

1. A visit to the Laotian refugee camp at Nong Khai Thailand

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By Mitchell Bonner

As one approaches the Provincial Administration Building in Nong Khai, one turns right and proceeds six kilometers along the river highway. At the six kilometer post one turns off the road and stops at the gate to the Lao Refugee camp, and asks for permission to enter. Journalists, and people with cameras are discouraged from entering the camp because the Thai government has received bad international publicity over its operation of the Indochinese refugee camps.

At the front of the camp is the administrative section, which includes the camp headquarters building; the Lao section administrative building, a hospital, the refugee processing building, and a large building built as a Bhuddist temple but now used for housing excess refugees who lack housing. Lao Bhuddists monks live in small bamboo huts behind the temple.

Behind the administrative section is a large rectangular field used for sports and group assemblies. Along both sides of the field and across the far end are about forty long, low bamboo buildings which house most of the Lao refugees. Each building has a corrugated metal roof and bamboo walls, and is divided into about 60 family compartments. Each compartment is about three meters wide and 7-8 meters deep with a raised bamboo floor covering about five meters of the length. The compartments are separated by a woven bamboo wall about two meters high, and above the wall the space is open to the roof. The buildings are very breezy when the wind blows. The wind blows dust through the buildings during the day, and it is cold at night in the winter time, say about 15-20°C.. As many as fifteen people live in a single compartment. The people cover the bamboo walls with cardboard or cloth to keep out the wind and dust. At the front part of the compartment, on the ground, is the kitchen. The kitchen is built by the refugees from woven bamboo, and consists of a fire pot, home made bamboo tables containing the eatingware, containers for food and charcoal, and a Shanghai water jar. Each compartment contains one electric light socket, but the electricity is turned on only four hours a night. Some people use great ingenuity in running several electrical items from one socket.

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Water is brought into the camp on water carts. the cart consists of a large manpowered tricycle with a bed behind the man. the cart carries the water in five-gallon cans. Some carts carry as much as a half ton of water. The water comes from water pipes one to two kilometers outside the camp. The water is stored inside the camp in large cube-shaped metal tanks of about one cubic meter in volume, and the tanks are located outside each building, where the people draw their water. The waste water and some human waste is dumped into open drains on the ground. Outhouses are used for human toilet functions.

The Thai government provides rice and some vegetables. Other items have to be bought from stores in the camp. Some refugees with money have been allowed by the camp guards to set up businesses inside the camp. The owners get passes to buy merchandise in Nong Khai and sell them inside the camp. Businesses include restaurants, variety stores, a barber shop, a dentist, repair services, and a "cinema" using a T.V.. Many refugees receive money from friends and relatives overseas, and spend it in the businesses. The owners of the businesses bank their money in Nong Khai.

It is my impression that the refugee camp is the major "industry" in the province, because it may be the largest source of money coming into Nong Khai, from the remittances of overseas relatives.

Many people are allowed to catch fish from the Mekong River, and they dry the fish on the roofs of their buildings. The refugee camp also has some pig and poultry farms. Ten pigs are killed daily to feed the 24,000 refugees.

The refugee camp population includes 5000-6000 Hmong(Meo), 17,000 Lao, and about 700 Thai Dam(Black Thai). The Lao come from Vienetiene and other urban areas, The Hmong come from the mountains, and the Thai Dam originally come from North Viet Nam but fled to Laos about 25 years ago. The Thai Dam look like Vietnamese, but use a Thai-like written script. The script is taught from father-to-son, and is in danger of dying out because they have no books to teach the language. The Thai Dam live in three buildings in the Lao part of the refugee camp.

Some new Laotian refugees live in wooden buildings of the same general design as the bamboo buildings, but with wooden exterior walls and floors. Concerning the reason why some laotian refugees live in bamboo buildings, and others live in wooden buildings,

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I was told by someone from the U.S. Refugee Office in Bangkok that the Lao came to Nong Khai first, and that the Thai government built them the flimsy bamboo buildings. When the International Red Cross saw the buildings, they severely criticised the Thai government for the poor buildings. The Thai government built better wooden buildings, just in time for the Hmong refugees, who were beginning to enter the Nong Khai area. The Hmong and some later Lao refugees now live in the wooden buildings. The compartments in the wooden buildings are about the same size as those in the bamboo buildings, and are separated by 2-meter high walls of woven bamboo

Some of the Lao live in small bamboo shacks along the back of the Lao section. These shacks look like those occupied by poor Thai farm families living in the Nong Khai area. A couple of the refugee shacks have water wells in front of them. The water table is about three meters below the ground level.

The Lao have little to do in the camp. They eat, sleep, and kill time. Some learn English in make-shift schools in the camp. An international religious organization has constructed a school for teaching English to children. Many

people kill time by playing soccer, tekaw (a game played with three-man teams and a rattan ball. The teams try to hit the ball over a volley-ball net using any part of their body but their hands), or socializing with friends. Some people rent sewing machines from the Singer Sewing Center in Nong Khai to make clothing. Some Lao can get passes to visit Nong Khai or go fishing in the Mekong River.

Lao need passes to leave the camp. There are two types of passes, temporary and permanent, and they are issued on an individual basis. Ten temporary passes are issued to a camp building. Each day ten families get to use a pass. The pass allows one person to leave the camp for a few hours, but he has to be back before midnight. The next day the ten passes are issued to ten more families.

Some Lao are lucky to receive a permanent pass. These passes allow a person to live outside the camp for a few days at a time. The passes are issued to people favored by the guards.

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Behind the Lao section and to one side, is the Hmong section. The Hmong are separated from the Lao by a small field, and a pond. The field is used by the Hmong to play soccer, and the pond is used by them for watering their gardens. The Lao and Hmong don't like to live together, maybe because their life styles are different. The Hmong live in large wooden buildings with metal roofs. These buildings are the same size and are compartmented like the Lao buildings. In front of each compartment the Hmong have built a small bamboo shack for doing their cooking. The Hmong camp does not have electricity. There is lots of space between the Hmong buildings, and the Hmong have used this space for growing gardens, and raising pigs and poultry. They get their water from carts or from the pond. The Hmong buildings are arranged in four rows of six buildings each. In front of the Hmong buildings is an administration building with a Hmong commander and Hmong staff, and a small hospital. The Hmong do not need passes to leave the camp, and they go out to fish or to gather fire wood.

In the field between the Hmong and Lao sections is a open-sided building where Hmong women sell textile handicrafts. Buyers are mainly the few Thai visitors to the camp, or staff members from the refugee organizations.

Outside the main camp and 1/2 kilometer from it is a smaller, older camp used as a detention center for illegal refugees. Refugees told me that when they enter Thailand, the Thai government charges them 500 Baht to enter the country legally. If they don't have the money they are put into the detention camp for a month. People who can prove that they are under seventeen years old can leave the detention camp after two weeks. Some young looking people lie about their age to reduce their time in the camp. After a month the illegal refugees are allowed to enter the main camp. The Detention camp looked very crowded.

Recently the Thai government closed the Nong Khai camp to new refugees because it is "full", and are sending the refugees to Loei and Ubon. The Thai government, claiming that it has too many refugees, will no longer accept "economic refugees (those leaving Laos for economic reasons or because of the drought)". In some cases the Thai government has refused to allow refugees to, land, and even has returned some refugees to the Laotian authorities.