

## **A Narrative Report on a trip to Karenni refugee camp (2) / Mae Surin**

**To: Karenni families and friends**

**From: Lu Kayahphu**

**Date: July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2013**

### **1. Introduction**

On the morning of 23<sup>rd</sup> of April 2013, the new of the ravaged fire started spreading around the globe. The incident actually happened on 22<sup>nd</sup> at around 3:00 pm local time. We were all awed and could not believe what we saw on the internet which the merciless inferno was billowing the two sections of Karenni Refugee Camp (2) so called Mae Surin Camp in Thailand. There were four sections in the camp and the section (1) and (4) were the victims of the blaze. These two sections housed about 2, 000 Karenni refugees. The most heartbreaking new was the 37 lives including children and women were taken by the fire.

### **2. Organizing**

Karenni families and friends from many states in U.S.A came together over the phone and internet for collecting monetary contribution. The contribution just did not come from our Karenni families only, but also from our many generous friends, coworkers, churches and employers. I accepted the responsibility of putting the entire fund collected from all the representatives mentioned bellow so within a week, I started receiving and recording all the personal and electronic checks, bank transfers, cash and so on. An excel file for details is attached. Many representatives from the states of CO, KY, MN, NC, NJ, NY, NE, OR, SD, TN, TX, UT, WI, OR had several meetings over the phone and emails on how to send the monetary support to the victims. At one of the discussions over the phone in the first week of April, 2013, we had a chance to call one of the secretaries of the Karenni Refugee Committee (KnRC) and told her what our plan was going to be. On April 8<sup>th</sup>, we sent out an email to KnRC for what exactly we and all the contributors wanted to do with the monetary fund we collected. In the email, in both Burmese and English languages, we asked KnRC's help to distribute the money to the victims' families. However, one week passed and we did not get any response from the KnRC whether it would be possible or not to help fulfill the wishes of the many of the Karenni families and friends here in the U.S.A.

### **3. Plan B**

As we could not get in touch with anybody from KnRC or the camp committee, I was a bit frustrated of what to do with thousands of dollars in my hand. Furthermore, no one knows if there were doubt or suspicious about the transaction activities in my personal bank account. Anyway, I initiated the option of being in person myself in Thailand and taking chances to meeting with the Karenni Refugee Committee, the local camp committee, and the survived families on behalf of the representatives from many states. We hold another teleconference about the plan. The majority was in favor of the idea because being personally present to the site would give the Karenni families and friends here in the U.S.A an opportunity to be able to send their representative and more importantly it would enable the moral support and encouragement to the survived families. Thus, within about two week period of time I booked a round trip's to Thailand departed the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May, 2013.

#### 4. In Thailand

I arrived in Bangkok, Thailand around 8:30 local time on May 5<sup>th</sup> then I took a night bus from Bangkok to Chiang Mai. I arrived in Chiang Mai the next morning at around 9 am, but I could not get any bus going to Mae Hong Son that day. I had to ask a friend in Chiang Mai booked me a one way flight to Mae Hong Son the next day.

#### 5. Meeting with KnRC and Camp (2) committee

It took me more than a week to finally meet with the chairman and secretaries of the KnRC to get their permission and assistance for what I was planning to do. I told the committee about the plan which I would be distributing the money contributed from Karenni families and friends from many parts of the United States to the survived victims. Right then, the secretary told me the KnRC is also planning to do the same way and the committee has been collecting and putting the entire fund together right now. I wondered if she wanted to tell me I can hand the donation to them and be on my way back to U.S.A. I wished and desperately wanted her responded the email sent to her on April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2013 and boldly type in a "YES" which was simplest answer we all wanted to get. That simple email could have saved a lot of resources such as times, stress, anxiety, money, and so on. Anyway, I was determined that I needed to finish the mission I was assigned so I asked the committee for the list of the households so that I can do my best to do the math within the amount I had. I was given two files of soft copies which one file contained households of section (1) and another was section (4). Each files had about 8 pages as there were about 200 households from each section.

