

Informal Northern Thai Group Bulletin

8 May, 2016

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**1. MINUTES OF THE 403RD INTG MEETING:
Tuesday, 19 April, 2016
“Bureaucratizing the Good Samaritan”
A Talk by Tony Waters**

1.1. PRESENT : Eric Eustache, Doug Fraiser, Meg Fraiser, Louis Gabaude, Hepmibah Joseph, Joseph Manickam, Patrick Morel, David Steane, Susan B. Walker, Dagmar Waters, Kirsten Waters, Kristin Wolf. A total of 12 signed.

I. Basic Introduction

In 2001, I published a book *Bureaucratizing the Good Samaritan*. The book was an attempt to tell the story of how modern refugee crises work. First is the halcyon days when money is plentiful, and the inexperienced people like me are told to “spend more money.” This period is sustained by a hyper-attentive press, which is willing to heroize the efforts of rather normal people who rush in to save lives in situations like this:

- It is a country soaked blood, devastated by war, and its people are starving to death [...] Relief agencies believe as many as 2.25 million [...] could die of starvation in the next few months unless a vast amount of aid is provided soon [...] there is nothing ennobling about death by starvation....

The good news is that there is today a relief apparatus—bureaucracies—that can in fact provide such relief, and undoubtedly has saved at least 2.25 million lives. The problem is that the system which has emerged to save these lives is dependent on the press generating noise and drama. This is hardly the type of emotional context that makes for the most efficient use of funds, or is the best way to “save lives.” Indeed, in places where such noise is not made, many more than 2.25 million lives have been lost. In the last 20 years alone, such losses have easily occurred in Congo and South Sudan in particular.

II. Personal Background

This theme tonight goes way back for me to my time in Thailand. I came to Thailand in 1980 as a young Peace Corps Volunteer in Phrae. It was my first “job” out of college, and I was assigned to the Malaria Zone Office in Phrae. After two years, my time was finished with the Peace Corps, but I still really liked Thailand, and wanted to stay on—I suspect this audience understands this impulse!

In 1982, Thailand, as it is now, was dealing with the “maintenance stage” of a refugee crisis. Beginning in 1975 following the collapse of Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia, small numbers of refugees escaped into Thailand. Then in 1978-1979 came the Vietnamese boat crisis with surges of new Hmong and Lao refugees from Laos, and most significant, the Cambodian border crisis which happened as the Vietnamese army invaded, pushing the brutal Khmer Rouge government into the areas along the Thai border, and hundreds of thousands of refugees into Thailand itself. The refugees of course were seeking mercy—mercy from Thailand, and mercy from the international community.

And I wanted to be part of this response. In part, this impulse was because it seemed more exciting than sitting around with civil servants in Phrae. I had imbibed the dramatic press and was vaguely aware that refugee workers flew in helicopters, and rode elephants. They also attracted the attention of the press too, much more so than boring Peace Corps Volunteers who examined mosquitoes and blood parasites under microscopes. Refugee workers worked for NGOs with dramatic names like “The International Rescue Committee,” “Doctors Without Borders,” “CARE,” and “Catholic Relief Services.” Anyway, I ended up after the Peace Corps working for the International Rescue Committee first in Ban Nam Yao camp in Nan Province for the last four months of 1982, and in Phanat Nikhom camp in Chonburi for all of 1983. .

Thailand was not unique. Such emergencies had happened frequently in the twentieth century. Some big ones were the refugee exodus following the collapse of Germany after World War II, followed by the establishment of Israel. There was the exodus of 10-20 million refugees following the partition of India in 1947, the Korean refugees associated with the partition of Korea, Biafra in Nigeria, the Bangladesh refugee crisis in 1971-1972, the Cuban refugee crises, and so forth. Just as today, the world had millions of dispossessed, and there were emotional pleas to “deal” with them—to extend mercy. Much of this had been done by the militaries or semi-official agencies like the Red Cross Red Crescent societies, and relief extended in the context of military interest in stabilizing the peace, and not primarily that of an abstract humanitarian need.

