Overcoming Obstacles, Creating Opportunities

Youth Perspectives from the Thai-Burma Border
Overcoming Obstacles, Creating Opportunities: Youth Perspectives from the Thai-Burma Border

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With Thanks and Gratitude to the brave young people on the Thai-Burma Border: your genuine hearts and tireless spirits have inspired this document. We dedicate this report to you in the spirit of solidarity and peace.

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acronyms

AFPL    Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League
ASEAN  Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BYP    Burma Youth Project
CBO    Community-Based Organization
CPBI   Center for Peace Building International
DKBA   Democratic Karen Buddhist Army
ICT    Information and Communication Technology
IDP    Internally Displaced Person
ILO    International Labor Organization
KNU    Karen National Union
MP     Member of Parliament
NCGUB  National Coalition Government for the Union of Burma
NLD    National League for Democracy
RCH    Reproductive and Community Health
SEP    Special English Program
SLORC  State Law and Order Restoration Council
SPDC  State Peace and Development Council
TBBC   Thai Burma Border Consortium
TOEFL  Teaching Of English as a Foreign Language
UN     United Nations
UNSC   United Nations Security Council
WLB    Women’s League of Burma

Organizations

ALTSEAN Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma
AEIOU  All-Ethnic International Open University
BLC    Burmese Lawyers Council – Peace Law Academy
BWU    Burmese Women’s Union
ERS-B  EarthRights School - Burma
EWB    Empowering Women of Burma
EIP    English Immersion Program, Umpium Camp
HREIB  Human Rights Education Institute of Burma
KWAT  Kachin Women’s Association Thailand
KWO    Karen Women’s Organization
KYO    Karen Youth Organization
MTHS   Mae Tao High School
PEC    Peace Education Center
WH     Wide Horizons School
YCO    Yaung Chi Oo Workers Association

map
Center for Peace Building International

CPBI’s mission is to enhance local capacities for peace; promote understanding of the role of youth in conflicts and peace-building; and to strengthen connections between young peace builders globally.

CPBI is a small, adaptable, youth-led non-profit and non-governmental organization with a unique ability to engage young people through out innovative, multidisciplinary projects and programs. CPBI programs seek to create a platform for the voices of youth to reach the ears of policymakers, in order to have a substantive affect on outcomes. This goal is accomplished by executing innovative peacebuilding and leadership training programs which empower young people, while simultaneously involving our international network of policymakers to ensure that the message the young leaders craft is Included in the mainstream debate. In this way CPBI is able to entrench young people and enhance their involvement in the drafting of policy that affects their future. Programs run by CPBI in dozens of countries train youth leaders to give them the skills they will need to be able to lead their countries and communities on a positive path for the future.

CPBI works with local partners on youth-led, technically-advised programs that are conflict sensitive and context-specific. Some of the countries CPBI has worked in so far include Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Democratic Republic of Congo, South Africa, the West Bank, and the United States. Through our networks of youth-led organizations, CPBI aims to learn from each other’s work with the focus on improving the quality of life for young people affected by conflict, poverty and natural disasters.

Burma Youth Project

A variety of groups are working to build the capacity of Burmese organizations on the Thai-Burma border. Despite these good efforts, there has not been a particular focus on the needs unique to youth activists and their organizations. This program was designed to facilitate that goal and support a collaborative network among youth activists who are working towards a unified peace and reconciliation process for their country.

Supplementary Materials

This comprehensive report is part of a package of work produced by the Burma Youth Project. Additional elements of our research include:

Film: Under the Sun: Life on the Thai-Burma Border (12 minutes/NTSC) is a documentary short film that tells the intimate story of a Burmese family living as migrant workers in neighboring Thailand. The mother dreams of providing her children with the education she could never face arrests and raids by the police.

Photo Essay: “The Experience of Struggle” depicts the everyday realities of Burmese living in Eastern Burma and in refugee camps or migrant centers in Thailand.

Overcoming Obstacles, Creating Opportunities produced by CPBI is one of the most comprehensive analyses of the situation on the ground, clearly detailing the experiences of displaced youth living on the border between Thailand and Burma. Included in this report are details of the organizations currently engaged in the task of assisting these youth developing their remarkable potential. The goal of this research is to enhance the international community’s awareness of the situation and providing particular context to international organizations and practitioners intending to work with displaced Burmese youth in Thailand.

A number of significant events have taken place since the CPBI team concluded their research on the ground in March 2007. These events have the potential to be significantly impact youth, and are important in understanding the current situation faced by Burmese nationals living in Thailand.

February 14, 2008: Padoh Mahn Sha was assassinated in Mae Sai, Thailand. A leader of the Karen National Union, he was an advocate for improving educational opportunities for youth as well as giving a larger voice to youth activists within the democracy movement.

May 2-3, 2008: Cyclone Nargis touched land in Burma’s Irrawaddy delta, causing mass devastation and taking the lives of over a hundred thousand people.

July 2, 2008: The 46th anniversary of the 1962 student led uprisings in Burma which was suppressed and subsequently led to General Ne Win’s dictatorship lasting until 1988.

August 8, 2008: The 20th anniversary of the uprising of 8-8-88. The opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympic Games 2008 fell on the anniversary of this uprising. Meanwhile, China continues to support Burma’s military regime.

Ongoing, 2008: Youth activists have been arrested for their democracy building work inside Burma and are currently being held in secret prison facilities. Some have been sentenced to up to 30 years in jail for these acts. In Thailand, they continue to face arrests and raids by the police.

Despite these tragic events and the checked history of the conflict, this report serves as a source of inspiration and a call to action for the international community to ensure the current generation of youth leader’s voices are not ignored. The Burma Youth Project’s findings not only provide a nuanced understanding of the plight young people face in the democracy movement on the Thai-Burma border, but also pave the way for CPBI’s mission to enhance local capacities for peace to promote understanding of the role of youth in conflicts and peace-building; and to strengthen connections between young peace builders globally.

Best Wishes

Lakshitha Saji Prelis
Executive Director
Center for Peace Building International
Burmese activists living in Thailand are a fundamental component of Burma’s democracy movement, organizing and strategizing for a future democratic state. The Burma Youth Program is dedicated to the critical task of understanding and supporting the role that young people contribute to the task of leading Burma peacefully from dictatorship and civil war to democracy and reconciliation. *Overcoming Obstacles, Creating Opportunities* details the experiences of displaced youth from Burma living on the Thai-Burma border during the spring of 2007, focusing on several organizations working to educate, support and empower them in their work. In doing so, it aims to turn a spotlight on their accomplishments, the ways that their work is being directed to the greater good of their people and their country, as well as to amplify their voices in the international arena.

What are the factors that compel youth to leave Burma for Thailand? For many, life in Burma means extreme hardship and perpetual uncertainty. Since the military seized power in 1962, Burma has gone from one of Southeast Asia’s wealthiest nations to one of the least developed countries in the world. Over the past four decades the military government has grown increasingly repressive, denying civil rights such as free speech and outlawing political opposition in any form. It has forced its citizens into hard labor and aggressively pursued a de facto civil war against Burma’s many ethnic minorities. In recent years the government’s fiscal policies have pushed the economy into crisis, arbitrarily hiking up prices of necessary common goods and allowing rampant inflation. These conditions often compel people to begin working at a very early age, whether in the fields of rural areas, as day laborers in urban centers or, increasingly, across the border in neighboring countries. Large numbers of youth are recruited into the military – Human Rights Watch estimates many thousands of soldiers in the Burma army are under the age of 18.

According to ASEAN’s Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus approximately 40% of Burma’s population is 18 years of age or younger. In a country with dwindling economic opportunities and a crumbling education system, there are limited options available to the large youth population. At
the same time, the political situation inside the country prevents them from taking any meaningful ownership over most of the things that govern their daily lives, leading to a disaffected and potentially volatile youth population. The lack of educational possibilities, high levels of unemployment and the persistence of active military violence targeting ethnic minorities displace many youth to surrounding border countries. In Thailand an estimated 2.5 million people from Burma live as refugees, migrant workers or political exiles, a great number of which are youth. Upon arrival in Thailand, many of these youth choose a life of activism as a means of opposing a government that has caused great suffering to its citizens; these youth activists are the focus of this report. *Overcoming Obstacles: Creating Opportunities* reports the results of BYP’s baseline survey and needs assessment. It is intended as a tool for activists, students, donors and the international community, encouraging leaders to take a more instrumental role in supporting Burmese youth. In addition to the research findings outlined below, this report offers recommendations on how the international community can better provide support as well as providing background and context to the conflict and to BYP.

First, we examine the history of conflict and situation in Burma which compels youth to leave. Our research uncovered three main reasons: to escape the violence and human rights violations of the civil war being waged by government authorities against ethnic minority groups; to pursue an education that is unattainable to the majority of Burmese youth remaining inside the country; and to seek employment opportunities unavailable in their homeland. Many of these determined individuals turn harrowing tales of personal hardship into effective political engagement and activism. Second, this report examines the circumstances which contribute to the politicization of these displaced Burmese youth and turn some into activists, including the legacy of suffering within the country, access to education which raises awareness about human rights, and personal experiences of hardship based on gender or ethnic discrimination.

Upon arrival in Thailand, youth face serious obstacles. Those who possess official refugee status are challenged by the difficulties of life in refugee camps. Those living outside of camps and without official paperwork face jail time or deportation if caught by authorities. Feelings of isolation generated by limited access to communications technology as well as living in a country far removed from their family, friends and culture also have a profound impact on Burmese youth activists.

The youth featured in this report have sought to overcome these obstacles in their quest for education, employment and other options unavailable in their homeland. Those who are able to achieve further education are empowered by their newfound knowledge and skills, which increase their capacity and motivation to work for their communities. These programs need support, however, and this report outlines further ways the international community can contribute.

Looking ahead, displaced Burmese youth have sought to define their future goals for themselves in the movement towards democracy. Through the perspective of first and second day issues we examine the short and long-term goals of these activists, including their definitions of democracy, human rights and federalism. We also examine the ways they are working to achieve these goals, and their desire to build connections, both within the movement and with the outside world.

In the final section of analysis, we examine how lessons from BYP’s research in light of the events of last September’s Monk Uprising against the military regime inside Burma. The dedication of youth activists, their innovative use of technology and their work across divides represent assets in the struggle against Burma’s military regime. BYP’s research findings are submitted in the hope that they can be applied to enhance the capacity of a new generation of leaders and thus contribute to a more peaceful transition towards a democratic, free and prosperous Burma for all.
The scope of the Burma Youth Project’s 2007 research focuses on Burmese youth forced to live in Thailand because of the violent and unjust situation in their homeland. The impetus behind their move to Thailand, their status in the country, their access to educational opportunity and their commitment to political action vary widely (for further information, refer to Section 5: Findings).

Given the focus of this report and the variety of situations Burmese youth face in Thailand, CPBI’s recommendations for action center on how to best support Burmese youth in both political empowerment and capacity for activism in the Thai-Burma border region. Recommendations are delineated into short- and long-term timeframe. This has been done to emphasize the importance of addressing the immediate survival needs of Burmese youth in their development of political awareness, as well as to further legitimize the role of youth activism in the success of democratic transition and peace building efforts taking place inside Burma. These sections are termed First Day (humanitarian aid and daily support) and Second Day (future stabilization and sustainable development) support recommendations.

We call on members and supporters of Burmese democracy, humanitarian aid and non-governmental/community-based organizations, and the international community to bring the voice of youth into the movement in a way that brings their unique skills and potential to this fundamental cause and in the process strengthens Burma’s democratic efforts in the future.

Youth are an asset, not an afterthought— they have the dedication, the passion, and the capability to help strengthen democracy efforts today, and sustain peaceful transition tomorrow.

Supporters of the Burmese Democracy Movement:

First Day Support
- Provide material support for educational facilities operating along the Thai-Burma border, including meals, textbooks, building rental, sports and recreational equipment, access to information.
and communication technology (ICT) and internet resources, volunteer teacher support, and direct funding.

- Sponsor youth in their quest for an education through tuition payments and scholarship programs, assistance in travel funding, access to international testing standards such as TOEFL tests and computer science courses, and similar necessary materials.

- Raise awareness about the current situation in Burma by writing opinion/editorials and letters to the editor in local newspapers, blogging, and educational presentations.

- Organize your community to support youth-oriented programs on the border through charity drives, fundraising, and public awareness campaigns.¹

To Burmese Democracy Activists:

- Increase the provision of information about youth-oriented organizations so that youth interested in learning more about the movement can get involved.

- Facilitate inter-group communication efforts: connect youth activists with one another by providing contact information of groups and assisting in networking forums.

Second Day Support

- Support increased collaboration between youth-oriented activist groups and other organizations, including INGOs, CBOs, and other groups affiliated with the Burmese democracy movement operating on the Thai-Burma border.

- Develop programming to increase inter-ethnic dialogue between youth, and support programs that bring them together collaborate and learn from one another in the spirit of building democratic institutions in the future.

- Expand advanced educational opportunities available to Burmese youth living on the border: incorporate civic education into the curriculum of existing, non- Activist schools; maintain updated current events information and an analysis of political developments inside Burma for schools that are already training youth activists in the principles of democracy.

- Increase opportunities for youth activists to participate in exchange programs with peers around the world, particularly those who are also working on transitional justice issues in closed and conflict- Affected societies.

To Burmese Democracy Activists:

- Work to decrease the isolation of youth activists by developing mentorship opportunities between 88 Generation Student activists and today’s youth activists, thus growing the movement and developing practical skills for future leaders.

- Increase the arena for youth voices to be heard within the movement in order to stimulate creative new initiatives and more responsible young leadership.

- Strategically implement technological communication methods to target Burmese youth on the border, increasing their political knowledge base and engagement; as well as increasing the communication, collaboration and coordination methods at their disposal.

- Support the sustainability of youth activist programs through marketing their efforts to the international community, raising awareness, material support, and funding.

Burmese Diaspora Community:

First Day Support

- Donate materials and funds to help Burmese youth organizations cover basic expenses immediate needs such as food, shelter, educational material and communications equipment.

- Work with resettlement organizations to maintain contact with refugee areas and strategically develop means of supporting and improving the camp environment and surrounding areas.

- Return to the border region and volunteer to teach at schools and other non-profit organizations providing support to Burmese in need.

- Provide translations of materials into other languages in order to increase information dissemination about the situation in Burma to the international community.

¹ For more information about organizations working on the border, see Appendix D on page 166.
Second Day Support

- Provide mentoring and support to Burmese youth who have resettled from refugee camps in your community; continue to nurture their connection to their culture and understanding of the situation in your shared homeland.
- Work with border organizations and individuals to provide information and trainings to those in the camps and surrounding areas.
- Communicate with refugees still living in border areas about both the difficulties and opportunities of resettlement.
- Utilize your voice in your community to raise awareness about the situation in Burma and on the border, and cultivate support for youth efforts towards democratization.

International Aid and Non-Governmental Organizations:

First Day Support

- Offer widely available emergency services to those in need including healthcare, legal support, customs, childcare, etc.
- Develop teacher training programs that will empower youth to teach others within refugee camps fundamental subjects (e.g. math, science, English, etc.) as well as lessons in human rights and political science.
- Assist existing schools in expanding their curriculum to include all relevant subjects of study.
- Provide grant writing assistance to youth-oriented programs on the border, so that they may solicit their own funding sources.
- Continue to raise public awareness by educating the international community about the situation in Burma, expanding efforts through creative and focused media.

Second Day Support

- Cultivate training of trainer programs that will provide stronger teachers for youth activists already well versed in human rights and politics: more experienced trainers are needed at advanced activist schools along the border.

Regional Political Actors:

First Day Support

- Strive to strike a balance between regulating enforcement of illegal migration that addresses the national security concerns of each country while ensuring the personal security of youth activists.
- Implement a system of immigration that provides security and legal status to youth living in the border areas, including the provision of documentation.
- Increase security inside Burmese refugee camps

recommendations

- Establish indicators to quantify success of youth activist organizations via systematic monitoring and evaluation tactics; utilize these indicators to strengthen organizational functioning, allowing for greater effectiveness within the movement.
- Further train youth activists in international relations including foreign affairs, communications, English as well as other foreign languages, and the further development of international exchange programs.
- Extend gender equality studies into educational institutions not solely affiliated with the women’s movement, so as to further promulgate gender equality principles.
- Document current events and abuses of Burmese refugees and activists occurring in Burma as well as Thailand; provide objective non-political analysis of these events, which is critical for transition efforts in the future.
- Support continued research into the situation for Burmese youth in Thailand and Burma’s other border countries: China, India and Bangladesh. This is critical for directing aid and training where it is most needed by displaced Burmese living in the region.
- Increase methods proven successful in other transitional justice environments, while adapting to Burmese needs where possible.
- Facilitate inter-organizational communication between youth-oriented programs: aid organizations are in a particularly good position to facilitate dialogue about non-governmental work occurring on the Thai-Burma border.

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within your territory by facilitating NGO access to camps and provision of supplies such as water, food, shelter, and constructive employment activities.

- Allow for safe travel and freedom of movement for law–Abiding youth activists seeking refuge outside of Burma.
- Develop rehabilitation programs for child soldiers, trafficking victims, and other sub-groups particularly affected by human rights abuses inside Burma.

Second Day Support

- Engage the SPDC in constructive dialogue about human rights; continue to apply international charters (e.g., ASEAN’s human rights charter, the UN Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Rights and Principles at Work, etc.) throughout these discussions.
- Join the wider international community in its efforts to apply pressure for democratic changes inside Burma.
- Devise trade regulations that respect human rights, and refuse to engage in the trading of goods that have been obtained through the violation of human rights.
- Eliminate military support of the junta until a functional roadmap to democracy is implemented.
- A stable and democratic Burma is in the best interests of the region: support the development of youth leaders who will one day hold political power in their country by offering scholarships to State universities.

International Community:

First Day Support

- Help youth-oriented programs like the ones profiled in this report keep their doors open through funding and material support.
- Work to extend internet access and free media resources into refugee camps as well as areas inside Burma: increased technology will help to increase accurate and current information about what is happening inside the country.

- Continue to pressure the military junta about implementing a functional roadmap to democracy and the release of political prisoners including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and call on the military junta to maintain an open line of communication with political opposition groups such as the NLD and NCGUB.
- Provide asylum for those whose lives are at risk because of the situation in Burma.

Second Day Support

- Support systematic documentation efforts of human rights abuses occurring inside Burma so as to facilitate transitional justice efforts.
- Refrain from punishing victims of Burma’s war for their compulsive involvement in the violence of their country, such as denying asylum to sympathizers of opposition groups.
- Highlight the role that youth play in democratization efforts, specifically their involvement in 2007’s September Uprising, in order to show the full picture of youth activism.
- Continue to cultivate tangible UN action such as dispatching Special Envoy Ibrahim Gambari to regularly monitor the situation in Burma and meet with opposition and military leaders, and sending Special Rapporteur Paulo Sergio Pinheiro to document human rights abuses in Burma. Utilize both General Assembly and Security Council measures to sanction the military regime whenever appropriate.
- Maintain consistent and open dialogue within international forums about the situation inside Burma and continually assess international policy towards the country including financial and punitive sanctions, multi-party talks, and security assessments.
- Focus on the development of Burmese youth leadership in democratic institutions: today’s youth activist is tomorrow’s political leader in Burma—it is in the best interest of the international community to facilitate youth development in a way that promotes the principles of peace and freedom within Burma and as an international actor in the future.
If you were writing a book about the current situation in Burma, where would you begin your story?

“I think it would start in 1962, after the military coup in Burma. It started at that time.”

“We have to look back very far, because the conflict would be studying the history. I think it would start with the (arrival of the) Karen inside Burma, in 739 BC.”

“Some people think that the situation in Burma is an ethnic conflict. If we say it is an ethnic conflict we have to look back very far in history. We know that all ethnic peoples inside Burma, most people came from another place and stayed in Burma. Why did the ethnic conflict start? It’s difficult to understand the history if you start in the 21st century.”

“In my opinion it’s better to start after independence because of a problem of the 1947 constitution. It doesn’t give equal rights to the ethnic people. That’s why the conflict started again and again. In 1962 the military coup took place. Then it continued till 1988, then again. The ethnic conflicts continue. I think it started since independence till now.”

1. Transcript from an interview with four BLC – Peace Law Academy students.

A young boy in the Burmese border town of Myawaddy. Burma has been under military rule since 1962; guns are emblematic of the decades-old civil war.
3.1 A History of Conflict in Burma

In order to better understand the violence and brutality that currently afflict Burma, one must see the situation in the proper historical context: put simply, Burma is a nation that has never been at peace. Centuries of dynastic rule gave way to British colonialism in 1885, at which time the British declared Burma to be an Indian province and removed Burma’s capacity for self-government. Turbulent colonial rule continued until 1937, when the decision was made to annex Burma as a territory from India; this move deeply divided the Burmese populace along tribal lines and laid the groundwork for future ethnic warfare. The annexation decision occurred during World War II; Burma was a major battlefront of the war. In the fight for control of Burmese territory, Allied forces and the Japanese army each trained different ethnic groups to proxy fight for their cause: as a result, the peoples of Burma were actively fighting each other throughout the war.

Control of Burma constantly changed hands between the Allied forces and the Japanese until the Allies gained final authority in 1945. Several ethnic groups fought with the Allies in order to liberate Burma from Japanese occupation. After defeating the Japanese, General Aung San, considered by many to be the father of the Burmese democracy movement, successfully negotiated with the British for Burma’s independence in 1948. However, by that time, the bitter ethnic divisions already festering within the country had deepened significantly, as Burma’s population had divided itself along two sides of a bitter World War.

World War II also brought a wide array of weapons into the country. Burma, traumatized by conflict and plagued by ethnic division, was full of military artillery and without any recent history of self-governance. This violent legacy became all too apparent in late 1947 when General Aung San and several leaders of the transitional government were assassinated by political rivals: it seemed that peaceful democratic transition in Burma was not to be.

Burma officially became independent from Britain on January 4, 1948, but internal struggles between political and ethnic groups persisted. As a result, Burma’s transition to representative democracy was significantly impeded. In 1958, after a decade of civil strife Prime Minister U Nu asked the military, led by General Ne Win, to intervene. Order was briefly restored, and Burma returned to democracy and enjoyed relative peace for a period of four years. General Ne Win quickly tired of his return to a subordinate role in Burmese politics, and in 1962 he staged a military coup to take control of the government. He abolished the constitution and instituted a policy entitled “The Burmese Way to Socialism,” effectively cutting Burma off from the outside world and establishing a period of isolationism that persists to this day.

Under Ne Win’s rule the economy of Burma - one of the most resource rich nations in Southeast Asia - deteriorated and eventually collapsed. A familiar saying in Burma is that military officers know how to “make war, not rice.” Unfortunately, they were tasked with managing Burma’s vast resources internally, as Ne Win nationalized most of the country’s industries. The military officers’ inexperience in accounting and business management destroyed the blossoming Burmese economy. As the economic situation worsened, the people of Burma suffered from extreme hunger, disease, and poverty, in addition to constant civil war in parts of the country. Several of the ethnic groups had never accepted being forced to join into a single nation state, and had been actively fighting state-run forces since shortly after independence was declared.

In 1988, after 46 years of suffering under military rule, the people of Burma staged peaceful anti-government demonstrations throughout the country. These protests began as demonstrations against Ne Win’s decision to demonetize many forms of Burmese currency, sending the cities into an economic tailspin. Though demonetization was the impetus, it was not the root cause: the Burmese people had had enough of their military governments’ severe mismanagement of the country and were issuing a collective call for political change. Student activists led the protest movement which would become known as the 8/8/88 demonstrations, held on August 8th, 1988. The general public strongly supported the 8/8/88 protests; as the demonstrations grew in size, the regime, fearful of losing power, violently suppressed the participants. At least 3,000 demonstrators were killed, and thousands more fled into the jungles of Burma to escape arrest.
After the 8/8/88 uprising, yet another military coup was staged and Ne Win was overthrown on Sept 16, 1988. The new regime called itself the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), and ruled under martial law, continuing to hunt down and imprison all political dissidents. Despite the dire conditions for democracy a new leader of the opposition emerged after 8/8/88: Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of General Aung San. As the leader of the largest opposition group, the National League for Democracy (NLD), Aung San Suu Kyi was an immensely popular and charismatic leader; hers was a voice for democracy and an alternative to violent military rule. They were concerned by her popularity because of the threat of democracy so they put her under house arrest, where she has been held intermittently since 1989; however, the attention garnered by Aung San Suu Kyi from the international community compelled the SLORC to allow for multiparty elections in 1990, the country's first in over thirty years. The results of these elections were overwhelmingly in favor of democracy: the NLD won over 80 percent of parliamentary seats despite Aung San Suu Kyi's continued imprisonment.

The sweeping NLD victory in the 1990 elections shocked the SLORC leaders. In response they nullified the election results, refused to allow the elected members of parliament to convene and continued their campaign against political dissent. The regime began arresting any elected member of parliament who had not already fled the country.

