

Ben Kates – Burma Lawyers' Council

Replete with challenges and rewards, my summer at the Burma Lawyers' Council (BLC) was a valuable and on the balance a positive experience. The BLC is the foremost Burmese legal organization. It operates five kilometres outside of Burma in Mae Sot, Thailand, because of the difficulties posed to civil society within Burma. The organization's staff consists largely of local-trained lawyers and administrative staff, many of whom have been persecuted, imprisoned, and even tortured by the regime for their political stance and activism. Many of those who involve themselves with the BLC are exiled from their home country, and those who are not would face great hardship upon their return.

Needless to say I gained a great deal of respect for my colleagues this summer. In addition to devoting their careers to what is a truly noble cause, they welcomed me with open arms. This is not to say that my internship was an entirely smooth one. I learned early that one has to temper his expectations of the type of impact that can be made in a 10-week internship. I showed up eager, willing and ready to work but often found myself with nothing to do. I'm quite convinced that some of the work I produced will never be looked at again. Looking back, however, I view these types of frustrations as part of the process of learning to navigate the processes, norms and culture of a foreign organization.

Working in the BLC's legal analysis section, I undertook legal projects of my own and supported the rest of the section. For instance, I responded to an op-ed printed in the state propaganda organ *The New Light of Myanmar* justifying the continued incarceration of Aung San Suu Kyi, worked on a draft Security Council resolution for referral of the regime to the International Criminal Court, and outlined legal arguments as to why the state's response to the Cyclone Nargis constituted crime against humanity. On the other hand, I helped the Legal Analysis section convert their statements into English, supported their research of international legal norms, and helped the lawyers develop their English through conversation. Ironically, whereas I learned the most from the former set of activities, I believe I had a greater impact with the latter. Fortunately, by the end of my stay at the BLC, I was able to balance my days between drawing from the BLC and contributing to it.

My time at BLC also taught me a great deal about the limits and realities of human rights and international humanitarian law. The situation in Burma is particularly tragic because I do not foresee real change taking place anytime soon. It seems that absent of political will no amount of documentation, analysis, argument or advocacy will be adequate to effect change. With that in mind, I came to view the BLC's most valuable work as coming in the form of their law school (which has unfortunately been discontinued due to lack of funding) and a legal aid section that helps local Burmese migrants. In fact, I consider my greatest accomplishment this summer to have been when I referred to the legal aid section the case of a teenager held by Thai authorities on a trumped up murder charge. After being imprisoned for over three weeks, he was released within days of my referral.

Beyond the walls of the BLC, Mae Sot offered a wealth of learning opportunities. As a major hub of Burmese public interest work it is the home of dozens of expatriate workers in fields such as medicine, public health and education. In passively observing what went on in the town and casual conversations with my peer group, I was provided with an invaluable source of education about human rights, development, and international systems. Beyond Mae Sot, I had the opportunity to travel to Cambodia, Laos, Singapore, Hong Kong and the Philippines, all of which further enriched my internship experience.

In sum, my experience this summer was not without its frustrations and disappointments. Each obstacle, however, provide a new learning experience that will stay with me and benefit me as I pursue my legal education and career. More than anything, I am grateful to the staff of the BLC for taking me on and for their patience as I integrated myself amongst them. My only hope is that I can work with them once again, perhaps in a free Rangoon.