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IRP-THAI: Reports

General

WORK WITH REFUGEES IN THAILAND

Activities Report:
July 1, 1980 to June 30, 1981
And Projected Activities to June 30, 1982

Introduction

In recent years the people of Indochina have suffered greatly from war, famine, economic hardship, and civil strife. These factors have generated a flow of refugees within and among the countries of the region (Vietnam, Thailand, Kampuchea, and Laos), and to the outside world as well.

Currently the largest concentration of refugees is located in camps in Thailand: Khmer from Kampuchea, Lowland Lao and Hmong from Laos, Ethnic Chinese from Vietnam. They have come to Thailand for a variety of reasons: hope for a better life (including resettlement in the United States or Europe), fear of violence or political repression, or simply because they have heard that there is food and medicine in Thailand while there may be little at home.

The Thai government and the Thai people have great reservations about this refugee inflow. There are fears that refugees may take jobs away from local Thais; there is concern that some refugee groups may use the camps as sanctuaries from which to support guerilla warfare in their homeland; there is apprehension that the U.N. and other agencies may stop supporting the material needs of the camps, leaving the Thais with the costs and responsibilities.

The refugees themselves (whose numbers in Thailand are currently estimated at 300,000) live their daily lives with a mixture of fear, apprehension, boredom, and hope. Some have the goal of resettlement in a more prosperous third country and patiently or impatiently await their transit permit. Others would like to return to their homeland, some quietly and some as partisans of political insurgency. Still others feel that they have nowhere to go, living out each day in a kind of twilight existence, dependent upon a social service network that may one day disappear.

The AFSC Refugee Program in Thailand is specifically aimed at two groups of refugees who have the fewest options before them. These are Lowland Lao, who have left Laos in search of economic opportunity, or to escape drought and flood,

or to avoid participation in political reeducation camps; and the Hmong and other Hill Tribe minorities, many of whom were involved in fighting against the Pathet Lao which is now installed as the government in Laos; thus the tribes people are not likely to be allowed or to accept repatriation to their homeland.

In the past three years, the AFSC program has also assisted Vietnamese "boat people" in the Malaysian island camp of Pulau Bidong, and Khmer refugees in Thailand, particularly in the Sakaeo camp (population 30,000). The AFSC has worked closely with the Thai Committee on Refugees, an indigenous organization that is committed to developing a better understanding between refugees and local citizens.

Accomplishments in the Past Year

In August, 1980, AFSC's Co-Directors for the Thailand Refugee program, William and Ruth Cadwallader, arrived in Bangkok to initiate work with the Laotian refugees. The Cadwalladers have extensive experience in Thailand, and speak the Thai language. They immediately began the complex process of achieving formal government agreement for specific program plans, and visited various refugee camps to explore project ideas with local authorities. Formal registration and final approval to work in the camp at Nong Khai came through in March, 1981. By that time, however, the Cadwalladers had already begun program activities in the camp under temporary permits, and had hired six local Thai and Lao staff who had begun community development work in the camp. The work in Nong Khai is described in detail below.

The Cadwalladers have also established an office in Bangkok, and have continued contact with the Thai Committee on Refugees (TCR). In February they approved a small grant of \$250 to aid the TCR in its work at the Sakaeo camp. In November, 1980, the Cadwalladers were joined by Jill Arace, an Oberlin graduate student who has been assigned to the staff for two years. She immediately began Thai language study in the town of Chiangmai, and has accompanied the Cadwalladers on visits to several camps. In May, Jill Arace presented a proposal to work in the Sob Tuang camp, initially assisting an English language training project. This proposal has been favorably received by camp authorities, but as of this date the final approval and arrangements have not been completed.

Nong Khai Camp

The Nong Khai refugee camp currently has a population of 16,000 Lowland Lao, many of whom have been there for four years or more. Medical and sanitary services are considered adequate, and the camp is supplied with sufficient food for all (though because of some mismanagement, some families have not been receiving their full rations). For years the Nong Khai camp has been open to new refugees, who have settled into the life of the compound once they arrive; however, in January 1981, the Thai government announced a new policy designed to discourage continued Lao immigration; as a result a fenced detention center has been built at Nong Khai where new arrivals are held pending transit to a spartan detention camp from which they will apparently be shipped back to Laos. The government has also reiterated its position that refugees cannot permanently settle in Thailand and must either settle in a third country or be repatriated to their former homelands. This has created an atmosphere of anxiety and concern among the residents of the

Nong Khai camp, many of whom are not likely to be accepted as immigrants in potential host countries. There is still a residue of skepticism about the continued enforcement of the new policies, since many policy swings have occurred in the past. On the other hand, there is a greater receptivity on the part of some residents to consider possible repatriation to Laos.

