

Although some of our Thai friends are familiar with happenings in Burma as well as friends in ACHR such as KA Jayaratne and Prafulla Pradhan - who worked on UN projects there - this was the first ACHR exploratory visit.

4 people - Fr Jorge Anzorena, Maurice Leonhardt, Jantana Benjasup and Ms. Tong Dee community leader from Chiang-mai went to see if there was potential for the rest of the region to help. It was not an intervention but an exploration - as interesting as it gets - and filled with humanity that comes through hard times.



Burma is in a unique position in its development. It has suffered from political unrest for more than 40 years leaving the country in a crisis situation.

Communities, all over the nation, have been re-located and people, moved from the land they were familiar with, find themselves unable to make a living in their traditional ways. Health care is very limited and the educational system dysfunctional with many schools and universities closed for much of the last decade. Youth, especially women have few opportunities - the younger generation in particular is suffering.

In the early 1990's, some cease-fire agreements gave a limited opening for some small-scale development to try and improve the situation. In this visit we were able to see some success from these interventions. As an Asian coalition, we hope to bring some of the richness of the urban poor movement in the region to our friends in Myanmar.

## The Spirit in Education Movement - SEM -

Somboon Chungprampree - (Thai nickname "Moo" photo top left) was our guide and arranged the 4 day visit. He has been active in Thailand and Burma since 1995 when SEM was founded. SEM is a local Thai NGO, now with a counter-part in Burma. It deals with programmes that encompass a spiritual and holistic perspective drawing upon engaged Buddhism, indigenous wisdom, liberation theology and participatory process. Moo says it's difficult to enter Burma to do development work - you come through the government channels or through the Buddhist organisations. Being a Buddhists organisation with an educational orientation allowed SEM to start work in Burma in 1995.

With help from local groups in Burma, SEM identified the need to build up local capacity and promote the growth of the NGO movement to respond to grassroots needs. This led to the first 10 week Grassroots Leadership Training (GLT) session in 1996. Since then the programme has expanded to have 2 courses annually, now each 16 weeks long. There is also comprehensive follow up activities to meet the needs of leaders of the alumni as the majority has gone on to set up small-scale development projects in Burma. We visited the small SEM office in Rangoon and met with 3 staff. Later on the last day of our visit, we were able to attend one of the training courses and speak with participants - in the hills 2 hours drive from Mandalay - see later.



## Lokahtta Cariya Foundation

**Founded by the Ven. U Kosalla - (pictured mid right) - Lokahtta cariya means doing merit for the world.** We spent a couple hours with the founder at a Wat in Rangoon. The Foundation's work with the urban and rural poor communities has not long been underway and seems very much in the control of the founder who is an inspiration to others. He has traveled to Thailand and Cambodia and upon return has implemented some Participatory Action Research Training in a number of states.

Ven. U Kosalla says, as a Monk he wants to emphasize micro finance - and teach how to save and plan finances He also wants to focus on agriculture, particularly organic fertilizer - not meat products - he'll teach younger monks and they will teach others.

Fr Jorge spoke of the savings groups in Cambodia, about horizontal learning through exchanges and the wise words of Khun Paiyon in Thailand on agricultural management.

Ven. U Kosalla also gives lectures and seminars on Buddhist related issues as well as development issues. He has been extremely helpful for SEM during their entry to Burma and particularly for getting passports and official documents required by locals to travel outside the country for educational exchanges.







## A Savings Group on the fringe of Rangoon

In the afternoon, we traveled an hour by car to the fringes of Rangoon, to a farming area being rapidly over-taken by factories. 20 or so houses / shacks scattered amongst the rice fields were the homes of one of a few savings groups started by the Lokahitta Cariya Foundation.

We stopped at the local Wat and spoke with 6-7 members of the savings group. They belong to the ANAWAR Credit Union. Savings began in 2000 with 23 members - 7 are women. They tried to save 150 chats per month. After six months they have 900 chats - about \$US1.00 - They could then get a loan of 1800 chat - \$2.00. The group lives near the Pago River so they used the loan to buy fishing nets and equipment. They try to repay the loan within 6 months at 5% per month interest. - informal money lenders charge 20% monthly, they tell us.

They have a 5 member working committee who make decisions on loans and finance. The monk gives guidelines and will choose the 5 persons at a General Meeting every 6 months.



We tell them about savings in Cambodia and other countries. They are eager to learn. They want to expand the group and increase the amount saved and also contact "Swiss Aid" for a larger capital base.