In 1992 General Than Shwe became the newly appointed leader of the SLORC; he announced that those elected in 1990 would be allowed to convene for the purpose of drafting a new national constitution. However, only 15 percent of the delegates attending this convention had actually been elected in 1990; the remaining 85 percent were appointed by the regime due to the “absence” (i.e. the imprisonment, death, or exile) of the remaining elected parliamentarians.

The obvious injustice of this convention compelled the NLD to boycott its proceedings: the convention closed in 1996 without completing a constitution.

The SLORC junta renamed itself the State Peace and Development Council (“SPDC”) in 1997; to this day the SPDC remains in control of Burma with Than Shwe as its leader. The regime's policies against Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD continue, as do efforts to suppress democratic opposition. Violent clashes between SPDC soldiers and democracy activists occur throughout the nation, particularly during the brief periods of Aung San Suu Kyi's freedom from house arrest.2

The United Nations General Assembly, the UN Commission on Human Rights and the International Labor Organization have each expressed their concern about the situation in Burma and have passed repeated resolutions calling for democratic change in the country. The UN General Assembly has passed 15 resolutions against the SPDC; and yet today, the junta continues to perpetrate its crimes against its citizens.

The crimes of SPDC soldiers and officers against the Burmese people are widely known. The country’s ongoing chaos also poses a serious destabilizing effect for the Southeast Asian region. The SPDC has been waging an ethnic cleansing campaign against the country's minority populations, in effort to not only end ethnic resistance against the government, but to also eliminate minority ethnic identities. The generals of the SPDC see ethnic nationalism as a threat to security and refuse to allow schools to teach ethnic languages or history. Their "Four Cuts" strategy — to deprive ethnic insurgents of food, money, information and recruits — has also been used as justification to kill hundreds of thousands of ethnic civilians. Burma has an

2. Aung San Suu Kyi is considered the international face of democratic opposition in Burma. She has won numerous international awards, including the Sakharov Prize for Thought from the European Parliament (1990), Nobel Peace Prize (1991), the Jawaharlal Nehru Award from India (1995), and the United States Presidential Medal of Freedom (2000). Aung San Suu Kyi has to date spent 13 of the last 18 years under house arrest by the SPDC. Despite this isolation, she has called on people around the world to join the struggle for freedom in Burma, asking the international community to "Please use your liberty to promote ours."

3. One incident of particular note occurred on May 30, 2002: the Depayin Massacre. Upon her release from house arrest, Aung San Suu Kyi was permitted to travel the country and address NLD supporters. During on such trip she and several other NLD members were ambushed by government—Affiliated militia members and specially trained prisoner—Armed. Eyewitnesses report over 70 deaths in the incident; police, though present, did not attempt to stop the fighting. The incident was one of the most violent confrontations between SPDC and NLD supporters since 8/8/88; the SPDC blamed Aung San Suu Kyi for the incident and re-placed her under house arrest, where she remains to this day.
estimated half million citizens internally displaced within
the country, and at least 2.5 million more live as official or
undocumented refugees in Thailand alone as a result of the
internal crisis.

The outflow of refugees into the neighboring countries of
Thailand, India, China and Bangladesh has brought with it
a vast black market of illicit drugs, which Burma exports as
one of its primary means of income. A public health crisis
is also burgeoning, as Burmese living with HIV/AIDS, Avian
Flu, Malaria and Tuberculosis have entered countries without
being treated for their disease. AIDS and the drug trade are
spreading throughout the region at an alarming rate as a
result of the SPDC’s negligence.

Military officers currently occupy 33 of the 38 ministerial-
level positions in the government, and corruption is
widespread throughout the public and private sectors. The
judicial system is operated solely through the regime: pro-
democracy leaders are arbitrarily arrested and held, denied
representation, and tried in secret tribunals on a regular
basis. The junta refuses to meet with opposition leaders or
to release Aung San Suu Kyi and other NLD leaders.

Although the SPDC has announced a “road map to
democracy” and the intention of reconvening the constituent
assembly, both statements were made without consulting the
NLD and other pro-democracy groups and the probability of
either event happening in a free and democratic manner is
not likely. In early 2008 the regime announced its intention
to hold a constitutional referendum, during which it plans
to finalize a constitution including plans for elections to be
held in 2010. Opposition groups and government observers
almost universally view this announcement as the SPDC’s
attempt to further consolidate and cement its power as
rulers of the country. Although at the time of this writing
the referendum has yet to take place, the regime has already
announced that Aung San Suu Kyi will not be allowed to run
for office because she was married to a foreigner.

Still, there is hope that a free and democratic future can
succeed in Burma. In August and September 2007,
thousands of Burma’s citizens once again put personal fear
aside to join monastic and democratic leaders in nation-
wide demonstrations calling for an end to military rule in
the country. The world watched as the September Uprising
was violently suppressed by the military. It seems that
democratic institutions and human rights implementation
is far away for the people of Burma. Yet as the September
Uprising demonstrates, the peoples’ hope for such
freedoms is as strong as ever; their desire for a peaceful,
more prosperous future cannot be oppressed by threats
and violence.

4. For more information about the September Uprising and the impact it
made on Burmese youth, see section six, Analysis on page 148.
Hla Moe, female, 20 years old, EIP

I am a young Muslim girl who lives in a refugee camp on the Thai-Burma border. I’ve lived in Mae La refugee camp with my family since 1997. Before I arrived in Mae La, I lived in “Mae Ka Tee” village for 2 years. I grew up in refugee camps. Now I’m going to share an experience about a little girl with a big problem.

It happened 3 years ago in Burma. There was a family who had a son and a daughter. They were very poor. They lived in a small village. The girl name was Moe Moe and her brother’s name was Aung Aung. Their father’s job was a shoemaker and their mother was a housewife. They did not get enough money for food from their father’s job.

One day, Moe Moe asked her brother to find a job. Unfortunately, he didn’t get any job. So he decided to sell firewood in the market. So every morning he went to the jungle to cut firewood and came back in the evening. Moe Moe sold it at the market in the morning. After she sold it, she helped her brother to carry firewood but her brother didn’t want her to go. Aung Aung said that cutting firewood wasn’t a job for a girl in the jungle. Still she helped her brother.

One day, a group of boys were standing in the middle of her way. They tried to approach to her but she ignored them and kept walking. One of the boys said, “You are a girl coming in the jungle without friends” The other one continued “you are in our area, now you become our prey, you have no way to go back for tonight”. Now she couldn’t move. They kept her in the circle and brought her into the deep forest.

Aung Aung thought today his sister didn’t come and help him. It was OK; he could do the work alone. When he came back to the house, he asked his mother, “Mother, where is Moe Moe? Didn’t she come back from the market?” His mother thought he made a joke. So she replied, “Moe Moe went to the jungle every day when she comes back from the market.”

“No, she didn’t come to me today”

“Don’t make me get hypertension Aung Aung”

“Mother, believe me. She didn’t go to me”

“So, let’s wait for the time she comes back”

They were waiting and waiting for her but she didn’t come back. Early next morning, Aung Aung went to the jungle found his sister. Unfortunately, he saw his sister raped by a group of people. When he saw this, he got so angry and tried to kill them with his knife. He couldn’t kill anybody but they killed him with guns. One of the men released Moe Moe and said, “You can go anywhere you want, but you have no chance to tell about us. If you tell, look here.” He showed the gun, “I will bury the same hole in you as I did your brother.”

When she arrived home, she cried a lot and explained what happened to her mother. Her mother told the head villager what happened with her daughter. Immediately the head villager phoned to the police station. The police came to ask information from her and she answered. The policeman said, “That is not their fault, this is your fault. You went to the jungle alone” The family couldn’t do any thing. He continued, “They are young boys. They will change their minds when they see a girl like you in the jungle alone.”

If Moe Moe gave money to the police, they would take the problem to the office but the family didn’t have any money to give them. So the police went back and didn’t ask any questions because they got a lot of money from bad boys’ side. Moe Moe, got pregnant, and nobody cared about her.

So they came across the Thai-Burma border, Mae La camp. When they arrived, they explained their problem to the Karen Women’s Organization (KWO) leader. They were supported by the KWO and also by RCH in the camp. The medics took care of her until she gave birth. Now her family’s lives are free from under the devil’s control and they can live without...
The Burmese authorities don’t care about people lives. They look after for only themselves and their relatives. In this case, if Moe Moe had money, she would have won her case. Instead she had to move to a refugee camp because she is poor. There is no justice for crime. The authorities are corrupt in every way.

This short story was written by Hla Moe, a recent graduate of the English Immersion Program, while she was still a student in the school.

3.2 How Findings from Threat to the Peace Impact Youth

To better understand the role that youth activists play in Burma’s transition to democracy, consider the particularly strong impact of the SPDC’s practices on the young people of Burma. Clearly the policies of the military junta have tremendous consequences for society at large: below we look at their impact on youth, specifically in the areas of education policy, drug production, public health mismanagement, and exploitation of child soldiers and labor.

The UN Report, Threat to the Peace published in 2005, documents the dehumanizing policies of the SPDC and identifies five vital components present in Burma today that constitute a threat to international peace and security. Threat to the Peace is gives a thorough examination of the effects of the SPDC’s failed policies on both the people of Burma as well as the international interests of a peaceful and prosperous South East Asian region.

In examining the issues brought forth in Threat to the Peace, the importance of taking steps to incorporate youth voices into addressing them becomes clear. Young peoples’ experience of injustice as well as their innovative approaches to combating can play a key role in transitioning out of the political and humanitarian crises currently occurring in Burma. While youth are often the targets of manipulation and brutality, they also provide a unique perspective to solving these issues; youth bring innovative ideas as potential solutions to these problems.

In this section we analyze Threat to the Peace from the perspective of Burmese youth, looking at effects on the youth population and the potential to find solutions through youth activism. The five components of destabilization identified in the report comprise:

1. Disregard for a democratically elected government.
   Multiparty elections were held in Burma in 1990 in which the democratic opposition party National League for Democracy (NLD) won over 80% of the seats in parliament;

6. Threat to the Peace (2005): UN report commissioned by former Czech Republic President Vaclav Havel and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu. All statistics included in this section are taken from Threat to the Peace except where otherwise noted.
the military junta has since refused to honor the results or engage in meaningful dialogue with democratically elected members of parliament.

Impact On Youth: Unlike older generations who might remember a time before SPDC rule, young Burmese have never known what it means to live in a democratic, participatory society. Their experience of political leadership consists of totalitarian rule, severe abuse, and contempt for the will of the public. The SPDC’s disregard of Burma’s 1990 elections has left the youth without institutional role models who can teach them what it means to have a government that respects civil society, economic growth, the rule of law, and the will of its people.

Youth Approach: The youth activists interviewed for this report recognize that in order to become the future leaders of their country, they must learn to respect the democratic process by looking outside of their own history. The education they receive on the Thai-Burma border provides valuable insights into the democratic process - education that is inaccessible in their homeland.

2. Systematic humanitarian and human rights violations. The SPDC army has destroyed over 3,000 villages in Eastern Burma alone; soldiers have routinely used rape as a tactic of war and have recruited an estimated 70,000 children as soldiers to their ranks. The government regularly carries out extrajudicial killings, torture, disappearances, and arbitrary imprisonment for political dissent. The ILO has documented widespread use of forced labor as well as forced relocation on a mass scale.

Impact On Youth: The brutal human rights abuses perpetrated by the SPDC have come to define Burma. The country’s rich and varied history is relatively unrecognized; instead, it is known primarily as a rogue state profiting from the victimization of citizens. For the youth of Burma, this social identity has fostered feelings of hopelessness, isolation and shame.

Youth Approach: In choosing a life of activism, Burmese youth living on the border have consciously rejected this violent culture in favor of a hopeful future. In the struggle to achieve a democratic transition in Burma these youth contribute an alternate message of human rights, respect, and cultural pride back to the country.

3. Conflict between the military junta and ethnic factions. Active fighting continues between SPDC and various ethnic groups on a daily basis, even in ceasefire areas. Inter-ethnic conflict and civil war is pervasive in Burma.

Impact On Youth: The ethnic divisions prevalent in Burma deeply impact the interactions of youth democracy activists. The different ethnicities have lived in relative isolation from each other; several have established their own sovereign governments and actively fight for independence from Burma.7

Youth Approach: The organizations operating on the Thai-Burma border are instrumental in aiding youth to overcome these inter-ethnic divisions. Numerous youth activists recounted that prior to coming to Thailand, they had little to no interaction with individuals from other ethnic groups. Through their educational facilities they have been introduced to one another. These youth are better able to overcome negative stereotypes and to establish meaningful, collaborative relationships with their peers from different communities. Their shared goal of a free and democratic society offers hope for future collaboration and healing.

4. Outflow of Refugees and displaced people. Over 2.5 million Burmese refugees and migrant workers have fled across the border to Thailand,8 with more in India, Bangladesh, China and Malaysia. There are an estimated 630,000 internally displaced peoples hiding from the SPDC deep inside Burma’s jungles.

Impact On Youth: Many of the young generation of Burmese currently growing up in refugee camps in neighboring countries have never lived in Burma. Sixty years of civil war

7. For more information about the issue of Burmanization, see section 5.2, Politicization on page 65.
8. The Thai Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) reports that as of June 2007, approximately 2.5 million Burmese refugees were currently living in Thailand. This includes 156,000 residents of refugee camps, over 200,000 Burmese living outside of camps, and over 2,000,000 migrant workers. Retrieved from http://www.tbbc.org/resources/2007-6-mth-rpt-jan-jun.pdf; to access other TBBC reports, visit www.tbbc.org.
have resulted in a significant amount of people living either internally displaced within the country, as stateless people in Southeast Asian refugee camps, as illegal immigrants in bordering nations, or resettled far away from their homeland. Alienation from Burma is a severe concern for democracy activists working to reunite their divided nation.

Youth Approach: Despite the associated feelings of isolation and alienation, crossing into Thailand provides Burmese youth with a newfound opportunity to analyze their country’s situation in an objective manner and develop potential solutions. Youth living on the Thai-Burma border as refugees, migrants, and underground activists operate under very real security concerns while conducting their work; but they readily confront these risks, driven by the desire to end the suffering of their people—suffering which they understand on a personal level.

5. Drug Trafficking and Disease. Burma is one of the world’s leading exporters of heroin and is a major supplier of methamphetamine to international drug markets; lack of adequate healthcare has left diseases such as HIV/AIDS, Avian Flu, Malaria, and Tuberculosis unchecked. Illness is spreading throughout South and Southeast Asia region from Burma as patients are unable to access treatment.

Impact On Youth: An economy built on drug trafficking offers no legitimacy in the international market. Burma, arguably one of the world’s most resource-rich nations, has squandered its natural resources in order to feed an illegal black market. Furthermore, infectious diseases induced by rampant drug use are on the rise throughout the country. Due to a lack of public health education and professional opportunity outside of school, youth in Burma are a particularly vulnerable to drugs and disease. The lack of opportunity available to them in Burma magnifies this vulnerability.

Youth Approach: It will fall on the next generation to address the corruption and healthcare crises that have been created by current government social and economic policy. Activists on the Thai-Burma border are responding to this responsibility by working to empower others through education and awareness-building regarding these vital public health concerns: they conduct public education campaigns, strategize about constructive alternatives to the black market economy, and develop avenues of transparent communication between their own agencies, thereby setting an example of honest, upfront dialogue about issues long left in the dark in Burma.

The facts put forth in Threat to the Peace as well as the decades of documentation produced by international organizations, government sources, and Burmese citizens, illustrate that the actions of Burma’s current government warrant response from the UN Security Council. Concern about the situation in Burma is not limited to the Security Council; the SPDC’s policies pose a real and present threat to the peace and security of the region and the globe. By compromising development, exploiting resources, disregarding international authority and coercing migration and immigration, the SPDC’s rule destabilizes the entire Southeast Asia region. For the youth of Burma, this threat represents more than an abstract international concern; to them, it is a threat against their livelihoods, their families, and their future.
My name is Ye Zaw. I was born in 1981. My brothers and sister are in Mae La camp. I am the youngest of my siblings. My parents are farmers. My father was a KNU soldier.

Since I was a child, I grew up in the jungle. Because the military regime forced villagers to work for them as porters, my parents fled the village and lived in the jungle for ten years. We had to stay quiet because the military regime would try to find us. We found out that the military regime burned the village houses. Then, we entered a refugee camp called Mae La Oo.

(When) I came to Thailand, sometimes I would go back to the camp to visit my family. In the camp, there is no chance to further my education. Through a friend, I heard about Karen Youth Organization (KYO). I wanted to gain experience, so I decided to join. I have been working for KYO for four years.

There is a community here. At KYO, we learn how to be a teacher, about leadership, and community organization. Sometimes we go to Mae Sot for leadership training. We learn about human rights, democracy, and issues about Burma. We empower others.

I want rights in Burma. I want enough rights in Burma that there is no more torture or discrimination. Everyone should have equal rights. I want rights to protect the people, rights to property, anti-discrimination laws, rights from abuse—basic human rights. I want the freedom to teach Karen language and to learn more about Karen history. I want freedom of speech and the freedom to practice my religion.

For myself, I wish to be a journalist. Sometimes I do some writing. But, journalists from Burma cannot take photos and can only write what the SPDC tells them to write. I don’t want to be like that. I want everyone to know about the issues of Burma. Please, if I write something for you, tell the whole world.
4.1 About the Project

About The Burma Youth Project (BYP)
Committed to promoting youth leadership in conflict-affected areas, and inspired by the courage of young Burmese democracy activists, the Center for Peace Building International (CPBI) launched the Burma Youth Project (BYP) in October 2006. Through BYP, CPBI aims to raise awareness within the international community about youth-led efforts to create democracy in Burma. We believe that a youth-focused approach is a critical component of ensuring a sustainable transition in Burma; the current project was born from a sense of solidarity, derived through direct interpersonal exchange and dialogue from years of working together.

Due to the large concentration of Burmese activists and organizations operating in Thailand, BYP began its work with a research trip to investigate youth-oriented organizations operating along the Thai-Burma border. The team of eight researchers traveled to Thailand in March 2007 to meet with displaced Burmese youth, document their personal narratives, compile a comprehensive analysis of their current situation, and generate an understanding of their future aspirations. In the process, we conducted a survey of the current state of youth-oriented programs as well as a needs-assessment, in an effort to determine how other activists, students, donors and the international community at-large are currently supporting their work.

From the beginning BYP sought to share youth voices through multiple mediums. In addition to audio interviews recorded for the report, a short documentary was produced entitled *Under the Sun: Life Along the Thai-Burma Border*, and a photography exhibit entitled “The Experience of Struggle” to more fully express the urgency of their work. *Under the Sun* gives a personal look into a day in the life of a migrant family living along the Thai-Burma border. The whole of BYP’s work can be viewed online at www.cpbinternational.org and www.whywords.com.

Youth in Burma
Youth activism has long played a central role in the Burmese pro-democracy movement, even before the nation-wide protests in August 1988 that were led by students. Since that time youth have worked to combat abuses perpetrated by the SPDC and continued to advocate for political change. Almost twenty years after the ‘88 wave of political refugees fled Burma, a new generation of youth representing a great diversity of backgrounds has come to the Thai-Burma border. Building on the lessons and experiences of older generations, these youth activists are finding ways to strengthen and enhance the struggle against Burma’s brutal military dictatorship.

The youth interviewed for this report either grew up within Burma - in relative isolation from the outside world - or have lived most of their lives confined to refugee camps on the Thai side of the border. Despite these experiences of isolation, however, Burmese youth currently living in Thailand are becoming increasingly involved in the democracy movement; each day they enroll in schools, accept internships, and begin jobs with community based organizations dedicated to creating positive change in their homeland. Youth voices are instrumental in defining the struggle for democracy in Burma in the 21st century: as one EarthRights School - Burma (ERS-B) student put it:

“The youth are involved in the political and social (realms) and if they can be strong and involved in decision-making then it can create our future situation better for our people. If we are activists we need to think for our people, our community.”

– Female activist, ERS-B

Youth bring renewed energy and passion to activism: that energy can be directed in innovative ways to reconcile tensions or overcome problems that previously seemed insurmountable. By focusing on the importance of youth in the democratic movement for Burma, we aim to underscore their work and to create further measures of sustainability for a transition to democracy in the country. As future
leaders, they are a voice for change and can be a powerful conduit for political and social transformation in Burma.

**Project Details**

Time in Thailand was split between two cities: Chiang Mai, a city of 700,000 in Northern Thailand, and Mae Sot, a border town with an estimated population of 41,000, 90% of whom are originally from Burma. In addition, the researchers visited a high school at the Mae La refugee camp just north of Mae Sot, and the English Immersion Program in Umpium Mae Camp south of Mae Sot. Interviews were also conducted in Bangkok at ALTSEAN Burma (Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma) and a background information session was held at Burma Issues.

Nine of the organizations included in this report are schools that offer a specific training program for Burmese students. The other seven are CBOs (Community-Based Organizations) offering a variety of internship or training programs for Burmese youth democracy activists. Many of the organizations conduct additional trainings or skills institutes, both for Burmese living in Thailand as well as inside of Burma. The youth activists interviewed throughout the research are also working for or affiliated with numerous CBOs, including ones focusing on women, environmental and ethnic rights. Youth from at least 15 ethnic groups were represented in the interviews.1

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**Mya Nu, female, age 22, BWU**

“My biggest problem is I didn’t get the opportunity to study. I want to study. I want to graduate like young people, like other young people.” Mya Nu participates in trainings through her organization the Burma Women’s Union, but like most young people who share her circumstances, with opportunity grows the thirst for much more.

In Burma, Mya Nu lived with her grandparents and wanted to be an engineer. She completed secondary school, but could not afford to continue on to college. Her family of eight is currently scattered across both sides of the Thai-Burma border including refugee camps; her parents live in the northern Thai border town of Mae Hong Son.

She crossed into Thailand after finishing secondary school. “The young girl and young boy are also resources in Burma,” she says. For Mya Nu, exploitation seemed the norm on both sides of the border. In Thailand, she worked in houses where she didn’t always have free time even to eat. She had to pay to access her own ID card from her employers.

Her ties with Burma Women’s Union came from being a member of the migrant community. Now she works with women at migrant centers. Mya Nu helps in many ways, including translating from Burmese to Thai at hospitals.

She proudly writes for Dove, a Burmese language women’s rights magazine distributed clandestinely across the border, throughout Mae Sot, and among local communities around Chiang Mai.

Next, Mya Nu wants to strengthen her advocacy skills through internships and additional education. Her goal seems clear and far-reaching: “I have to do something, do more than get democracy to Burma. I have to share human rights and women’s rights in my society in my country, in my friends, in my family because they don’t know about this.”

Mya Nu is an activist working for the Burmese Women’s Union: above is a summary of her thoughts shared with BYP, including direct quotes and ideas paraphrased by the interviewer.

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1. See Appendix B for graphs with the ethnic distribution of respondents on pg 160.
4.2 Methodology

This report, as well as the short documentary and photography exhibition that complement it, are the result of a three-week research trip conducted by a team of eight in March 2007. The research—a baseline survey and needs assessment—focused on 16 youth-oriented organizations, schools and internship programs located in Chiang Mai, Mae Sot and Bangkok. Researchers worked in pairs and groups to conduct interviews and gather statistical information.

Defining youth

In focusing on youth, it is important to note that in Burma, cultural definitions of youth do not directly correlate to an American or European perspective. Most ethnic groups from Burma consider youth to range from their mid-teens to 35 or even 40 years old. In our sessions we spoke with Burmese youth ranging in age from 15 to 39, as well as trainers and administrators: the median age of our interviewees was 23.89 years, and the majority or those with whom we spoke fell within our target age range of 18 to 25.

Research Design

When meeting with organizations our goal was to spend time in small groups with our interview subjects. As such, the number of research team members present varied according to the number of people meeting us at particular organizations. At larger schools such as BLC and ERS-B, all team members conducted interviews with students; at organizations where a small number of youth activists were available such as KYO and HREIB, the team adjusted to send a smaller number of interviewers. This allowed us more flexibility in our schedule, increased intimacy in our interviews, and to ultimately reach more organizations.

We began organizational meetings with introductions and a description of the project’s aims and goals. As a large group we investigated each organization’s background, mission statement and day-to-day operations, speaking with administrators, teachers, and program coordinators. After the initial introductory session, researchers would split to conduct in-depth interviews with the youth members or students of the organization. Interviews lasted from one to three hours and were recorded with audio recorders and on video camera, supplemented by written notes. During these sessions researchers covered thematic topics including access to education, the reasons young people leave Burma, their political opinions and activist history, and personal views for the future. In all interviews emphasis was placed on assessing needs—individual needs, needs of the organizations, and needs of Burmese youth as members of the activist community.

In addition to oral interviews, BYP researchers provided written questionnaires which the majority of our interviewees completed. The questionnaires were designed to supplement the qualitative oral interviews and provided information on demographics, personal history, and the subject’s perspective on democracy, awareness of public health issues, and access to technology.³

Language

Learning English is a primary focus for many of the organizations included in this study. Because of this, the majority of the interviews were conducted in English between the researchers and the interviewees. At some organizations interviews were conducted through the aid of translators. In total, the young people interviewed speak 19 different languages. Where there have been uncertainties due to translation, the work has been double-checked.

