

THE JUST WORD



THE IGNACIO MARTÍN-BARÓ FUND FOR MENTAL HEALTH & HUMAN RIGHTS

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MARTÍN-BARÓ FUND SUPPORT FOR THE BURMESE REFUGEE PROJECT

by *Celina Su (Burmese Refugee Project) and Ann Brian Murphy (Martín-Baró Fund)*

Ignacio Martín-Baró Committee Members recently had the opportunity to spend an evening with Peter Muennig and Celina Su, leaders of the Burmese Refugee Project, a Martín-Baró Fund grantee. With slides and stories, they educated us about the realities of Shan refugees in Burma and Thailand.

The Burmese Refugee Project works in north-western Thailand with approximately 100 ethnically Shan refugees from Burma, helping them gain access to education, health care, and legal services. These services are essential to the refugees' quality of life and human rights, otherwise denied to them by the Burmese and Thai governments, and are irrevocably intertwined with the recent history of Southeast Asia.

The Political Background

When Burma (now officially Myanmar) gained independence from the British in 1948, many expected the country to be a

quashed hopes for democracy. In 1962, matters grew worse as General Ne Win abolished the constitution and legal system, and all political parties.

During this time, the U.S. began escalating its conflict in Vietnam, and turned toward neighboring countries to build alliances. Perhaps the strongest local ally was Thailand, which assisted the U.S. in its covert operations in Laos and its support of Khmer Rouge leader, Pol Pot. Against this backdrop, Burma, like many other Southeast Asian countries, faced complex ethnic and ideological civil wars. One group fighting the Burmese government was the Shan, an ethnic population living in a northern territory bordering Thailand.



future world power. It had a strong educational infrastructure and is rich in resources. Almost as soon as independence came, however, a military dictatorship

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On August 8, 1988, illegal opposition parties, students, and intellectuals within Burma called for general strikes. Ne Win responded by ordering the military to halt strikes and demonstrations. Hundreds were killed. Students and intellectuals fled into the jungle. Shortly thereafter, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) took power and called for national elections, which they lost. SLORC immediately arrested the democratic opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi. While under house arrest, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her commitment to peace and democracy.

Since 1988, the government has closed all universities nine times, cut educational spending, and launched massive attacks on ethnic rebel armies. One such army is the Mong Tai Army, which runs a large medical, food, drug, and arms trade within Thailand. While the Mong Tai Army, which consists of about 20,000 Shan soldiers, officially fights to liberate the Shan state, its activities increasingly blur military and drug operations, thus providing justification for U.S.

involvement in policing activities since 1995.

Rebel armies are often integrated with the communities from which the soldiers are drawn. SLORC has therefore taken to attacking the minority groups in a



de facto genocide policy that includes “Burmanization,” which requires minority groups to adopt the religious and social norms of the Burmese. This option, offered to groups that have brokered peace plans with the Burmese government, still restricts travel

and education, and effectively provides license for SLORC soldiers to rape minority females (the Shan being one of the most documented).

As a result of SLORC force attacks against the villages from which the Mong Tai rebel

soldiers are drawn, many innocent Shan in Burma have fled to Thailand as refugees. Shan communities have thus become mobile. They readily decamp in either Burma or Thailand. One element of this coping lifestyle is the “jungle school,” a quickly assembled hut that can be just as easily abandoned.

The Burmese Refugee Project

The Burmese Refugee Project (BRP) was started when Peter Muennig, a public health physician, encountered a jungle school in Thailand, run by a Thai couple who were volunteering as math and Thai teachers to a group of Shan children. The BRP’s original work entailed little more than providing medical exams and vaccinations. Since then, with support from the Martín-Baró Fund, the project has expanded to provide material and psychological support for Shan refugees. The project assists three extended household clusters of Shan, each serving as a separate but overlapping community, and over 30 children in school. The jungle school teachers work as social workers who engage the community with talk therapy, help coordinate activities, and counsel community members.

