

# TAABS

Former student, Rita Lobo, who graduated in TBS in 2005, tells us some news about Thailand:

"When I first volunteered to go and teach in the ESC school in Nupo Temporary Refugee Camp, I had absolutely no idea what I was getting myself into, and I mean that in the best possible way. I and one other volunteer were going to this Camp, where we would spend 3 weeks. It was located 6 hours south of the border town of Mae Sot, where all of our friends were staying. I didn't really know what to expect, and no one seemed able to tell me practical things about the camp. But I went anyway.



Nupo Temporary Refugee Camp is a pretty amazing place, as I found out as soon I arrived there. It is literally in the middle of nowhere, 6 hours from a hospital, 3 hours from a petrol station but only 20 minutes from the violent Thai-Burma border, where Burmese military like to lurk around with big guns and mortars! Even though it is called a "temporary refugee camp", Nupo has been here for around 20 years. It started as a Karen refugee settlement. They were the first ethnic minority to escape Burma en masse, as they are the most viciously persecuted, but were soon joined by all different types of Burmese refugees, all escaping the SPDC dictatorship that grew more violent every day. Now there are over 7 ethnic groups and 5 different religions coexisting peacefully in Nupo camp. The 20 thousand people that live in the camp have not adopted their former government's taste for ethnic discrimination.

The camp is really enormous. It is spread over in a flat clearing in between big wild mountains and rice paddies. Over the past 3 years it has almost doubled in size as the Thai authorities changed their policy towards Burmese refugees. Before 2005 they had been allowed to live in cities and try to adapt to the Thai society, but with the ever increasing flux of immigration they were now made to live in camps and then encouraged to re-settle in a third country (usually the USA or Australia). No more Burmese refugees are being granted permanent political asylum in Thailand, so the 200 thousand refugees live in the 7 camps along the border, waiting to be transferred to a third country. And that is why Carl and I are here. A lot of these people will be transferred to the USA in the next few months

and they do not speak a word of English.

ESC school is located in a section of Nupo camp for Political refugees, that is those who escaped Burma because their political activities and beliefs were putting them in danger of being persecuted/arrested by the SPDC. The original idea was to teach English to those facing re-



settlement so they could carry on their activities for a free Burma and their fight for democracy from their new location. Originally, classes were taught by the few with some English experience, but eventually the number of students grew so much, and their level of English improved beyond the capacities of the local teachers. That is when they started bringing in foreign teachers, that is, native speakers who were willing to come and spend some time teaching English and helping out in the school.

ESC now has almost 500 students aged 13 to 60 and over. It is not a formal high school. It is what they call a school for continuing education, which means that most of the students there have completed their formal education else-where, and



now come to ESC to learn English and prepare to apply to Universities once they have re-settled. It is an ambitious project. Today, over 20 teachers, local and foreign, volunteer at ESC, teaching 7 levels of English, and GED and GCE preparation classes that will enable refugees to sit exams and attend universities in the USA and Australia after they re-settle.



Because it is not a school for children, and because a lot of the students are prepared to leave at a moment's notice when their re-settlement papers come through, ESC has not been recognized as a formal school and receives no funding from any NGOs or from the Thai-Burma Border Committee. The school depends on independent donors which means that sometimes they can afford electricity and sometimes they cannot, and sometimes there are school supplies and sometimes there aren't. I spent almost a month in Nupo this past summer and it was the most amazing experience imaginable. As well as teaching, we helped out with the administration of the school, helping them find funding and develop their projects. One of the ideas was that if we created a real sense of community and school spirit, maybe they would get recognized as an official school and would have more opportunities to grow and develop. We started a Students' Union that now helps in raising money to help keep the school open as well as meeting with the Camp Leaders on a regular basis, in the hope of improving education, not only for ESC but for the whole camp. We also founded a school newspaper, The Burma Student Post, which is now reaching it's third edition with it's circulation up to one thousand copies and reaching all sections of the camp, not only the school. Recently, the school administration applied again for formal recognition, and we all have our fingers crossed."

If you have been a student or member of staff at The British School, Rio de Janeiro and would like to let us know what you have been up to since you left school, or if you would like the contact information of ex-students, please contact Adriana Nogueira de Andrade '94 at  
(+55-21) 2539-2717 ext 196 and/or  
aandrade@britishschool.g12.br

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