

Top of Their Class

Karen kids seek good education in refugee camp schools

By **Shah Paung** / Noh Poe

1. **S**tudents in developing countries often look to distant lands to fulfill their dreams of a good education and a brighter future. A growing number of young people in Burma's Karen State, however, find that schools operating in refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border offer them the best chance of achieving these goals. Noh Poe refugee camp in Thailand's Tak province is one of them.

2. "I came to Noh Poe to continue my education because the cost for school in Burma is too high and the quality of education is poor," said one student enrolled in the Karen Economic Development Course (KEDC) at Noh Poe refugee camp,

3. Saw Eh Lar Khwe, a young man from Ta Ki village in the Kyar Inn Seik Kyee Township, Karen State, also studies at Noh Poe. After attending his local primary school—the only school in his village—he completed his tenth grade at the Kyar Inn Seik Kyee high school. Khwe considers the camp school his best option for future success.

4. "At Noh Poe you can study at all levels depending on your abilities. In Burma you can only study if you have enough money for tuition." That tuition, according to Khwe, is prohibitively expensive for most families.

5. Students in the tenth grade pay 100,000 kyat (US \$96) in tuition fees per year while in lower standards the annual fees run about 3000 kyat (\$2.8)—not crippling by Western standards, but books and study materials are not included in those sums.

6. In addition to high costs, the lack of promising employment opportunities in Burma—where the kyat remains weak compared to the Thai baht—tempts many students away from school to seek employment and a better life in neighboring Thailand.

7. The stark realities facing many students in Karen State seem lost on the Burmese government, which insists that education in Burma is moving in the right direction. Education in Burma is a success, Minister of Edu-



Students at Noh Poe refugee camp attend a computer class

cation Than Aung told educators in December 2004 after their completion of a teacher training course in May Myo Township, Mandalay Division.

8. "The government is successfully nurturing a new generation of young people in the educational sector to overcome the challenges of the future and to help increase stability and develop the national economy of the Union of Myanmar," Than Aung said.

9. Naw Tha Maw Klay, a young Karen woman who dreams of becoming a nurse, sees it differently.

“I will not trade my education for a more comfortable life somewhere else”

10. "In my village, only one or two young people out of ten choose to go to school," she says.

11. Klay is currently waiting to enroll in the KEDC program. "Because of so many problems with school in Burma, I have to postpone my dream," says Klay. "But I still hope one day to fulfill it."

12. Naw Eh S'khee, who came to Noh Poe because her village did not have any school beyond the primary level, also complains about the cost of education and the trouble of traveling great distances to attend high schools

in the larger towns.

13. "I could not afford to go to the school in town," says S'khee, from Kawkareik Township, Karen State. "I chose the school in Noh Poe, even though life in the camp is difficult and the people are very poor. I will not trade my education for a more comfortable life somewhere else."

14. All the students at Noh Poe share the same objective—to finish their studies and return to their villages, where they hope to improve the quality and availability of education locally.

15. The Burmese Army's presence in Karen State has—in addition to its many other abuses—made life even harder for students from rural areas by

putting enormous economic burdens on their families. Farmers in these rural areas are required to hand over an annual allotment of rice for the support of Burmese troops stationed nearby.

16. More than 200 students from Karen State have come to Noh Poe to study since 2002. They receive assistance from the Karen Women's Organization for access to medical services when needed, and Burmese Border Consortium helps supplement the limited food allowance available in the camps. However, the students receive no support for additional items such

as toothpaste, soap, and other personal materials.

17. Noh Poe refugee camp, located in the Umphang district of Tak Province, near the Thai-Burma border, was established in 1997 to meet the needs of Karen refugees displaced by fighting between the Burmese Army and Karen National Union forces.

18. Six other camps operate along the Thai-Burma border, and these have attracted more than 100 additional ethnic Karen students to their schools.

19. According to the 2003 Karen Refugee Committee Report, more than 100,000 refugees live in the seven camps in this region; and of these, more than 10,000 live in Noh Poe.

20. Saw Sanson A, a coordinator for the KEDC program at Noh Poe, says that some students in the program eventually leave to study in other countries. Most, however, return to Burma or remain in the camp school to become teachers.

21. KEDC is a two-year program that consists of seven subjects: accounting, economics, management, social studies, computer skills, Karen history, and English.

22. The Karen Educational Project, under the auspices of the Thailand-

based NGO ZOA Refugee Care, administers the KEDC program in an attempt to enhance the quality of education for more than 25,000 ethnic Karen children affected by the continuing conflict in Karen State.