Great emphasis is placed in this report on highlighting youth voices. Boxed quotes are direct quotations from transcribed interviews; where ages and gender are known, they are listed in order to give the reader a fuller picture of the speaker. Though many were willing to share their names, the risk this would pose should they return to do work inside Burma is too great. The safety and security of youth interviewed for this report remains of the utmost importance to CPBI and the BYP; therefore, names have been withheld uniformly in order to protect the safety and future work of all youth interviewed for the report. In order to maintain the integrity of using profiles to personalize ³. For Survey Analysis, please see Appendix B on pg 160
the situation on the border, pseudonyms have been given to youth profiled in this report wherever appropriate. Except where otherwise noted, these profiles are monologues taken from their transcripts, edited for length and minimal grammatical changes resulting from translation. Throughout this report the profiles are intended to personalize the story of youth along the border and contribute to the overall narrative of the report.

**Terminology: Burma vs. Myanmar**

The use of the name “Burma” as opposed to “Myanmar” in reference to the country is intentional throughout this report. Members of the democratic opposition do not recognize the change; they do not recognize the legitimacy of the current military government and do not see the name changes as being representative of the peoples’ will.

In 1989 the military junta renamed the country “Myanmar”, reasoning that “Burma” represented a legacy of colonial imperialism under the British Empire; the name change was an effort to further distance Burma’s history as a British colony. The name “Myanmar” is the formal title of the country in native language—Burma is a derivative of the Burman tribe, which represents approximately 2/3 of the nation’s population. Simultaneously the regime changed the names of several cities in the country, including the name of then capital Rangoon to Yangon. Opposition groups continue to use the name “Burma” as a means of protest against the regime, as do the governments of both the United States and Great Britain. In this report we refer to the country as “Burma” because it is the preferred nomenclature of our research population; that name will be used throughout this document.
I am Sulien, female activist, age 20, BWU

I am Sulien, and I’m from Burma. I was born in Karenni State. I am from a rural area. So there is really bad education, no health care. I came to Thailand in 2003, and I got a (position) at Burmese Women’s Union in July 2003. So I have been working at BWU for over three years.

I am an activist. In our community I was discriminated against. I suffered. And also I saw (human rights) abuses in our community with my own eyes. So I really want to change the future for my people. I want to really work for women and for our country. I want to learn more about gender issues and educate about them in order to change society.

I really want an education. Many Burmese women don’t have the chance to attend school. It’s like a culture of discrimination. For example in my family, I have four brothers, and they can attend school, but my parents cannot afford for my sisters to attend school. I want to abolish discrimination. In Burma, women are a larger part of the population than men, but they have less education than men.

I left Burma because the education is very bad. In school women and men don’t have the same rights to learn. There is a huge disparity in grades between men and women, and very bad education in the school. I decided to come to Thailand and continue my education. I came with 15 friends, only women. We traveled here together.¹

At first I arrived at Karenni refugee camp. I had one sister who was at the refugee camp, and she is also a BWU member. I learned about BWU working for women, and I decided to start getting involved with them. It was very amazing for me.

When I was in Burma, I didn’t know what my human rights are. We faced trouble day and night, but I didn’t know why we had the problem. In Karenni state there is much forced labor, and also rape cases perpetrated by the SPDC. The SPDC came to our village and raped women. Also porters were used for the military. For example my father always made to be a porter. But at the time I didn’t know yet (these are) human rights abuses.

¹. To read more about Sulien’s journey to Thailand, turn to page 60.
When I arrived in Thailand I started to learn about human rights, and also what women’s rights are and about democracy. Now I know what democracy is, I know what my women’s rights and human rights are. I want to raise awareness about the different discriminations as well as help inform other women of their rights. Only then if women know what they’re entitled to will this kind of discrimination be abolished.

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5.1: Crossing

For so many Burmese youth activists living on the Thai-Burma border, their story begins with their decision—or their compulsion—to cross into Thailand. Each year thousands of people make this treacherous journey crossing through a dense jungle landscape of battlefields, landmines, traffickers and soldiers. They come from all backgrounds and ethnicities, but they are unified in their decision to face their fears about a trip that will lead them to a place that, while geographically close, is a world away from the home that they know. This place is the Thai-Burma border, where people from Burma live confined in crowded refugee camps, young people line up for a small number of educational opportunities, migrant workers labor for a fraction of the wages received by Thais and politics is inextricably tied to daily life.

In this section we explore the different reasons that young people leave their homeland of Burma. Some leave because they are forced: either they flee their country, or face an almost certain death in a brutal civil war. Others come in search of some hope for their future: the education available in Thailand presents them with opportunities they dare not dream of in Burma. Still others come in search of livelihood: unable to feed their families and survive in an exploitative labor market, migrant workers arrive in Thailand daily hoping to find better work. Whatever their reasons, their impetus for crossing the border brings Burmese already living in Thailand new knowledge—and newfound fear—of the situation in their homeland. Rarely can they go back from where they came.

“I lived in Burma at the age of 23. In Burma, I heard about many experiences about human rights abuses. Many community people cannot do anything or cannot see anything—me too. In my mind, I want to say something. But I know if I stay inside, it won’t effect. It’s better to go outside, like to Thailand.”

– Male student, age 24, ERS-B
A Life on the Run: The world’s longest running civil war has made survival impossible for many living in Burma

For young people growing up in Burma, daily life is often focused on basic survival. Decades of civil war have left areas of the country virtually uninhabitable: fighting between the SPDC and ethnic armies occurs on a broad scale and, as is the case in so many war zones, it is the innocent who suffer the most.

Fleeing to safety

Many youth interviewed for this report have lived as IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons) for periods ranging from several days to several years before coming to Thailand. In one case, an interviewee was born and spent the first 10 years of his life as an IDP before arriving at Mae La Camp in Thailand. Another recalled that her mother left Burma to give birth to her at a hospital in Thailand. After her birth, she and her mother returned to live in an IDP camp inside Burma for 11 years before it was attacked and destroyed by the SPDC. Several recalled the day the SPDC razed their village to the ground, changing their lives forever. They recounted graphic images of relatives being shot and killed before their eyes, old men being made to work as porters and children being recruited to join the ranks of the military.

“Every village they came and killed the people and burned the houses. So we could not live there. We came to take refuge in Thailand.”

—Male Activist, Age 26, KYO

Village destruction is all too common in Burma, and is the primary reason many Burmese youth flee to Thailand. One activist recounted that he crossed the border at the age of fifteen after the Burmese military destroyed several villages in his province. He was forced to grow up in the jungles of Burma and to constantly be on the move so that SPDC forces would not find them. Ultimately, this young person lived as an IDP for 10 years before reaching Thailand; some of his family members, however, are still hidden in the Burmese jungles and unable to contact him.

Another activist described an all-too familiar tale: coming from a politically charged family, the young woman recounted many debates within her household about national politics. Her family, however, is Karen: and in her household, the intra-ethnic divide between Karen Buddhists (DBKA members are currently allied in a ceasefire with the regime) and Karen Christians (KNU members remain actively at war with it) made these debates highly contentious. The young woman recalled the day that she fled her family home into the jungles of Burma, having seen her uncle murder her grandmother over their opposing political views. She stayed in the jungles alone for three days before being taken by KNU soldiers to a refugee camp in Thailand.

“We had to flee many times because the SPDC they burn (and) attack our village. So we had to flee (and) hide in the jungle. Life as an IDP is very difficult. As for me, as I was a child, I was afraid to cry. We didn’t have a chance to go anywhere, always had to be afraid. I had no confidence to do anything, to speak out.”

—Male student, age 20, EIP

Forced relocations leave families constantly on the move—for practical matters, living in the jungle reverses all routines and perverts every responsibility. During their days as IDPs, youth reported having to clear forestland for farming; at night, they would rebuild camp in a new place so as to hide from troops, yet remain close enough to their makeshift farmland. None had access to medicine, or regular nutritious food: all were susceptible to disease and too-familiar with fear.
Forced Into Submission

Villagers whose homes are not summarily destroyed by SPDC troops are often forced to become slaves to the regime. Whether through building roads or gas pipelines, clearing landmine fields or portering supplies for the junta, forced labor is a pervasive part of Burma’s civil war. Several activists interviewed for this report experienced forced labor either personally or through their family members. One student recounted that after her village was razed by SPDC soldiers, half of the villagers were taken from eastern Burma to the Chinese border where they were made to work on a gas pipeline. Neighbors not moved to the China border worked to clear their burnt village remains and were forced to build a military barracks in its place.

Another student recounted a similar story. She and her fellow villagers were forced to clear landmine fields for the military. She was very young—around four years old—when taken to the fields. Her aunt, not wanting her to be scared, pretended that they were at a picnic; the child thought they were playing a game. Like many of her fellow villagers, this student did not understand human rights: she did not understand that the abuse they were enduring at the hands of their government was illegal. They all deeply felt, however, that these government acts were wrong and that immediate change was needed.

Portering—compelling civilians to carry supplies and resources for the regime from one battlefront to the next—is a particularly dangerous form of forced labor, because it puts innocent lives in the war’s immediate line of fire. Several interviewees had family members who were forced to work as porters for the SPDC. One student recalled that he was required to work as an infantry porter in his father’s place when his father was traveling for work. He was made to clear forestland, build new roads, and clean soldiers’ weapons.

Another student living in Karen state spoke of her older brother: “Sometimes in the village the SPDC comes and makes children work in the labor camps. We had to go and cut down bamboo and take it to them, and work for them half a day, sometimes the whole day, and clean their camp.”

— Female student, age 26, BLC

No One is Safe

One of the most prevalent dangers to youth in Burma is the use of child soldiers in the conflict. The regime routinely kidnaps children and forces them into the military. Some families flee to Thailand because they don’t want their children to be soldiers. Other families remaining in Burma opt to take their children out of school so that they are less likely to be forcibly conscripted into the army, because soldiers regularly target schools throughout the country as potential ‘recruiting grounds’ for child soldiers. This decision has a doubly negative effect of denying children their right to an education.

Youth who have been arrested (some for crimes, some for political activism) have a very difficult time finding work or re-enrolling in school after their release. For these young people, entering the military, on either side of the conflict, is sometimes their only option. One activist recalled being approached by SPDC soldiers to enter the military. He was on his way to school when a group of soldiers pulled him aside to ask him to enlist in the military. This episode spurred this student to consider moving to Thailand: he being taken from her family home in order to work as a porter for the regime. During his time with the army he was badly injured: as a result, someone in the family had to take his place. Because her father was very ill and her mother had to remain at home to take care of him, this youth was compelled to work for the SPDC in place of her older brother. She was away from home with the army for several months: during that time, government forces burnt down her village. When the young woman returned to her home, she found nothing but ash.

“For me it was because of the political situation. We always have to do for the military, forced labor. So if we follow their orders we will be punished. So we have no chance to express our experience for human rights. If we say the truth, we will be in trouble. So I decided to come somewhere it is safe for me.”

— Female student, age 24, ERS-B

5.1 - Crossing
knew once the SPDC had decided to recruit him to their ranks, it was only a matter of time before he would be forcibly taken.

“The reason I come here in 1997 the Burmese military troops attacked my village and burned all of my house and my things. Even though I was a student at that time, I was going to school and the SPDC soldiers saw me and asked me to join. I could not attend school so I moved to Thailand by myself. It took me 1 month to arrive to Thailand in the refugee camp.”

– Male activist, EIP

The SPDC is not the only military division that concerns youth in Burma. Interviewees reported that like the SPDC, ethnic armies have committed acts of violence against civilians; and just as in cases perpetrated by the SPDC, ethnic armies appear to act in a climate of impunity. In recent years some ethnic armies, such as the Karenni army and the Karen National Liberation Army, have been commended by international human rights groups for no longer recruiting child soldiers and removing them from their ranks. Despite this, numbers of children still show up among the ranks of the various ethnic armies. Interviewees explained that many child soldiers in ethnic armies were victims of violence at the hands of the SPDC when they were younger; those experiences inspired them to take up arms to exact revenge and to defend their people. For ethnic armies that are drastically outnumbered by SPDC forces, it can be very difficult to turn away willing, able-bodied fighters simply because of their age. This situation is taking its toll in both human lives and in human capital; only time will determine the degree of impact that the practice of child soldiering will have on Burma’s future.\(^2\)


“(I was too young to remember.) My mother told me why we had come (to Thailand), because of the SPDC, they are fighting with KNU. We cannot stay in our village and so, we came here.”

– Female activist, age 26, HREIB

As a result of this life of extreme uncertainty and violence, youth interviewed for this report sought refuge in Thailand. However, once they make it to the border, they encounter a new problem: how to get inside the country.

One activist recalled traveling with her family to the border at a very young age. Her Karen village had been targeted in the SPDC’s ‘four cuts’ initiative: quell any resistance by destroying opposition access to food, funds, intelligence and recruits. The SPDC targets civilians as well as insurgents with this strategy; to citizens, the four cuts strategy amounts to cutting off access to food, economic autonomy, communication, and loved ones.

After escaping their village’s destruction, the family made it to the Thai-Burma border. But they were denied access to the Thai refugee camps; the battle was too close and camp authorities had closed their doors fearing that letting in new refugees would inadvertently result in the entry of soldiers, causing war to break out inside the camp. The family remained close to the border, living in an IDP village inside Burma. For several months they lived alongside other IDP families in the middle of the battlefield before eventually being allowed across by Thai authorities.

Enabling an Education: Thailand’s promise of education brings a promise of a future \(^3\)

For some young people in Burma, traveling to the Thai-Burma border is not solely an exercise in fear; it is also an attempt to escape from extreme poverty and a lack of opportunity. Youth who have learned to survive in their country despite the violence still face serious obstacles growing up in Burma. For many, the challenge of accessing and affording a high quality education is a primary impetus for making the journey to Thailand.

At Home, In the Dark

Youth interviewed for this report stated that the lack of education in their homeland compelled them to seek it elsewhere: to them, receiving an education is the sole

3. For more information about youth activist’s access to education, see section 5.4, Opportunity on page 111.
escape from the oppression of their daily lives. For too many youth in Burma, however, good education is prohibited by high cost and poor instruction.

All aspects of education in Burma come with a price tag attached – tuition, food, uniforms, books, even instruction. As one interviewee at BLC quipped, “The teacher won’t teach properly without money.” The miniscule amount of the money allotted by the regime to educational institutions—education expenses are estimated to total only 8% of the total federal budget—leaves schools unequipped to adequately educate students.

“In our village, (there was) no high school. That is very bad. (We) must go far to the township to attend high school. If we want to study, need to find a place to stay that is near the school. Even if we can attend, we don’t get international or legal education. We only learn about what is the government’s policy. They do not care about international community.”

– Female student, BLC

Paying school tuition is impossible for the vast majority of families in Burma who are already fighting to survive on too little money. Parents are often forced to choose between education for their children or food for their family.

Enrollment in school does not guarantee a good education. Despite the high price youth in Burma must pay in order to access educational facilities, there is little return on their investment. Learning consists of reading and reciting answers without analysis or independent interpretation of the lessons. Numerous interviewees described classes in Burma as teachers writing information onto a chalkboard while students mechanically copy the information into their notebooks before being dismissed. Rote memorization is valued over critical thinking skills. Schools have insufficient access to materials and research.

Many interviewees reported feeling profoundly unfulfilled by this kind of education. They view this type of schooling as a waste of time, not providing them with any real training or skills for life post-graduation. One of the most tangible examples of this deficit in learning is found in the field of technology: most schools inside Burma do not have computers available to their students, yet computer access is a key desire for youth yearning to get the most out of their education. One interviewee reported that inside Burma he never once saw a computer. When he heard that computer training courses were being taught on the border, he decided to leave Burma. Opportunities such as this are a strong incentive for young people to make the journey to Thailand.

Problems with the Burmese education system are not limited to primary and secondary schools. In order to have a say over one’s course of study at the university level, it is critical that a student receive high scores during high school. Because schools in Burma are so inadequate, students with the financial means to do so hire personal instructors to teach them from home rather than attend high school. Interviewees reported that in many cases these richer students stop attending school altogether, preferring to work solely with their personal instructor. What arises is a system in which only the rich are able to score high enough to determine their course of study at the university level.

Education for women is particularly difficult at the university level. Females are not afforded the same access to education as their male counterparts. Families that can only afford to educate one child regularly choose to put their sons through school over their daughters. Females who do attend school are graded much differently than
section 5.

males. Several female activists said that this disparity was one of their reasons for seeking education in Thailand.

“In (in Thailand) we can express our opinion, like the way we feel. And we have more choice what to study – in Burma we cannot choose anything. In refugee camps, education is better than Burma. We don’t like refugee camps, but the education is better than Burma. I decided to go to Thailand because I could not attend school in Burma. The SPDC should have education for the citizens, as well as healthcare. But they don’t do anything.”

— Female Activist, Age 20, BWU

“In Need of Income: The inability to find work for a living wage forces even the most apolitical Burmese to cross the border

“I was a rice farmer in Myanmar. But I could not support my life or a family, so I came to Thailand to work.”

— Male Activist, Age 24, YCO

Even the most highly educated young people in Burma struggle to find work in their homeland. Young textile workers interviewed for this report stated that it is extremely difficult to find work in factories inside the country—it is estimated that Burma’s unemployment rate hovers around a staggering 10.2%. Those that are able to find work are often employed in factories that use exploitative practices, prohibiting breaks for meals, maintaining highly dangerous working environments, and paying well below a living wage to workers. For these youth, the choice to relocate to Thailand is one driven primarily by economic—rather than political—necessity.

No Work, No Hope

Finding work in Burma is an extremely difficult task. As a result of poor educational institutions, many youth are ill-equipped to enter the professional job market. Moreover, if they are not members of a pro-junta group or do not have relatives who are members and can attest to their loyalty to the regime, finding well-paying jobs can be nearly impossible.

“Young people want to go to different country; in Burma, there’s no chance to live in a higher standard. But when they leave, they stay for a long time, sometimes 3-4 years and they become depressed. Sometimes they’re very worried about their future. Many friends, they phone me, ‘oh, I’m very depressed and I don’t want to live here but I don’t want to go back to Burma.’

— Student, ERS-B

Youth in Burma are often trapped between an obligation to help provide for their families, and their desires to pursue their personal goals. As one activist described, “(Young people in Burma) are working and getting paid for their family, (but) they lose their dreams.”

The youth that were able to find employment in Burma reported conditions of long, arduous workdays with poor pay and little or no compensation for overtime. While they acknowledged that many of these problems also exist in the jobs available to migrant workers in Thailand, they said that relative to Burma the conditions in Thailand are not as bad. They also referenced a number of border-based NGOs that provide trainings, healthcare, education and other social services to migrant workers – services which are not readily available inside Burma. Characteristic of most interviewees was the desire to work for more money in Thailand and remit wages to their families in Burma.

Youth from Burma living today on the Thai-Burma border have been forced to choose between decidedly negative alternatives: living a life of fear and hiding while fleeing from a civil war; being forced to work for a government that exploits and terrorizes them; or pursuing potential opportunities of education and employment far from their homes and families. Youth activists who make it to Thailand and are able to enroll in schools or find jobs within the Burma movement recognize the amazing opportunity...
they have to affect change for their peers and countrymen.

However, the loss that youth activists feel from leaving their homeland cannot be underestimated. 6 Youth refugees reported feeling isolated, lonely, and alien to a land that is the only safe place they know, but does not feel like a home in any sense. Many youth resolve this internal conflict by becoming active in Burma’s fight for democracy. One activist described these feelings:

“I feel not good because we have a country but we cannot live in our country. We have to flee to other countries because our government is governed in dictatorship. We cannot do anything in our country, so we come here. I feel so bad about that. If the government (were) not like that, we (could) do so many things to improve our lives and to extend ourselves in education. But now we cannot do anything in Burma. So we come here and work to get our democracy in our country.”

– Female activist, age 26, HREIB

Bridging the Gap
Youth interviewed for this report were compelled to seek refuge in Thailand from civil war, and to seek an education that eluded them in their homeland. A female activist from BWU shared her story of crossing into Thailand: hers was a decision propelled by a desire to learn and a need for survival.

Sulien7 traveled to Thailand with a group of fourteen teenage girls. The group sought out the assistance of Karenni resistance groups that work to shuttle IDPs and other vulnerable Karenni people to Thailand for a chance at safety. Sulien describes her passage to Thailand as follows:

“Sulien and her friends made this treacherous journey because they feared for their lives were they to stay in Burma; but they were also motivated by a strong desire to seek quality education that they had heard existed in neighboring Thailand. She and her friends were in constant terror throughout their trip: but they believed their only hope for any future lay in receiving an education.

“The Karenni opposition group, they always come to Karenni state and talk about the education in Thailand being better than Burma, so they always say, would you like to come to Thailand to continue your education? He asked like that, so I decided to come.”

Sulien acknowledges that many people cross over to Thailand because of the extreme hardships they encounter at the hands of the SPDC. What strikes one of the BWU trainers is not why people choose to leave Burma, but how they respond to the opportunities with which they are presented after arriving in Thailand:

6. For more information on the isolation youth activists experience in Thailand, see section 5.3, (In)Security on page 89.
7. See page 45 to learn more of Sulien’s story.
Regardless of their reasons, Sulien and others interviewed for this report feel very strongly that Thailand offers them a hope for a future that is non-existent in Burma at this time. For the youth who have decided to channel their hopes into political activism to positively shape their country’s future, Thailand offers a new realm of possibilities.

“All these (years of civil war) have created a country that’s so unstable, there’s a civil war that’s going on and all the infrastructure is gone. There are women who are finishing grade 10 with no future. But the source of the ... mass exodus that’s taking place within Burma is because of the problems that the SPDC has created by the military regime being in power. That’s the driving force of why they leave, but once they’re here everybody has different aspirations. The migrant worker who wants to get enough money so she can support her family back home, or the young student who wants to be a future political leader so that she can bring change for other people like her mothers and sisters.”

– Female activist and trainer, BWU

The decision to cross the border from Burma to Thailand is made for a variety of reasons: but in almost all cases, it is a permanent one. Whether fleeing from civil war and military violence, protecting one’s family from regime exploitation, seeking out a new future through education, or earning enough money to provide for one’s family, the result is always the same: by crossing the border young people from Burma find a new perspective on their lives as well as on the true situation in their homeland. For the youth interviewed in this report, that newfound knowledge has led to a personal revolution: the decision to become a political activist. In the next section we explore what drives these activists’ work: their motivations and aspirations to choose a life of politicization.

“Many come from (Burma) not being given the opportunity or having been denied the education that they deserve, so they come out here (to Thailand) to prove themselves. And when they’re given opportunity, I’ve witnessed personally how they’ve blossomed into these independent strong activists that really believe in a future democratic Burma. They’re trying to make themselves better, they’re trying to be leaders at every level.”

– Female activist and trainer, BWU
Thiri Thura, female activist, age 26, KWO

My name is Thiri Thura and I was born on the Thai-Burma border, in Mae Saw province. I became a refugee in 1991 when I was ten and grew up in Mae Ra Ma Luang refugee camp. Eight years ago I joined the Karen Women’s Organization, working on different issues like leadership training, coordinating human rights and democracy education, and also advocacy.

The first things I learned about at KWO were human rights and women’s rights. In the past, we knew we were not treated fairly by the military regime but we didn’t know these acts were human rights violations. But later, because I learned about this and discussed it openly, I came to understand human rights and the situation in Burma. Because I lived with different ethnic groups, I learned about their struggles. And later through my work, I met with different women’s groups. We often have conferences and meetings so we can better understand the struggles for freedom, human rights and democracy in Burma.

I’ll often go to the camp for work and visit families: I’ll share the news about what I’m learning with them and give trainings and talks to the leaders, asking their opinions. We always have to make the link between the Karen peoples’ struggling, and the struggle for human rights and democracy in Burma. If you are too far away from your community it’s a problem because it’s very hard for your community to accept you; I have to balance my time. I want to do advocacy work, like lobbying the international community, but also always keep contact with the grassroots people so that my community can see me as a person that truly understands the situation and is trying to create change.

When I was living at the camp I knew nothing about what people are doing outside. I went to ALTSEAN Burma to intern and I learned more about what happening in Burma generally. When I returned I began working with other organizations providing education to youth and the women groups. As I had a chance to attend more trainings, I came to understand the neighboring ASEAN countries as well as
the international community’s policies towards my homeland. It’s powerful to me, this kind of education and knowledge. It helps me throughout my work, my relations with friends, with the community, and the way I analyze the situation. The more I attend trainings, the more I want to work for my organization to help educate young people. I see things a different way and I want everyone to experience thinking differently also. It means so much to me to have a goal: I want to help other young people and do whatever I can to best contribute to the changes in my own community, but also to Burma as a whole.

I hope there will be positive change in Burma. I don’t want to see any fighting or suffering. I hope we can pressure the Burmese military regime so that they come on the table and talk with the ethnic groups so there will be a dialogue to try to sort out Burma’s political problems through negotiation, leading to a transitional government. I want everyone to have a chance to go back to their homes to rebuild their lives, living just like everybody else. I think people want to have a normal life, to live peacefully.

