

"30 years not knowing the refugees along Thai-Myanmar border".

*Refugee's perspective on the situation, challenges,
expectation, and other points you think it's important for
society to know.*



Presentation by Naw K'nyaw Paw
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My Story

My name is Naw K'nyaw Paw and I'm the General Secretary at the Karen Women's Organization. I was born in 1981 near the Thai Burma border when the Burma Army launched its clearance operations in my homeland against the ethnic people. At that time the Burma Army was still implementing what they called the **"four cuts" policy targeting civilians which had started in the 1970s**. The attacks forced thousands of villagers to flee to the border. This included my parents. I became a refugee at the age of 11 and grew up in the camps where I finished high school. **I know first-hand how difficult it is to be poor in the camps without enough clothes or nutritious food to eat.**



Refugee Camp Administration

The refugee camps along the Thai border are **different from those in other parts of the world**. The camps are under the official administration of Thai government authorities. However on a daily basis, **we run our own affairs and provide services by ourselves with support from donors outside**. The camp's leaders, teachers, medics and social workers are all refugees.

Over the past 30 to 40 years, **refugees have found safety in the camps from the persecution we suffered in Burma**. There has been enough basic services available for refugees to live with dignity despite many restrictions. Refugees get along well with Thai villagers around us. **Refugees always hope that they will be able to return home safely or find a place where they can live just like other human beings, be welcomed, and enjoy their human rights**. But no refugee wants to live in closed camps, particularly the children and young people.



No refugee thinks that they
will be living in a refugee
camp for ten years – let
alone 30 years.

Durable Solutions for Refugees

According to international standards, there are three, what are called “durable”, solutions for refugees.

Returning home, integration within the country they have taken refuge, or resettlement to a third country. The resettlement option is now closed for refugees on this border. It started in 2005, under UNHCR’s leadership, coordinating with about 10 countries who opened up their borders and took in refugees from this border. The biggest number went to the USA, and smaller numbers to Canada, Australia, UK, and the EU. Although many refugees chose to resettle, more than 90,000 people still remain in the camps and the resettlement program is closed.





In 2012, the Karen National Union (KNU) signed a bi-lateral preliminary ceasefire agreement with the military-turned-civilian government in Burma.

In 2015 Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD won the elections in Burma, and the KNU and other ethnic armed organisations signed up to a National Ceasefire Agreement and agreed to take part in a “peace process”.

Donors, international governments, and INGOs saw these steps as progress towards an improved situation for everyone in Burma. Refugees also felt hope for a better life.

However it has been seven years now, but the situation and conditions on the ground in Burma from where refugees fled have not improved. The peace process has stalled.





There is still a lot of Burmese military activity against ethnic people in our homelands. There is no talk, no effort being made, to ensure safe conditions for refugees to return. In 2017 UNHCR opened up their Voluntary Repatriation Centres (VRC) in all refugee camps, hoping to encourage refugees to return to Burma. However **only about 1,000 refugees have returned through UNHCR. This low number clearly shows that refugees do not feel safe to go home.**

The ethnic areas in Burma are very militarized by the Burma Army who continue every day to build up their soldier camps and send more troops, ammunition, and build new roads to transport their supplies, destroying villages as they go.

The army breaks their ceasefire agreement every day, but the Burmese government, and donors, do nothing. The fighting continues. Landmines are still everywhere. Even the internally displaced people cannot go back to their own villages.




Since 2012, donors have cut a lot of support to refugee camps. The funding cuts in refugee camps have greatly reduced the basic services and food.


For example now an adult receives about 200 baht to buy food for one month. Minimum international standards are not being met anymore. The cuts in food and services make life extremely difficult.

We feel like we are being
forced out, to return to
Burma.





People in the camps are now living in a great difficulty, and it's getting worse by the day. There is more depression, feelings of hopelessness are causing increases in drug and alcohol abuse, there is more violence against women and children. Less funding means more children drop out of schools, less teachers are employed, and even less study supplies are provided. Our capacity to govern our communities has been diminished by cutting the resources. There are not enough community police to enforce simple camp rules, to provide protection to women and children. Less funding means not enough medics in the clinics, not enough medicines, and almost no referrals to Thai hospitals.

