced to leave behind almost everything they possess when they flee their country. But there is one thing they cannot leave behind: their culture. SVA continues to promote library services in the belief that educational activities to restore and nurture the refugees' culture can help them to help themselves.

Myanmar Refugees in Thailand

A total of 130,000 refugees including two minority groups, the Karen and the Karenni, have fled from Myanmar to Thailand and are now residing in ten different camps on the Thai-Myanmar border. The vast majority of refugees in the camps wish to return home as soon as their safety can be assured, but the prospect of repatriation seems distant and the number of new refugees annually fleeing into Thailand is 10,000. It is reported that there are also over one million internally displaced persons in Myanmar.

The refugee camps were established in about 1980. Health, sanitation, food supply, and shelter are being provided through the cooperation of various aid organizations. There are also elementary and secondary schools supported by Dutch and American NGOs. There are two needs, however, that have not been adequately addressed. The first is the lack of cultural and leisure opportunities. For example, people have no access to books and, although there are areas to play such sports as soccer or volleyball, there are no areas set aside for children to play safely. As wage earning is prohibited in the camp, refugees cannot work. One high school student told me, "When I graduate, I want to work at something that is of service to others. But I don't know what to do." The other need is for opportunities to heal the psychological trauma borne by all refugees, including children and youth. When children are permitted to draw freely, many of



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them depict the tragic events they have experienced such as the death of a father, war or life in the jungle.

It was in consideration of these factors that SVA decided to support this library project. From our experiences in Cambodian and Laotian refugee camps, we believed that children's healthy development depends not only on food and shelter, but also on books and stories that nourish the soul. These help develop children's creativity, reinforce values and the attitude of cooperation, and impart the power to heal their psychological wounds.

The Library Project in Myanmar Refugee Camps

SVA supports a total of eight libraries, two or three each in three different camps: Mae Kong Kha Camp (15,000 refugees) and Mae Ra Ma Luang Camp (10,000 refugees) both in Mae Hongson Province, and Nupo Camp in Tak Province. Members of the Karen ethnic minority comprise the majority of camp residents. UNHCR provides financial support for the library project and the contents of project activities and services are described below.

1. Establishment of a Library Committee

The library committee is the parent organization responsible for management and administration of the libraries. It decides the number of libraries to be established, library rules and location, recruits and appoints library staff, and bears responsibility for maintenance and administration. Members are all unpaid volunteers and they consist of teachers, camp section leaders, youth, and women. SVA specifically requests that women be appointed to the committee but it is very difficult to achieve an equal number of men and women members due to the gender role division that exists in traditional Karen society. The process by which the committee is established is crucial because the successful solution of the many problems that occur during and after establishment of a library will depend upon the committee's capacity.

2. Construction of Library Building

The construction site is selected in consultation with the library committee and in consideration of the site conditions, population, and access for children. Bamboo and eucalyptus are the main building materials. These are procured outside the camp and shipped in by SVA because cutting timber in the camp area is prohibited. The roofs are made from leaves that fall from trees within the camp. As there is no electricity in the camps, six semi-transparent plastic sheets about two meters in length are built into the roof as skylights to provide interior lighting. Floors are raised on stilts. Male refugees construct the building and it takes eight men about ten days to complete it.

The library has three rooms: a children's room, an adult room and a librarian's room. The children's room is the larg-

est and has sufficient space to accommodate reading aloud and cultural activities with large groups of children such as arts and crafts, singing, drawing pictures, and dancing. Shelves are made of steel for durability and are specially ordered from a Thai manufacturer. The shelves are designed to display the covers of picture books and are adjusted to child height to catch children's attention.

3. Training and Support of Library Staff

The most difficult and, at the same time, the most rewarding task is training library staff. First a four-day workshop is held prior to the library opening for those who have been selected. Content focuses on the basic theory and application of library activities. Until they undergo this workshop, staff members usually assume that libraries are places for quiet reading and the role of staff is simply to organize and lend books. SVA libraries, however, are noisy places where children can freely learn and engage in various activities, essentially acting as a type of children's centre in addition to their library function. The role of staff is not merely to lend books and to maintain and administrate the library but also to direct cultural activities such as story-telling, songs, games, dance, hand games, arts and crafts, and origami. Staff members learn various story-telling techniques such as oral story telling and reading picture books, as well as how to use various story-telling media such as panel theatre, illustrated picture cards and cloth books. Once the library has opened, regular training sessions are held every two months to brush up their skills. Librarians are supported a small monthly compensation, which is regarded as incentive for medical and education staff in the refugee camps.