Burmese youth have to start becoming involved in the democracy movement at a very early age because we don’t have choice. They finish education in the camp and then either have to become a teacher or there is no further education. Some people are getting involved in political organizations and somehow that we don’t even experience being young. I think we need young people around the world to support us.

Activism is my life. I want to either work to educate the community. I also want to represent the people in government so I can be their voices. I will either become the activist for people, helping trying to bring up issues, or either be involved in the government so I can represent them and speak for them directly.

I believe everyone needs to be involved in the democracy struggle in some way. If you are a refugee, start building up your skills and knowledge. Once Burma gets democracy, you’ll be prepared to go back. As a women’s group we focus on educating young women. It’s frustrating in one way, but in another way it’s looking at your work day by day and then just doing the best you could to contribute to the freedom.
Within the context of Burma, it is sometimes difficult to define ‘activist’ or to distinguish between a Burmese youth activist and a Burmese youth affected by conflict. Growing up either repressed by a military dictatorship, isolated within the confines of a refugee camp, or cut-off from the international community, youth from Burma have a wide range of motivating factors for getting involved in their country’s democracy movement. The young people we met with on the Thai-Burma border made it clear that once youth are given the opportunity to participate in human, environmental, ethnic and labor rights efforts, many are transformed from victims of the regime into empowered and informed activists—armed with the motivation, knowledge, and resources necessary to organize, educate and positively impact the efforts for democracy in Burma. This transformation—from living in conflict to living for peace—is the subject of this section.

Upon their arrival in Thailand, many youth know little of politics or human rights; they would hardly consider themselves activists. But through observation, education, personal drive and inspiration, youth living on the Thai-Burma border are increasingly making the choice to become active political participants motivated to change their current situation through organizing and advocacy.

“Youth from Burma become aware that freedom can be easily lost if it is not fought for and fiercely protected. They are interested in social and political issues because they understand that knowledge is the key to sustaining democratic ideals in their homeland. As one student said, “If we don’t know the political situation or are not interested in it then we will lose our rights.”

Youth activists believe it is their responsibility to bring awareness of democracy back to their communities; specifically, to educate their families and neighbors on human rights. The leadership role that youth play in promulgating democratic ideals in the larger society is vital to the future of their country. By putting the atrocities committed by the SPDC into the proper political framework for their fellow countrymen, engaged youth activists share what they’ve learned in order to increase democratic awareness.

This section examines four components that turn youth towards activism - living a legacy of activism, education as exposure to an activist existence, deriving political awareness from personal causes, and fostering a deeper understanding of democratic principles. Together, these elements combine to transform youth living on the Thai-Burma border, into young people creating change for their homeland.

—I would explain to (my community) that democracy is we have rights to travel to another country, we can express our opinion, we can choose the government that we want. I would give them the example that now the SPDC rules Burma but it’s not like democracy – we are afraid of them all the time. And also Burmese people go to another country and get trouble but SPDC don’t care – they say there aren’t migrant workers in other countries. But it is going on now—we have many migrant workers in Thailand and China and other countries.”

—Female Activist, Age 20, BWU
Living the Legacy: Activism provides an alternative to past sufferings and refugee life

“As long as I’ve been alive; I have a duty to fight for my country’s independence.”

– Male activist, age 26, KYO

We all learn from our surroundings: our environment, our elders, our experiences and our observations. For youth from Burma, too many lessons have been learned through suffering and victimization. Yet they have also learned by overcoming those obstacles in order to create opportunities—for themselves, their families, and their future.

An Activist Heritage

The struggle for democracy in Burma has crossed generations: for over 60 years the people of Burma have been fighting for political change and greater freedom. Many young people from Burma have watched past generations of their family fight—even die—for this cause. This experience has deeply influenced the development of younger activists in the younger generation. They feel that not only are they fighting for their own future, they are continuing the work their parents and grandparents began.

Many youth living on the border today were too young to remember, much less participate, in the 8/8/88 protest movement in Rangoon and throughout Burma; yet they vividly recall the effect those protests had on their families. One student recalled this story about the 1988 protests:

“When I was about 8 or 9 years old there was a big uprising in Burma demanding democracy. At that time I realized people were demanding democracy but I did not know what it is. I knew the people were demonstrating against the government because it is bad and the people need a good government. I just knew that.”

– Female Activist, Age 28, BLC

Another young woman recounted a familiar tale: at the age of four and during the 1988 movement, her father fled to Thailand after participating in the protests. She did not see her father for 19 years; he stayed in exile on the border as a political activist. There were severe economic struggles in the house; her mother never dared to talk about politics. However, the memory of her father was never absent from the home; his philosophy and ideals shaped the young woman’s development as an activist throughout her childhood. When her mother died in 2006 of cancer; the young woman crossed over the border to reunite with her father in Thailand, where she began to attend an activist school.

Several interviewees were also heavily influenced by their parents’ activist roots. One student recalled her father as being very vocal about the war between the SPDC and the KNU: “he told me, ‘KNU and SPDC are fighting each other because we don’t have democracy, and for our Karen people we don’t have freedom. They fight for our freedom.’” But at the same time her father also took care to discuss the difference between fighting for democracy and fighting violently. The student said she was not told about the military’s role in violating rights; he spoke only about the principles of democracy and freedom. This fundamental distinction helped this youth develop into an activist concerned with finding political solutions, rather than violent ones, to the situation in Burma.

Other youth chose the path of political activism because they regard it as a family trade. One student said that he came to Thailand to find work as an activist because all of his family worked for the Karen autonomous government. This history influenced the youth, who decided that in order to continue his family’s work, he must first learn leadership skills. He views activism as a form of familial legacy building; if democracy is to succeed in Burma, it will require this type of long-term, collective commitment.
For some students, a commitment to activism came not out of their parents’ actions directly, but from witnessing their hardships in trying to raise a family in such an oppressive environment. One activist stated that she had no knowledge of politics while growing up; but she was able to listen to the BBC for periodic updates on the situation in her homeland. Her father was a migrant worker in Thailand; when he returned to their home he would compare the rights of people living in Thailand to those inside Burma. There was no public conversation of politics; thus, she did not believe her father’s stories of political demonstrations and personal freedoms he experienced in Thailand. But his stories, combined with the information she received from BBC radio, helped to convince her to travel to the border and see for herself; when she did, her dedication to political activism was solidified.

Alternatives to Camp Life
Another motivation for youth to become involved in political activism is that they are tired of being confined to refugee camps, having limited opportunities and living as stateless people, “There are no opportunities for young people in the camps,” said a member of KYO. Activism, for him and others, is an alternative to camp life.

In the camps youth feel little to no connection to their community. Serious problems arise with drug and alcohol abuse. One activist working with KYO stated that his motivation for involving young people in activism is to prevent them from turning toward more destructive behaviors:

“My parents told me to study very hard: ‘you have to escape, you have to get educated,’ my father said to me. My mother was very quiet, and stayed at home. My dad said if you get older you will know what the situation has been. When you get older you will understand. If you get involved in the movement, you will understand.”

— Female Activist, age 24, BLC

For youth who have been trained in democracy and human rights, participation in politics is a fundamental component of their identity — to them, lives depend on politics. However, activism takes many forms: as one young man told us, the choice to be an activist does not necessarily mean a life of politics. He, like several youth interviewed for this report, wants to be an engineer. Others want to be in the medical profession, business operators, even musicians or singers. For these youth, being an activist means fighting for the freedom to follow ones’ dreams, whatever they are. The situation inside the country and in refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border makes youth leadership and development particularly critical for the future of Burma. Developing leadership capability, and the importance of an education rich in critical thinking and broader perspectives of the world is a fundamental component of youth activist leadership training in Burma.

Education as Exposure: Enhancing youth activism through education and critical analysis

“Why is it important to train youth in democracy? Because young people, living in the camp they are very naughty...they do not want to work with the community, they want to work for themselves. They want to go on their whims...we need to change that so they will become good leaders.”

— Male Activist, Age 26, KYO

8. For more information about youth activist’s professional aspirations, see section 5.5, Looking Ahead on page 131.

— Female activist, age 24, ALTSEAN
As is the case for many young people coming to live on the Thai-Burma border, interviewees highlighted the fundamental role that education plays in developing their political consciousness. Moreover, education on other topics such as science, law and engineering reveals to students perspectives on the deeper problems that exist within their country. This revelation results in new political motivations for youth activists. Many make a connection between a lack of education and high levels of poverty, with the inadequacies of current regime policy on a broader scale. Youth often arrive at a new understanding of government-perpetrated abuses. As one student said: “people (in Burma) do not know their rights. Government can do whatever it wants when the people are not educated.”

Learning their Rights

Before coming to Thailand, many young people did not connect the violence perpetrated by the SPDC to a violation of their civil and human rights; once given a framework for understanding how the SPDC violates human rights, they become devoted to learning more. As one student stated:

“I decided to attend the school because we don’t know about human rights (in Burma). When the military chairman in the village made (us) do forced labor, this is abuse of human rights (but) we didn’t know. It’s our duty; we had to go, we had to work. When I came (to BLC) I learned this is an abuse of human rights, so I want to spread this knowledge to the grassroots people. If they know that this is our right—our legal right—they will be brave and ask the SPDC to stop land confiscation.”

– Female activist, age 26, BLC

The evolution that youth undergo throughout their education in Thailand not only informs them of their rights, but also establishes them as global citizens supported by international laws and institutions. This serves as a call to activism for many youth on the border. And though some attended rudimentary schooling while inside Burma, it is in Thailand that they learn about different democratic organizations working for their homeland. One student recalled her first exposure to these organizations; she did not know what democracy was until witnessing so many groups working for her peoples’ freedom.

“I don’t know what mean this KWAT, but I want to learn and have job. When I was in Burma I always thought I want to do something for my country, I know that is not good because I always see, our family always gave tax to the government and always make people porter, a lot of forced labor, I don’t like that and I think that is not good government. I didn’t know what is democracy, gender, human rights, but now I know and I want to know more.”

– Female activist, age 22, KWAT

Through this experience the young woman was able to begin analyzing the situation in Burma to see how the brutality and bad policies of the SPDC are directly responsible for minimizing freedom. This newfound understanding of politics’ impact on the daily lives of people inspired her to become active in Burma’s democracy movement.

Other youth became activists by different educational means: some were sponsored by community organizations to attend schools on the border and developed as activists through exposure to these organizations’ work. An intern at ALTSEAN told us about her educational path: after finishing 9th standard inside Burma (the equivalent of a mid-high school education in the United States), she was forced to become an IDP. She crossed into Thailand and became a refugee in a camp, where she completed 10th standard (her high school education). After finishing school the young woman met with KWO and began working for their organization; because of her commitment to human rights, KWO sponsored several internships for the young activist, first with KWO’s women’s leadership school, then at ALTSEAN. Upon her fulfillment of her ALTSEAN internship, this life-long activist will return to the camp to work for KWO’s refugee program.

One young woman told us that when she arrived in Thailand she wasn’t interested in learning about democracy: she wanted to get basic skills and work. She felt a desire to help her country, but because she lacked a framework to understand democracy. She had yet to make a commitment to activism:

“Here when I came I don’t know what mean this KWAT, but I want to learn and have job. When I was in Burma I always thought I want to do something for my country, I know that is not good because I always see, our family always gave tax to the government and always make people porter, a lot of forced labor, I don’t like that and I think that is not good government. I didn’t know what is democracy, gender, human rights, but now I know and I want to know more.”

– Female activist, age 22, KWAT
For this young woman and for others like her, education is a way to escape oppression. And because they view their educational opportunities as a gift, many feel compelled to return to Burma to work for the people still living under such cruel conditions. “Not only (is education) a means to escape, but we have to work for people of Burma. As much as we know and our knowledge, there are many people suffering so we have to work for them too.”

Education provides youth activists with the tools to be able to be involved in their communities and speak out within organizations. One young activist stated that she felt “empowered” by her education to critique information, not just memorize it. Another student told us that critical analysis allows her to comprehend the many different ways in which youth can participate in democratic development.

The interrelation of governmental action and social conditions is an important topic for youth activists studying on the border. As Solid education is fundamental in demonstrating the government’s relationship to the country’s problems, and in developing alternative models to address them. Thus activists are less likely to revolt against politics and more likely to use it as a tool for non-violent change. An education based on critical thinking also builds capacity of the larger Burmese civil society, enabling Burmese people from all walks of life to more fully participate in their country’s transition to democracy.

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“After transition, we can participate in finding justice. And then other way is in the constitutional process, making law for the future, our opinion will be involved in that role.”

– Female activist, age 24, BLC

The Personal Becomes Political: The draw for young women to political activism

“...we should be fighting this battle. I almost feel that there’s a deeper understanding amongst women in terms of asking within the pro-democratic movement itself. There’s a (common) understanding, I don’t know maybe it’s like feeling issues from a different perspective which is why I think we have a lot to offer as women, and young women leaders hopefully in a future Burma.”

– Female activist and trainer, BWU

Equally important to activists’ development is their personal connection to the movement: why they are drawn to the cause for which they fight in the first place. Female activists on the Thai-Burma border bring a unique perspective and a new dimension of organizing to the democracy movement. For many young people from Burma, supporting the struggle for democracy is not a choice they have made to do professionally; it is a personal decision that impacts every part of their lives.

In a society that remains deeply segregated in terms of gender, the women’s movement in Burma has made remarkable progress in a very short time. Many of the youth interviewed—both female and male—viewed the women’s movement as a model for the larger democracy efforts Burmese activists undertake. Yet a very tangible gender divide remains outside of the schools visited. How youth approach incorporating women leaders into politics will no doubt be a defining characteristic of this generation. As an activist from KWO explained, the struggle for women’s rights goes hand in hand with the struggle for democracy, as women cannot gain rights while the country is still under a dictatorship.

Women’s Work is Democratic

A common theme we heard from young female democracy activists on the border was that their commitment to democratic change stems from their commitment to
promulgating women's rights and ending gender discrimination in their communities. Many recounted being discriminated against because of their gender: “In our community I was discriminated against. I suffered. And also human rights abuses in our community I saw with my own eyes. So I really want to change the future for myself, and for my people.”

“Some women are very smart and very intelligent but there is no position and place for women.”

— Female Intern, age 31, KWAT

Traditional gender roles in Burma have impeded the public perception that women can be political leaders or work within the political realm. As this generation of young female activists is growing in numbers and is well-organized within the movement, that perception is slowly but surely changing. Increasingly, the parallel between equal rights and women’s rights is being seen within the democracy movement. Men within the movement are also beginning to recognize the importance of including women’s voices in politics. This egalitarian approach has brought many women into the democracy efforts; their activism is expanding as they begin to see how the causes of feminism and political activism are deeply interrelated.

“For me, I am very happy that I am a woman, so understanding the women situation. I think sometimes it’s hard from especially the man to understand the women because they are not women and they don’t suffer or experience the same thing. So they cannot think, put themselves in your situation like that. So as a woman, I feel like I understand more about the women situation.”

— Female Activist, KWO

Moreover, female youth who join the democracy movement bring a different voice to the suffering occurring in Burma: a disproportionate number of women are victimized by the violence inside the country, particularly through the use of rape as a tactic of war. Though men can acknowledge women’s suffering, without women to personally articulate such pain, the degree of torment shouldered by the women of Burma is lost.

“I want to really work for women and for our country. Men and women both, I want to work for them to educate them, why there is gender discrimination. I want to learn more about gender issues and educate about them in order to change society.”

— Female Activist, Age 20, BWU

Role Models
Mentorship is also an important factor in bringing young people to activism. Several young activists recalled an older activist who inspired them to work for freedom:

“Before I start working with women organization, I saw one of the leaders, she is like a kind of role model. She’s working very hard and then came back and support the community. So I want to be able to be like her. That’s my first inspiration that I got from her.”

— Female activist, KWO

Today’s female youth activists recognize the important role that strong women role models have played in their political development. They will in turn serve as mentors for young women who will become involved in Burma’s democracy movement, thus creating a sustainable effort to develop strong female leaders for their country’s future.

The Deeper Issue: Democracy and the Ethnic Divide
While the role of female leaders becomes increasingly important in Burma’s democracy movement, students of both genders living on the border today are continuing to discover many of the complexities of democratic activism. Initially, youth join the democracy movement looking for an alternative to suffering; but as their activism evolves, they come to understand that democracy is also a viable solution for simultaneously addressing the underlying social and economic problems that exist in their country.

9. For further analysis of the debate over federalism in Burma, refer to section 5.5 on page 131.
Ethnic divisions play a very large role in perpetuating these problems; if not properly addressed, such tensions between groups will ultimately erode any democratic institutions that are set up in Burma.

“Burma problem cannot resolve only with democracy. Also federalism is necessary to settle the conflict of Burma. The conflict did not start with democracy, it started with ethnic problem.”
– Male activist, BLC

**Debating the Issues: Federalism and Burmanization**

As youth become more knowledgeable about politics and more engaged in its practice, they discover that there is more to developing a sustainable democracy than meets the eye. Many young people have been active within the democracy struggle because they come from a repressed ethnic minority and want to ensure that when changes in governance do occur in Burma, ethnic groups will be adequately represented. They are also motivated by the fact that many of those outside the conflict might know about past democracy movements: the ‘88 Student’s Generation and Aung San Suu Kyi, but have heard little about the ethnic-based conflicts that have plagued Burma before the SPDC came to power. Often, however, these youth quickly discover that they, too, have much to learn about the application of federalism in Burma, a country deeply divided along ethnic lines. When Burmese youth choose a life of activism, they are confronted with difficult problems that could potentially prevent democracy from taking hold; problems that they must address if they are to be successful leaders.

When asked, youth activists typically identify “Burmanization”—the process whereby the SPDC attempts to erase ethnic identification by educating, governing and enforcing law from the perspective of the majority Burman ethnic group—as one of the primary impediments to establishing democracy in their homeland. The SPDC aggrandizes Burmanization as a means of unifying the country as one state of Burma: but it often executes its goal through coercion and violence, including moving soldiers into ethnic villages and ordering them to ‘marry’ young women in an effort to meld the cultures. Many interpret these ‘marriages’ as another form of rape as a tactic of war.

Burmanization causes severe divisions in the country; minority groups, fearing that Burmanization will ultimately force their customs into extinction, have become deeply mistrustful of the Burman ethnic group. It is this mistrust that could severely slow democratic institution building; in a government ruled by majority vote, youth activists are learning that finding a voice for all of the ethnic groups is imperative for democracy to have any hope of success.

“Burma problem cannot resolve only with democracy. Also federalism is necessary to settle the conflict of Burma. The conflict did not start with democracy, it started with ethnic problem.”
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We regularly heard that ethnic groups do not want an equal voice within the government if democracy is realized; they want a degree of autonomy within a new state. The difference may seem minor, but to youth activists this is a very real point of contention within the movement; some students aim for a unified Burma that brings all its’ groups together under a federal system, while others believe that without a certain degree of partition the ethnic minorities will continue to be prevented from exercising their right of self-determination. As youth continue to grow into their activism, they are searching for viable solutions to the Burmanization challenge. The answers are not easy; but nonetheless, youth activists provide the most potential for overcoming this challenge through open minds and a multicultural approach to education.

The Intra- & Inter-Ethnic Split

Related to the debate over Burmanization is the larger issue of the ethnic divisions created by over 60 years of civil war. In addition to resisting Burmanization, ethnic groups must also deal with the complicated relationships that they have with each other. One tactic employed by the SPDC in its totalitarianism is the periodic brokering of ceasefire agreements with certain ethnic groups in exchange for their attacking another ethnic enemy front. The result has been warring factions between different minority groups for a generation, and an inability to truly join together against the SPDC’s brutality.

"America is a melting pot so ethnic groups get along. Burma is different. (There are) about 20 major ethnic groups with their own histories and backgrounds. No ethnic can renounce their identity. They have to carry it and their culture."

— Activist, BLC

Youth activists explained that most people in Burma believe when the country achieves democracy that minorities should be protected by law. Some see democracy as a social panacea, a cure—All that will solve all their problems. Others understand that the reality of democratization usually proves to be the opposite: it is characteristically a difficult and arduous process. Often, countries undergoing a transition to democracy experience years of uncertainty, difficulty, and debate as they struggle to implement the fundamental institutional reforms required for democracy to take root: because democracy is defined by freedom of ideas and speech, it is extremely difficult for leaders in new democracies to resolve the many different opinions about their nations’ direction. Moreover, old habits die hard: in countries such as Burma where problems have long been solved by violence, democratization is by no means a simple, linear process. Democracy is not a means to a peaceful end, but rather the end achieved through peaceful means.

The notion of balancing ethnic sovereignty with national unity—that democratic principles will lead to increased tribal autonomy and the right to establish their own national areas—is an intricate component of the inter-ethnic divide that will need to be addressed before and during any democratic transition.

Many youth activists see it as their responsibility to serve as a voice for the ethnic minorities inside Burma who are unable to speak for themselves within the formulation of government. Just as youth activists feel that they represent their ethnicity in politics, they also feel a duty to return to their communities to speak about government in an effort to generate public support for democratic reform. Acting as a conduit for communication between government leaders and the public is a critical role that youth activists play in the movement.

Another means by which youth activist organizations are attempting to overcome the ethnic divide is through education. Many schools operating on the border are open to all ethnic groups. Several make an effort to select class members who represent different ethnicities in order to facilitate dialogue. This effort has led to significantly
increased understanding between the groups: several students commented that they did not know anyone from the other groups before enrolling in an activist school, and that such a multicultural learning environment has allowed them to learn so much more about the world from each other:

“I lived with different ethnic groups, so I learned about the different ethnic groups that are struggling. And later through our work, I have worked with different women’s groups, (and) we (are) working with different ethnic groups. We often have conferences and meetings, so we came to understand Burma situation and understanding Burma qualities and the struggling of ethnic people and the struggling for freedom and human rights and democracy in Burma.”

– Female Activist, age 25, KWO

To these students, democracy is defined as different ethnic groups working together towards the same goals from different perspectives. Through schools and umbrella organizations, youth activists are finding new ways of communicating across ethnic divides. Their efforts to create a new cross-cultural appreciation offer the greatest hope for a unified Burma. By intricately linking the next generation of leaders who will be working together for a democratic future, these organizations are bridging divides developed out of the military’s anti-ethnic policies and the lack of cultural sharing allowed inside the country. As one student told us: “We are working for the same goal – to get democracy and help our people.”

“I have to do something, do more than get democracy to Burma. I have to share human rights and women’s rights in my society in my country, in my friends, in my family because they don’t know about this.”

– Female Activist, Age 20, BWU

Regardless of the reasons behind the choice to turn towards activism, the lives of youth are forever changed by that decision: their personal security is permanently compromised, they may be misunderstood or ostracized by their non-political friends and family, and they face a future of precarious work and rare reward. Yet the drive to become an activist is very strong in the youth we interviewed; those who identified themselves as activists found it to be inextricably linked to their personal identities. In the face of many obstacles, their efforts represent a continuation of important work: freedom for the people of their country, and the continuation of democratic evolution within their homeland. The next section focuses on the security issues that Burmese people—particularly political activists—face while working on the Thai-Burma border. Unfortunately, the dangers posed by living and operating illegally in Thailand potentially prevent many youth activists from carrying out their critical work.
Khin Thiri, age 26, Mae La Refugee Camp

My name is Khin Thiri and I am 26 years old: I have grown up most of my life inside Mae La refugee camp on the Thai-Burma Border.

I was born Karen State in the village of Mingala. My village was very dangerous: always there was fighting by the SPDC and the KNU. I tried to attend school for only one year in Mingala: but outside of the schoolroom we would hear gunshots, so we constantly had to run. My family would hear rumors such as: ‘tomorrow, the army will come;’ so we have to run and hide in the jungles. The SPDC accuses our villagers and our village leaders of supporting the Karen army. If we have anything of value—food, a house, or strong men—we have to hide it. If there are children, they don’t really care for the children. Children, like me, suffer very much at the hands of the SPDC. Sometimes, we had to go very far and stay in one house for one or two months. We worry that the army will see us. We had to walk slow and be quiet. It was a very scary way of life for me.

When I was a young boy, I went with my older cousin and brother to Rangoon. On the way there were so many problems going there. There were a lot of police who don’t like Burmese army; there also was army who don’t like the police. You never know who to trust. During our travel we had to go through a lot of police checking by the KNU. If we save money, they take the money also. We had to hide it. The KNU asked my cousin if he was Karen, and he said yes and showed them his ID card, but they didn’t believe him. The police took all our money. I was constantly afraid that my cousin would be taken away by the soldiers.

Eventually, we made it to Rangoon. The trip was very terrifying for me; I was a child at that time. There were more than 20 police checks, and most of the time, my brother had to pay money. My brother said that he could tell that the police were drunk because he could smell the alcohol.

I have seen a lot of death in my life. As an infant my mother passed away, my father took care of me but when
he passed away, my grandmother became my caretaker. At the age of 10 I came to Thailand: I followed my grandmother to Mae La refugee camp. I loved my grandmother: she cared for me when no one else could. But she died in Burma before she could get to Thailand. I miss her so much. I cry every time I think of her.

