

Dearest friends and family,



I'm not sure about you, but I haven't had the heart yet to put away the Christmas lights and few decorations I put up a month ago. It's not so much the beauty of the season that is difficult for me to box away; it's more the sight of the beautiful lights breaking the darkness around I treasure. It feels safe knowing that when darkness starts to fall, beautiful lights will be turned on and admired. Tai Hope is not a big, fancy organization. In fact, our office is in my own living room! But we are extremely effective and flexible to make sure that the forgotten refugees and suffering people from Burma receive the dignity, respect and hope they deserve. Our constant challenge is translating hope into concrete actions for those who need it the most. Our constant longing is to bring some light into all the darkness and hopelessness. And when all is said and done – may the light and hope we leave behind shine so brightly that all darkness and suffering is chased away.

My dearest friends and family: With all my heart I thank you for your friendship, trust and support to me personally and to Tai Hope in 2011. May this New Year bring us closer to the hope, peace and justice we all long for!

Confusion, abundance and empty shelves

During my 13 years in South East Asia, I've usually managed to make yearly home visits to spend time with friends and family and raise awareness and funding for the work. But until today I still find myself totally unprepared for the extreme differences I step into as I walk down the stairs from the small airplane that brings me to Norway. Among the people I love, help and belong to (Shans), I look like a stranger. Among the people I was born and raised (Norwegians), I look like a native, but feel lost and like a stranger... It generally takes me around 2 months in Norway to somehow fit in, but for sure this would take forever if it wasn't for all the warmth and love I receive from friends and family! Thank you all for once again receiving and spending time with me! I would also like to thank for the positive response you gave during all the awareness/fund-raising events I held! Thank you for believing and trusting in me and the responsibility I have to help the Shans! Without your support I would never be able to reach and touch so many suffering people with help and hope!

Returning to Chiang Mai I was again unprepared to face all the challenges the country had gone through during my time away. The



severe flooding had already caused most commercial supply lines from Bangkok to shut down. The demands for food and clean drinking water were higher than normal due to all the flood victims who "fled" to Chiang Mai for a dry shelter. Personally I faced many minor damages and challenges with my house truck, and added all together I began wondering why I had left the abundance, safety and comfort in Norway for this chaos... It was a strange feeling to walk around in markets and supermarkets to find empty shelves or only a few basic, over-priced items still available. This challenging situation went on until end of November, but until today Bangkok has yet to return to its



buzzing normal. At the present I have been back in Chiang Mai for 2 months, almost exactly the same amount of time I spent in Norway. And with all my heart I have to say I feel deeply grateful to be part of two worlds, two cultures. The abundance in Norway and the empty food shelves in Chiang Mai have taught me to always be grateful and make use of what I have available.

Hungry flames

Imagine you are a young Shan mother or father who sees no other option for survival and safety than leaving behind the familiar village and country where you were born and raised. You have heard about a country called Thailand, where jobs and relative safety are available. However, in order to reach this “promised land” you have to make a dangerous journey through the jungle where you or your family members might die of malaria or malnutrition and rebels or government troops patrolling might threaten to kill you or your family if you don’t play by their rules. When you finally reach Thailand you are told to run and hide every time you see the police. You have no legal rights in this country, but if you are lucky, you might find work and make just enough money to send home so your parent can survive. You are only able to get the kind of jobs that the Thais don’t want, which usually means underpaid construction work. The conditions are merciless: You do backbreaking work and live at the construction area; you are not allowed to leave unless your boss allows it,



and sometimes you risk going months without any pay. If you are exceptionally lucky, your employer might issue you work permits and allow your children to go to school. But your whole life revolves around the construction projects. Soon as one project is completed, you have to uproot and literally earning as little as 3 US Dollar per day...

This is the reality for nearly

200,000 Shan refugees in Thailand today. The struggles and intimidation they face in this country, which should offer them the safety and dignity they deserve are often heartbreaking.

One early morning last October, 41 Shan construction workers became homeless when their temporary shelter at their current construction site burned to the ground. All their money, ID papers,



clothes and household equipment got totally damaged by the hungry flames. Tai Hope was able to distribute the most basic necessities and food items to the fire victims, thanks to our fast responding helpers and emergency network.

