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SNAPSHOT

A Medical Lifeline on the Border

Through USAID support, the Mae Tao clinic treats 150,000 patients at the Thai-Burma frontier with a 20 percent increase in cases each year.



The clinic provides free primary healthcare services on the Thai-Burma border and mobile clinics serving more than 17,000 Internally Displaced Persons in Burma. / Photo: Peter Biro / The IRC.

“It was not easy to get here, but it saved my life”

- Unidentified patient diagnosed with tuberculosis

Nyine Tun lies in a hospital bed hooked up to a drip bottle with saline solution. The frail 34-year-old woman says that she contracted malaria two weeks before arriving at Mae Tao from a village deep in the eastern Burma's interior. “I had a very high fever for days,” she says. “I went to a clinic in my village but they wouldn't treat me because I couldn't afford the medicines.” Nyine Tun resorted to seeing a traditional healer who prescribed herbs as treatment. “They didn't help,” she explains. “But poor people always treat themselves with herbs.”

Nyine Tun finally decided to travel to Mae Tao, hitching a ride on the back of a truck and crossing the border on an inner tube across the fast-running Moei River. While patients like Nyine Tun describe making long arduous journeys to get to Mae Tao, it is the only way many of them will ever receive any form of health care. “This clinic truly saves lives,” says Frank Brewster, a volunteering physician from Canada. “There simply is no functioning public health system in Burma.”

Dr. Cynthia Maung, a nominee for the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize, established the Mae Tao Clinic in 1989 in response to an uprising in Burma that forced thousands to flee to Thailand. Since 2005, USAID has provided the clinic \$450,000 each year to cover core operational and support costs. USAID also provides financing and training to “backpack health worker” teams that cross the border into remote rural areas where internally displaced persons (or IDPs) are hiding from the Burmese military.

The Mae Tao clinic has grown from its humble beginnings as one small house to a complex of buildings providing a wide variety of health services to many different groups, including more than 17,000 IDPs in Burma. Today it serves a target population of approximately 150,000 on the Thai-Burma border with a 20 percent increase in case loads each year.

The clinic is staffed by five physicians, 200 healthcare workers, 100 trainees and interns, and 80 support staff. It provides comprehensive primary healthcare services including a surgical unit; blood transfusions; reproductive and child health; eye care; HIV/AIDS prevention, care and support services; emergency referral services to Thai hospitals; and prosthetics for landmine survivors.