I made it to the camp alone; I now live with my uncle and his family inside Mae La. Life in Mae La camp is quieter compared to life on the run in Burma. I like Mae La but that there is a severe shortage of water. At the camp school I study very hard: my favorite subjects are Thai language, computers, botany, sociology, chemistry, English. The main subject is Bible, but actually I don’t want to study Bible. We have to study Bible, or we cannot go to school.

Democracy is no concept to the youth living in Mae La. Sometimes they sit together and talk about how they have no country. We talk about how the government is very bad or if the government was good, we would study in the university. When we have free time in the school, we sometimes talk about democracy. Some of us have already applied for (refugee resettlement). But I haven’t: I am too old and I have nowhere else to go.

I feel that I am too old to be a Karen youth leader inside Mae La, and anyway I’m not interested in political work. I do not want to become politically active or join the army. Instead, I just want to help people heal. To be a Karen leader, you have too many responsibilities. I just want to study medicine.

I miss my family very much. I want to see my mother’s face. I am told that I look like my mother. My mother and brother, they don’t like the armies....my grandparents never talked about war. They didn’t like the war, not like this.
Challenges of Camp Life: Refugees on the Thai-Burma border seek solace, but often only find more uncertainty

Burmese people of all ages travel to Thailand to seek refuge from violence; many choose to enter one of the ten refugee camps currently operating on the Thai-Burma border. Upon arrival, however, they quickly realize that life inside a refugee camp provides its own host of problems. Many are immediately relieved by the supplies—basic food, shelter, clothing—that are provided inside the camps. But this relief comes at the cost of independence and self-determination. Camp residents are reliant on the outside world—a world they feel has forgotten them. Camp residents’ only sources of information are either NGOs or ethnic political structures; thus there is a lack of trustworthy information. It is this sense of hopeless dependency and constant uncertainty that pervades camp life, and youth living there have fully internalized that despair.

“We live outside our country because we are refugees—we don’t have any guarantees. If we don’t have any knowledge through education we will be poorer and poorer. Also, our nationality will be lower and lower, and we will lose our language and culture.”

— Female Activist, age 24 BLC

Camp life is difficult for residents. The English Immersion Program (EIP) is located in Umpium Mae Camp. Although the camp has a population of approximately 20,000 people, there is no electricity, and the school uses a generator for its few computers. The students eat the same basic rations as the rest of the camp population, with the bonus of receiving curry from World Education Consortium, EIP’s primary sponsor. Travel outside of the camp is restricted, and the students are not able to visit friends or family in other camps. They watch as some camp residents exit the camp, illegally, in search of work to earn money to pay their children’s school fees. Finally, the camp faces drought-like conditions in the early part of the year before rainy season begins, and people are unable to bathe and shower regularly.

“We are living in a new unknown. We don’t know what is happening outside of our camp. You don’t know your future and you are afraid. You can only go to school everyday. Like, your daily life, you go to school, you study, and in the school you are taught a school subject. You only have that view, and you don’t even know what people outside our camp are doing.”

— Female activist, KWO

Youth activists no longer living in the camps also captured the experience of camp life in their interviews. One activist at KWO told us that high expectations of youth in camps could prove to be crushing to young people’s fragile state: they have grown up isolated in a remote jungle area, and then have fled to camps where their freedom of movement is extremely limited. As she put it:

“There are a lot of fears already. You don’t know your future and you are afraid. You can only go to school everyday. Like, your daily life, you go to school, you study, and in the school you are taught a school subject. So you only have that view, and you don’t know what people outside the refugee camp are doing, and you don’t even know what people in another camp are doing. You can’t imagine it.”

— Female activist, KWO

The lack of information about what is happening inside Burma and in the outside world makes camp life particularly difficult for youth, who possess an acute need to explore the world around them. A second, third, or fourth-hand re-telling of news and events hardly satisfies their desire for information. As one student told us, “it is very different from reading and hearing than for yourself to go out and see what is happening, and how people are living. That will really change the way you live, or the way you think and organize your daily life.”

Depression is the Norm in a New Unknown

Many students spoke of their feelings of deep despair and depression that accompanied the realization that camp life did not necessarily offer a better life. They often feel powerless to change their fate. These feelings led to severe depression in many youth and their neighbors.

“As a refugee, you have no citizenship, so you cannot travel anywhere. But we don’t want to go back to Burma. So, it’s hard to go anywhere. So we are very depressed. As for me, I am sometimes very depressed as well.”

— Female Activist, Age 20, BWU
More than one student described life in the camps as “blocked”: without access to the outside, refugees can only see what is happening inside the camps and nothing more. Further, they cannot fully think critically about the information they do get; what they experience can be their only truth, because they have no basis of comparison. And because their experience is a decidedly negative one, negativity forms their life view.

Young people often become paranoid about their existence inside the camps: this paranoia is fueled by the instability that defines camp life. For example, rumors regularly spread throughout the camp that rice rations will be shut off, that clean water will cease to flow, that the SPDC is planning to invade the camp. How are youth supposed to know what is true? All of these threats have happened to them before.

“In the refugee camp, because they don’t have work, it’s very hard as a youth you grow up in a family that only gets supported from the international NGOs. So as a youth, you feel very sad and depressed.”

– Female Activist, KWO

Inside the camps, residents who have no outlets to express themselves sometimes turn to crime, violence, drugs or alcohol in an attempt to numb their suffering. This is a problem that activists interviewed for this report see as particularly dangerous to their country’s future. Violence and drug use is spreading throughout the camps, and exacerbating the residents’ feelings of helplessness. Higher levels of violence often lead to Thai authorities cracking down on the camps, making life for refugees even more difficult.

The strictness of the camps combined with boredom and the perception that the Thai soldiers assigned to the camps regularly abuse their authority, leads to problems between young camp residents and soldiers. Youth in the camps can have a difficult time controlling their reactions to soldiers who insult them; they have not yet learned—or been given a forum—to express themselves positively. This friction makes camp life particularly difficult.

“Security is the major problem. Actually, I’m a refugee and I’m not supposed to leave the camp, so since I leave the camp, (I’m already) at risk of being arrested by the Thai police or sending (me) back to Burma. But we have to do something. We can’t just stay in the camp and do nothing, so security is a big problem. We always have to be careful.”

– Female activist, age 25, KWO

Many of the youth interviewed in this report have chosen to leave the camps in search of a better life; all recounted their experience living inside the camps as a mixture of uneasy relief and full-fledged restlessness. A feeling of being caught between two worlds—Burma and an unknown—was evident throughout their recollections.

Choosing to Leave
One activist from Human Rights Education Institute of Burma (HREIB) recounted her experience of being raised inside an NGO-run refugee camp on the Thai-Burma border and her life-changing decision to leave the camp and seek opportunities in Chiang Mai. Hla San was born inside Burma and brought to Umpium Mae camp in Western Thailand at the age of two. In Umpium Mae camp she lived a very monotonous life of schooling and boredom. Sometimes she and her family would attempt to leave the camp in search of work. Hla San recalls the process of leaving the camps:

“I was young, so I’d just stay at home and go to school. You cannot do anything outside so we can’t go outside. My parents, also, stay in the camp. If we go out, we have to ask permission. If we can’t get that, we cannot go. Sometimes if we go get permission, we have to pay money. We didn’t have money, so we’d just go out, I guess, sneak out. (We needed) to go out to work, because we don’t have any money in the camp. We cannot make money.”
Hla San grew up knowing nothing about the politics of her country: it was not something that was discussed inside her home or inside the camp in general. There was a persistent fear in the camp—a feeling of continual escape from Burma. Because she could not leave without considerable difficulty, Hla San could not gain that knowledge from the outside world.

“...When I was in camp, I didn’t know about politics. We didn’t have any knowledge about outside. So we just stay in the camp, go to school, come back, and just did whatever.”

Eventually, she graduated from high school; she wanted to become a doctor, to help people in some capacity. Hla San left the camp at a young age in pursuit of her dream to study medicine.

“...After I graduated, I wanted to learn more about medicine. So I came to the (ERS-B) organization, and they told me that they will support me in that. Then I came here (to HREIB), and after that...I became more knowledgeable about the many organizations and many of the youth outside. So I have many friends, and I become more knowledgeable about politics, environment, and things like that.”

Hla San doesn’t recall a specific moment when she decided to choose a life of activism: for her, activism presented itself as an evolution from her mundane existence inside a refugee camp, to seeking a better life for herself, to working for that same hope of a future for her larger community.

Today Hla San works as a child advocate and travels regularly to the camps along the border, providing parenting education, child care tips, and school evaluations for her organization. Her time in the camps is now spent helping others develop positive alternatives in their lives, so escape is not their only option. She hopes to return to Burma one day and become a teacher; working with children has become her means of influencing her nation’s future development.

(5.3 - Insecurity 0x0)

“Insecurity on the Outside: Leaving camp life often a choice between two dangerous worlds

For youth like Hla San who choose to leave camp life, the situation awaiting them in Thailand is just as precarious but in different ways. Burmese youth activists are officially stateless, having fled Burma oftentimes without any documentation proving citizenship and without having taken the proper legal steps to leave their country. Without any paperwork or proof of residence, Burmese are often at the mercy of officials who could choose to detain or deport any undocumented migrants. However, as many activists told us: for the right price, anyone can be free.

A Life in Limbo
Security is perhaps the biggest problem facing young Burmese people in Thailand today. The majority arrived in the country illegally, and as a result have neither the identification nor documentation to be able to travel and work safely in the country. Many live in seclusion, either in safe houses or their organization’s offices.

“We feel ‘unsecure’ always. We cannot dare to go and visit around the towns. They will put us under arrest and we are afraid of that. But in our village it is ok, but there is an agreement between us and the local headmen (in the border town). Corruption of local authorities helps us.”

– Activist, BLC

Traveling outside and conducting everyday tasks—going to the market, running errands, visiting friends—is extremely difficult without papers. Most would like to go on day trips, but are unable because of their security situation: one young activist at BWU likened her situation to democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi: “…she is under house arrest, but her mind is going on strong to fight for democracy. So sometimes I want to be like that, strong in my mind. When I have troubles ... I feel like we don’t have security, so I always worry ‘when will the police come and arrest us?’ Sometimes I feel like I am under house arrest like Aung San Suu Kyi.”
Students reported that generally, most Thai people treat them well; but there is a historical enmity existing between Burma and Thailand that facilitates a degree of racism in their interactions from time to time. Students at BLC, for instance, have been following a case in which six Burmese migrant workers were captured by Thai villagers on the border and murdered. The crime was not reported to police, and the headmaster of the village attempted to ignore what had happened. BLC conducted an independent investigation and sent their findings to the Bangkok authorities, who then arrested the people responsible. Crimes like this illustrate the strong discrimination against Burmese in the border areas.

When asked what the number one concern that Burmese youth activists have in Thailand, the answer was almost uniformly ‘security.’ Not having an ID card makes working outside of the home nearly impossible. They must be extremely quiet at home; befriending their neighbors is out of the question. As long as they do not carry documentation, activists feel that it is like they don’t exist; and if something should happen—should they be hurt or disappear—they would be no way to find out what happened to them, no way to prove that they ever existed.10

Violence and Migrant Labor

Migrant workers in Thailand face similar challenges to those of political dissidents. Burmese people need Thai jobs to survive, but they receive much lower salaries than do Thai workers and are often assigned the most difficult and dangerous work in the factory. Because most Burmese are working in Thailand illegally, they have no recourse against such discrimination. Meanwhile the Thai government, eager to continue the flow of cheap Burmese labor into their country, does little to curb the maltreatment of migrant workers. What’s worse, factory owners are sometimes paid by the SPDC to send illegal workers back to Burma; labor activists are particularly targeted because of the trouble they cause for the managers.

Burmese migrants working in factories face awful working conditions and receive little pay and no benefits for their labor. Pollution in the factories causes many migrant workers to become ill, oftentimes with incurable lung diseases.

96 97

5.3 – Insecurity

Migrant laborers receive only the most cursory access to healthcare; health insurance is not an option. If they get sick and their employer refuses to allow them time off to go to the hospital, then they are forced to work while ill and risk their health—and the health of their co-workers. Because they are typically without ID cards or proper documentation, migrant laborers who can seek medical care are faced with high costs that are usually prohibitive to receiving treatment. Because workers often know little about human rights, they are unable to demand that their rights be honored.

Youth activists recounted several stories of migrant labor abuse: through their organizations they are documenting Burmese labor injustice in Thailand and working to help victims seek recourse. These injustices range from factory labor to the service industry to victims of human trafficking.

We have no vacation, no holiday time. We are kept separate from Thai workers always. We work from 8AM to 5 PM, and overtime from 6PM to 11PM everyday, but we only are paid for 2 hours of overtime. We are forced to work; some faint, but are still forced to work. Pregnant women work until they give birth; if you are pregnant, (you) get 2 months off after having the baby but it is unpaid. If they have children, they still have to work; children are sent to schools, and parents can’t see them.”

– Female activist, YCO

Because of extremely poor working conditions, labor organizers such as the activists at Yaung Chi Oo Workers Association (YCO) have a particularly dangerous job. Inside the factories, these labor activists work in secret to bring the Burmese factory workers together and to negotiate with factory owners for better working conditions. If they are identified before they are able to reach a critical mass of workers, however, their punishment is severe. Several YCO leaders have been deported to Burma at the request of factory owners. Many have disappeared at the hands of the SPDC, which is especially interested in maintaining an economy of forced labor.

10. For more information about regional actors’ response to the situation in Burma during the September Uprising, see section 6, Analysis on page 154.
An activist at YCO recalled the story of a labor organizer who had worked with YCO in the past. This person is a prominent activist who had gained strong support from the Burmese migrant community and was able to successfully negotiate with factory owners on behalf of the community. The SPDC, aware of his work and worried that his influence would spread further, contacted a factory owner in Mae Sot. They bribed the owner to turn the activist in to Thai authorities so that he would be deported. The organizer was last seen by YCO workers on October 13th, 2006; he has not been heard from since his deportation, and is feared dead.

Factories are not the only places where migrant workers face severe injustice: Burmese employed in the service industry as hotel workers or household maid servants are also at risk. Women and men working in this setting are largely undocumented, and their work hours and job descriptions are left up to the whims of the employer. They may or may not get paid: if the employer decides to withhold salary (a common practice), they have no venue in which to seek recourse. Several reports of physical, mental, and sexual abuse of service workers have been collected by activist organizations on the border: a lack of advocacy on their behalf leaves them particularly vulnerable.

BWU is one of several organizations that track Burmese women working in the service industry in Thailand. One activist told us of a case she has been working on: a Burmese woman was sold by her aunt to work as a maid in a Thai home. She was kept prisoner in the house for several months, until she was eventually rescued by an organization in Mae Sot. She is currently working with BWU to receive an education and find a job.

“For us we can move to Thailand to get involved in an NGO and develop our education, earn experience, critical thinking. And for the others who are coming as migrant workers, some have been killed, some have been raped by trafficking problem. When they come here they are illegal and their boss can abuse them. They can get just basic jobs in construction carrying things or fishing or sewing. We have to be afraid of the police, we get low wages. (We have) many, many problems.”

– Student, ERS-B

Human trafficking is a large problem on the Thai-Burma border, which while closed to refugees, remains quite porous to illegal trade and traffickers. As explained by several activists, the poor economic situation and physical instability in the border areas creates a climate ripe for black markets and human suffering. Women, in particular, are not paid a living wage in either country; often they are forced to sell their bodies in order to survive. Other times, women are tricked into becoming trafficked. As one activist told us, “sometimes (women) are told, ‘Thailand has a really good economy so if you come to Thailand you can work maybe get good money so you can support back to your family.’ Traffickers lie, and some young women believe them, and they go to Thailand and sell themselves, but cannot go back.”

Whether in factories, in the service industry or in the traffickers’ clutches, Burmese coming to Thailand face insecurity in the workplace. Moreover, Burmese outside of the camps face an additional fear of being discovered and deported by Thai authorities. Because they know what fate awaits them should they return to Burma, this fear can often be crippling, preventing them from seeking out the justice they deserve. They endure horrible conditions and constant exploitation because of this fear. Youth activists widely believe that until migrant labor is legitimized as legal work by the Thai government, the situation for these workers cannot improve.

“Thai police are most corruption. But, if they are more corrupt, we are more free. Their corruption is good for us, but not good for their country. Thailand is not like the USA. How long we have been here? How long we have to stay here? We will not be citizens. “

– Male Student, ERS-B
Thai Authorities Offer More Uncertainty

Dealing with the Thai authorities is a reality of traveling for Burmese youth activists—a large part of being an effective organizer involves traveling to different communities and documenting stories. But this travel is made extremely difficult by the security situation in Thailand, and the work of Burmese activists is compromised as a result. Those activists who travel for their work are forced to avoid official routes, dodge police, or ‘negotiate’ their way out of arrest; sometimes, these negotiations can cost them several months’ salary.

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“In Thailand police wait on side of road and police stop, stop, stop (Burmese people). I didn’t actually have any ID cards, so the police tried to stop me; I turned right on the bike and then ran. I was very afraid when I looked back, ‘Is there any police follow?’ (I wondered.) In Burma the police always follow and try to catch us like this.”

– Female activist, age 21, KWAT

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the Thai authorities will think they’re tourists from another Asian country. Some students keep money with them just in case they are detained by Thai authorities. “We can deal with the Thai authority with money,” one young person said. “That’s the best way for illegal people.”

The general consensus among the youth interviewed for this project was that bribing Thai officers was the quickest and safest way to get out of trouble if stopped—and worth it, too, for the price of fighting deportation is prohibitively high. An activist who is sent back to Burma is being handed a virtual prison or death sentence; in the larger picture, paying a few hundred baht to save one’s life is well worth the cost. An activist from KYO put it this way: “It is still more safe in Thailand because we don’t have to worry about the SPDC.”

The difficulties that Burmese people face on the border make it hard to organize and unite a democratic effort for Burma. Restrictions on travel and the financial burden of being ever ready to bribe one’s way out of arrest impede youth activist’s work on a daily basis. Moreover, finding secure venues and means of transport to trainings is difficult and often hinders capacity-building efforts within youth focused organizations. These concerns also make it hard for youth to build long-term relationships with one another. Networking in person is nearly impossible. But here is an example of where youth activists are at an advantage; because they are relatively tech-savvy, they have been able to have preliminary connections over the internet. Though not a substitute for face-to-face communication, technology has certainly helped youth activists overcome some of the problems associated with working illegally in a country that would rather get rid of them.

**Alone in their Ambition: Feelings of Isolation from Family and Friends Constantly Weigh on Youth Activists**

Because of their activism, youth involved in the democracy movement experience a higher security risk in Thailand than do other Burmese refugees or migrant workers, particularly on the border. Their families, who may still be living inside Burma, are also at a greater risk because of their work. In order to protect their families, many young democracy activists living along the border refrain from seeing or contacting their loved ones still living in Burma.

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**Self-Imposed Exile**

Even taking into account the despair that characterizes camp life, the dangers of working outside the camps in Thailand, and the perils of activism, Burmese youth regularly listed isolation as the hardest element of their lives as activists. Being far away from parents and loved ones weighs heavily on them. If something were to happen at home, they have no way of hearing about it in a timely fashion. If something were to happen to them in Thailand, they are unable to communicate that back to their families easily. This isolation makes young activists long for the day when their efforts can be realized and they can return to their homes, see their families, and live freely.

Burmese youth activists are forced to grow up very fast. They are constantly worried that their family’s safety is in jeopardy because of the work they are doing. Many reported that their family members initially did not want them to come to Thailand: but they defied familial expectations in search of a better life. In many ways, this choice is the defining characteristic of this generation; they have chosen independence of thought and of action, and now have the desire to bring that freedom of choice back to their nation.

“I think (our family members in Burma) are afraid for their security or for their life. SPDC intelligence, spies will know and give problems to their family. So they cannot say any political word. They are afraid of this.”

– Student
Still, it is difficult for Burmese youth to maintain this choice. Many are unable to contact their loved ones for months on end, fearing that they may put family members in danger. One Kachin Women’s Association-Thailand (KWAT) activist described the danger her activism would put her family in. If the authorities were to find out what she is doing in Thailand, they may arrest her family members for questioning. Her family may be subject to torture and months in captivity. She is constantly scared for her family; she is afraid to tell them anything of her work, and the fear prevents her from returning to her parents’ home.

Other times, it’s the abominable infrastructure systems in Burma that prohibit communication with loved ones. Many youth who enjoy cell phones and internet access in Thailand come from homes that do not have electricity or running water, let alone house phones or regular mail service. Lack of communication only contributes to paranoia and fear, and activists are understandably on edge as a result.

Youth activists in Thailand often cope with feelings of isolation by developing strong friend groups and communicating online. The internet has opened up the world to these activists: they feel that it is their outlet to learn from as well as to teach the outside world. One student told us that after internet was provided at their school, they seemed not to have enough time! Boredom—if not loneliness—slipped away.

“At first (my family was) very worried, but now they understand what I’m doing and I think they understand more, because I’m working with the women’s organization, they understand more about women’s work and also become more interested in politics. And they will often listen to the radio and then when I go back we can start discussing about this, they ask me a question about what happened. So, yes now I get support from my family, which is very important.”

– Female Activist, KWAT

An Inter-Generational Understanding

Some youth interviewed for this report have found a certain degree of understanding with their families about their work and their life choices. Those that choose to tell their loved ones about their work are typically met with a mixed reaction of concern and—to their surprise—admiration. Young activists today are born to a generation that has suffered all their lives at the hands of a brutal regime, but was largely unable to find their own voices against it. Interestingly, parents particularly see their child’s decision to become involved in the political opposition as a sort of personal sacrifice for the good of the country. They are worried for their children’s safety; but of the activists interviewed for this report who were able to tell their families, none said that their relatives tried to talk them out of their decision.

Though it can be months—or years—between visits, some youth are able to travel back to the refuge camps or to Burma for familial visits from time to time. Typically schools on the border get a break of several weeks once a year that allows for travel. Also, many organizations observe key Burmese or Thai holidays, which afford an opportunity for visiting. This is particularly true for activists who were raised in refugee camps and are working to monitor the situation in all the camps. When in the camps they will work by day, and stay the night with their families. This is something they look forward to with undisguised anticipation.

“I think my family is very happy to see me. And I’m very happy but sometimes I’m having work and I get tired, I need people to support me. I have friends, but my friends are also busy with their work. So it’s nice to be with family, sometimes sharing my work but most importantly, to get their care and their understanding and just relax. They don’t do anything, they don’t say anything to me. And it’s still important that they keep supporting me and understanding me. Even though I don’t go back (often), they don’t say anything. If I have time, I go back and then they are always supportive to me.”

– Female Activist, KWAT
Insecurity, fear and isolation: these are the hallmarks of a life of activism for Burmese youth. Having to be so focused on their day-to-day security situation, it is a wonder that they are able to conceive of any future at all. We asked several youth the typical western question: Where do you see yourself in five years? The answers varied from rehearsed textbook responses to blank stares of confusion. Perhaps one student’s answer sums up their feelings:

“I’m not a Burmese citizen, I don’t have Burmese ID card. And in refugee camp we don’t have stability. Now, because of that issue, I feel like in my life, it is so difficult to answer the question of where will we be in 5 years – not sure, because there is no stability. Even though we live in the camp, there is no guarantee for us. We came here to study. My family (members) are working in political party, so I have a chance, the camp leader understand our situation, they know that one day we will work for our community.”

– Female student, age 24, BLC

Despite the dangers of traveling to Thailand and the hazards awaiting them upon arrival, many youth continue to leave Burma in order to work for change in their homeland. The next section focuses on the opportunities that life in Thailand affords, particularly the quality and diversity of education.
Joseph Win, male, age 21, ERS-B

My name is Joseph Win, I come from Chin State. I was also a teacher inside Burma. For one year I taught Three Standard - around 9 age – in one village of my town, in Sagaing Division.

Before I came to (Thailand), I was interested only in the environment, I don’t know about human rights – what is human rights? I came here because I wanted more education and to study. My organization is Zomi Student and Youth Organization. My organization does capacity building and human rights training inside Burma. (When I arrived in Mae Sot) they told me what ‘Do you want to study, and what do you want to do?’ I wanted to get more education and improve my English. So I applied to (ERS-B), and I got in.

The reason I came here is my father told me you have to promote your education. In my father’s family, they are only farmers. Only my sister and I passed 10 standard. So I passed 10 standard, and was trying to get bachelor’s degree. My father said to me, you have to get more education – so wherever you want to go you should go. So I decided to go here.

(Thanks to) education we have more knowledge about many things. Example, in many things like political and economics, without education there is no way to share with other people, and communicate. So education is important in our country, to know many things like politics and economics. Without education there is no way to (know this). We have educate and share with the people. So education is important.

(Schools in Thailand and Burma are) different from each other. The most is very good in Thailand. The problem in Burma is because the Government have good plan, but they don’t follow their rule or policy. They (practice) corruption or the training manager chooses those who give him money to attend training. Some people have no money to pay like that. Some people are interested in teaching, so they lose their vision because they don’t have money to pay.
(The government) doesn’t put good teachers in village. We have no good teacher, and also not enough equipment for school … and enough salary.