They tell us men have to sign for the loan - in Burma - men - they say - have higher status and are the lord of the house. 5 of the 7 women savers have no husbands.

They are attracted to the idea of learning from other savings groups - but there are none around - perhaps they will link with METTA groups (see later).

Thong Dee (community leader from Chiang-mai) tells them how active the women are in savings and organising in Thailand. Pui from CODI-Thailand asks if they are linked to the authorities and do they discuss issues with them.

They reply that in Burma you either link with the government or the monks. We take our guidelines from the monks. They tell us that the savings group also helps people who fall ill, as well as with funerals and welfare, health and education - but it's difficult - especially education. The monk intervenes and expresses a keenness to link up with others - there is a strong need for networking and learning from others. he says.



We then visited the village and had a discussion over lunch in the house of the chairman of the savings group. Fish, vegetables and rice, soft drinks and fruit. Friendly neighbours willingly posed for group photographs.







Khun Paw (photo left) accompanied us throughout the visits in Rangoon - filling in background, translating discussions and guiding us through the complexities of a new country.

He heads an NGO working on income generating activities for poor village women. He is keen to expand the savings groups. The groups have had success in marketing traditional style cushions, mattresses and mats. Loans can be allocated for equipment and paid back as incomes rise.

Unlike most of our contacts, Khun Paw works with government authorities. Its important he feels - to link them into the economic activities of the grassroots and give them understanding of grassroots development issues. Khun Paw links equally well with the other groups in Burma.

## METTA Development Foundation



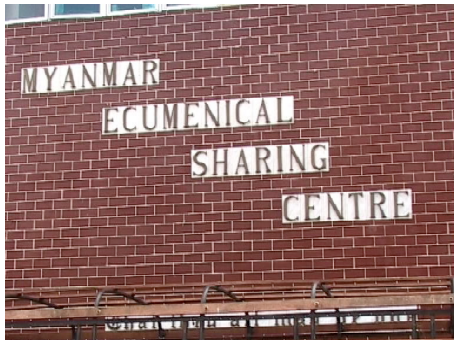
Mrs. Seng Raw (left) and the staff reminded me of some other country focal points in ACHR in that they thoroughly understand the political, economic and social culture of their countries and take every opportunity and strategy to improve the life of the poor within this context. - And also like us perhaps, are a bit too busy to learn from "outsiders".

METTA is a large, committed and professional NGO with proven impacts in rural and urban development - an OPP.



Some of METTA's achievements include the training of over 5,000 community members (half of whom are women) in participatory methodologies; wide scale Agricultural development programs for villages in rural Burma; water supply projects in 10 towns; savings groups; early childcare programs in ethnic villages; clinics - drug centers in 11 villages; Farmer Field Schools in 2 states; a Centre for Action Research and Demonstration (CARD). The Rural Reconstruction Programme aims to support "war-weary" peoples attempting to construct peace. promote rehabilitation and reconstruction.

## The Rural Urban Mission



URM is a church linked group who tackle difficult issues sensitive to the military government of Burma. As far as they can they raise issues and take actions on the misuse of power which affects people at the grassroots, including land and human rights issues. Their clientele includes women, youth and factory workers, among others. They have a wide outreach to all parts of the country including the minorities. URM still feels restricted in what they can do, because



of the government. It has a national program on building leadership capacity and community organising which has linked with COPE Philippines earlier this year - through an ACHR supported exchange. They also have programs embracing legal aid and workshop rights and in urban areas work particularly with women and the garment industry. The micro credit programs are linked with the church. and the diocese structure has good potential for expansion of savings groups and networks in urban areas. Fr Jorge felt ACHR could link with this urban structure to help expand the savings groups.





# Urban Poor in Mandalay



We visited a poor community in Mandalay - Burma's second largest city - most houses were made of thatched materials - public utilities were minimal - water, sanitation, roads - were amongst the poorest we had seen in Asia.

28% of Burma's population live in urban areas. The annual urban growth rate is around 2%. In Rangoon 4 new satellite towns have been established by government - high rise in the rice -

Despite poverty in the cities, the overwhelming problems in the country are in the villages and rural areas - along with the dislocations caused by internal war. This is recognized by the local NGOs.



## Paung Daw Oo Monastic High School

Founded in 1993 this school has over 5,000 students ranging from kindergarten through to primary and high school. The school has given over 17 years of private FREE tuition to children of poor families who cannot afford education.

