

**Report on Health and Human Rights workshops held in Thai-Burma border,
Dec. 28, 2000 - Jan 5, 2001.**

Fifty two years ago the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) to guarantee all people security, dignity, and well-being in every country of the world. Drafted as a response to the horrors of World War II, the UDHR was intended to be taught, much as the US Constitution is taught in the United States, at every institution of learning and at every level of education throughout the world. Article 25 of UDHR guarantees the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of all people and their families, including food, clothing, housing, medical care, and necessary social services. Identification of health impacts associated with violations of rights and dignity will benefit both health and human rights fields. Health professionals have a key role in affirming the universality of human rights and in promoting respect for them.

It is also essential to increase the awareness of the connection between health and human rights. Using rights violations as an entry point for recognition of health problems may help uncover previously unrecognized burdens on physical, mental or social well-being. For a human rights perspective, documentation of health impacts of rights violations may contribute to increased societal awareness of the importance of human rights promotion and protection.

Workshops on “Health and Human Rights” took place in MaeTao clinic, Mae Sod and in Halochanee camp in Sangkla Buri, Thai Burma border areas. Each workshop was a 2 day program of discussion designed to provide health professionals, teachers, medics, community organizers and any one who is involved in taking care of refugees, migrant workers, and people crossing the Thai-Burma border.

Facilitators

Facilitator - Dr Khin Saw Win (Alice), University of Alberta, Canada

Co-facilitators - Dr Cynthia Maung, Mae Tao Clinic, Mae Sod, Thai-Burma Border

Dr Kyaw Nyunt, People’s Progressive Front, Sangkla Buri, Thai-Burma border

Objectives

1. To be able to acquire a basic understanding of the history and contents of international human rights and international humanitarian law.
2. To increase the awareness of connection between health and human rights.
3. To understand and explore the health impacts resulting from violations of human rights.
4. To develop a special skill to analyze the impact of health policies and practices on human rights.

Background history of Burma

Millions of people took to the streets in August of 1988, demanding an end of the military dictatorship of General Ne Win, who seized power in 1962. The peaceful demonstrations were met by violence when the army opened fire and thousands were killed outright during and after the massive pro-democracy demonstrations in 1988. The Burmese junta has been repeatedly condemned internationally for widespread abuse of human rights. Thousands of democracy activists are in prison.

Over the past decade, the military junta has set out to consolidate its control over all parts of Burma. The army has been sent out into remote jungle regions inhabited by Burma's ethnic peoples who live in small, scattered communities. Because of the war and repression, thousands of Burmese have sought refuge in neighbouring countries. Between 1988 and 1998, there are 120,000 refugees in border camps in Thailand and at least 70,000 in India and Bangladesh.

A Thai Public Health Report estimated there were 150,000 Ethnic Burmese in Tak Province in 1999, living in refugee camps, 35,000 factory workers, and 55,000 people migrate along the border possibly as temporary workers. Among the sex workers in Tak Province, 86% were Burmese, of whom 26% were HIV positive.

Workshop Program and Activities

Day one

1. Introduction
2. Basic concepts of health and human rights
3. The link between health and human rights
4. Origin and philosophical premises of International Human Rights
5. Contents, means and methods of International Human Rights
6. Value and Impact of linking health and human rights

Day two

1. Application of human rights framework to public health policies
2. Skills for putting the linkage into practice
3. Breakout Sessions
 - HIV/AIDS, human rights and vulnerability
 - Reproductive Rights and gender issues
 - Health aspects of implementing Rights of the Child
 - Identifying and treating survivors of torture and refugee trauma

2 rounds

4. Presentation by the participants and wrap up
5. Conclusion remarks
The Way ahead: Making the Health-Human Rights Linkage Work

The participants in the workshops are displaced Burmese themselves, human rights activists, from the surrounding refugee camps as well as from the Mae Tao clinic. There were about 35 – 40 participants in each session. They actively participated in the discussions especially on HIV/AIDS, Women's Rights, Child Rights and torture survivors. Some of them used to be prisoners before they fled their homeland and shared us their first hand account on how they have been tortured in the Burma's infamous prisons. The physical and emotional damage inflicted by torture, war and displacement was also highlighted. Mental health problems are acute among Burmese in the Thai refugee camps.

Health professionals and workers in the border areas are not very well accustomed with the rights issues, and many of them do not know the real meaning of health as a right. Thus, they think that such a call for health is right is to pay attention to the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners or to follow the Medical Ethics.

Trainings and workshops are required for health workers in the camps and the clinic to deal with problems faced by women and children suffering the trauma of violence, displacement, loss of family, friends and community. The "Health and Human Rights" workshops have extended the knowledge and understanding of health and human rights issues among the health workers in Thai-Burma borders. More trainings and similar activities are needed in order to promote on the fact that the level of respect for human rights and dignity independently and decisively influences health status.

Recorded by Dr Khin Saw Win Alice