But mercy was not the only emotion. There was also the emotion of fear, which leads to the “send them back where they belong, so they don’t take advantage of us!” impulse. This emotion often happens at the same time as the demand to “do something” and prevent the loss of obviously innocent lives. Both are emotional and moral appeals, not rational ones which are dealt with via politics where moral paradoxes are sorted out by appeals to values. But in the modern world, who sorts this out? The answer is the governments and the impersonal bureaucracies that deal with bland duties like immigration control, security, policing, and social welfare.

These organizations are first and foremost government bureaucracies. Such bureaucracies enforce laws, policies, and respond to politicians who make policy. Bureaucrats are functionaries, skilled at doing technical tasks, and making judgments over and over again “without passion or scorn.” Bureaucracies are faceless “judging machines.” In other words, they do emotions, and extend mercy as a robot does. Or, to put it more rawly in the case of immigration agents, deport as a robot would, meaning to follow the laws about visas and passports strictly. Which is of course kind of weird.

Except of course bureaucracies and bureaucrats are not really that weird—only ideally so. In reality, bureaucracies are staffed by human beings, who irrespective of a calling to act with robotic impartiality, are human beings that must sleep at night. And it is this paradoxical form of human being—the bureaucrat—from which the refugees seek mercy and the NGOs seek funds.

So in the modern era of large impersonal organizations and bureaucracies, the appeal to “do something” can also take on a *rational* appeal. After all, the bureaucracy that we all complain about, is still the most effective way to organize a major task, whether it be highway construction, provision of social security, social welfare, or organizing a large capitalist corporation.

Which brings me back to 1982 when I was finishing up my time in the Peace Corps, and seeking my first “real” job here in Thailand.

a) The Thai Refugee Relief Program in 1982-1983

The Thai refugee relief operation by 1982-1983 when I arrived was roughly four years old, and had normalized as much as such inherently emotional things can. *Time* magazine was no longer around, the helicopters were gone, and there was an impatience with the refugees whose motives for flight—was it fear of persecution or opportunism?—was questioned by the Thai authorities, donors, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR,) and Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs). All were calling for the refugee camps where I worked to close—indeed, there was a t-shirt circulating around Phanat Nikhom with each of the 6 or 7 closing dates announced by the UNHCR and Thai military listed and crossed out.

The emotional draw of the go-go days of 1978-1979 was tough to keep going. In fact as I was to find out in the 1990s in Africa, in a refugee crisis the emotion really lasts only 6-9 months, after which point the soulless bookkeepers with the green eyeshades reassert control. After 6-9 months, “compassion fatigue” sets in, which is what happens after the euphoria of the adrenaline rush passes, and things become normal, and again bureaucratic.

The border crisis that ended in 1978-1979 had had the large budgets. By 1980 the Thai and international bureaucracies in all their imperfections had learned to cope, perhaps ham-handedly, with the refugees who were still arriving, and the ones who remained. Ham-handedly or not, the operation was much more organized and routinized than it had been just months earlier where non-existent bureaucracies were first confronted with the boats from Vietnam, and the starving masses arriving from Cambodia.

Likewise, by the time I arrived in 1982, the situation in Southeast Asia had become a multi-sided stalemate between the Khmer Rouge on one side, the Vietnamese backed Khmer government in Phnom Penh on another, a Thailand government determined to protect the integrity of its border, and international donors who wanted to cut financial costs, and did not want to settle more refugees in their own countries. In the shadows were the Cold War combatants The United States, China, and Russia who saw the situation in global terms. In particular, this was an “I told you so” moment for the anti-communist Cold Warriors in the United States because it followed shortly after the fall of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos and as a result still fit in with the broader Cold War narrative.

And those of us who were new, could smugly point by then to the many mistakes our gung-ho predecessors made. Buried under the big boring bureaucracies was a landscape of the more halcyon days when money was plentiful, and decisions made quickly. They were present in the form of water systems that did not work, mass-produced toilets that popped up out of the ground, sedimentation ponds that were off-kilter, and refugee camps which flooded in the rainy season.

b) The Key Role of the Press in Sustaining Emotion in the Southeast Asia Context

But what we really missed by 1982 was the press. Journalists make and create “emergencies” from the raw material presented to them by events. In such a context they become heroes by printing and broadcasting the suffering. This worked because it pushed the emotional buttons in rich countries for generating political and financial support. The United States Government especially could be prodded by the press to provide cash via American NGOs, and provide resettlement spots for refugees. Many Americans had experiences in Vietnam and neighboring countries which made it easier to wrestle with a skeptical public that was torn by the need to “protect our shores,” and “do something” about the suffering they saw on the evening news.