Most of schools (for Burmese) in Thailand are good in teaching. (At ERS) students can use internet to search what they like to see. We can’t do that (in Burma).

In my community we don’t know about human rights. We cannot get any information about human rights, the government controls all information. So that’s what I’m interested in. Before I come to hear and learn about human rights. So I want to share about human rights so the people who are abused their human rights … they know what is human rights, what is the meaning of HR.

Every year Burmese youth come to Thailand not just fleeing violence and repression inside their country, but in search of an education and other opportunities. In focusing on youth organizations, BYP was afforded a close-up look at many of the educational opportunities available to Burmese youth. Of the youth surveyed for this report, 80% quoted education as one of their top priorities. As described in section 5.1, the education system in Burma has failed the population on multiple levels. In search of quality education, skills trainings, and financial opportunities, young Burmese leave the known difficulties of their homeland for unknown, sometimes elusive opportunities in Thailand. In this section we look at some of the benefits of education in Thailand, the challenges faced by the educational programs we examined, and the ways in which education has raised the political engagement of Burmese youth.

Empowered by Education: Burmese youth find many benefits of being educated in Thailand

“Education is a part of it. We need ethnic cooperation, education, and equality.”

– Female Student, WH

"In our country most people are not educated. Eighty percent of population in Burma lives in poverty because of lack of education. (The) country cannot promote economics because of lack of education. People don’t even know what right they should have. In that situation, the government can do whatever they want. Education can change the people’s life, the people’s destiny. ”

– Male Student, BLC

5.4 of 63 respondents cited education as one of the five most important reasons for seeking refuge in Thailand. For details and other survey results, please see Appendix C.

11. See section 5.1 page 49.

12. See section 5.1 page 49.
Defining an Education

Because most of the programs investigated for this report are educational or training programs in some capacity, interviews often began by asking for the interviewee’s definitions of education. Regularly answers were linked intrinsically with the respondent’s reasons for leaving Burma: a search for better education. As explored in section 5.1, many young people could not afford education inside Burma, a difficult situation since education was also viewed as the best way to escape the cycle of poverty. As a result, many were encouraged by their parents to further their education. An 18-year-old student attending high school in Mae La Camp explained “My parents think education is important, but they don’t have it. So they tell me to study hard.” She was born in the camps; her family fled to the border in 1987. A male activist at BLC was also encouraged by his parents to seek further education. Because neither of them graduated from high school, they worried they would have nothing to leave for him when they die. Because of this, he explained, “Knowledge is power. (With education) there is a chance for a future at university.” This idea – that education equals a chance for their future – was echoed by many students.

In addition to the financial benefits, education was viewed as something that can help provide for students’ futures in other ways – by teaching them how to think critically, by helping them maintain their cultural identity, by introducing them to new concepts. A 24-year-old Mon student at ERS-B, who as a child went back and forth from Mon State to Thailand in her search of an education explained, “I have very many difficulties to get education, but that has taught me to know what is the problem of my people.” Another student’s definition of education is broader than schooling alone:

“To me education means something very special in my life, because I can use my education … to earn our living.”

– Female Activist, Age 24, BLC

“Education is a part of it. We need ethnic cooperation, education, and equality.”

– Female Student, WH

Many students’ definitions of education, such as the one above, were based on the kind of education they were receiving in Thailand. Education alone does not create unity, but because many of the educational programs we examined are focused on bringing together youth of various ethnic groups and helping them work together, a strong sense of shared community developed. Next, we examine the types of subjects and themes Burmese students are learning at schools in Thailand, beginning with the idea of critical thinking.

The Power of Constructive Criticism

“In Burma, education is only what the teacher teaches. There is no critical thinking, we are told that A is A. In Thailand, teaching is different; (the focus is on) critical thinking, as well as the bigger picture, politics”.

– Female student, Age 26, BLC

13. See section 5.1 page 49.

14. In Burma education has been used to discourage interethnic dialogue and divide the populace.
In Burma’s closed society, education is not viewed as a tool that should be used to increase the intellect of the populace. Like most state-sponsored programs within the authoritarian system, it is used to promote inequality and teach citizens from a young age that dissent will not be tolerated. From a curriculum standpoint, this means that teachers must follow the approved curriculum and pedagogically the focus is on memorization and repetition rather than evaluation and analysis.

Most programs in Thailand emphasize the opposite—promoting the ability for Burmese youth to think critically and independently, to be thoughtful and engaged citizens rather than fearful loyalists. For those students who have been educated in the Burmese system, this is a truly revolutionary change; interviewees consistently listed the encouragement to think critically as one of the most important benefits of their education in Thailand, where they are encouraged to do group work and see teachers as facilitators of learning rather than austere authority figures.

“The education inside Burma is just propaganda. Here we have a student-centered curriculum— we can express our ideas freely, even criticize our teachers. In Burma it’s teacher-centered.”

– Student, WH

When discussing the importance of education for themselves and their peers, youth activists highlighted critical thinking specifically. Students at BLC explained that, in their experience, a good teacher creates sample problems to help the students understand the principle behind a concept and have the group work together to solve it. A Karen student at the EIP explained that he thinks it is important for the Karen not to be “glued to a specific subject” or biased in their learning. Instead, by focusing on critical and creative thinking, “we understand the diversity” preventing further problems once there has been a transition in the country, allowing the ethnic minorities to better take part in Burma’s future, and helping them to better understand one another.

“I think education must be free. Education should give further knowledge of critical thinking skills, creative thinking, that we can think further and further about a specific subject or provide an education that gives ideas that we can acquire by ourselves.”

– Male Student, Age 20, EIP

In addition to broad themes of critical thinking, students are learning specific skills through the education programs in Thailand. Although there are some common areas of emphasis—human rights, democracy, and language skills—each school or training program does have a particular focus, offering potential students advanced skill sets in their field of choice. Below, we give an overview of the subjects students are studying, and explore ways in which these programs can be expanded.

Subjects and Syllabi: A summary of the educational programs offered to activists on the Thai-Burma Border

To gain perspective of educational options offered to refugees and migrant youth without a high school degree, BYP researchers visited two high school programs: one in Mae La, the largest refugee camp in Thailand, and Mae Tao HS, offered to children of migrant workers in Mae Sot. Both of these programs offer a standard range of high school subjects, at MTHS the list includes: English, Burmese, Thai, science, physics, chemistry, biology, history, economy, geography, as well as the electives of handloom, sewing, dancing, music, arts. Classes at Mae Tao are taught in Burmese; at Mae La in the Karen language.
A Summary of Post-High School Educational Opportunities

Although in Burma high school lasts until 10-standard, at MTHS administrators have expanded eligibility rules on age in order to accommodate students left behind by the Burmese education system. Schools that offer programming past high school are referred to as post-10 programs. Many youth we interviewed previously attended SEP – Special English Program – where students learn usual high school subjects such as math, reading and writing while developing their English skills at the same time because instruction is conducted in English by native speakers. Below is a list of the post-10 schools we met with offering programming past the high school level. Unless otherwise noted, classes are taught in English.15

All Ethnic Institute Open University: Located in Chiang Mai, AEIOU students study history, human rights, democracy, management, current affairs in Burma, international economic relations, and English, French and Thai languages. The program is connected with Chiang Mai University and lasts four years, but faces problems with matriculation.

Burmese Lawyer’s Council: BLC’s Peace Law Academy is based in Mae Sot and focuses on giving youth a legal framework for understanding issues of international human rights, democracy and rule of law, the role of civil society and federalism.

Burmese Women’s Union: Taught from BWU’s offices in Chiang Mai, the Peace Education Program is one of many programs BWU has for training young women to be leaders in the movement. “In the PEP program we are learning many many issues. We learn about democracy and human rights and gender equality, and environment, and Burmese history.”

EarthRights School-Burma: Based in Chiang Mai, ERS-B accepts only 8 females and 8 males yearly into its rigorous program, which lasts 7 months. The school also recruits a diverse group, ensuring that there are never more than two students from a particular ethnic group in each matriculating class. As the name suggests, the school focuses on issues of environmental justice and rights, as well as sustainability. However, ERS-B also provides students with a strong foundation in human and women’s rights, democracy, and international relations.

English Immersion Program: EIP is based in the Umpium Mae Refugee Camp. The school offers English-language instruction, where the mostly-refugee students are only allowed to speak English both in and out of class Monday through Friday. Native-English-speaking volunteer instructors live with the students in dorms.

Peace Education Center: PEC, located in Mae Sot, offers students beginners English, as well as introductory lessons to developing leadership, communication practices, and organizing skills for future political activists. The school is designed to introduce students to politics and the power of collaborative education.

Wide Horizons School: EIP’s sister-school located in Mae Sot, WH offers a similar student-centered approach to learning. WH is intended to be an intensive capacity

“The main thing is here they provide some knowledge, some education about international law, international criminal law, the concern of development. They also teach about laws in Burma, the criminal procedure in Burma, the civil procedure. We also learn about the different legal systems like the civil law system ... constitutional rights. One more thing we are learning is human rights, which is a very hot issue in Burma because the Burmese government is violating human rights.”

– Female Student, Age 20, BLC

15. For a more detailed description of each organization’s mission and operation, please see Appendix A
training program for students interested in a career in social service, politics, and other democratic-based organizations. The school places a particular focus on the arts, as well as photography and video editing.

Foreign Affairs Training (not interviewed in this report): Located in Chiang Mai, FAT is widely renowned for its role in educating the next generation of young Burmese leaders in international relations. We met several graduates of the program who are now coordinating trainings and intern programs for their respective CBOs. FAT educates students in issues of foreign policy and prepares them for careers in diplomacy. In Spring 2007, our group was unable to meet with FAT students at the school because they had just left for internships. FAT closed for the year 2007-2008 due to funding issues.

Internship and Training Programs

In addition to educational programs, we met with seven organizations offering a combination of training and internship programs:

ALTSEAN Burma: One of the most prestigious internship programs available to Burmese youth activists, the ALTSEAN office offers an intensive internship program to four young activists annually. Interns learn office skills, management, human rights, political science, and how to analyze Burma’s crises such as the issues facing migrant workers, politics prisoners, and sex workers. ALTSEAN is based in Bangkok.

Human Rights Education Institute of Burma: HREIB has offices throughout the border areas, including in other countries, and facilitates a range of training and advocacy programs to grassroots organizations and community leaders intended to empower people to engage in social transformation and promote a culture of human rights for all. Training programs include basic human rights, women’s and children’s rights, fact finding and human rights monitoring, advocacy, community organizing, and transitional justice.

Women’s Advocacy Groups: KWAT, KWO and KYO operate along the border to offer intern-like programs, training new leaders for their respective organizations in issues of human rights and their relation to women’s rights. By teaching beginning and intermediate English, women’s studies, leadership and other skills, these and similar programs can serve as a bridge for students who may have finished 10-standard but are not yet prepared for the academic program at schools such as ERS-B or BLC’s Peace Law Academy.

In addition to these programs, CPBI researchers spoke with Empowering Women of Burma (EWB) trainers in Chiang Mai who work as educators in Burmese refugee camps and YCO activists in Mae Sot, who are focused on supporting migrant workers, conducting several training programs and other forms of assistance offered to Mae Sot’s extensive migrant population.

Quality Teachers

“Sometimes I am shy and I want to say something, but I am shy. I think it is very bad education in school. (In Burma), if we want to say something to teacher but teacher doesn’t allow us to speak out, then we don’t (have the confidence to) speak. So our education system is very bad.”

– Female Activist, Age 20, BWU

When addressing the benefits of education in Thailand in the Burmese context, it is important to note how often students praised the work of their teachers. Some instructors are foreigners working through volunteer programs or NGOs because they see education as a way to support the Burmese democracy movement and to aid in the preparation of the next generation of Burmese leaders. Others are from Burma, themselves perhaps graduates of similar programs, who have remained on the border in order to pass on their knowledge to others. One of these teachers, a female graduate of EIP, is now an administrator for WHS. She spoke of her former teacher as her role model:
This mentor was one of many teachers, instructors and administrators praised by the youth interviewed for this report. When asked about the benefits of their programs, students consistently listed the quality and dedication of their instructors. This mentor was one of many teachers, instructors and administrators praised by the youth interviewed for this report. When asked about the benefits of their programs, students consistently listed the quality and dedication of their instructors.

Qualified and dedicated teachers, critical thinking skills and diverse subject matter that is not filtered through strict government censorship – these are some of the benefits of education in Thailand that simply are not available to youth through the Burmese education system. Most often, however, youth expressed how education has inspired them to work for change in their country by giving them a framework to understand the abuses occurring in their homeland and offering alternative political and socio-economic models from which they can construct their country’s future.

Raising Political Awareness: Education is seen as a tool for social change and political understanding

“Human rights is something of the outside world that I want to share with Burma.”

– Student, ERS-B

The Burmese military junta has worked for more than 40 years to isolate itself from the international community. Harsh repression by the regime makes even small acts of resistance, such as distributing pamphlets or flyers, punishable by prison sentence. The lack of free and independent media sources or a balanced and objective education system often prevent young Burmese from knowing what is happening across town—not to mention what goes on in other regions of the country or world. Youth reported not knowing much about other ethnic groups, or being aware of the military’s oppression in other regions of the country. In interviews after leaving Burma, young people reported being unaware that their human rights were being violated—or even the concept of human rights—until leaving Burma. For many, the turning point in developing political consciousness occurred after enrolling in a Thailand-based school or becoming involved in a CBO focused on women’s, ethnic or migrant rights. Once given the opportunity, space and tools to dissect their experiences, many embraced a self-identity of “activist” and work to better understand alternatives to the military dictatorship.

“I am very satisfied here because I can get many information and learn many things. When I lived in Burma, I don’t know exactly what are rights, or human abuse. I graduated, but I have no chance to speak. No one discusses these issues. There are many… like a blind people, you know, in Burma.”

– Female Student, Age 23, ERS-B

The metaphor this young activist describes is apt: lack of information in the country works like a cloak to hide the misdeeds of the SPDC. This student was one of the lucky ones in Burma who was able to finish school and had a job working for an NGO: but even at the NGO, she was unable to speak her mind freely or discuss issues of human rights.

“At first, I was very surprised [when I heard about human rights abuses]. I was very sorry but now I understand what are rights. Now here, I can learn many things and learn about different ethnics, especially about rights and things political. In Burma, I’m not allowed to be political. I don’t understand how government can do all these abuses.”

– Female Student, Age 23, ERS-B
A student at BLC explained that before arriving in Thailand, she didn’t understand the conflict going on in her state between the SPDC and opposition groups. The Peace Law Academy is giving her the opportunity to study how the Burmese government is violating international law in its treatment of its own citizens. “When we are in Burma,” she explained, “We can’t say anything about how they are violating our rights. But now we can say, ‘They are violating our rights.’” This statement empowers the speaker; the student plans to share her newfound political knowledge with her community, giving them an opportunity to fight for their rights by first naming them.

Another student at BLC, and aspiring judge, agreed about the importance of teaching her home community about rights in Burma. Although the SPDC says that human rights are an imperial concept emanating from the West, she disagrees, emphasizing saying they are important for all communities to apply and exercise at the local level.

Commitment to the Larger Movement

“We need people who love our nation, to be leaders for our communities. To have unity, we need to understand diversity. Even in ethnic groups we have a lot of diversity such as religion and language. We can form a unity if we appreciate our diversity.”

– Student, EIP

The framework for understanding human rights and democracy also dedicates many youth to the larger cause of democratization for Burma. It does this by making students more interested in political issues and by giving them a chance to work together across ethnic, religious and economic lines that normally divide them. At schools where students of diverse ethnic backgrounds are brought together, stereotypes about other ethnicities are confronted. Students at WH for instance laughed about how far they have come as a group in embracing ethnic diversity at their institution. One explained, “(Here at school) it was difficult when we first stayed together–the different ethnic groups, but also different personalities. At first we were all so different from each other. But now it’s no problem–we all get along. Now it’s exciting.” In addition to a desire to work with one another, many of the education programs were cited as inspiring confidence in the youth who take part.

“Before I come here, even though I finished 10th standard, I had no ability to work in my community, but now I have confidence. I think I will be useful in some path. I have confidence now.”

– Female Student, EIP

Many interviewees, particularly young women, explained that they felt a severe lack of confidence earlier in their lives. As one PEC student explained, as a result of the military government: The youth “do not believe (in themselves), they are not confident.” However, the student-focused approach of many schools in Thailand forces youth to step out of their comfort zones in order to complete their schoolwork. This process helps instill confidence in them, giving them fortitude to challenge their government.

“Our school, Special English Program (SEP)...we learn all the subjects, so after we leave the school we can help our society and teach our community.”

– Female Student, Age 24, Graduate of SEP and currently at BLC

For Future Generations: Problems and needs of current educational institutions

Self-confidence is just one of many opportunities afforded by education in Thailand. However, these are tempered by the challenges faced by these programs – some institutional, some environmental.

“Young women, they want to continue their education but they don’t have the chance. So if NGOs support them, they can learn more, they can continue their education so they can work for our country.”

– Female Activist, Age 24, BWU
**Funding**

Education programs for Burmese in Thailand work to fill the gaps of a government education system that has failed its youth. Thus it is not surprising that the largest obstacle faced by these groups is financial – there can really never be enough funding to educate all the young people left behind by Burma’s dysfunctional education system. Financial constraints are compounded by the security situation in Thailand where the majority of groups are underground, working quietly behind the gates of their compounds to avoid the gaze of Thai authorities.

A student at WH said, “We need more schools like this.” However, given the security situation, and financial limitations, it is unlikely that as many schools will form as are needed to educate the ever-increasing number of youth living along the border.

For the purposes of this report CPBI examined the specific issues and requests of the youth we met with and interviewed. We did not specifically investigate the financial limitations of particular schools and programs. Below, we look instead to what students viewed as problems and needs.

**Security**

The issue of security accompanies any discussion of educational opportunities for Burmese youth in Thailand. When questioned about the biggest problems they face, interviewees consistently responded with the issue of security, as they live in constant fear of being arrested or raided by Thai authorities. The students at PEC explained how tenuous their security situation is; because they cannot leave their compound often, they are left with only study time – which leads to tedium:

> “Even though we are very interested in our lessons, we are not free to have a life. Even though we have bicycles, if we want to travel just only over there we have no chance. Even though you are very interested in your lessons, if you don’t have a chance to do sometimes maybe free time it’s not good.”

– Student, PEC

17 For detailed analysis of the security situation faced by Burmese youth in Thailand, please read section 5.3: (in)Security.

An administrator at WHS echoed these thoughts, explaining that “(better) security is the main thing that the students need. They don’t have a chance to leave the school and they have a feeling of being trapped inside.” The administrator elaborated that the students need the international community to help them gain the right to freedom of movement on the border.

**More Teachers**

Qualified instructors, trainers and English teachers are a need that many youth stressed. It is one way that internationals wishing to contribute to the cause can support the Burmese struggle for democracy.

EWB conducts two-week trainings in the camps in order to train new teachers. The teachers then attend a more comprehensive program in Chiang Mai in order to better teach their students. But despite their efforts, there are teacher shortages within the camps. EWB listed numbers: at one site there are only three instructors for 65 elementary aged children. Their needs are basic: salary for the teachers, fees for school rooms and other administrative costs.

Other students had specific requests. At AEIOU, for instance, students were hoping for a new computer teacher, as their old teacher had returned to Burma. A graduate of BWU’s PEP wanted more instruction on the subjects of politics and women’s issues, and would like to have women from democratic countries come and share their experience with her and her peers.

**Better Materials & Technology**

In addition to increasing the number of instructors, Burmese youth would like to see more materials and technology, such as computers and internet access, in their classrooms. New textbooks, subject-specific curriculum and a range of technical needs were listed regularly. At WH, which encourages students’ creativity in various ways, the students would still like to see more instruction in video editing as well as web design. In addition they listed the need for “real-life experience,” from working

18 Please see Appendix D on page 172 for some groups which place volunteers on the Thai-Burma border.
in the sectors of health care, environment and other hands-on projects. Many young Burmese activists are engaged in advocacy of some sort, and need training in communications technology as well as specific computer applications that will allow them to produce reports and share information. One of ALTSEAN’s interns listed some of the technical skills she would like to learn – computer skills including Adobe programs Photoshop and Pagemaker.

**Other Subject Matter**

> Q. If you could design the perfect school, what would it look like?

> “(The students would learn) human rights, constitutional law, with a concern of grassroots empowerment and collecting information from the public.”

> – Male student, age 23, BLC

In addition to technology equipment and training, interviewees had suggestions for specific programs that are currently lacking. For example, a few students mentioned a need for programs to rehabilitate former soldiers. A BLC student specifically envisioned a program which might “educate soldiers to fight for rights within the rule of the law.”

One male student interviewed at EIP is planning to teach English because many young people in Burma cannot speak English, which he sees as their connection “to the world.” If possible, he would like to establish a school to teach Burmese of different ethnicities about federalism, in order to teach students how many ethnic groups can live together in harmony.

> “Today we learn, tomorrow we do.”

> Mantra at WH

It is inspiring to see how Burmese youth have overcome countless obstacles to take advantage of opportunities available to them in Thailand. Even more exciting is the prospect of what they might do next. In the next and final section, we examine young Burmese people’s goals for the future: the short- and long-term goals of displaced Burmese youth as well as the ways they are working to achieve positive change in their country.
My name is Zeyer and I am 26 years old. I was born inside Burma on the Thai-Burma border to migrant labor parents. My family still lives inside Burma, but I decided to come alone to Thailand to fight for a better future: for myself and for my country.

I grew up knowing nothing about the politics of Burma: we did not discuss such things in my home. But always, my father would return from working in Thailand and tell us about the rights of people in Thailand: people were demonstrating against their government and taking political action. I could never believe his stories: it all sounded so unreal.

Growing up inside Burma was so hard: my village was forced to work on the gas pipeline for the SPDC and to clear landmine fields. This was an abuse of our rights as humans but at the time we didn’t know that. We didn’t know anything about human rights in Burma. When the military—the chairman in the village—made us do forced labor, we believed it was our duty; we had to go, we had to work. Forced labor was not seen as a human rights issue, it was seen as an obligation. When I came to BLC, I learned this is an abuse of human rights. This knowledge was a revelation to me. Now I want to spread this knowledge to the grassroots people. If they know that this is our right—our legal right—the will be brave and ask the SPDC to stop. The people in my country seem completely unaware their human rights are being exploited: I need to work to change this ignorance.

Right now I am a second-year student at the Burmese Lawyers Council (BLC). When I finish my studies I will return to Burma and work at the community level to educate the grassroots workers in human rights and justice. Education is the key to our freedom in Burma. We have to fight with our academy; we have to fight with rights and law. Burmese people need to understand this: we have to train the young people and the soldiers like this.

I believe deeply in the power of grassroots efforts to stop
the SPDC’s abuses; in looking ahead to the future of Burma, I believe that the power of the people is the only thing that can bring my country to democracy. I think young people in Burma are also grassroots because to them, it is important to collect their information in order to understand and address what their problems are. I know that I have the knowledge to help tell these peoples’ stories, and that is what I am prepared to do with my life.

Democracy comes from the citizens; the civilians. If we choose the government; if the government is elected by the people, a democratic government has to do for the interests of the people. They’ll be compelled to create equal work for equal pay for instance. If the UN gives people the right to live safely, the right to work, and the right to be at peace, then the government must also give others the same right. Law is but one weapon to face the SPDC—also the cultural, the civil society. We have to join each other; we have to cooperate with each other to fight the SPDC. We have to find the best way in non-violence. As youth activists, we know these things: so it is up to us to bring this knowledge to other Burmese people.

5.5: Looking Ahead

Goals for the Future - From Dictatorship to Dialogue

What is liberty? Democracy? What are human rights? The ability to be in charge of one’s daily life? To be free to choose one’s future? These are values that people living in democratic societies take for granted. Although Burmese youth grow up in a society unable to learn about such concepts, many choose to dedicate their lives to attaining these ideals for their community. Seeking to define these terms for themselves, they are taking action to achieve them. In an authoritarian dictatorship such as Burma’s, where the majority of citizens struggle to make a living, the ability to freely decide one’s future is simply not an option. This report is a testament to the bravery of many Burmese youth, both inside and outside the country, who are going to great lengths to oppose the corrupt regime, whether through small acts of defiance or committing their lives to the struggle for democracy.

In this final section of our findings we highlight the goals of Burmese youth living in Thailand. Through the lens of first- and second-day issues, we focus on ways to support youth activist groups immediately, today; as well as how to best sustain their work into the future. We begin with a focus on their short-term goals, then shift attention to the larger aim of being able to return to their homeland and help make it a country practicing democracy and supporting human rights. We examine their definitions of democracy, federalism, human and women’s rights, as well as their views on transitional justice. Finally, we look at the ways in which they are working to achieve these long-term goals.

