



TO THAI WITH LOVE

by Terri Lackey

Temperatures in the province of Tak, Thailand—where 70,000 Lutheran World Relief quilts are shipped every year—can fall into the 50s on some nights.



Ko Loh Wah

High in the mountains in Umpiem Mai refugee camp, constant rains and whipping winds can make it feel much colder. When camp residents reach for protection from the damp chill, they select the warmest cover-up they can find. Often that is a scratchy wool blanket, not a “beautiful” LWR quilt.

“The quilts are very beautiful, but they can be too thin sometimes,” a camp resident said with the help of a translator, rubbing a Lutheran World Relief (LWR) quilt between her fingers.

Mud generated during the months of near ceaseless Thailand rains renders lighter-colored quilts useless after about one season, though the residents continue to use them until they are threadbare. The refugees’ bamboo houses with leaf roofs do little to stop the rain and wind and cold.

Believe me, I know. I was there with two LWR staff—Melanie Gibbons, quilt and kit ministry manager, and Joanne Fairley, regional director for Asia and the Middle East. Each evening after we visited the refugee camps, I was filthy, wet, and cold—but headed to my comfortable hotel room. After taking a hot shower (not available in refugee camps), I reached for the warmest cover I could find.

“You might find it interesting to learn that even in places we think of as warmer climates like Thailand, it’s very important that quilts be warm,” said Gibbons who explained quilts are processed and baled before their final destination is determined. “In Thailand, technically a tropical climate, I saw almost exclusively thin quilts. The people we talked to said that the quilts are sturdy and beautiful, but simply not warm enough.”

Gibbons said that in deserts or tropical parts of the world, “the temperature can drop dramatically at night. The trip to Thailand was a good reminder for us that the batting or blanket or other warm layer in those quilts really matters.” In fact, she said, LWR’s guidelines specify “that all quilts be warm because warmth is important no matter which country refugees live in.”

No More Blankets

Until about four years ago, locally purchased wool blankets (one per two family members) were issued through the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC), a non-governmental organization (NGO) that has helped refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) on the Thai/Burma border since 1984. The TBBC also distributes food and material resources like charcoal, cooking

oil, and LWR quilts to camp residents. It used to distribute the wool blankets, donated from another Christian organization, but that money has dried up. And without heavy blankets, it is a challenge for the 150,000 refugees in the nine camps that sit at the Burma (Myanmar)/Thailand border to keep warm.

The LWR quilts lovingly made by Women of the ELCA participants and others are currently the only cover-ups refugees receive to snuggle under at night or during chilly days. Some even hang them in their homes as shields from the wind and rain.

“The TBBC could use more quilts if we could get them there,” Gibbons said. “If we could, we would send them between 75,000 to 90,000 quilts every year to meet their demands of providing one quilt for every two refugees each December.”

“Now we send them about 70,000 a year.”

Eh Gyi and her household of six have received several LWR quilts over the 16 years she has been in Mae La camp. Now 46, she lives in a

big house (think large hut, not a McMansion) that was home to several families, many of whom have resettled to other countries.

Eh Gyi owns a small shop that she runs with her grandmother. Neighbors come and go, grab a bag of chips or a sweet, and put their money in a till. Married with three children (19, 16, and 4), she has also received an LWR baby-care kit for her youngest.

“The items were very good, very soft for the baby’s skin,” she said. She still has them; her young son loves the blanket and continues to carry it around.

Eh Gyi treasures the LWR quilts, too, preferring the darker ones because they don’t show dirt. She said

she carefully washes them in a basin, never in the river. “They are very good in hot times.”

Eh Gyi asked us to give a message to the quilters back home in America. “I am very grateful (for the quilts). I pray for the one who made this for us because in the making of the quilts there may be accidents. And I pray blessings upon them. The quilts are very valuable for us and we feel so lucky to have received them. They are so beautiful, colorful, and powerful.”

A Community of Women

Ko Lo Wah, the newly elected chair of the Karen Women’s Organization (KWO) in the Mae La refugee camp, met with us on our first day visiting the camps. The Karen people are one of Burma’s largest ethnic groups and have their own language, culture, and traditions. Ko Lo Wah brought along about 20 others who were also members of the KWO, formed in 1949 to support their own community of women.

Like many Karen refugees, Ko Lo Wah is a Christian, and she cares deeply about the welfare of women in her community. “We look after each other,” she said. “The ladies have to stand for the ladies.”

The KWO, with a membership of more than 49,000, is a community-based organization of Karen women working in development and relief in refugee camps and with internationally displaced persons inside Burma. In addition to social welfare, KWO members encourage women’s rights and promote women’s participation in community decision making.

Ko Lo Wah, who trained as a medic, left Burma because of violence between the Burmese military government and ethnic groups living near the border. In 1984, Burmese troops began attacking ethnic populations on the border of Thailand, according to a TBBC history book commissioned at the organization’s 20th anniversary.

Ko Lo Wah didn’t escape Burma before she witnessed the government-run military shoot dead a man



Eh Gyi

and the grandmother he carried on his back. “I will never forget it,” she said.

Villagers were murdered and raped and used as forced labor, according to *Twenty Years on the Border*. Their property and livestock were stolen or burned. And so they moved across the border into Thailand where the Thai government allowed them to live, believing their stay would be short. That was 28 years ago. There is hope, though, TBBC leaders say. Burma is moving toward democratization. It is releasing some of its political prisoners, most notably 1991 Nobel Peace Prize recipient Aung San Suu Kyi (a woman activist).

“Refugee camps are not natural places to live. Refugees in camps do not have the freedoms the rest of us enjoy—freedom to study, work, and travel,” TBBC executive director Jack Dunford said in the book’s introduction. “Refugees have lost everything in their homelands and carry sad and painful memories. Camp life is tedious and the standard of living in these camps is very basic indeed.”

Like most refugees, Ko Lo Wah, her husband and two children live in a thatched hut. They eat the rations given to them by the TBBC—and they sleep under LWR quilts.

How Can You Help?

Currently, LWR ships about 400,000 of your quilts to 25 countries each year. And they would ship more if they had them.

“If you are already quilting for LWR, thank you,” Gibbons said. “You have helped us serve millions of people around the world.”

Gibbons challenges quilters to make more quilts this year as a part of LWR’s 2013 Mission Quilt Campaign to reach a goal of 500,000 quilts. “In honor of Women of the ELCA’s 25th anniversary, why not make 25 more quilts—or even 25 percent more.”

LWR hopes to collect the 500,000 mission quilts by December 2013, Gibbons said. “Set a goal and tell us about it.” Go to www.lwr.org/quiltcampaign to log your group’s goal. Making LWR Mission Quilts provides a way for Lutherans to answer God’s call to love and serve our neighbors in need.

Do your part to help Ko Lo Wah, Eh Gyi, their families, and hundreds of thousands of others stay warm in 2014 and beyond. 🌸

Terri Lackey is managing editor of *Gather*. She traveled to the refugee camps in Thailand in August 2012.



Terri Lackey, Joanne Fairley, and Melanie Gibbons with members of the Karen Women's Organization

Resources

Call 800-597-5972 to request:

Quilt & Kit Ministry Guide

Quilt & Kit Shipping Fund brochure

Visit LWR.org/quiltcampaign to download:

2013 Quilt Campaign Leaders' Guide

Instructions for making a mission quilt

Tips for alternative quilt filler

Packing and shipping instructions

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LWR Lenten resources will arrive in churches in January.



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