It targets children from poor rural and urban families and particularly those subject to ethnic abuse, or who are orphans or those could not attend government schools for various reasons. Both girls and boys are taught courses accredited by government and without a bias toward any religion. The school presently has 108 teachers and the enrollment of students totals 5,898.

The school is funded through its income generation projects such as its mechanical repairs workshop, tool making, welding, photocopying and computer typing. It also calls on donations.

Last year a new medical clinic (below left) was opened within the school grounds. It gives free service to the surround poor community and a local doctor volunteers his services when he can.

The head monk has started a savings group amongst his staff - and was keen for us to speak to organisers who may be able to expand to the nearby communities.





# SPIRIT IN EDUCATION MOVEMENT TRAINING

## A visit with the Local Grassroots Leadership Training Group



Around 400 young persons have been trained and most are still working in community organising in villages in all regions of Myanmar.

We spoke with a group of 26 enthusiastic, mainly young and educated, Burmese under-going training.

The coordinator explained the selection process was carefully controlled by considerations of ethnicity and religion: In Burma all groups should be represented.

This particular course had a wide range of topics over 9 weeks:

- Concepts on Development;
- Micro Credit;
- Sustainable Agriculture,
- Ecology,
- Women,
- Holistic Health and
- Conflict Resolution,
- HIV, Drugs

Each course is learnt in the field at an appropriate location in Myanmar. - on farms, in villages with crises, at Credit Co-operatives, in women's centres.

The course on women's issues and HIV takes place near the border with China - where many young girls are kidnapped into prostitution and HIV is endemic.

After the course each person will work for at least 3 years at village level building grassroots capacity.

The origins of a large scale Network are in the making as all states of Myanmar are participating. The bonds we saw being made were strong and lasting. - They already have ideas on grassroots exchanges between villages.



26 participants from all states in Myanmar - Each ethnic group is represented. Some are farmers, students, religious, and other professions. - 11 female, 15 males.



Fr Jorge Anzorena expresses his thanks and shares some thoughts on networking with the group and coordinator .

## Recommendations for Follow UP



There are many organisations in Burma doing good community development work, under very difficult circumstances, mostly in villages and rural areas. It is recommended that we invite representatives to engage other ACHR members at the annual ACHR meeting in an effort to build links and share experiences.

Secondly, many groups have either micro-credit or savings groups and these are scattered all over the country. It would be beneficial if ACHR could organize to bring community members from these groups together to share their experiences in a Grassroots Savings Workshop in Rangoon and perhaps one or 2 other cities. Participants at the workshops would also include grassroots savings representatives from Thailand and one or two other countries. They could share their experiences - starting with women and savings and linking this with networks, housing, community organizing etc. A loose federation or network of grassroots savings groups could result and the beginning of a process of horizontal learning across the country.



# Exploratory visit with .....



**Fr Jorge Anzorena**  
SELAVIP and a founding father  
of ACHR



**Pui - Jantana**  
with the Secretariat of CODI  
Thailand



**Ms. Tong Dee**  
works with Burmese in  
northern Thailand



**Maurice Leonhardt**  
ACHR Secretariat  
Bangkok



ဒေါ်အောင်ဆန်းစုကြည်

**Daw Aung San Suu Kyi**



**Myanmar**

[See:](#)



## Aung San Suu Kyi, January 1999:

"I still think that people should not come to Burma because the bulk of the money from tourism goes straight into the pockets of the generals. And not only that, it's a form of moral support for them because it makes the military authorities think that the international community is not opposed to the human rights violations which they are committing all the time. They seem to look on the influx of tourists as proof that their actions are accepted by the world."

"There are fewer tourists - the boycott is working, and the better it works the better for the prospects of democracy in Burma."

"Burmese people know their own problems better than anyone else. They know what they want - they want democracy - and many have died for it. To suggest that there's anything new that tourists can teach the people of Burma about their own situation is not simply patronising - it's also racist."

"Tour operators and guide book writers should listen to their consciences - and be honest about their motivations. Profit is clearly their agenda. It's not good enough to suggest that by visiting Burma tourists will understand more. If tourists really wanted to find out what's happening in Burma - It's better if they stay at home and read some of the many human rights reports there are."

"I hope you can come back to this country one day and see the people when they are not frightened. Burma will be here for many years, so tell your friends to visit us later. Visiting now is tantamount to condoning the regime."

### Burma / Myanmar - the names

In 1989 Burma's official name was changed to Myanmar. This change was a move toward a name inclusive of all ethnic groups - not just the majority Burmese. Myanmar was the name used in Marco Polo's account of his travels there in the 13th century.

