A harsh but still hopeful life in Tham Hin Camp

by Cholchaya Suwanpanmani, Thailand

There are roughly 140,000 Burmese refugees living in nine remote refugee camps on the Thai side of the Thai-Burma border, many of whom are ethnic Karen or Karenni. Living conditions are overcrowded and harsh. Some of the refugees have lived in the camps for over 20 years, dependent on external support for their very existence.

Since 1995, the European Commission's Humanitarian Aid Department (ECHO) has been funding food aid, health assistance, clean water and proper sanitation systems to the refugees through international aid agencies, including the IRC, which provides basic services in the camps.

Tham Hin Camp

A small stream meanders down the steep valley and through the 16 acre Tham Hin Camp just 10 km from the border in Ratchapuri Province, Thailand. The camp is home to over 7,900 Karen refugees, mostly women and children. Not allowed to leave the camp to find work to support themselves, dependent on relief agencies for every aspect of their basic survival and with no immediate prospect of returning home, their future looks bleak.

Pit latrines are dug under houses and when full are covered over and new ones dug. Clean water for bathing and cooking comes in a plastic gallon tank. Candles and lamps

provide the only lighting at night. Illnesses associated with overcrowding – such as respiratory infections, tuberculosis, scabies, typhoid fever, skin diseases, and mosquito transmission of malaria, dengue fever and Japanese encephalitis – are kept under control but remain a constant threat.

Ray Po, 20, lives in a nine-by-nine foot shelter made of bamboo with five other family members. Her eight-month-old son was born in the camp clinic. "I left Burma in 1997," says Ray, "I was about nine years old and didn't really know anything about politics and war. I crossed the border on foot with my parents." Ray hopes that she and her family will be able to stay in the camp until it is safe for them to return home, hopefully in the near future.

Our work in Tham-Hin

In 2005, with ECHO funding, the IRC took over responsibility for health, water and sanitation service provision in Tham Hin. We operate a clinic where refugee health workers, trained and supervised by IRC doctors, provide basic health care.

In 2006, European and other western nations began to offer refugees in Tham Hin the chance to opt to resettle in third countries. As often happens when resettlement is introduced, the most educated and skilled refugees jumped at the opportunity to seek better lives and over sixty percent of Tham Hin's skilled refugee health staff have resettled to third countries in the past year. The total camp population, however, has reduced only slightly as new arrivals continue.

In response to this and with ECHO support, IRC continues to train new refugee health workers who have chosen not to resettle. Medic and nurse trainees undergo six months of intensive classroom training followed by rigorous on-the-job training at the camp clinic and bedside teaching at the in-patient hospital ward. Upon passing their exams at the end of the programme, they are ready to assume full-time health worker jobs – providing critical services to the refugees unable to give up the hope that one day they might return home to Burma.