And the governments of the region, particularly Malaysia, had come to understand that they could stimulate

donations to the refugee assistance programs by shoving boats back to sea in a manner that brought international attention to what they viewed as assaults on their sovereignty. Other nations in region responded similarly—create dramatic footage in order to attract assistance, protect the refugees, and keep the NGO-world in business.

c) The Emergence of The International Humanitarian Relief Regime in Thailand

But there was distrust between Thailand and The United States, which had so recently left the region. The United States Navy (or Army) was not going to deliver refugee relief. For that matter the United States did not trust the militaries of the region. What was left was the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, a “non-operational” and “temporary” agency of the United Nations, and newer United Nations agencies cobbled together specifically for these crises, and the Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies. Stepping into the void would be “voluntary agencies/volags” as they were known at the time, i.e. today’s “non-governmental organizations.” These were charitable agencies with roots in fund-raising in the west that were receiving both private and, especially, government funds.

All of these agencies were acutely aware that their political legitimacy and financial stability was based on their ability to attract money via political processes of donor governments, UN agencies, churches and others. If these constituencies wanted the NGOs to “do good” about what they had seen on the television, they needed to stimulate the emotions of the giving public. President Clinton’s National Security Advisor Anthony Lake explicitly acknowledged this when he suggested that NGOs “make more noise” during the 1990s refugee crises if they wanted government support. What it implicitly acknowledged is that refugee crises are not responded to in a traditionally bureaucratic way in which “just the numbers” are important. To get a government to respond to a refugee crisis, you need emotion, too.

III. The Power of Bureaucratic Action

So far, this story-telling is a round-about way of getting to my main point, which is that refugee relief operations are both inherently emotional, and inherently bureaucratic. But what is bureaucracy, and why is it so incompatible with delivering mercy?

a) Bureaucratic Action in the Context of Refugees

Bureaucracies are large organizations that organize tasks that require a division of labor and technical proficiency. Refugee relief is such a technical task. On top of this, the element of emotion is thrown in—you have to generate an emotional response from donors so that they will give, which is easy to do as long as the press keeps the emotional levels of western donors at a high level. Ironically, the generation of this emotion is also a technical task.

But such emotion flies in the face of the rational plodding character of bureaucracies, which is where their strength comes from. Bureaucracies impersonally perform their duties in a skilled and proficient manner in response to the commands from a hierarchically organized chain of command. This makes for an organization that is able to undertake difficult tasks, like shipping food around the world to feed hundreds of thousands of refugees two or three times per day. This is done only with a complex division of labor and tasks, not by uncoordinated appeals to the heart.

The trick in a refugee crisis is to take advantage of this bureaucratic strength, while also stimulating donors to give from the heart. The donors can be the little, nice people in churches, and also the faceless bureaucrats in donor agencies like ECHO (Europe), USAID (United States), UNHCR (United Nations), SIDA (Sweden), etc. who truth be told, exist in a political context that is indeed highly responsive to the nice, rich church people. From this comes the request for the NGOs to “make noise,” or to put it more cynically, encourage the press to support your chosen victim.

b) Donor-Driven Action

In a normal government or capitalist bureaucracy, there is a “feedback loop” which disciplines it. Consumers

or citizens respond to inefficiencies with their wallets, or their votes. In the refugee business, however, it doesn't work this way, which is why there are inefficiencies. When the donated food is bad, the water system doesn't work, the "customers" who are refugees, have no way of protesting. This is because as Mark Walkup wrote,

"For Humanitarian Organizations, resource generation is dependent on such factors as image enhancement, donor-centric evaluation criteria, distinctive visibility...efficiency, according to donors (the ones who matter), is sometimes a measure of how fast an HO can spend money...Clients are not party to HO mandates, budgets, or operational guidelines..." Mark Walkup, 1997