19 For more, go to Section 2: Recommendations, on page 12.
First-Day Issues: The short term aspirations of Burmese youth activists

Whether they live in refugee camps, toil in fields, factories and houses as undocumented migrant workers, or conduct underground political work as activists, Burmese youth living in Thailand face innumerable challenges. Because of the high degree of insecurity in their everyday lives, interviewees found it difficult to conceptualize where they might be in five years. It is simply not a question they have the luxury to think about. When asked to respond to this question on surveys, one third of those who responded wrote “I don’t know”, “I don’t understand”, or “I have no idea”.

Despite this uncertainty, the young people interviewed for this report have definite visions for their future and how they would like to see things change in the short-term. The short-term goals of Burmese youth include security, freedom of movement and labor rights.

"They are always afraid, afraid and afraid—afraid in Burma of SPDC, afraid of Thai government, Thai police. They want to work to make money to give to their family in Burma, to give money to their children inside of Burma to go to school.”

– Female Activist, Age 22, BWU

Freedom of Movement

As examined in section 5.3, one of the biggest problems faced by Burmese youth in Thailand is security and an inability to move around freely. Youth want to be recognized and protected under international law. They want to be able to do simple things like ride a bicycle to the market without worrying about being stopped by the police and needing to pay a bribe. The root cause of this problem is the insecurity in their home country, but in the meantime they seek a way to live more safely inside their host country; not to fear being sent back to Burma if caught without legal papers.

Access to Information

"(In our village) we cannot get any electricity so we cannot get any situation on the politics. They don’t know anything on politics. They don’t get any newspaper. In my society it is mostly people in farming so they didn’t know any of the political.”

– Activist, ERS-B

Obtaining consistent and reliable access to information via the internet, radio, or other news sources was repeatedly identified as a fundamental need of Burmese youth. Many activist’s work depends upon receiving news from inside Burma and disseminating it to organizations equipped to respond to current crises there. Without access to information, youth feel that they are not effective in addressing the core needs of their countrymen; if they do not know what is happening, they cannot help. Moreover, receiving unbiased and objective news is key to combatting feelings of paranoia and isolation that youth have developed while living in their homeland. So often in Burma, people cannot speak openly: they do not know whom they can trust with their thoughts, and who is a potential regime spy. On the border, youth activists need to be able to trust media as a component of civil society building for Burma. This can be done by regularly reading and verifying news sources in an effort to compile a collective picture of the current situation in their homeland.
Labor Justice
Along with safety, security and freedom of movement issues are questions of daily survival. The majority of young Burmese living in Thailand are migrant workers and refugees. For them, the focus is necessarily on their meeting immediate needs such as physical security in their living situation and job security in order to support their families. One female migrant worker explained:

“If the people could unite as one, we could fight the SPDC; but for now, we must fight for labor rights in Thailand.”

– Female Activist, YCO

YCO supports migrant workers through the provision of safe houses, trainings and advocacy for labor rights. Some of the youth interviewed at this organization were focused on the day-to-day struggles of finding and keeping work, a necessity for those who are the sole support for their families. Many of those who came to Thailand for economic reasons said they would be willing to return to Burma if jobs were available. Others disagreed, not willing to return until there is democracy in their country.

Individual Advancement

Everyone here (at KWAT) finished university in Burma but we did not have a good job there. I want good education system in Burma to able to work anywhere in the whole world.”

– Female activist, KWAT

Frustrated by the lack of university options available inside Burma, many young people focus on a desire to further their education elsewhere. As the intern from KWAT explained, even a university degree inside Burma is not enough to guarantee a secure future. Outside of the Burmese university system, however, many students see a college degree as a way to contribute to the larger movement. A young woman at BLC explained that because she wants to be a judge and help bring rule of law to Burma, she is seeking an internationally recognized legal degree. Internationally recognized certificates of learning such as TOEFL, and computer programming trainings help youth to further pursue education and validate their skills in a way that supports the movement. Students are hungry for more education because they want to be leaders in their communities.

Second-Day Issues: The long-term goals of Burmese youth activists

Short-term goals are on young people’s minds, but it is the long-term goals to which they have invested their lives. In our research we sought young people’s varied definitions of democracy, and their visions for the future of their country.

“Military government should change their policies. If they want peace, they should release all political prisoners and have a dialogue between themselves.”

– Female activist, age 24, ALTSEAN

At WH, when asked what kind of government the students would like to see in Burma, there was a rapid, back– And-forth discussion:

“The aim is federation.”

“For me the first consideration is that men and women have to be equal.”

“Self-determination is the most important – without it we won’t really have democracy.”

“I think federalism can solve the problem of equality between ethnic groups.”

“I do not think the transition will be peaceful – some want federalism, some want self-determination. We will maybe have another civil war again.”

“I believe that whether we want self-determination or federalism, we have to use nonviolence to fight the SPDC (in order for our future to be peaceful).”
These represent some of the multiple responses by students to this vital question of what people from Burma want for the country’s future. Burma is a nation of over 50 million people—a transition in the future will need multiple answers to this question. What then, are some of the specific long-term goals of the Burmese youth interviewed for this report?

“My life has changed so much in the last two years (since coming to Thailand). (Working as a migrant worker) made me want to do something changing for my country. If I do a little bit and someone do a little bit ... then I hope there will be change in the future.”

— Female activist, age 22, KWAT

Preparation for Democratic Transition in Burma

Democracy may be the term most-often applied to the diverse movement of resistance to the Burmese military junta, but even for those who adopt the word as one of their goals, definitions often vary. Many of the students interviewed for this report defined democracy as meaning “rule by the people.” They define a democratic government as one that allows the people to select their leaders and having a government that focuses on fulfilling the needs of its citizens. A democratic government ensures human rights, and to them that means “freedom.”

“There are also advantages and disadvantages. One thing is we can get human rights and can get equal opportunity and equal rights, and all people are under the law. But, some people said that it also has problems.”

— Activist, ERS-B

Burmese youth may be creating definitions of democracy for themselves now, but they often come to Thailand with only the vaguest idea of what the term means. At protests, “I (would) shout about democracy,” explained one student, “but I (didn’t) know exactly what is democracy.” Another explained hearing about democracy from a friend at a young age, but not understanding exactly what it was. Now, he defines it as “rule by law” and government policy focused on people’s input. Others define democracy in terms of social services; a student at WH said, “Democracy is when all people are equal, when everyone has access to education.”

“Right now we don’t have democracy and the SPDC says we have ‘democracy with limitations’. We don’t need that kind of democracy, we need democracy that is decided by law society. We need ... the rule of law in our country, and civil society in our country. Everybody would get more freedom in democratization, for example ... they would allow political parties to practice in the country. And then we have a peaceful country, with stability.”

— Female activist, age 24, BLC

Federalism

Democracy alone will not solve Burma’s problems. Many youth pointed out that rule by the majority causes problems for minorities—a fact that ethnic minorities in Burma are acutely aware of. At EIP the discussion turned to federalism, and how a federal system could work in a post-junta Burma:

— For further analysis of ethnic divisions in Burma, refer to 5.2: The Deeper Issue: Democracy and the Ethnic Divide.
Students explained that they see a federal system working because it is the best way to give ethnic minority populations the opportunity to develop their states yet also work in unity at the national level. As a BWU intern explained, “We need ethnic people to really get to know and understand one another. Because in our (Karenni) history many ethnic people think about Burmese people as the majority that discriminates against the minorities.” She wants people to understand that the SPDC is the root cause of the troubles, not the Burman ethnic group. She also pointed out that the government has worked to sow distrust among the different ethnic minorities. “This happened since colonial time–they spread upper area and lower area (of the country). They rule like a different situation, and the (ethnic groups) hate each other, so we need them to understand each other in order to make a democracy.” In her eyes, developing an understanding between Burma’s ethnic minorities is an alternative to violence.

“I think that Burmese government have to consider national reconciliation. Now they do hold national conventions without any revolution group that is fighting for democracy. So for the SPDC, with this convention (they are trying to) make legal status that is not peaceful or stable for the country. So they should recognize the national reconciliation with the revolution groups, and begin a dialogue between revolution groups, NLD and SPDC. (They should) meet together and reform the country in the best way. And then for the revolution groups they should negotiate with the SPDC as much as they can. But the SPDC is very difficult to make negotiations—they didn’t accept the idea of the groups. The SPDC should recognize that national reconciliation (will lead to) Burma’s unity.”

– Female activist, age 26, BLC

Human Rights: Often, youth come from Burma to Thailand fleeing human rights abuses without understanding what human rights actually are. Once they do learn human rights discourse, however, they apply these definitions to envisioning a future Burma. They are working for a country that doesn’t resort to forced labor in order to build infrastructure, where minority groups are incorporated into the political process rather than targeted and abused. One BLC student said that after attaining federalism, the country would need to turn attention to addressing human rights violations. Their definition of human rights also incorporates basic social services currently lacking inside Burma, such as education and health care.

“One day we will gain democracy, and I would like to share my experience about this. If possible I would like to learn more about the human rights from you. There are many human rights abuses in our country. So youth or young people, the new generation is very dangerous for them, because they have lost their rights. So I would like to … learn more about human rights because it is very important for our community.”

– Male student, age 39, ERS-B

Equality: Human rights discourse helps Burmese youth understand areas in which their government has failed them. As is the case everywhere, human rights abuses are particularly hard on groups that are historically mistreated, such as women and ethnic minorities or lower classes. Regarding long-term goals, many activists expressed their aim to achieve true equality, both within the democracy movement and in their homeland.

“At first I didn’t understand much human rights, when I learned human rights here I noticed that each right under the UDHR is equality for men and women. But in Burma each right is more men than women. But now I can compare that not differently men and women. Everyone (should) have the same rights.”

– Female activist, KWAT
Female democracy activists often face a double challenge—standing up to the power of the military regime, as well as struggling for the right to be taken as seriously as their male peers. As a female intern at KWAT explained, this is a big challenge for the democracy movement, because there are still some pro-democracy organizations without women’s participation. However, the women’s movement within the democracy movement is very strong, and steps are already being taken to achieve greater gender balance. Starting in 2005, Women’s League of Burma (WLB) demanded a minimum of 30 percent women’s participation in drafting the future constitution of Burma. Now, KWAT and other organizations in WLB are doing advocacy in order to reach that goal of 30 percent. By increasingly involving females in leadership positions, women are seeing more opportunities for work across gender lines.

“You can talk about democracy, but its true essence can never be realized if half the population is denied these same equal rights. If half of the population, the women, are limited, then I don’t think that democracy will be truly real, in all its definition or all its capacity. In a way, I almost feel like maybe through democracy and through my sisters - meaning my peers and my fellow women activists - maybe if we bring about democratic change in Burma, maybe that’s a way of getting women’s rights as well.”

– Female activist and instructor, BWU

Transitional Justice-Burmese youth are thinking about the difficult issue of transitional justice: how to transition in a peaceful way to a democratic political system, and how to handle the complex issue of dealing with military leaders who perpetrate human rights abuses. Answers again and again returned to the need for tripartite dialogue between the military leaders, Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy, and the leaders of the ethnic minority political and armed groups.

WH students weighed in with their opinions of transitional justice and whether the transition of power would bring more blood-shed to the war-torn country:

“Supposing there is democracy but people are not ready, then we will lose again.”

– Student, BLC

Regarding the crimes committed by the military junta, a BLC student explained that some opposition leaders have stated their support for the top generals to be tried at the International Court of Justice or the International Criminal Court. Fear of this could be keeping the military from agreeing to a transition. Another BLC student said that she would prefer to see the SPDC leaders tried in national court where they will receive a harsher punishment, and that they should pay compensation to victims of abuses. A female worker at YCO saw yet another possibility – to grant top leaders asylum. Even though Sr. Gen. Than Shwe has perpetrated so many crimes, “Peace would be worth asylum for Than Shwe; as long as he leaves Burma, there will be hope for transition.”

The Path to Democracy: How to get there

At the forefront of the thoughts of young Burmese activists living in Thailand is the struggle for democracy. Envisioning a more positive future is no easy task. Working together,
and with the support of the organizations where they work, intern or study, Burmese youth are fighting for a future that will bring more democratic political system to their people. At the seek a democratic system that will respect and protect human rights, fully incorporate minority voices, and allow them to be leaders in the international community, rather than isolated from it. However, merely envisioning a brighter tomorrow is not enough. More important are the steps, both large and small, which youth are taking to achieve their goals. For many young activists these steps begin not with personal advancement, but with giving back to their communities.

Giving Back

Many of the schools profiled in this report require students to work with CBOs after their academic program finishes. Often, these are the women’s, human rights or youth organizations that helped facilitate their journey to Thailand in the first place, helped them apply for positions in the schools, and where their newfound skills can be applied at the grassroots level. For example, while BLC gives students training in human rights, business, refugee issues, and legal analysis, the program pays special focus to local needs so that students can apply these trainings to help their communities. Similarly, the goal of PEC is to help students find jobs along the border or to eventually return to their villages, emphasizing the importance of students working to strengthen their own communities.

At other organizations like YCO, where the emphasis is on conditions in Thailand rather than across the border, young people’s lives are still connected with the struggle for democracy inside Burma. Members of YCO fight to improve the working conditions of migrant workers in Thai factories. Motivated to minimize both discrepancies in pay and maltreatment of laborers, many workers have become involved in politics outside of workers rights. They demonstrate a fierce determination and sense of urgency mostly due to poor treatment they have received in Thailand and their inability to return to Burma because of a lack of job opportunities.

Giving back to their communities can require a certain degree of sacrifice. A young man at the EIP program in Umpium Mae explained that his passion is music, and that he would like to be a singer. However, because the situation for his people is dire, he plans to be a medic instead. Sitting in a room of his peers, he solemnly explained that, “To be honest, I want to be a singer. With this situation, it is not suitable yet so I choose medic first.” One of his classmates echoed this sentiment; he plans to be in politics, perhaps as a Karen leader of an opposition coalition, but only until there is a transition of power.

Teaching Others their Rights

Further education for young Burmese was a theme at almost every organization interviewed in this report. A BWU intern who is working on human rights documentation told us that she hopes to conduct trainings for her peers

21. For specific recommendations on ways Burmese living in Diaspora can contribute please see page 12 recommendations.

“I hope one day I will go back to our country, and my country will be a democratic country. Then I will go to work with children for their education. I want to make it good for the children and youth.”

– Female activist, age 26, HREIB

“For me, just because I choose politics, does not mean I want to be leader or President. If we get out of situation, I want to be engineer. Since I was young I want to be engineer.”

– Male Student, Age 20, EIP

One ERS-B student, whose village suffered from mining and poor health conditions, is interested in community health issues. After finishing school she wants to work for an organization to help prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS inside Burma. Another wants to take his knowledge of traditional culture and apply it to environmental issues by raising awareness of the environment in the local population, and facilitating projects that improve the environment. A Mon student explained that in her home community, people see things like changing weather patterns but don’t understand the root causes, like deforestation. Teaching people about the linkages between the two is the kind of work she would like to do.

Teaching Others their Rights

Further education for young Burmese was a theme at almost every organization interviewed in this report. A BWU intern who is working on human rights documentation told us that she hopes to conduct trainings for her peers
in the future: “I want to educate women who are from Burma, in the factories...also in refugee camps. I want to go inside Burma to educate them, but the situation is dangerous.”

BLC, like many other schools, is preparing students to share their new knowledge with their communities:

“We can distribute the concepts that we have learned here through our organizations. Some students will go back to Burma and they can distribute the concept of what we have learned here among the people.”

– Male activist, BLC

Giving back to their communities is a priority of young activists. One of the most significant ways to accomplish this is through teaching, training and educating at a grassroots level on issues of human rights, law and democracy. Burmese youth view this as vital in preparing their people for a future transition of government. One young woman at KWAT explained that because many people in Burma don’t have much knowledge of politics, they think that when bad things happen to them, it is their destiny. Young people at the organizations we met with on the border are working to combat this fallacy and show the people of Burma that resistance to the dictatorship is possible, as well as spread ideas of how they can organize politically in the future.

“At EIP, although the intention of program is to increase English comprehension, students said their motivation to learn English and study at EIP in the first place was to use their education in order to go back and better support their communities. For them, the suffering of their people is so great that they could not turn their backs on the situation. Instead of continuing

“Next year, I will go back to my refugee camp; I will go back and be a teacher, maybe I will need some help from my school. After next year, I want a chance for further study; where I will have a chance to go, I don’t know.”

– Female student, PEC

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their education in other fields, students have opted to work directly for human rights in order to support their country’s struggle for democracy.

“All Burmese people can solve the problem in Burma.”

– Female Activist, KWAT

At KWO, women are working to teach human rights and democracy to the Karen community. Sometimes community members see human rights as something new. She works to combat this idea, by explaining that this is just a new understanding of a concept the community has already been fighting for:

“This young woman and her peers are working to increase education of human rights at the grassroots level because they believe that all Burmese should have a stake in the future of the country, not just the educated elite. Education and training courses help develop local leadership in their home communities. This allows activists to put their values into practice. Believing in democracy, they teach democratic concepts at the local level, helping to create civil society groups that can then put democracy into practice.

Training for Transition

“If I go back to Burma, I want to promote the democracy.”

– Activist, ERS-B

In addition to giving back to their own communities and helping to educate others, Burmese youth are personally participating in the struggle for democracy by preparing
themselves for a transition of power in the country. For those who have been exposed to human rights education, focus is often on how best to apply this knowledge in order to support the struggle.

“Law is one weapon to face the SPDC also the cultural, the civil society; we have to join each other, we have to cooperate with each other to fight the SPDC. We have to find the best way in non-violence.”

– Female student, Age 26, BLC

Students see their social role as preparing to participate in civil society institutions once there is a peaceful transition of power inside Burma. For some, such as women interviewed at YCO, the focus remains on specific aspects of democratization such as their struggle is for labor rights, rather than a fight against the range of atrocities perpetrated by the SPDC. YCO workers see the government as the biggest impediment to good labor conditions and they believe that a united labor movement can fight and win against the government. It is this dual purpose between issue-specific and general democratization that provides important balance to Burmese youth activism.

Often, young people have trouble finding new space for themselves in the movement. Many groups have been in existence since 1988, and there is not always room for younger activists to join the cause and move into leadership positions. Yet our research shows that today, more and more young people are getting involved in political activity and a large number of groups founded in the ‘88 era are paying attention to the specific needs of this younger generation of activists. Youth walk a fine line in maintaining the connection to their home communities and networks inside the country, and learning new ideas and communicating with the international community from outside the country.

“In the past, different ethnicities didn’t get together but now they do, like in Mae Sot, where there are different organizations. There, they can work together, and there are different youth networks for the different ethnic groups. They all work together for democracy.”

– Activist, ERS-B

Difficult work lies ahead as the struggle continues. Burmese youth seek a governmental regime transition of government followed by transitional justice. They want democracy, but once democracy is achieved, will come the difficult process of making democracy work, in a country whose history only knows war and hostile occupation. A country where democracy was only briefly practiced a generation ago with marginal success. In addition, the majority and minority groups have a history of mutual distrust for each other, in a country that has been severely isolated from the international community and only one percent of the population has internet access. In short, the very fabric of civil society has been unraveled in the four-plus decades of civil war.

Young activists are aware of the problems that lie ahead.
As an ALTSEAN intern stated, “Democracy could come, but there would still be many problems that (would) need to be addressed.” KWO and other women’s rights groups are working to mobilize women so that they can better participate in politics. HREIB and others are documenting human rights abuses in various parts of the country. This documentation serves at least three purposes. First, it provides evidence of the SPDC human rights violations, in order to raise awareness internationally and bring the issue to the UNSC. Second, it can be used in the future to facilitate the process of transitional justice. Third, dissemination of the documentation amplifies voices internationally, and carries relevant stories into information starved areas.

**Reaching Out: Finding an International Voice**

In addition to working locally, conducting trainings, preparing themselves for democracy and working across divides, Burmese youth are able to give back to their communities by forging connections and communicating with the outside world. Many of the young Burmese trained in Thailand have become spokespersons of sorts for their homeland. They spend a long time learning English in order to better communicate with the outside world. One KYO activist interviewed helps take journalists across the border into Karen State with the Free Burma Rangers. Foreign journalists who travel across the border are often accompanied by young Burmese, who serve as translators and guides.

Others are doing journalism of their own, contributing to independent Burmese news media groups, publishing newsletters and reports from their CBOs. Some, for example alumnae of the Foreign Affairs Training School, have even traveled internationally to promote global awareness of Burma, testifying in Washington and European centers of power.

“We must learn English. Many foreigners sympathize and support us. When are suffering but can’t speak English then we can’t explain it exactly to you. When we can speak that is one of the important things.”

– Female Activist, KWAT

Communicating their experiences to the outside world is important on many levels. It can help raise global pressure on the regime to change. It can help to convince foreign governments to enact laws that place pressure on the military regime. It can increase support for the programs operating along the border; that support can take many forms, including donating funds, knowledge, information, skills or time. At YCO, they explained that when international groups visit them, they ask them to share their story with the world.

Ye Zaw always wanted to be a journalist in order to share the story of his people, particularly the internally displaced people of Karen state, with the outside world.

“I always wanted to be a journalist that is my ambition because when I stayed in the camps, till now, when I have a chance I write poems, any information and then what happens to the IDPs or In Burma all of the events I know, about what I’m feeling, my experience, and what my people are saying.”

– Ye Zaw, Age 24, KYO

Despite the obstacles, young people from Burma are dreaming of the future they would like to see for themselves, their community and their country. From the day-to-day goals that address immediate needs to long-term objectives that will build Burma up over the longterm, it is important to understand and support these dedicated young people in achieving their goals.
My name is Kyaw Tway. I am 20 years old. I have been a refugee for almost 10 years, since 1997. Before (then) we had to flee many times because the SPDC they attack and burned our village. SPDC come nearly every summer, so we had to run we had to flee, hide in the jungle. We had to be IDPs.

Life as IDP is very difficult. I was a child, I was afraid to cry. We didn’t have a chance to go anywhere, always had to be afraid. So I had no confidence to do anything, to speak out. But now I feel happy because I have a chance to express my feelings.

(My School) EIP focuses on working for the community after the program. After the students graduate from this school they can transfer their skills and work for NGOs, in refugee camps, as teachers or translators. EIP is a very good school. We learn, for example, not only math there but how to write. Also political ideas, philosophy and ideas like humanitarian aid. Whatever we learn in our class, we relate to the situation in Burma. Also we learn interview skills, how to write a CV (curriculum vitae), persuasive essays, compare and contrast essays, and persuasive speech. These are the skills we would never learn in Burma.

I am interested in (the George Orwell novel) Animal Farm. Before I never learned about this kind of book and I didn’t know about the politics very much. With Animal Farm we learned about many kinds of propaganda. In Burma, the SPDC use propaganda. But now I know they use a lot of propaganda. The book, the lesson of Animal Farm it opened my mind that I can judge what kind of government is in Burma. I can take a lot of parallels in real life with Animal Farm.

For instance, in Animal Farm the leaders like Napoleon, he is corrupt. At first he is fighting for independence; (the animals) want to have freedom, but later there is freedom
only for Napoleon. He is corrupted because of no checks and balance, because no one knew what he was doing, no one tells him he is doing badly. In Burma (it is) also like that for the SPDC, the leaders. They create a big army, but the people they don’t know anything. The people are too busy doing things, and they have to work very hard, they don’t know anything about the government but later the government gets stronger and stronger so they have more power and the people cannot stop it.

From these books we learn about leadership. Some leaders, before they become leaders they say all are equal. But after they become leaders they change their minds. Some leaders set up rules and break them. So we got knowledge that if we become leaders we should commit to what we say and what we believe.

When you ask ‘Why do you need more education?’ I see a parallel for Animal Farm. For example, (for us) to overthrow the SPDC government we need education. In Animal Farm, the animals, they overthrow the man, but only a few animals, especially pigs, are educated, but the other animals they are not educated so they (end up) facing the same problems that they faced when with human control. We are refugee people, small minority groups. We don’t have an education. If we overthrow the SPDC government, the leader who controls will control like SPDC government. So we need education to be aware of this problem.

We compare the SPDC to Napoleon because Napoleon controls the dogs that are very huge, this is their weapon. The SPDC, they have military troops. They control the whole country by military. In animal farm some pigs want to (go) against Napoleon but the type of dog frightens them. Like in power SPDC controls by military so even though people want to point out their mistakes, people are not brave.

For me I like Mahatma Gandhi. Because when he was against British government, he said we should protest British products. He doesn’t only say (this), he started the boycott by himself, he with his people. He said to cook the salt and went to the beach and cooked the salt. I think a good leader should do as he says. Also he told his people not to use violence, to use non-violence. Many people were killed by the British, but they just used non-violent way (of activism). They were totally committed to what they believed until they achieved their goal.