4. Selecting, Preparing and Distributing Books

Books are provided in two languages: Karen, the refugees' mother tongue, and Burmese, the common language used in Myanmar and one that refugees will need to speak when

they return home. Books for adults in Burmese can be purchased in bookshops in towns along the Myanmar border in Thailand. As very few books are available in the Karen language, Japanese and Thai SVA staff in cooperation with capable teachers in the camp translate books from Japanese to English and then to Karen and Burmese or from Thai to Karen and Burmese. The size and type of font for translated texts are adjusted for each page by computer, printed onto seals, and then pasted to the pages of the original language book. The book production process is thus very time consuming. We also purchase books from other NGOs and borrow any books in Karen owned by refugees for copying. There are five criteria for selecting children's books. They must have universal appeal, meaning books that have been read by children around the world for at least thirty years, foster intercultural understanding, express the importance of family bonds and peace, explain how the body works or health and sanitation, or deal with environmental conservation. We currently have fifty-seven children's book titles in Karen and Burmese that have been translated from Thai, Japanese or English. Each library stocks four hundred children's books and three hundred books for adult readers.

5. Mobile Library Services

Very few children who live over fifteen-minute's walk from the library are able to come. This trend is particularly marked in the three to seven-year-old age group. Accordingly, books for preschool children and those in the lower elementary grades are packed in boxes and taken to nursery and elementary schools in sections that are too far from the library. Workshops are also held for teachers in these facilities to train them in story-telling techniques.

6. Monitoring and Evaluation

After the library opens, monitoring is conducted every two weeks. The librarians keep a daily record of the number of



The library at Mae Kong Kha Camp



Shanti Volunteer Association (SVA) website
URL: <http://www.jca.apc.org/sva>

visitors, titles of books that were read aloud, any cultural activities held, and any problems or successes. The contents are discussed with the library staff during the monitoring sessions. Storytelling and other cultural activities are observed and suggestions are offered for improvement. Many different problems are recorded, such as loss or damage to books, a leaking roof, too many children visiting the library, and failure of some people to return books. SVA consults with the library committee and staff on possible solutions but many of the problems cannot be solved quickly.

Evaluation is conducted six months after the library opens. At the evaluation for Mae Kong Kha camp, it became clear that 1,500 children and 600 adults were using each library every month, achieving the projected objective. Ninety percent of children using the library, however, had already read all the books it stocked, indicating that new titles were needed. We plan to provide ten additional titles every year. It also became clear that there is a pressing need for English books for adults.

7. Book Publishing

As there are not enough children's books in Karen and Burmese, we have been publishing titles in both languages. Up to the present, we have published *Asian Folk Tales*, which includes Burmese and Karen folk tales, *A Picture Book about HIV/AIDS*, *An Origami Manual*, *Children's Rights*, and *A Collection of Karen Jokes*. As publishing consumes a great deal of time and funds, however, we have provided a portable mimeograph device to each library and train refugees in its use so that they can produce their own books. They are currently printing short stories.



Children enjoying reading books

Aid Organizations as Catalysts

I worked as the project manager for the Myanmar Refugee Aid Library Project from 2000 to 2001, and there was as much joy as suffering in this work. One of the greatest joys was to learn from a camp leader that of the more than ten aid organizations in the camp, they liked SVA best because we regard refugees as people who can change their own lifestyle, not as aid recipients, and provide assistance that empowers them.

The late Mr. Arima Jitsujo, the founder and former Executive Director of SVA, often reminds SVA staff that aid organizations are catalysts. In a chemical reaction, catalysts do not change, but they can activate and accelerate change in others.

Refugees are not powerless or wretched objects of pity. They are people with the capacity to live in difficult conditions; people who have pride in themselves. The role of aid organizations is to create opportunities for them to further develop their powers.

(translated by Cathy Hirano)



Reading story books for children at Mae Ra Ma Luang Camp library (photos in pp. 10-11 courtesy of SVA)

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