

# Learning for Burma

Dissident Thein Naing has devoted himself to training teachers and providing education to refugees on the Thai-Burma border and internally displaced people inside Burma.

**KRISTA MOGENSEN** reports.

**W**hen Thein Naing fled Burma in 1988, little did he know that he would be offered a scholarship six years later to study in Australia. In Burma he was a university student committed to the democracy movement. When the military took over, he had to leave his family, studies and homeland.

Finding himself in a camp on the Thai-Burma border, he discovered he was one of the few refugees to have an advanced education. Although he was not a trained teacher, he felt compelled to teach others in the camp and help them overcome poverty and displacement.

For the next six years, Naing and some friends ran a makeshift bamboo hut school for children and adults. "It was very difficult, very challenging," he says. Some of the students were older than the teachers, and they came from many different ethnic backgrounds. Teaching materials and resources were scarce and Naing was paid with a monthly tin of rice.

After two years, he did three months of teacher training, partly funded by Burmese democracy

movement leader Aung San Suu Kyi's Nobel Prize winnings. In 1994, out of the blue, he was offered the AusAID scholarship in Australia.

"I felt I needed to get a proper education," he says. "In the camps, students could go no further than Year 10. I wanted to study more so I could do something for them."

Naing had married two years earlier and had a young son. Moving to a stable country was appealing, but it was hard for him to leave the camp. "It was difficult to leave my colleagues and the democracy movement, which is very much a part of my life."

He and his family arrived in Australia after a difficult transit through Bangkok as refugees without legal papers. "One month I was in the remotest part of the Burmese jungle, and the next month I am in Melbourne learning English at Swinburne University," he says. In the next seven years, he completed a bachelor of applied science, diploma of education and masters degree.

After working briefly as a teacher in Melbourne, Naing returned to the Thai-Burma border—initially assisted by AEU

funding—to conduct training, and research into multicultural education.

He was shocked to see how conditions had deteriorated. Support from aid groups had increased, but so had the size of the camp he had been in—from 2,000 to 20,000 refugees. There was tension from overcrowding, and widespread boredom and depression from lack of work. "The younger generation there does not currently have a bright future," he says.

Yet some people, especially those displaced by civil war, told him the refugee camp was better than life in Burma. It provided basic food, education and healthcare. "Because of the economic hardship and political situation in Burma, many people are forced to leave. In Burma, 40 per cent of children can't go to school. We estimate that almost 70 per cent of children who start primary school can't complete it."

Thein Naing is now part of the National Health and Education Committee, an umbrella organisation of ethnic groups and democratic organisations opposing military rule in Burma, and promoting democracy and human rights. As a senior



PHOTO: JULIE RENOUF

educator, he is involved in several educational projects to train teachers, write curriculum support material in English and Burmese, and train local educators to become researchers in their communities. Currently, he is working as an academic coordinator at NHEC and as a local consultant in education.

This work has taken Naing away from his family in Melbourne for 11 months of each of the last three years, so he is looking for a way they can be together most of the time. He is considering further study to enhance his efforts to help Burma return to being a democracy.

"We can't return to Burma, but there are small things we can do to help. I have an obligation, so I must use this opportunity to help others who are in need." •

**KRISTA MOGENSEN** is Australian Educator's commissioning editor.

## + Resources

- Donations to help provide basic education and health supplies for internally displaced people of Burma can be made at [www.nhecburma.org](http://www.nhecburma.org) or [theinnaing@nhecburma.org](mailto:theinnaing@nhecburma.org)