

## Life on the Thai-Burma Border



Tom Rosen in Burma with the Branch Foundation charity

**'My interest in the political and humanitarian crisis occurring in Burma began whilst I was travelling throughout South East Asia in 2006.** I had always known there was a country out there called Burma yet I knew little about it. As my knowledge grew so did my disgust at both the military régime's policies and the genocide that was slowly but surely happening to the ethnic minorities who make up roughly a third of the population.

In 2010, I left my job in London to volunteer on the Thai-Burma border. My first destination was Chiang Mai where I was to teach English to Burmese Journalism interns, who, as they can't openly report inside Burma due to the lack of freedom of the press, were mostly aligned for jobs at news agencies along the border.

When their internships had finished, I began to fundraise for migrant schools. Whilst working on these projects, a friend of mine informed me about a New Zealand based not-for-profit organisation called The Branch Foundation, which promotes sustainable community development throughout South East Asia.

I could see they had a true passion to make a difference whilst being totally transparent and


accountable. I began helping with research and administrative work and since that time have become project manager.

One of our main projects is a refugee camp for the ethnic Shan people from Burma, which is located in the north of Thailand. The residents have a common story; they were forced from their villages, shot at and had their possessions stolen by the Burmese military. All that remained in their village were land mines and one single building riddled with bullet holes.

The Branch Foundation has been helping this community with educational resources, access to better hygiene and, most importantly, income generation opportunities. Instead of cash handouts, we provide items such as weaving looms from which residents can create a reliable source of income all year round. We also provide solar panels as no grid electricity is allowed in the camp. In agreement with the head of camp, it is up to the residents to complete the solar lighting system by sourcing the wire, switches and light bulbs themselves. This creates a sense of self-empowerment whilst ensuring that they do not become totally dependant on aid.

We plan to help other communities in need throughout South East Asia in the coming years. As a charitable organisation, we always appreciate any support people are able to provide, be it in monetary form, volunteering or supplying us with the resources necessary to continue the work we do.

Unlike many larger aid organisations, we use the cheapest modes of transport and undertake many activities ourselves to ensure that money donated goes to the people for whom it is intended.

I have learnt more over the past 16 months than I ever could have imagined and look forward to the future growth of the organisation.' 

For more information regarding the organisation, please visit [www.thebranchfoundation.org](http://www.thebranchfoundation.org) or email: [info@thebranchfoundation.org](mailto:info@thebranchfoundation.org)

Tom Rosen (WG 1994)