#### 6. Trip to Camp (2) or Mae Surin

I finally could get an arrangement with the chairman of the KnRC to travel to camp (2) on the 18<sup>th</sup>. Mr. KnRC's chairman and his driver picked me up by a 4 WD truck from Nai Soi (a local Thai village closes to Karenni refugee camp 1) at about 8 am in the morning. The truck was fully loaded at the back so I had no choice, but to squeeze in at the back seat with other three ladies from Karenni Women Organization who were also going to Mae Surin. Traveling through a mountainous and winding road from Mae Hong Son to a junction where an access dirt road to hill tribes' villages wasn't that fun. However, the second phase of the journey to reach Mae Surin was another different story. You would have to be physically and psychologically strong for this one as the dirt road is snaking through the narrow, bumpy and again massive mountainous track. Furthermore, getting through with the hilly part was not enough, but winding down the valley of the Mae Surin's river was something else. Rushing through the sandy and stony river and about two feet deep of the water was not that nice for both the driver and the truck. Anyway, the rest is a history. We made it to the camp at about 10:30 am and took a short break at the chairman's house. Mr. Chairman's wife hosted us with sweeten sticky rice which make my day as I was pretty hungry that time.

#### 7. Monetary contribution

Mr. Mahn Saw, the KnRC's chairman, led me to Mrs. Shelly Than's (chairwoman of Karenni refugee camp (1) committee) house at around 11:00 am and fortunately she was at home. I told her about what I was planning to do which I also mentioned it to her over the phone about a month before my arrival. She then took us to her office which located on a hill side of the section (2) and it's just across the river from her house. As we got to the camp committee office, Mrs. Chairwoman picked up her Walkie Talkie to get a hold of the two section's leaders. Within minutes, the two section (1) and (4) leaders arrived at the office. We all had to go through the list of the households from what I got from KnRC and compared it to what the camp committee had. There were some different in numbers of households and their members

because some of them already left for resettlement to third countries. Through a PA system, the section leaders requested each of a head of household to be present at the office to receive the contribution. I told the committees' chairperson and their staff one more time about the monetary contribution we were going to distribute did not come from me personally, but from the Karenni families and friends in the United States. With the help of the two chairpersons and their staff, we could manage distributing the money to all the survived victims within six hours that day. There were over three hundred head of households or representatives show up at the camp committee office for the monetary distribution.

### **Reflection**

I felt like I was entering into a newly rampaged war zone the moment I entered the site. The fire leveled out everything. The new houses and those were still in the process of rebuilding persuaded me to believe these people were fresh refugees escaping a war or disaster. This tragedy changed everything. I lived, went to school, had a family of my own in this camp 13 years ago and I know what and how this camp was to me. I considered this camp home, but what I saw completely turned my mind upside down. I could not tell where all the major landmarks such as formal location of boarding school, playgrounds, schools, clinics, and so forth I was familiar with anymore. Nevertheless, I was relief to see families and friends in general were showing their blossom faces. It seemed they were getting back to their normal lives with an exception to those who lost their love ones in the fire. There were no churches rebuilt yet, but the Karenni refugees keep their faith by worshiping and praising God under temporary tents which the heat of the scorching sun could easily fill up the space.

### **Acknowledgement**

On behalf of the Karenni refugee camp (2)'s fire survived victims, I wholeheartedly appreciate the organizing team's members here in the U.S who put their time, effort, and energy to make this happened. I also like to extend my gratitude to the KnRC and Karenni refugee camp (2) committee for their support and cooperation. I also like to give a special thank you to a few friends in Thailand while I was there for giving me all kinds of support such as assistance in exchanging currency, booking flights, transportation, accommodation, foods, and so forth. With limited budget, I don't think I could both physically and mentally survive to stay in a foreign country for weeks without good friends' support. Last, but not least, and most importantly, the total appreciation will go to those individuals, families, organizations, churches and friends who generously made the monetary contribution that had given me a privilege to carry out a mission. Wishing you all in good health and God bless you.



With KnRC's chairman on the way and at his house with his family



Mr. Chairman leading the way to camp committee chairwoman's house from Sec (1)



Meeting Mrs. Chairwoman, then coding her staff to come to the office



Rechecking household members and recalculating the amount of money



Some charming faces while waiting for their small gift



Survived victims picking gifted money from you



Some more of survived victims picking gifted money from you



Part of rebuilt to Sec (4)