23. Life for the students at Noh Poe has

authorities to move beyond its limits. The camp imposes a 9 PM curfew.

24. Such restrictions mean little to Naw Eh S'khee and the rest of the students at Noh Poe, who consider the training they receive in the camp school—and the hope it inspires for

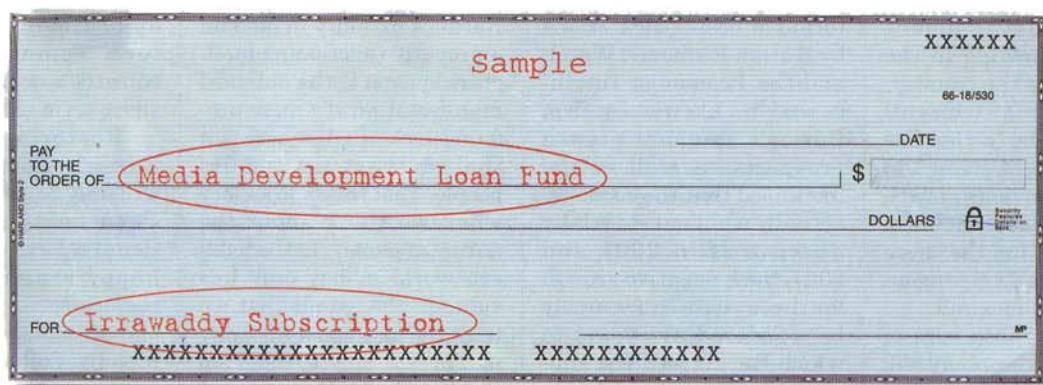


Noh Poe refugee camp

its limitations. Chain cable fences enclose the camp, and all refugees must get permission from the local Thai au-

the future—worth the temporary humiliations that characterize life for so many along the Thai-Burma border. ■

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Learning with the Irrawaddy 2
To accompany May 2005 Issue of Irrawaddy Magazine
Selected article: *Top of their Class*, page 28

Activities to do Before Reading

Activity 1

What do you know?
What do you think you know?
What do you want to know?

What do you know about schools in Karen refugee camps on the Thai border?
What do you think you know? What do you want to know? Complete this chart.

Schools in Karen Refugee Camps		
Things I know	Things I think I know	Things I want to know

Activity 2

Prediction: Phrases

Here is a summary of the article you are going to read.

It is difficult to get higher education inside Karen State. Therefore many young people are coming to refugee camps on the Thai border to attend schools. One of these schools is the Karen Economic Development Course (KEDC), a two-year programme in Noh Poe camp. Although conditions in Noh Poe are not easy, students are glad to have a chance to study at KEDC.

In the article, you will read these phrases. What do you think the article will say about these phrases?

1. 100,000 kyat in tuition fees
2. dreams of becoming a nurse
3. More than 200 students
4. More than 100,000 refugees
5. accounting, economics, management, social studies, computer skills, Karen History and English
6. permission from the local Thai authorities

Activity 3

Prediction: Who says what?

Here are some quotes from the article. Who do you think says these things? Match the quotes with the people.

- | | |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| 1. 'I came to Noh Poe to continue my education because the cost for school in Burma is too high' | <i>A student</i> |
| 2. 'The government is successfully nurturing a new generation of young people in the educational sector to overcome the challenges of the future' | <i>The Karen Refugee Committee</i> |
| 3. 'I will not trade my education for a more comfortable life somewhere else' | |
| 4. 'Some students in the program eventually leave to study in other countries. Most, however, return to Burma or remain in the camp school to become teachers.' | <i>A KEDC Coordinator</i> |
| 5. 'At Noh Poe you can study at all levels depending on your abilities. In Burma you can only study if you have enough money for tuition'. | <i>A Burmese government official</i> |
| 6. 'More than 100,000 refugees live in the seven camps in this region; and of these, more than 10,000 live in Noh Poe'. | |

Read the article, and check your predictions to activities 2 and 3.

Activities to do During Reading

Activity 4

Words from context

Here are some excerpts from the article. Find these in the article, and choose the best synonym or definition for the underlined words.