IV. Tanzania, 1994-1996

After living in Thailand, I ended up in Tanzania, where I worked on the Burundi border for three years (1984-1987) helping refugees resettle locally. The refugees had arrived in Tanzania in the early 1970s, and many died because no support arrived. The refugees were every bit as deserving as those from Vietnam and Cambodia who had attracted so much attention, but they missed out—no one was there to "make noise." In compensation, the UNHCR funded rural settlement schemes for the survivors on the cheap between about 1974-1988. I was a field bureaucrat at the tail end of these projects, trying my best to keep the bureaucratized system going under logistically difficult circumstances. This meant I spent a lot of time as a bookkeeper counting liters of diesel, building supplies, tracking vehicle usage, etc. As with my time in Thailand, it was a time of established routines, albeit in a new circumstance. I still had not seen my first "acute" crisis!

a) An Acute Crisis

I returned to Tanzania on-the-quick in 1994. Burundian refugees had arrived in October 1993 following a coup in that country, and I'd heard from my sister-in-law (not the press) that the problems along the border were acute. Refugees were dying from disease at high rates, and relief was slow to arrive. So I wrote my old boss at the Lutheran World Federation and offered to return. This got bounced around for a month or two, when suddenly the offer to go to the Burundi border came, and I left in April 1994 for Tanzania. On the way though, I watched the television pictures coming in—following a successful multi-racial election in South Africa in which Nelson Mandela was elected, a press which lacked dramatic footage was looking for something to do. They found it on the Rwanda-Tanzania border where masses were pressing up against the border, preparing to cross the border. In front of the TV. cameras this time!

And were they ever ready to take advantage of this. CARE, Oxfam, LWF, Red Cross, International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC), World Vision, Medicins sans Frontieres, etc., all followed the cameras and were arriving, with flags flying. People were flying, too—no hitchhiking early in the crisis. Planes were flying relief supplies into Tanzania, and places on trains and trucks were being bought up. Even trucks were flown in. The urge was to do something! And the money flowed so fast we couldn't spend it all. Suitcases full of Tanzanian Shillings were common, and deals cut quickly, and without much thought or expertise. I myself once handed over a suitcase with \$30,000 in Shillings to a truck driver who gave me several thousand liters of diesel in return. Another time, my boss and I kicked the tires of \$50,000 worth of heavy plant (backhoe and grader), and said that we would buy it. I finally knew how the relief workers on the Cambodian border must have made their mistakes. Fast decisions, made under the pressure to do something!

How long did this last? In the case of the Tanzania-Rwanda border relief operation, about six months. Which is when delays inevitably started to occur, and more importantly, the more savvy "emergency agencies" started to leave. MSF was among the first to go, pointing out that their mandate was for only "the emergency" which is when money really flowed. Promised food deliveries started to slow as "the pipeline" from the west to the distant border became clogged, the quickly drilled wells collapsed, and as importantly, refugees continued to arrive as fighting in Burundi and Rwanda resumed in 1995-1996.

b) Normalization

It was in this context that we were told to "normalize" the operation. Donors informed UNHCR and WFP that

money and food would not continue indefinitely. And even as we became better at the art of delivering relief supplies and building refugee camps, the need to do so began to dissipate. Tanzania and the donors began to question why refugee camps were so necessary—ostensibly there was peace in Rwanda, and the 500,000-700,000 refugees in Tanzania could go back to Rwanda (as could the million plus refugees who had fled eastward to Zaire). After all the genocidal government was finished, and new authorities were in charge. More importantly, the new Rwandan government was claiming that the camps were bases for attacks on Rwanda itself, as indeed they were, particularly the Zairean camps.

In such a context, announcements of impending camp closures became frequent, just as they had been in Thailand. The difference was that there were still more refugees arriving, and camps being established, first refugees from Rwanda, and later from Burundi.