The BRP’s accomplishments rest both with the social workers and with the families themselves, who assist the project through monetary donations or time, and contribute to the development and social infrastructure of their own community. Thai social



Peter Muennig and Celina Su of the BRP share stories and photos of their work with MBF committee members.

A GLIMPSE OF PALESTINIAN HEALTH STATUS

by Ellen Cantarow, JAMP

In January 2004, a delegation from the Jewish American Medical Project (sponsored by four organizations within the Jewish peace movement in the U.S.) visited the West Bank, hosted by the Union of Palestinian Medical Relief Committees (UPMRC), one of the largest non-governmental organizations providing health care in the Occupied Territories. In Jenin, we interviewed two of UPMRC's physicians.

Dr. Jamil – Palestinian doctors are called by their first names – has worked with UPMRC since 1990, and is the medical director of UPMRC's work in Jenin. We asked him about Israel's re-occupation of the West Bank. In 2003, there were fifty days of curfew. "The first, second or third day people can manage with what is available in the house. But if it is more than three days, sometimes they tell the people they can go to shops for an hour or two. As a human being you can imagine how it is for the children to live inside a house and you cannot leave the house." Domestic violence is a problem which is exacerbated by the situation. "War trauma doesn't happen immediately. You can expect it in the future. The environment will affect children greatly in the future. There's a stress trauma, or a psychological effect, and this will [continue to] be a problem.

"If you ask a child to draw something, he will draw a tank or a gun. This means there is some-

thing wrong. It must be treated by whole programs, not by a pill. They must be dealt with [according to] the psychology of the whole situation." Does Dr. Jamil think the occupation will end? "Yes, if I didn't think so, I wouldn't be here. But I don't see that it is very soon, or very near. Hope gives you the power to continue. We empower ourselves by hope. Nothing was the same thousands

"We believe that an end to the occupation will lead to the growth and empowerment of the peace-seeking factions within the Israeli and Palestinian communities, the end of the current cycle of violence, fear, and despair, and the beginnings of a new momentum towards peace."

Jewish American Medical Project

of years ago. Sometimes for a hundred years there is a big state that is guiding the world, and history is telling me that things must be changed one day. But without serious international involvement in this conflict the problem will not be resolved. What is going on now in the world is not justice or the means of justice, it is power."

Dr. Bassem is a sweet-faced, dark-haired, slender 29-year-old who looks ten years younger. He studied medicine in Kiev when Palestinians could still study for free in Russia. Unlike his patients he comes from a well-to-do family. He is not concerned with politics: "Sharon and Arafat are on top,

and the simple people are between them." Bassem's only concern is to serve the villagers, whom he loves and treats not as "cases," but as whole lives. "Seventy percent of the patients I know, we keep contact with them for two years. Without understanding their problems, their suffering, I cannot help them. Most of them come talking about their problems. [One of my patients today] was an old man, 70. He lost his land, it was due to the wall which was built by the Israeli government, so he has hypertension, he is suffering because he lost his land. I have to talk with him about life, about hope. I can't just say, 'Take this tablet daily.' Another patient was a young man who finished his education in a university in Nablus in business administration. His problem is, he cannot find work. He is reading about music, sport, all day. He had work inside Israel but now, because there is a wall on three sides in his village, he cannot go there. He is suffering from sinusitis. He said, 'I can do nothing useful for me or for my family.' He depends on his father. So he is depressed and in my opinion he will think his problem is due to the wall, to the occupation. He believes he is right but the law is not right. He is an educated person. He wants to stand up and build his future, so he's depressed. When he sees a young man, a doctor who gives him enough time to describe not only his health problem but his inside problem, this gives him hope." ♦

For more information, visit www.vopj.org

BOWLING FOR FUN-d-RAISING

by Ramsay Liem

Thirty-eight hard rolling, oreo cookie eating friends of the Martín-Baró Fund had a great time at this year's annual Bowlathon (April 4th) to support the work of our grantees. They came from all quarters - Boston College, Boston University, the Episcopal Divinity School, Fanlight Productions,