1. *That tuition, according to Khwe, is prohibitively expensive for most families.* (paragraph 4)

a. very	c. too
b. carefully	d. unfairly
2. *“Because of so many problems with school in Burma, I have to postpone my dream” says Klay.* (paragraph 11)

a. stop	c. obey
b. start	d. delay
3. *Farmers in these areas are required to hand over an annual allotment of rice for the support of Burmese troops stationed nearby.* (paragraph 15)

a. amount	c. kilogram
b. sack	d. shop
4. *They receive assistance from the Karen Women’s Organisation for access to medical service when needed* (paragraph 16)

a. help	c. training
b. medicine	d. hospital
5. *Noh Poe refugee camp, located in the Umpang district of Tak province, was established in 1997 to meet the needs of Karen refugees displaced by fighting.* (paragraph 17)

a. looked after	c. grown
b. bought	d. set up
6. *The Karen Educational Project, under the auspices of the Thailand-based NGO ZOA Refugee Care...* (paragraph 22)

a. money	c. education
b. support	d. care

Activity 5**Key vocabulary**

Scan the text and underline any words you don't know. Discuss these words in groups, and find out their meanings. Use a dictionary if you like.

Fill the gaps in the sentences using the words in the box.

option	tempt	insist	sector	burden	access to
	located in	eventually	curfew	restrictions	

1. Some children don't have _____ further education in Burma.
2. One _____ is to study in Burma. Another is to go to a refugee camp.
3. Because of the _____, we can't get any foreign guest teachers.
4. The high-quality education in the camps _____ students to come from Karen State.
5. My parent saved money for a long time, and _____ they could afford to send me to high school.
6. High school fees are a _____ on poor families.
7. The Burmese government _____ that education in Burma is going well.
8. There's a _____ on, so we can't visit each other after dark.
9. There is a lot of money going into the health _____ in the refugee camps.
10. KEDC school is _____ Noh Poe camp.

Activity 6**Pronouns**

Here are some excerpts from the article. Find them in the article, and decide what the underlined pronouns refer to.

1. *Noe Poh refugee camp in Thailand's Tak province is one of them.* (paragraph 1)
2. *...he completed his tenth grade at the Kyar Inn Seik Kyee high school.* (paragraph 3)
3. *"In my village, only one or two young people out of ten chooses to go to school" she says.* (paragraph 10)
4. *...where they hope to improve the quality and availability of education locally.* (paragraph 14)
5. *They receive assistance from the Karen Woman's Organisation* (paragraph 16)
6. *...and these have attracted more than 100 additional ethnic Karen students to their schools.* (paragraph 18)
7. *...who consider the training they receive in the camp school...* (paragraph 24)
8. *...and the hope it inspires for the future...* (paragraph 24)

Activity 7**Identify the main point**

What is the main point of this article?

- 1) Students in developing countries often look to distant lands to fulfill their dreams of a good education.
- 2) Education in Burma is nurturing a new generation of young people to help increase stability and develop the economy.
- 3) Education in refugee camps is very higher quality and cheaper than inside Burma.
- 4) It is difficult to get an education in Burma, so many young people are coming to refugee camps on the border.

Look again at the options above. One option is correct. Which of the other options is:

- *too general?*
- *too specific?*
- *not a point of the article?*

Activity 8**True, false or don't know?**

Read these sentences, and decide whether they are *true*, *false* or *don't know* (there isn't enough information in the article to know if it is true or not).

Why did you decide this? What evidence is in the text to make you decide this?

- 1) More and more students from Karen State are going to the refugee camps to get education.
- 2) It costs nearly 100 US dollars for tenth standard tuition in Burma.
- 3) It is easy to get a job in Thailand.
- 4) Education in Burma is a success.
- 5) The Burma Border Consortium provides students with toothpaste, soap and other personal materials.
- 6) Noe Poh camp was established eight years ago.
- 7) Most students study overseas after graduating from KEDC.
- 8) KEDC is the best school in Noh Poe camp.

Activities to do After Reading

Activity 9 What do you think?

Many people think that education in refugee camps is better than education inside Burma. What are the consequences of this thinking?
Make a list of possible consequences.

Do you think it is a good idea for people to come to refugee camps to get an education? Why/why not? Can you think of any better solutions?

Activity 10 Similarities and differences.

How is your school similar to KEDC? How is it different?
Write sentences comparing and contrasting KEDC with their school.

- e.g. - *Both KEDC and our school are in refugee camps.*
 - *Our school has a longer program. KEDC is only two years, but we are a three year program.*

Activity 11 Word Families

Here are some words from the article. Complete the chart, by adding other parts of the word families.

Noun	verb	adjective	adverb	person
development	develop	developing	developmentally	X
	study			
ability	X			X
success				X
			differently	X
				educator
	X	ethnic		X
				authorities
		additional		X
economics				

Activity 12 Poster Presentations

In groups, make a poster advertising your school.
First, think of all the good points about your school, and decide what you want to include.
Then present the poster to your class.