The attention of the press dissipated much more quickly though. The Tanzania crisis of May 1994 gave way to the Zaire crisis of July 1994. The new Rwandan government also were successful in pointing out that the government in exile, particularly that in Zaire, was guilty of organizing the Rwandan genocide, and revanchist groups continued to control the camps there. UNHCR piped in by claiming that voluntary repatriation, consistent with international standards, was possible, even in the context of occasional violence and massacres inside Rwanda. Unlike in Cambodia, UNHCR and others opened offices in Rwanda, and offered protection to returnees. Such policies were promoted by Europe and the United States in particular which wanted to both cut their expenses in Tanzania/Zaire, and also back up the new Rwandan government (irrespective of the fact that “urging” voluntary repatriation by manipulating food supplies is an oxy-moron). The Tanzanians of course, despite a history of welcoming refugees, were growing wary of the political instability that the presence of refugees brought. Tanzanians, like those in every other country, are wary of foreigners in their midst, and produced their own complaints about how the refugees were despoiling their country.

Still the Rwandan refugees demurred. They were hesitant about returning after only two years or so abroad, and the word-of-mouth news coming out of Rwanda was often scary. All this discussion, however, was brought to a sudden halt in December 1996 and January 1997 when the Tanzanian government pushed several hundred thousand Rwandans back into Rwanda in a military movement. This happened at about the same time that the Rwanda military invaded the camps in Zaire, dismantling the camps, and triggering the Great African War which began in Zaire in 1996, and led to the deaths of 4-5 million Congolese by 2005. In various forms, that war continues today.

IV. A Final Note on Syria, 2015-2016

There have been a number of refugee crises I have observed via the press (and Facebook friends) since I left the refugee business in 1996 and became engaged full-time with academic life. The current Syrian crisis is the most recent manifestation of this. And I am again impressed with the emotional swings that the international community has undergone as it wrestles with the drama of another CNN-mediated refugee crisis. The CNN-esque features have of course helped Chancellor Merkel of Germany focus on issues of mercy, and humanitarianism, at least in Europe. Elections are effected, and governments wobble as they struggle with the political fall-out of the 24/7 coverage, and heightened emotions associated with refugees “on Europe’s doorstep.”

But this is not the whole story. In fact, most Syrian and Middle Eastern refugees are not going to Europe, but staying in the Middle East. It is also true that in terms of hard numbers about suffering, the Syrian crisis is a middling one judged in the context of the last 50, or even 25 years. But it is the one that has caught the media-driven attention of the west, where again bureaucracies are wrestling with the contradictions inherent to the bureaucratized good Samaritan.

V. Further Reading

Fadiman, Ann (1998). *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*. A book about the war in Laos, followed by resettlement in Ban Vinai (Thailand), and then California. Focus is on a girl with severe epilepsy, and how she was dealt with by the American medical community. There are good descriptions of life in Laos,

Thailand, and California.

Long, Lynelyn (1992). *Ban Vinai The Refugee Camp*. Ethnography of life in Ban Vinai camp for Hmong in the 1980s.

Malkki, Liisa (1994). *The Purity of Exile*. Comparative ethnography of refugees who were resettled in a remote isolated settlement, and in a Tanzanian city.

Prunier, Gerard (2011) *Africa's World War: Congo, The Rwandan Genocide and the Making of a Catastrophe*. Central Africa is without question the major refugee crisis of the late 20th and early 21st century.

Shawcross, William (1984). *The Quality of Mercy*. An excellent evaluation of the early days of the Cambodian refugee crisis.

Stearns, Jason (2012). *Dancing in the Glory of the Monsters: The collapse of the Congo and the Great War of Africa*.

Umutesi, Beatrice (2004). *Surviving the Slaughter: The Ordeal of a Rwandan Refugee in Zaire*. Excellent personal account of life in refugee camps, and flight across Africa after the camps were invaded by Rwandan soldiers.