U Mass Boston, Weston Jesuit School of Theology, and the self-employed! Most importantly, we raised over \$14,500, more than enough to make two grants. This yearly rite of spring celebrates friendship and fun but also gives everyone an opportunity to stand with those who promote mental health in the face of structural violence. We thank everyone who bowled for justice, the many others who gave us pledges, and also Joe

Martignetti and the staff of Lanes and Games (195 Concord Turnpike, Cambridge) who go out of their way to support this event each year. Keep an eye out for Bowlathon 2005! ♦



MARTÍN-BARÓ FUND SUPPORT FOR THE BURMESE REFUGEE PROJECT *continued from page 2*

workers mediate this process, empowering individuals to act by providing informal psychosocial support, serving as cultural navigators, and providing supplementary monetary support to the collectives.

While the organic psychosocial support system has fostered qualitative emotional improvements for the refugee community, the project has also achieved more tangible success. For instance, the majority of children have been getting straight A's in school. Furthermore, the children, most of whom have been chronically

undernourished, are catching up on their growth charts. Nearly tangible, and perhaps most important, is the new, almost foreign, feeling in the communities: hope.

The words Ignacio Martín-Baró used to describe Salvadoran refugees resonate for those in Southeast Asia: "Above all, this is a society...in which the most basic human rights...are structurally and systematically denied - such fundamental rights as having a place to live, a job in which to fulfill oneself as a human being, or a school in which to educate one's children. This situation demon-

strates how arbitrary and deceptive it can be to distinguish between 'economic' and 'political' refugees....To demand the satisfaction of the basic needs of the poor majority is, in itself, a 'subversive' proposition since it attacks the very bases of a discriminatory system." ♦

For more information, see:

- ♦ www.pceo.org/BRP.htm
- ♦ www.irrawaddy.org/
- ♦ usinfo.state.gov/regional/e/burma/burman99.htm

Editor: Catherine M. Mooney. *Contributors:* Ben Achtenberg, Ellen Cantarow, Joan Liem, Ramsay Liem, M. Brinton Lykes, Ann Brian Murphy, Celena Su. **PLEASE SUPPORT OUR WORK.** Letters, inquiries, contributions can be sent to: Martín-Baró Fund, P.O. Box 2122, Jamaica Plain, MA, 02130. Checks payable to: Funding Exchange/Martín-Baró Fund; tax deductible to the full extent permitted by the IRS code. Thank you.

SEVEN PROJECTS FUNDED FOR 2004

by Joan Liem, M. Brinton Lykes, and Ann Brian Murphy

This year the Martín-Baró Fund received brief proposals from 77 new groups from Latin America, Asia, Africa, and North America. Approximately 25 of these proposals were from grassroots organizations that appeared to address both human rights and mental health needs of the communities they intended to serve. After careful review, six of the groups were invited to submit full proposals. In addition, five groups that had been supported by the Martín-Baró Fund in 2003 were asked to submit renewal proposals. From among these 11 proposals, the grant-making subcommittee has selected seven groups to fund for 2004. One additional proposal is still under consideration. The seven groups that will be funded are described in the paragraphs that follow.

BURMESE REFUGEE PROJECT

THAILAND

The Burmese Refugee Project (BRP) is working in northwestern Thailand with approximately 100 ethnically Shan refugees from Burma (now officially Myanmar), helping them gain access to education, health care, and legal services. These services are essential to the refugees' quality of life and human rights, and are otherwise denied to them by the Burmese and Thai governments.



See the cover story in this issue of the newsletter for more details on this project.