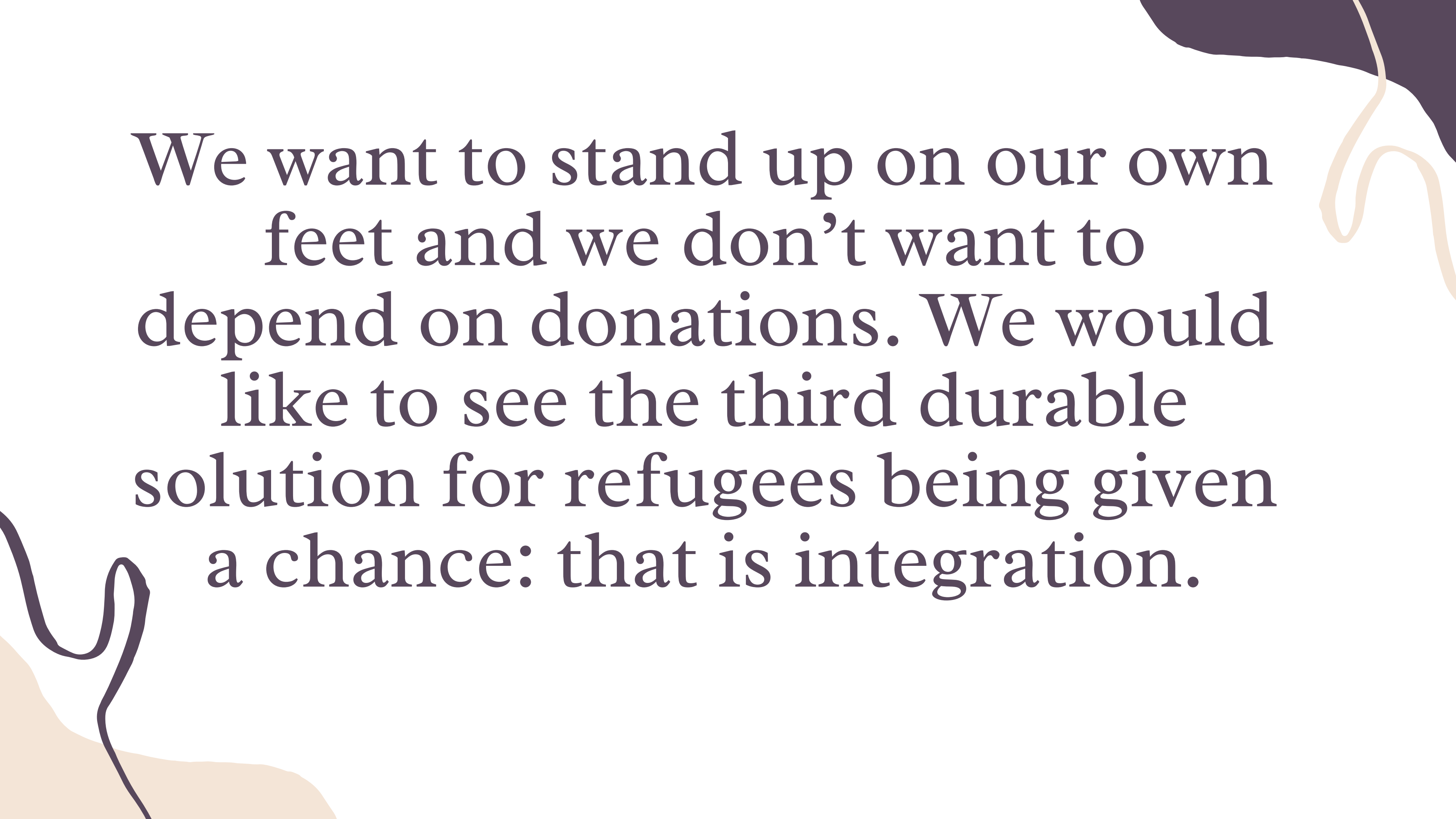




The cuts to services and rations has created a need to earn income. Parents and older siblings are leaving young children at home, unaccompanied, while they go outside the camp to look for work. As unregistered migrant workers in Thailand, they are exploited, arrested, abused. This is the situation across all the refugee camps.

Two of the three durable solutions for refugees along this border have been explored: resettlement is closed down, and return to our homeland is too dangerous.





We want to stand up on our own feet and we don't want to depend on donations. We would like to see the third durable solution for refugees being given a chance: that is integration.



Refugees are capable of working and accomplishing great things, if only we are given the opportunity. It is in the best interests of Thailand to open up opportunities for refugees to work outside of the camps, to allow them to earn an income and take care of their families' needs themselves. Refugees should have access to Thai education and health care like everyone in Thailand.

Recommendations

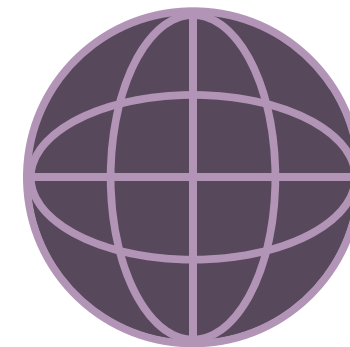
- Refugee committees, camp committees and Civil Society Organisations should be supported to do their work in refugee camps, and refugees should receive at least minimum international standards of food, health and education needs until they are able to be fully independent and all rights are respected.
- The Royal Thai government should provide temporary legal documents to refugees so they can legally work outside refugee camps and have access to Thai health and education services. This would be possible with financial and technical assistance from international donors.
- Programs offered by civil society should continue and donors should be responding quickly to meet new needs, such as providing emergency food supplies/rations, hygiene kits.
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- Donors should commit to providing adequate support to meet basic needs until such time that it is genuinely safe for refugees and IDPs to return home. The refugees themselves must feel that it is safe to return and must do so voluntarily. Funding cuts should not be used to try to incentivize people to return before it is safe for them to do so.

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