Waters, Tony (2001). *Bureaucratizing the Good Samaritan*. [Soon at the EFEO library]

Films

Hotel Rwanda The Killing Fields Gran Torino, by Clint Eastwood

Searching for Answers, by Dee Thao (on YouTube)

2. NEXT MEETING (404TH)

Tuesday, May 10, 2016

“CITIZENSHIP AMONG ETHNIC MINORITIES IN NORTHERN THAILAND”

A TALK AND PRESENTATION BY MUKDAWAN SAKBOON & PRASIT LEEPREECHA

The Talk: This presentation focuses on the issues of legal citizenship among ethnic minority peoples in Northern Thailand. It touches on the historical backgrounds of ethnic groups and state's citizenship projects. The two presenters will address the following questions. Why didn't villagers seek citizenship in the past? Why are they eager to obtain it now? Why do hundreds of thousands of individuals from ethnic minorities still lack citizenship in the present? What actions do they take in order to get citizenship? And what is the current situation?.

The Speakers: Mukdawan Sakboon and Prasit Leepreecha are faculty members at the Department of Social Science and Development, Faculty of Social Science, Chiang Mai University.

2. NEXT MEETING (405TH)

Tuesday, June 14, 2016

“WOMEN STUDIES TO DIE OR TO GROW: WOMEN AND GENDER STUDIES AT CHIANG MAI UNIVERSITY”

A TALK BY ARIYA SVETAMRA

The Talk: Women’s Studies programs in universities have been in crisis mode, deeply affected by the lack of official support. They are targeted as a ‘problematic unit’ for being a financial burden, not as lucrative as ‘trendy subjects that cater to demands from the business/industrial sector’. This talk will reflect upon the question of sustainability of Thai Women’s Studies programs and the work of academics and women activists. It will question the problems that have brought about this crisis as well as propose resolutions.

The Speaker: Ariya Svetamra is currently lecturer at Department of Women’s Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University. She received her Ph.D. in Social Science from Chiang Mai University. Her focus is women’s studies research, i.e. women market vendors, women’s perspectives on the underground lottery and ethnic minority women struggling for nationality. She has also participated in research on popular religions and spirit mediumship in contemporary northern Thailand.

5. Request for Carol Stratton's book on Northern Thailand Sculpture

Someone in the US needs one or more copies of our former speaker Carol Stratton's book entitled: *Buddhist Sculpture of Northern Thailand* (ISBN: 1932476091). The book is out of print and out of stock except on Amazon at 400 US\$. They need the book to prepare a symposium they are planning on art and spirituality. If anyone is ready to sell a copy at a reasonable price, please contact <gabaudel@yahoo.com>. Thanks in advance.

5. List of FUTURE INTG MEETINGS

Tuesday, 10 May, 2016, 7:30 pm at the Alliance Française, Chiang Mai : “**Citizenship among Ethnic Minorities in Northern Thailand**”. A Talk by **Mukdawan Sakboon & Prasit Leepreecha**.

Tuesday, 14 June, 2016, 7:30 pm at the Alliance Française, Chiang Mai : “**To die or to grow? Women Studies and Gender Studies at Chiang Mai University**”. A Talk by **Ariya Svetamra**.

Tuesday, 12 July, 2016, 7:30 pm at the Alliance Française, Chiang Mai : A Talk by **Taylor Easum** on statuary monuments in Chiang Mai.

6. INTG CONTACTS : Convenor - Secretary - Website

- 1) **Convenor : Rebecca Weldon** : e-mail : <rebecca.weldon@gmail.com>. Mobile : **087 193 67 67**.
- 2) **Secretary : Louis Gabaude** : e-mail : <gabaudel@yahoo.com>. Mobile : **087 188 50 99**.
- 3) **INTG Website : Clarence Shettlesworth**: <http://www.intgcm.thehostserver.com>

Informal Northern Thai Group (INTG)
31 years of Talks!

***Citizenship
among Ethnic
Minorities in
Northern Thailand***

A Talk by **Mukdawan Sakboon
& Prasit Leepreecha**

Tuesday, 10 May 2016, 7:30 pm

At **The Alliance Française** - Chiang Mai
131, Charoen Prathet Road, (Opposite EFEO)

Informal Northern Thai Group (INTG)
31 years of Talks!

***Women and
Gender Studies
at Chiang Mai
University***

A Talk by **Ariya Svetamra**

Tuesday, 14 June 2016, 7:30 pm

At **The Alliance Française** - Chiang Mai
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