SOFIBEF/SOLIDARITÉ DES FEMMES DE FIZI POUR LE BIEN-ÊTRE FAMILIAL

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO



The Fizi Women's Solidarity Group for Family Welfare – SOFIBEF – based in Tanzania, works with grassroots women in the Democratic Republic of Congo to promote women's rights and mental health for the survivors of state and domestic violence. During 2002 and 2003 SOFIBEF coordinated a wide range of activities, including workshops on gender equality, education, political violence, and AIDS; environmental projects such as planting fruit trees and clearing rubbish; and a forum on women's rights, torture, and detention without trial. In addition, SOFIBEF provided training in reflexology for fourteen women from local villages who then provided this service to their communities. The Martín-Baró Fund will be supporting the continuation of SOFIBEF's work during 2004.

CRISPAZ/CRISTIANOS POR LA PAZ EN EL SALVADOR

SAN SALVADOR, EL SALVADOR

With support from the Martín-Baró Fund, Christians for Peace in El Salvador – CRISPAZ – is working with a prisoner support group known as OPERA. The group, known by its Spanish initials that stand for Optimism, Peace, Hope, Renewal, and Harmony, works with young inmates, mostly gang members, in two prisons in El Salvador. High crime rates and the growth of gangs in El Salvador can be traced in part to the unhealed wounds of El Salvador's civil war and to current economic policies, promoted by the U.S., that exacerbate economic inequality. While the inmates involved in OPERA have contributed to the social violence that plagues El Salvador, they have also been victimized by it. Many have been the victims of violence at home and on the streets. OPERA seeks to address the mental health of young inmates by providing a variety of activities for them in prison including reading circles, craft and music workshops, film forums, and a self-help group that focuses on relationship difficulties, emotional experiences, communication problems, violence, and conflict resolution. OPERA also works to engage inmates directly in denouncing human rights abuses that are occurring in the prisons.



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IBDAA DHEISHEH REFUGEE CAMP, PALESTINE



The IbdAA Cultural Center of the Dheisheh Refugee Camp in Palestine has received funding for a second year to continue its cultural and sports activities with children and youth and its mental health workshops for parents and teachers. IbdAA (which means “to create something out of nothing”) runs a very active after school program (as well as all day programs during school holidays) that is intended to foster the development of constructive youth leadership in the face of ongoing conflict in the Middle East. It does this through a wide array of activities that include sports, music, art, drama, photography, and film screenings for several hundred children weekly.

Sports groups in particular offer a way for children to channel their resentments and frustrations into productive physical activity. IbdAA also sponsors field trips that enable youth who have few opportunities to leave the refugee camp to meet other youth from all over Palestine. For parents and teachers, IbdAA hosts workshops on crisis intervention, recognizing the human rights of young people, and identifying their mental health needs. With continued funding from the Martín-Baró Fund, IbdAA is adding open health days during which doctors and nurses provide free consultation and treatment for hundreds of children.

For more on the Palestinian situation, see "A Glimpse of the Palestinian Health Situation," by Ellen Cantarow of the Jewish American Medical Project, on p. 3 of this newsletter.

CENTRO BARTOLOMÉ DE LAS CASAS SAN SALVADOR, EL SALVADOR



The Centro Bartolomé de las Casas is a community organization with five staff and many volunteers who work with local communities in economic, social, psychosocial, and spiritual development. With funds from the Martín-Baró Fund, two members of their staff and several volunteers will extend recently initiated psychosocial work with women survivors of massacres and families of victims in two rural Salvadoran communities, Arcatao and Perquin. They will train local community workers who will work with an organization of survivors in these communities to systematically address social trauma through a project of recovering memories and through individual and group-based work using creative play, traditional medicines, and acupressure. This psychosocial work is part of a wider community process through which survivors will work to vindicate the past and seek justice towards the future.

