

CO-training Thailand 1-9 February 2008

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History

From the 25th up to the 27th of June a delegation from Belgium got the possibility to take part in a vast explanation concerning resettlement. The initiative for that purpose was taken by COA. At the end of 2007 a selection mission of COA and IND set off to the refugee camp of Tham Hin in Thailand. 3 Belgians accompanied them on this excursion: Agnieszka Sepiol and Vinciane Masurelle, for Fedasil, and Christophe Jansen of the Commissionership for refugees and stateless persons (CGVS). (Fedasil is the Belgian counterpart of COA, the CGVS has a similar task as IND.)

As preparation of the cultural orientation (CO) mission, on the 22nd of January two Belgian guests were invited in asylum seekers centre at Leersum: Marie Huberlant and Patrick Meers, both working for Fedasil. Nicolien Rengers ensured the reception, after which the earlier selection mission was commented by Ablo Tangara. Chantal Berkers and Peter Geerlings gave an introduction concerning the preparation activities and details about the Belgian participation at the CO - training. Afterwards followed an introduction in activities and a guided tour in reception centre Leersum by the staff of the reception centre.

Co – training

On the 31st of February I stood all ready to go, on the airport of Zaventem, with my colleague Marie Huberlant. We knew that it would become a long nocturnal excursion, but we looked forward to the period of training and experiences ahead of us. In Schiphol we met Nicolien Rengers, which would accompany us during the next week. Arrived in Bangkok, we headed straight of to Kanchanaburi. A misunderstanding with our driver appeared later, because a visit to BRC (Bangkok Refugee Center) had been planned before leaving to Kanchanaburi. Later on the evening Chantal Berkers and Peter Geerlings also joined us, dead tired, but clearly satisfied concerning the first training they just finished.

The weekend proved to be a combination of entertainment and preparation. Planning was made up for the next week and new stocks were laid in. Monday we left direction Tham Hin around 8 o' clock. That day the preparations were made. The coaches were more than satisfied with the present facilities. In the office of UNHCR the participants to the training got their allowance for one week. With the money they received, they could buy lunch. Some participants felt awkward: would they take the money with two hands, or the typical Burmese pose with the right arm stretched and the left arm supporting the right forearm, or would they bend and accept the money this way. It became gradually clear to me that this mission was about leaving behind identity, being open for a new life.

The latter would become like a red wire to me: these Burmese did not know what a washing machine or a fridge was or how the welfare state look after its inhabitants. They had to be teached everything.

Tuesday evening I asked myself if it was a good idea to take away people from their trusted surroundings, to deprive them of their identity. From our point of view, resettlement is a clear improvement: from a bamboo hut with a sail above your head, no electricity, to a comfortable shelter, with gas cooker, light switch and all modern supplies.

During this week it became however clear to me that these people had a greater resilience than I could imagine. The turn in their behavior which I saw on Thursday, made my flesh creep; it gave me some hours of stupefaction, but like wise the feeling (because you never know for sure) that resettlement was indeed a durable solution.

The virtually perfect preparation, the commitment of 2 extremely motivated coaches and a project leader who ensures, generally on the background, that the coaches can set limits to their own task. A model that deserves to be followed.

Within some weeks the first resettled Birmese will arrive at Schiphol. The Belgian look and learn mission will be continued. If we can persuade our political leaders as well, our acquired knowledge could be put in practice.

I want to express my sincere thanks to Nicolien Rengers, for her professional commitment, but also for her continuing care and concern; and to Peter and Chantal, because of their contagious enthusiasm and source of inspiration.