The AFSC feels that, where feasible, repatriation to Laos is a desirable and less culturally disruptive recourse for many Laotian refugees than is third country settlement. Since AFSC staff are also currently working in Laos (with agricultural development programs), there is some hope that the Service Committee may be able to aid in this delicate and difficult situation.

In working in the camp at Nong Khai, the AFSC will try to operate flexibly with the main goals of assisting the camp population to improve their daily lives through a variety of self-help programs. Recognizing that some residents may emigrate to third countries, that some may repatriate to Laos, and possibly that some may continue indefinitely in Thailand, the AFSC program attempts to support and initiate projects that strengthen vocational, language, and other skills, and that promote self-sufficiency, cultural integrity and self-respect.

Project Beginnings: In the period September to December, 1980, the Cadwalladers made three trips to Nong Khai to investigate the needs of the residents. During these visits they met with the camp officials, staff of other voluntary agencies, and the Laos Committee, which is composed of the leaders from each of the camp's 14 sections. In January the Thai Ministry of the Interior gave written permission to begin work in the camp, though it was understood that a formal project proposal describing the scope of the work would have to be prepared and approved by the authorities. In that same month the AFSC hired Chatri Moonstan, a trained Thai community development worker to be Coordinator for Community Development in the camp. Chatri Moonstan and the Cadwalladers visited the camp in early January and were formally introduced by the camp commander. They took along a supply of sports equipment which had been requested by the Laos Committee for a youth recreational program, and while there they explained the possibility of starting a program to train para-community workers from among the Laotian population. This idea had been previously discussed with the Laos Committee in November, and had gained their tentative approval. In fact, the AFSC staff were able to interview eight candidates who were interested in the program during their January visit. Several buildings were inspected as possible sites to house the AFSC program, and Norwegian Church Aid offered a building for use as a combination office, recreation center, and meeting place. Housing for Chatri Moonstan and a Thai Coordinator for Social Welfare was also secured on the grounds of the camp. The Social Welfare Coordinator was hired in March. She is Patama Vichianrat a graduate in Social Work and Community Development from Thammasat University.

Initial Projects: Chatri Moonstan moved into the camp in early March. At the urging of the camp commander, the AFSC had agreed to initiate a tree planting program on the grounds of the camp and Chatri worked closely with the Laos Committee to facilitate resident involvement in the program. Seedlings were secured from local nurseries, and planted in a camp nursery on the

grounds that had been constructed by the residents. Then teams from each section came out on various days to do the planting. By the end of May over 1,000 trees had been planted and several hundred camp residents had participated in the process, usually in teams of 8 to 20 people. The trees included pine, tamarind, eucalyptus, cashew, coconut and a number of other ornamental and fruit-bearing varieties.

A second project, designed especially for young people, was an attempt at mushroom growing. This was undertaken in conjunction with the Laos Christian Youth group in the camp, and was rated as successful by the young people who participated in it, even though the sale of the mushrooms did not fully repay the AFSC investment. The coming of heavy rains, and some damage by dogs and cows reduced the final yield, but the young participants were pleased that they had learned to grow this crop, and they plan to try again once the rainy season is over.

In April, the AFSC secured the services of a guitar teacher and arranged for him to hold classes in the camp for interested young people. Some 20 people regularly attended the classes, which were held for several hours each day through the month. In early May the students held a concluding performance which was attended by residents of the camp.

Leadership Seminar: The early activities were well received by camp residents and administrators. Each of them involved significant numbers of young people, a group that had been singled out as lacking activities and a sense of purpose. The concrete activities also gave the AFSC a clear identification in the camp, and created an atmosphere of good will which has provided a sound background for new projects.

In early June AFSC organized and hosted a three-day seminar on camp needs, attended by 36 Lao leaders as well as camp officials and a representative of the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

AFSC local staff planned the seminar during May, with the following objectives:

1. To motivate the participants to realize and identify their key problems.
2. To find ways and means of problem solving.
3. To help determine program areas and priorities.
4. To specify the role of the AFSC and the Laos Committee in working together.

The needs that were identified by the participants included: children and youth lack constructive things to do; adults need skill and vocational training; widows and unattached women have less resources than others, and those who have children are especially burdened (particularly because they have little chance of

acceptance as immigrants to third countries); camp security is inadequate, and contributes to problems with theft, drug sales, prostitution, and the disappearance of children.

The participants identified several steps that could be taken to meet these needs: adult education programs, recreation programs, a special counseling and activities program for widows, and camp committees to improve security.

Ruth Cadwallader reported:

It was the discussion of these kinds of problems which led us Thai and expatriate staff to sense the deep gratitude (which was expressed over and over again) of the Lao participants for the opportunity to be heard, to be listened to, and, most of all, as one person said, "to be treated as a real person not as a refugee!"