ACEFOMI/ASOCIACIÓN CENTRO DE EDUCACIÓN Y FORMACIÓN MAYA IXIL SAN GASPAR DE CHAJUL, GUATEMALA



The Center for Mayan Ixil Education and Development Association works with youth and women in the rural town of Chajul and its surrounding villages. Chajul is an area deeply affected by more than 36 years of civil war and ongoing and entrenched poverty. Prior to its formation many members of ACEFOMI worked within the town to meet the multiple psychosocial needs of women and children who survived the war and its effects. With funds from the Martín-Baró Fund, ACEFOMI will extend their previous work to include youth and adult women in five rural communities, that is, the villages of Ju'il, Tchacalte', Vi'pech, Ixla' and Visiquitchun. Thirty young girls and women in each community will participate in workshops on women's and indigenous rights and on community mental health. The goals of the training are to create a group-based process for remembering the past, enhancing women's self-esteem, and, through participatory and popular education techniques, to provide resources through which girls and women can organize their communities towards creating a more just future.

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REMHI/PROYECTO DE RECUPERACIÓN DE LA MEMORIA HISTÓRICA SAN MARCOS, GUATEMALA



The Recovery of the Historical Memory Project – REMHI – of the San Marcos Diocese was part of an inter-diocesan project that produced the report *Guatemala: Never Again*, a documentation of human rights violations in the country. The goal of the project is to motivate the organized participation of the people in the construction of a new Guatemala and

the development of a more human and dignified life. REMHI is a response at the community level and emphasizes exposure to history, mental health training, and human rights for the people of San Marcos, which has a primarily indigenous population. In 2004, the project will continue with the work of exhumations and reburials of victims of the violence, which helps family members gain closure and cope with the overwhelming fear of reprisal. It will continue to commemorate important anniversaries to prevent the obliteration of the past, and to support the training of community leaders to give workshops that contribute to reconciliation. It will publish a regional report of testimonies from the San Marcos area that survivors have gathered to document the stories of violence and remember the past to work together to build a better future. This report will be distributed widely throughout the department and beyond, contributing to further community work within San Marcos and serving as a model for other communities undergoing similar processes within Guatemala. ♦

"REMHI aims always to accompany the victims of the armed conflict to advance a process of mental health that springs from our experience of community reconstruction, rather than clinical therapy. We seek to break the bonds of fear, return voices to victims, and restore their dignity.

Through exhumations, anniversary commemorations, marches, and large-scale popular actions, we give recognition to their memories and historical reality."

*REMHI, Recovery of Historical Memory Project,
San Marcos Guatemala*

MISSION STATEMENT

The Ignacio Martín-Baró Fund for Mental Health and Human Rights was created to foster psychological well-being, social consciousness, and active resistance in communities affected by institutional violence, repression, and social injustice. We believe that the scars of such experiences are deeply seated in both the individual and society and, therefore, seek to support projects that explore the power of community to collectively heal these wounds and move forward. As an organization based in the United States, we have a special responsibility to support groups in regions harmed by U.S. policies and addressing problems created or aggravated by those policies.

Through grants, networking, and technical support, the Fund seeks to encourage the development of innovative, grassroots community projects that promote progressive social change and community mental health. In pursuit of this mission, the Fund's goals are:

- ◆ To develop a holistic perspective for understanding the connections between state and institutional violence and repression, and the mental health of communities and individuals;
- ◆ To support innovative projects that explore the power of community to foster healing within individuals and communities trying to recover from experiences of institutional violence, repression, and social injustice;
- ◆ To build collaborative relationships among the Fund, its grantees, and its contributors for mutual education and empowerment; and,
- ◆ To develop social consciousness within the United States regarding the psychological consequences of structural violence, repression, and social injustice.

"Ibdaa sees that the mental health of the camps' children is affected by two main factors, external and internal. First, they are affected greatly by the ongoing physical obstacle of living in the camp under the occupation. Second, being a refugee gives a child sense of rootlessness and worthlessness as his/her family suffers from the tremendous loss of their property, livelihood, culture, heritage, nationality, and homeland. Many of the youth in the camp lack self-respect, self-esteem, confidence, and hope for their life in general, not to mention the vision for their future."

IBDAA, Dheisheh Refugee Camp, Palestine

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