I have a request for all refugee people on Thai-Burma border and displaced people inside Burma and people who suffer by SPDC, I hope (the) international community will help us with SPDC because we don’t want to stay refugees forever... to find way, because for refugee people, displacement in Burma, we cannot serve them. (Without) education, we don’t have a chance. I hope that we in Burma will have freedom, I would like to go back to Burma because it’s my homeland, but now I am afraid to go back.
The September Uprising and Beyond

Since BYP researchers returned from the Thai-Burma border in March 2007, the world has witnessed significant shifts in Burma’s political climate—shifts which represent the potential for real democratic change in the country, but that also reveal a difficult path forward in attaining that transition. In the fall of 2007, the international community witnessed the events of the September Uprising: when thousands of Buddhist monks clad in their religious robes took to the streets of Burma, leading over 150,000 people in protest against the SPDC’s brutal rule. For Burmese youth activists, the September uprisings epitomized both the potential and the fears of their work: they were inspired as they witnessed their fellow countrymen set aside their fears to stand in a call for democratic reform, yet were also sobered by the regime’s ability to silence such calls.

In this section we examine the September Uprising in light of research conducted for this report. When analyzing the events from inside Burma during the fall of 2007, there are clear comparisons to be made with the results formulated through BYP’s research. In many ways, our work in March 2007 foreshadowed the role that youth would play in the demonstrations six months later.

Overcoming Obstacles, Creating Opportunities has shown how youth from Burma play a vital role in activism on the border daily; they played an equally important part in the September Uprising both inside and outside of Burma. Following an overview of the events of September 2007, we examine four lessons that can be applied to the future. Now more than ever, it is clear that increased support of Burmese youth activists is fundamental in facilitating a sustainable peaceful transition for Burma.

Timeline of Events:

August 2007: The Protests Begin
The September Uprising represents a build-up of tension and discontent of the regime over decades of abuse. This recent round of protests were triggered by the SPDC on 15 August 2007, when it imposed fuel price increases resulting in a 100% increase on domestic oil prices as well as a 500% increase in natural gas prices. This rapid increase was financially crippling to Burmese citizens, leaving many unable to buy cooking oil, heat their homes, or travel to work.

In response to this dramatic price hike, several members of the 88 Students Generation and the NLD began staging small-scale demonstrations throughout Burma. Immediately the authorities commenced arresting and disappearing protestors. It seemed the protests might lose momentum and end. However, the suffering inflicted by the price hike onto everyday people compelled Buddhist monks to publicly support the protestors. The monks’ collective voice was particularly significant, as Buddhism is Burma’s dominant religion and has a strong influence over the majority of citizens there—including regime and military members. Because the citizens of Burma revere monks and pay attention to their actions, the regime viewed their participation as highly threatening.

September 2007: Protests Reach New Heights
Demonstrations continued to build in both size and strength throughout Burma into the month of September, though the outside world was still largely unaware of this. That changed on September 5, 2007 when a small group of monks chanting the Metta Sutta (a Buddhist prayer for loving kindness) in the Northern township of Pakokku were violently attacked by police, military and regime supporters. Three monks were captured, tied to a pole in the center of town, and severely beaten with the butts of their attackers’ rifles. U Sandima, a highly revered monk in the community, sustained critical head wounds from the attack. This act of attacking praying monks was, to many, unforgivable.

1. The following sequence of events was adapted in part from information provided in The Irrawaddy magazine: an independent news source covering South East Asia with a special focus on Burma. (2007 December: “2007– A Year In Review” vol. 15, no. 12 pp 32-37.) Refer to www.irrawaddy.org
Demonstrations built steadily throughout the month of September, as did the calls for democratic reforms and national reconciliation from the international community. What began as protests of a small group of people eventually grew to over 100,000 participants throughout the country.

The world watched as 24-hour news cycles displayed pictures from demonstrations—pictures often smuggled out by youth on the streets snapping pictures of the protests and emailing them out of the country, or blogging about the events firsthand in real-time. Indeed, the regime seemed at a loss to stop such a fast-paced dissemination of images. Until they could stop international coverage of the events, they took no forcible action to end the street protests.

Soon, the situation changed. By September 23, Internet access began to be significantly shut down and the amount of information flowing out of the country started dwindling. On September 26, the regime began to use force against protestors, and on September 29 the internet was completely shut off in the country. Despite this, several accounts and images illustrating the SPDC’s violent crackdown were able to make it out of Burma. These included photos of abandoned monks’ sandals on bloodied streets in Rangoon; footage of a Japanese photojournalist shot by a soldier at point-blank range; and a singular monk floating face down in a muddy river.

Aftermath
As time went on and information flow continued to decrease, the world’s attention was diverted away from Burma. With international interest effectively muted, the SPDC continued to round-up and jail protestors and supporters. At the time of printing Overcoming Obstacles, Creating Opportunities (Fall 2008), the regime continues to conduct midnight raids on activists’ houses, breaking into monasteries known to have housed monk participants, arresting and forcibly disrobing them. Months after the demonstrations ended, the crippling fear remains.

However this is a time of great hope for Burma. The September Uprising illustrated the important role that youth activists play in Burma’s democracy movement. Young people brought a unique strategy, innovative use of technology and a vibrant energy to the events of September, helping to raise international awareness about the protests.

**Lessons Learned from a Youth Activist Perspective**

The high profile protests may have stopped, but the struggle for a more democratic Burma continues to grow. Several lessons can be gleaned from the September Uprising – themes that build from the research conducted by the Burma Youth Project in Thailand in March 2007. Below are four ways in which the experience of the September Uprising parallels larger themes identified in this report. Because today’s youth democracy activists are tomorrow’s democratic leaders, it is necessary that youth activists develop the skills necessary to lead Burma away from dictatorship towards a free and peaceful future. Taking the lessons of September 2007 and applying them to future democracy efforts is therefore critical to the movement’s success.

**LESSON ONE: Demonstrations provided an opportunity for young people to experience a moment of obligation in joining the struggle for an end of dictatorship.**

Some citizens were initially drawn to support the 88 Students Generation and NLD activists in their protests against fuel price increases, but fear of the regime kept many from coming out in support. The initial involvement of the Buddhist Monks increased sympathy for the cause, but not necessarily participation from other citizens. However when the SPDC began violently attacking monks, Burmese citizens were able to connect the protests over fuel to the deeper injustices due to the military regime.

For many young protestors, the September Uprising represented their first experience of public opposition to broad injustices inflicted by the regime. This exposure led thousands of youth to the realization that an increase in fuel prices could be a policy failure on the part of the regime, not a personal sacrifice for the good of the country.

Youth activists interviewed by BYP regularly recalled a
similar event in their own lives: a turning point that brought them to a life of democratic activism. Our research shows that although people who are suffering might have a general feeling of unease, until they have the language to frame the suffering as an injustice, there is little they can do to combat it. That language is provided through an education in democratic ideals. One benefit of the September Uprising is that it provided an opportunity to Burmese citizens to have and recognize the source of their suffering. It has validated the importance of human rights, and is potentially a turning point for them to recognize a vision of a different future for their country.

LESSON TWO: What began as a statement against an individual injustice evolved into a larger statement for civil and human rights.

At first, the content of the protestors' message focused on the increase of fuel prices. However, their message quickly expanded to include a call for democratic reform and national measures of reconciliation. Why? Because after witnessing the violent degradation of peaceful monk protestors, demonstrators realized that the first day issue of fuel price increases was a manifestation of a larger problem - the second day issues of respect for human rights, transitional justice, democracy and self-determination. These fundamental democratic concepts have not been established inside Burma; as a result, first-day abuses at the hands of the regime have been systematized, and the peoples’ suffering continues. Through The Saffron Revolution, citizens realized en-masse that unless the second-day issues are adequately addressed in their country, first-day abuses will continue indefinitely.

The speed at which protests turned from fuel prices, to regime brutality, to calls for democratic reform and reconciliation is revealing. Youth interviewed for this report demonstrated a similar arc of politicization. It is this process of awareness-building and political empowerment on a mass scale, that offers a possibility for sustainable democratization efforts inside the country. Without that transition from first-day to second-day issue awareness, the opposition will be compelled to continue to react to symptoms of the SPDC’s cruelty rather than creating widespread support for more permanent, substantive change.

LESSON THREE: Communication to the international community provided only temporary protection to protestors: in order for similar events to occur in the future, communication networks inside Burma must be strengthened and the international community must remain engaged.

Though the September Uprising was not the first mass protest to have occurred in Burma, it was the first time that the international community could witness them in real time. Access to technology in the form of internet, cellular phones, and blogs allowed citizens inside Burma to get images of the demonstrations out of the country for the world to watch.

The regime severely underestimated the power of technology and its effect on the demonstrations. They waited several days before shutting down internet access, and as a result their actions were broadcast around the world for weeks. However as soon as communication to the outside world was lost, the international community’s attention was likewise diverted elsewhere. Demonstrators who had placed hope in the international community to maintain pressure on the SPDC until reforms were realized have been sorely disappointed by the lack of follow-through from state actors. This disappointment is coupled by a very real fear that they are now also targets of an violent regime that remains unchecked by international spectators.

As we saw in our research, youth with greater access to internet and other communications technologies are more likely to self identify as activists. Their ability to utilize media as a source of information translates their knowledge into action regarding the situation in their homeland. Moreover, youth activists interviewed for this report stated that they feel more empowered in their work due to their ability to access technological means of communication. Youth activists are able to develop innovative new tools to combat the regime’s brutality, tools that are second nature to them having grown up in a technological age, but that the older members of the regime have to learn. This fact gives youth a natural advantage over the SPDC in their fight for freedom. They are able to take the offense, circumventing censors in getting information out to the public and preventing future...
abuses rather than taking a defensive strategy of reacting to the junta’s perpetrations after they have occurred.

LESSON FOUR: In order to produce substantive dialogue with regional actors such as China, India, Bangladesh and the ASEAN member states, Burma’s democracy movement must maintain a strategic focus on larger issues relevant to the region.

On a day-to-day basis regional actors maintain a policy of ‘constructive engagement’ with SPDC leadership. These states prefer to stay silent on the human rights abuses perpetrated in Burma and instead focus on building economic and security ties with the country. For the majority of Asian nations Burma’s issues are primarily internal—they do not want to pressure their neighbor to reform at the risk of straining regional relationships.

However, this consistent message coming from regional actors shifted significantly during the September Uprising. During that time, China engaged the SPDC in dialogue to allow UN Special Envoy Ibrahim Gambari as well as Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Paulo Sergio Pinheiro to enter the country and initiate diplomatic efforts. India and ASEAN nations publicly called on the SPDC to exercise restraint in their handling of protestors, and to refrain from resorting to violence. Japan, a primary funding source for infrastructure and social reform projects in Burma, withdrew financial support after a Japanese journalist was killed by soldiers during a demonstration.

Youth interviewed for this report recognize the vital role that the international community plays in supporting potential transition in their country. However, as the September Uprising demonstrated, regional actors will only proactively engage the regime to reform their abusive ways when under pressure from the international community, or in recognizing that Burma’s instability poses a threat to their own nation’s security. Strategically, youth activists realize that sustaining support from regional players is thus contingent on their ability to demonstrate that it is in the region’s best interest to support a peaceful and stable Burma.3

3. For more information about the regional security threat posed by the SPDC’s control of Burma, see section 3.2, Current Problem on page 29.

Conclusion
Activists and refugees continue to cross into Thailand fleeing the crackdown of the SPDC. New activists have been compelled into action after personally experiencing the regime’s brutality in September; scores of people who never considered getting involved in politics are beginning to realize a need to speak out against the injustices happening around them. The security situation on the border has become more precarious for activists in 2008. All activists face even increasing dangers of arrest, extortion and deportation, every day. Yet they still take these risks in order to educate themselves, and many then risk even more to return to Burma to share the benefits of their education with others.

In order to help the Burmese pro-democracy movement sustain the effects of the September Uprising it is imperative to continue supporting the organizations doing the day-to-day efforts on the border. Developing youth activists in their work is a critical part of this. Today’s Burmese youth activists are tomorrow’s leaders in the movement. Now is the time to focus on their influence over the next chapter of Burma’s fight for democracy and their development as independent and strong leaders of a free and peaceful Burma.

“Sometimes you feel disappointed because the movement is taking a long time already. But another time you always keep encouraging yourself, like the work you’re doing is also contributing to the change. It’s frustrating in one way, but in another way it’s looking at your work day by day and then just do the best you could do to contribute to the freedom in getting democracy in Burma ... Always have a hope that there will be a change one day.

No military regime will last forever.”

– Female Activist, KWO
Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma (ALTSEAN - Burma)

ALTSEAN-Burma is a network of activists, non-governmental organizations, academics, and politicians from Southeast Asia who support human rights, democracy, and peace in Burma. Through its reports, campaigns, trainings, and advocacy, ALTSEAN-Burma is working toward a free, democratic Burma that recognizes and respects the human rights of all its peoples. One of ALTSEAN-Burma’s primary activities is its internship program. Through it, ALTSEAN-Burma works with young women from Burma to develop their leadership abilities, advocacy skills, and knowledge base. Former interns have gone on to found their own organizations, to become highly-regarded, outspoken advocates at the international level, and to work with other youths from Burma as teachers and trainers. Additionally, ALTSEAN-Burma organizes regional trainings for both men and women in areas such as economic literacy and human rights.

Burma Lawyer’s Council (BLC) Pyidaungsu Law Academy

The Burma Lawyer’s Council seeks to promote and improve the education, implementation, restoration and improvement of basic human rights, democratic rights, and the rule of law in Burma; to assist in the drafting and implementation of a constitution for Burma; and to engage in matters of legal education and to participate and cooperate in the emergence of a Civil Society in Burma. The BLC’s efforts have recently resulted in the creation of the Pyidaungsu, or “Peace,” Law Academy, located in a small village outside of Ma Sot. The Pyidaungsu Law Academy seeks to educate students in questions related to human rights laws and mechanisms, including UN mechanisms and key human rights treaties; to raise awareness of children’s human rights and the environment; and to improve basic human rights, democratic rights, and the rule of law in Burma. The Pyidaungsu Law Academy offers an intensive two-year program in law and human rights to a small, but diverse student body hailing from a wide variety of Burmese ethnic minorities.

Empowering Women of Burma (EWOB)

EWOB is a Canada-based organization founded by Burmese refugees in 1992. Initially EWOB was established to help the needs of women and children, initiating skill development programs in sewing, weaving, typing, and more. EWOB consistently sought to adapt and expand as the needs of the people and communities it serves have changed. Today EWOB continues its work in various capacities, serving the ever changing needs of the refugee population with dedication and determination.

The EarthRights School-Burma (ERS-B)

ERS-B is a unique program that trains young activists from diverse ethnic backgrounds in Burma. The program is designed to empower young leaders with skills and knowledge for working in civil society groups with a focus on human rights and the environment in their community. The approximately year-long training program uses experiential learning methods to illustrate the connection between human rights and the environment, or “earth rights.” The program emphasizes the value of local knowledge and wisdom and the experiences of the participants, which will be combined with new ideas and knowledge around earth rights. The program remains focused on serving marginalized communities that work for environmental protection and human rights in Burma. The training program provides a balance of theoretical and practical learning with a constant mind to the importance of team-building and cultural exchange. The ERS-B program encourages participants to produce earth rights focused reports that can be used for local and international advocacy efforts.

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The English Immersion Program (EIP)

EIP is located in one of the Karen Refugee camps, Umphien Ma, on the Thai-Burma border. Every year, the program accepts twenty students from different refugee camps or who have been active working with community-based organizations. The students live together with teachers and support staff in an English immersion environment. Over the course of the ten month program, students take intensive courses in reading, writing, speaking, grammar, teaching skills, computer skills, and project management. At the same time, students participate in a variety of community service activities, including a big brother/sister program with a camp-based orphanage. At the end of the year all students must work with a community-based organization that works to forward for humanitarian and social causes for the peoples of Burma.

The Human Rights Education Institute of Burma (HREIB)

HREIB is a progressive organization based on the Thai-Burma border which administers and facilitates human rights trainings, advocacy programs, and internships for Burma’s diverse communities. HREIB uses a participatory teaching methodology to empower grassroots activists, community leaders, women, sexual minorities, and youth to become trainers, community leaders, and human rights activists. HREIB seeks to facilitate gender equitable, skills-based trainings on human rights at the grassroots level; to strengthen the knowledge of the people of Burma by creating a clear understanding of international human rights laws and mechanisms; and to use human rights and the environment in their community. The program is designed to empower young leaders with skills and knowledge for working in civil society groups with a focus on human rights and the environment in their community. The approximately year-long training program uses experiential learning methods to illustrate the connection between human rights and the environment, or “earth rights.” The program emphasizes the value of local knowledge and wisdom and the experiences of the participants, which will be combined with new ideas and knowledge around earth rights. The program remains focused on serving marginalized communities that work for environmental protection and human rights in Burma. The training program provides a balance of theoretical and practical learning with a constant mind to the importance of team-building and cultural exchange. The ERS-B program encourages participants to produce earth rights focused reports that can be used for local and international advocacy efforts.

Kachin Women’s Association Thailand (KWAT)

Due to the deteriorating political, economic and social situation in Kachin State, many Kachin people, especially young men and women, have left their homeland and scattered to foreign countries. A large and growing number have settled in Thailand. Recognizing the urgent need for women to organize them-
selves to solve their own problems, the Karen Women’s Association Thailand (KWAT) was formed in Chiang Mai in September 1999. KWAT works for women’s empowerment through capacity building, the promotion of child rights, the promotion of women’s rights and gender equality and a variety of facets, including increasing women’s participation in politics and in the peace and reconciliation processes the promotion and provision of health education and health services; and the promotion of women’s awareness of how to manage and protect the environment. To this end, KWAT provides skills training, internships, health education, migrant programs and anti-trafficking programs, researches, documents and publishes its observations; and promotes income generation through a variety of means.

Karen Youth Organization (KYO)
KYO is located in the Thai-Burma border town of Mae Sot. Its vision is to “empower and equip youth through democratic leadership and socio-economic development for a better world as a place of justice and peace.” KYO workers provide youth trainings on education, information technology, social protection, community development and organization, political awareness and special topics of interest to the Karen community in order to ensure that local needs find local solutions. In addition, several long-term programs are offered in youth leadership and management, mobile computer training, newsletter publication, community mobilization tactics, and efforts to link Karen youth leaders to youth leaders among other ethnic groups. KYO also hosts a young women’s empowerment program, helping women to become active in their community. Intending to help today’s youth become tomorrow’s democracy leaders, KYO’s efforts provide youth with a comprehensive view of the current situation in Burma, and empowers them with the knowledge to create change.

Karen Women’s Organization (KWO)
The Karen Women’s Organization, formed in 1949, is a community-based organization of Karen women working in for development and relief in the refugee camps on the Thai border; and with Internally Displaced Persons and women inside Burma. Since its establishment, KWO has expanded its focus from one of purely social welfare to promoting women’s rights and their increased participation in community decision-making and political processes. KWO aims to empower women through capacity building training which teaches skills, builds confidence and creates new opportunities for women to address a variety of problems. KWO believes that women’s contribution is an essential factor in the peace-building and national reconciliation processes of Burma and seeks to ensure women’s active and vital role in the process.

Mae Tao High School and high school in the Mae La Refugee Camp
The team visited two high schools, one for migrant youth located across from the Mae Tao clinic in Mae Sot, the other for refugee youth in the Mae La Refugee Camp. Both provide primary school to students through 10th standard (The Burmese equivalent of high school).

Peace Education Center (PEC)
A local non-profit organization which has been working hard in order to promote peace, democracy, and development mainly in Karen community of Burma through education (we are open to other ethnic groups from Burma, too, and we will most likely have a few non-Karen members this year). We try to produce young people with high ability and integrity who are ready to keep learning and working hard in order to make ourselves, our people, and our community self-reliant, respected, and fair to all. We believe that if we want to make a difference for the better, we should focus ourselves first: we are the one who must take the primary responsibility for the life of ourselves and our community. We will not be the people who can only “cry over our misfortune”; “blame someone else for our plight”; “hope/ wish for help from someone”; and/or “theat/lie or beg for selfish interests.” We try to be the people who will learn, plan, and take actions in reality in order to make a positive difference by ourselves.

appendix a.

organizations

Wide Horizons School
Wide Horizons School is a rigorous ten month program dedicated to education for life on the border line for migrant young adults from Burma. The school aims for an ethnically diverse student body to match the diversity of Burma. In its first year, 21 students were accepted, representing 10 different ethnic groups. These students come together to live, study and work in a multicultural, English-immersion, cooperative environment. Students study an intensive curriculum concentrating on the following: Organizational Management Skills, Project Design and Implementation Skills, Advanced Computer Skills (Microsoft Word/Excel, PowerPoint, Adobe PageMaker/Photoshop, Video Shooting and Editing, DreamWeaver Web Design, and Internet Navigation), Advanced English Skills (Speaking, Reading, Writing), as well as Teaching Skills. After completing their course of study, student-graduates return to the field to share their skills and experience with community-based organizations and NGOs across Thailand.

Yaung Chi Oo Workers Association (YCO)
YCO is a labor rights organization located on the Thai-Burma border. Its goal is to improve the working and living conditions for Burmese migrant workers in the Mae Sot area of Thailand by protecting workers’ rights, providing education to workers, supporting health care and facilitating proactive efforts by workers to improve their situation. YCO further facilitates non-violent participation in the movement for democratic change in Burma; the organization’s commitment to social justice and collaboration with other migrant rights organizations is a fundamental component of the Burmese democracy movement.
appendix b.

Ethnic Representation of Youth Activists Interviewed
- Arakan: 21
- Burman: 14
- Chin: 1
- Kachin: 1
- Karen: 34
- Karenni: 7
- Mon: 9
- Palaung: 3
- Shan: 1
- Lahu: 2
- No Answer: 1

Ages of Youth Interviewed
- > 17 years
- 16-20 years
- 21-23 years
- 24-26 years
- 31+ years
- No Answer

Future Goals
- Complete Education
- Work with current
- Other human rights
- Non-human rights
- Political Aspiration
- Married
- Children
- Don’t Know
- Did Not Answer
appendix b.

Frequency of Internet Access

- Every Day
- Few times a week
- Once a week
- Few times a month
- Once a month
- Rarely
- Never
- Did Not Answer

Where Youth Get Their News

graphs & survey data

Definitions of Democracy

- Representaive Government
- Freedom of Religion
- Freedom of Expression
- Freedom of the Press
- Right to Life
- Right to Property
- Right to Education
- Right to Health
- Peace
- Freedom
- Equality (racial, ethnic)
- Did Not Answer
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Individuals
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Lynn Syigiel
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Todd Walters
Bonnie Washick
Jeremy Woodrum
Thelma Young
Myat Noe Zaw

Organizations
Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma (ALTSEAN - Burma)
All Ethnic International Open University (AEIOU)
Burma Lawyer’s Council (BLC) Pyidaungsu Law Academy
Burmese Women’s Union (BWU)
The Center for Peacebuilding International (CBPI)
The EarthRights School-Burma (ERS-B)
Empowering Women of Burma (EWOB)
The English Immersion Program (EIP)
The Human Rights Education Institute of Burma (HREIB)
Kachin Women’s Association Thailand (KWAT)
Karen Youth Organization (KYO)
Karen Women’s Organisation (KWO)
Mae Tao High School and high school in the Mae La Refugee Camp
Padauk Pan Women’s Group
Peace Education Center (PEC)
The Student Campaign for Burma at American University (SCB)
U.S. Campaign for Burma (USCB)
Wide Horizons School
Yaung Chi Oo Worker’s Association (YCO)

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Ferrell Mercer
James Nelson & Jessie Norris
Wan Ryu
Carol K. Saller
Elaine Shaw
Stephanie Taylor
Liz Tylander
Marjorie and Jon Williams
For more information on Burma, please refer to the following:

AAPP
Association for the Assistance of Political Prisoners www.aappb.org

ABITSU
All Burma IT Students Union www.abitsu.org

ALTSEAN
Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma www.altsean.org

Amnesty International Myanmar Page
www.amnesty.org/en/region/asia- And-pacific/south-east– Asia/myanmar

BLC
Burmese Lawyers Council www.blc-burma.org

BumaNet
www.bumanet.org

Burma News International
www.brionline.org

Burma Issues
www.burmaissues.org

BWU
Burmese Women’s Union www.womenofburma.org

The Curriculum Project
www.curriculumproject.org

ERS-B
EarthRights School – Burma www.earthrights.org

The Gathering Storm: Infectious Diseases and Human Rights in Burma Report

HREIB
Human Rights Education Institute of Burma www.hreib.com

Human Rights Watch Burma Page
www.hrw.org/doc?i=asia&c=burma

International Center for Transitional Justice
www.icij.org

The Irrawaddy
www.irrawaddy.com

KWAT
Kachin Women’s Association Thailand www.womenofburma.org/kwat.htm

KWO
Karen Women’s Organization www.karenwomen.org

Mizzima News www.mizzima.org

Thai Burma Border Consortium
www.tbbc.org

Threat to the Peace Report and UN Security Council
www.unscburma.org

World Education Consortium
www.worlded-thailand.org

YCO
Yaung Chi Oo Workers Association www.yaungchioso.org

USCB
US Campaign for Burma www.uscampaignforburma.org

Resource section

The Burma Volunteer Program (BVP) places volunteer teachers in refugee camps and with CBOs, and many of the youth we interviewed in English learned the language from foreign volunteers.

Interesting Literature:
Living Silence
From the Land of Green Ghosts
Finding George Orwell in Burma