Other Activities

The AFSC is sponsoring the production of a low-budget documentary film on the Laotian refugee situation. This film will be used primarily in the United States to educate the general public. In April and May the film crew visited refugee camps in Thailand, and also filmed in Laos. In Thailand they were assisted by the AFSC staff, who arranged a trip to Nong Khai and set up interviews with the camp commander, refugee children, and section leaders.

The AFSC also carries on work in Laos (agricultural development), Kampuchea (relief and rehabilitation), and Vietnam (reconstruction, medical assistance, and support to a prosthetics center). Since Bangkok is a major shipping and commercial center, AFSC staff members there are often called upon to assist other programs by expediting a variety of food and material shipments, by purchasing equipment, and by hosting regional staff.

Future Plans

Sob Tuang: Having completed her Thai language training, Jill Arace is now ready to begin work in a camp setting. During the period March-June, she made visits to several camps that house Hmong and other hill people from Laos, and was encouraged to involve herself in the English language program in the Sob Tuang camp (population approximately 6,500). It is hoped that Jill Arace will work with the Ockenden Venture (a British social agency) program as a teacher and administrator, and that this initial involvement will lead to the initiation of other projects in the camp. As of this writing she has obtained permission from the camp commander and has secured an apartment in the camp, but several other arrangements need to be completed before Jill Arace can proceed with her work.

Laos Visit: Ruth and Bill Cadwallader plan to visit with AFSC staff in Laos for ten days during the month of July. They will be able to observe at first hand the current situation in Laos, to see areas from which refugees

have departed, and possibly to explore with officials the climate for repatriation. The Thai government is aware that the AFSC supports repatriation, where feasible, and has encouraged this program goal.

Nong Khai: Several initiatives have been taken as a direct result of the June leadership seminar. A Recreation and Sports group was formed, which has begun a survey of the camp in order to increase the number and quality of playgrounds, as well as to work with parents to provide for more adequate playground supervision (there were four drownings of children in just the few months previous to the seminar). They are beginning to identify the needs for recreational equipment, including some items that can be locally manufactured .

The building belonging to Norwegian Church Aid is being loaned to the AFSC for use as a recreational center. It is planned to install ping pong tables there, and to use it for musical and cultural activities.

A teacher at the Nong Khai school for Buddhist monks has offered to teach classes at the Center in Buddhist values and Lao culture.

Several women who have been contacted by the AFSC have decided to form a Widows Association. They will meet in the AFSC building, and a play yard for young children may be constructed nearby. The AFSC hopes that the building may be used as a center for programs that address a variety of women's needs. Widows are not the only women who face special difficulties; single and unattached refugee women with small children also are in need of assistance. (The AFSC has been given the names of 150 such women, and this group will be the starting-point for such work.) There was also some discussion in the seminar of the need to provide counseling for young women who are the targets of prostitution rings.

A program to train 30 Laos para-community workers was formally approved by the Tripartite Committee in Bangkok on June 10. The committee is composed of representatives of the government, the UNHCR, and the voluntary agencies and oversees all voluntary agency work with refugees in Thailand. With the approval came a grant of 473,000 baht (\$23,500) in UNHCR funds for support of the training project, the planting, and youth activities.

This project envisions training 30 camp residents who are nominated by the section leaders and who are interested in helping improve conditions in the camp and assisting residents who have special needs. The initial training will involve ten days of class work and discussion, followed by a period of on-the-job supervision by AFSC staff. The graduates will be assigned to work with ongoing camp social welfare programs (such as the Well-Baby Clinic) as well as with the AFSC Youth Center and recreational programs.

The training schedule for this project has been developed by AFSC Thai staff and the classes will be conducted by them. It is hoped that the community workers will be able to stimulate further self-help activities in the camp, to raise morale, and, where possible, to assist persons in receiving the social services that they need. A special role for the community workers will be in stimulating cultural activities: music, drama, traditional dance, and art.

Conclusion

The Thai government has recently announced that it intends to consolidate all refugee centers down to four by the end of 1981: one for Hmong, one for Laos, one for Khmer, and one for use as a transit camp for those who are on their way to a third country. This would probably mean the closing of Nong Khai and Sob Tuang, with AFSC staff shifting their work to the consolidated camps.

On the other hand there have been renewed plans to keep Nong Khai open, but with a smaller (5 - 6,000), more stable population. There is also always the possibility that the refugee population in Thailand may surge in the near future, increasing the size of the camp populations, and causing new problems and tensions.

In this context, the AFSC feels that the best program emphasis is on strengthening the skills, self-confidence, and abilities of the refugees themselves, so that whatever the future may bring, they will be better prepared to cope with their circumstances, and, hopefully, to improve their daily lives.