Not exactly money laundering...

The 3 former House of Hope girls staying with Pa Tzing (former HoH housemother) receive most of the funding necessary for their education and living expenses from Tai Hope. However, in conversations with Pa Tzing, we realized that these girls also need work experience. Due to the fact that they are orphaned refugee children, they need to be as empowered and independent as possible. We therefore decided to start a small laundry business in their village so the girls could earn and save some much needed pocket money and perhaps contribute to their school fees with their own money. So far the business is very good, and their customers trust them so much that they usually just leave their laundry on the stairs of their house if nobody is around. The girls have generally settled in well in their new village and show positive signs that they are maturing and growing emotionally and physically, and achieve very good results in school. I have personally watched over them since they were very young, and feel so proud to see their achievements today!



Projects successfully completed!



Do you remember the Loi Lam clinic renovation mentioned in previous newsletter? The desperately needed sleeping quarters, kitchen and clinic renovation project is now completed and the refugees seeking shelter in this area finally have access to health care! Enjoy the pictures!

The Reproductive and Child Health Center in Kong Mong Moeng is now completed, with all necessary equipment available. The midwife-in-charge has already helped many expecting mothers, and tells us that many young babies have already been rescued, thanks to a clean and safe Reproductive Center!



Handicraft sale in Norway

If you attended one of the numerous fundraising events I held during my last visit to Norway, you might remember the beautiful handicrafts made in Kong Mong Moeng camp. The sale was quite successful, and we managed to raise 190 US Dollars for the school. The children and teachers felt very proud to see the results of their hard

work when I handed the money over to the school principal in front of the whole school. I reminded the children that no matter our circumstances; if we work hard and help each other, we will always achieve good results. Thanks to all who purchased the handicraft!



Starting up Burma Border Guidelines Study Program

Printing a medical guideline book of more than 400 pages to be used by all Shan health workers along the border and inside Shan State, Burma, was a huge project for Tai Hope to commit to. Printing 500 books cost 6,000 US Dollars, which is probably the biggest and most costly project we have ever funded. In order to make sure that the books are read and used, we developed a study program for all the Shan health workers. During 6 months they will follow a reading plan which will take them through the whole manual during their free time. Burma Border Guidelines have been used by health workers along the Burma border for almost a decade, but no one has developed a study plan until now.



In December we started a journey to invite Shan health workers in 6 refugee camps for this study program. We gave them basic training in study techniques and self-study and helped them set up their very own study group. Altogether 43

participants representing all the camps are part of this new program. This means that I have to follow up on the study groups and visit the camps monthly to check their progress, homework and hand out exams. This program will demand much of our strength and time, but we feel it's a good investment because the knowledge will literally save lives!

Acknowledgement

Sai On is a highly skilled Shan humanitarian worker who managed several aid and community projects for Tai Hope last year. He joined us full-time in last October and will stay until he leaves for the UN University for Peace in February. I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge and extend my gratitude to Sai On for his dedication, support and tremendous help he has been to Tai Hope and sincerely hope he will consider working with us again in the future.



Still in the dark...

As I again expect the beautiful Christmas light to predictably turn on and break the darkness, my mind turns to the political changes Burma has experienced the last months. "We have found a light in the tunnel, but we are still in the dark", a Burmese leader said a few days ago. While the West is cheering and forgetting all about the serious crimes of humanity committed during the world's longest civil war, the people on the ground see no changes. The Shan Army has in fact already held a ceasefire agreement talks with the Burmese authorities, and yet the situation is exactly the same, if not worse. Parts of Burma (Kachin State) are still in the midst of full civil war, and I can't help but doubt the sincerity of the former military dictators who talk about peace and democracy. So far no words asking for



forgiveness or admitting guilt for suppressing the people for more than 60 years have been mentioned, and I still can't overcome the sense that all these changes are only cosmetic. But still, the small flickers of light that have reached us have awoken a deep longing in me to one day be able to help and live among the people inside Burma... If these flickers of lights become as predicable and beautiful as the Christmas lights outside, my dream will come true. I invite you to share this dream and longing...



Sincerely, Inger Lise Bjorkelid/Nang Mwe Nguen
On Behalf of the Tai Hope Team