



Spring 2021

Border Crossings

A Newsletter of the Brackett Refugee Education Fund



Annual Report 2020

by Mark Sommer and
Russell Brackett



Getting supplies to schools inside Burma has become more perilous since the army's coup.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted operations throughout the areas in Asia where we operate. Early on we thought we had dodged a bullet with very low infection rates in India and in Northern Thailand. Bangladesh and our IDP (Internally Displaced Persons) programs within Burma caused us much greater concern mostly owing to the lack of information. As we in the United States are rounding the bend, getting the virus under control locally, **Thailand and India are suffering accelerated infection levels.** For the most part our schools were able to operate and, even for those that weren't able to open, we funded teacher stipends in order to help sustain them through the scourge. Likewise for scholarship students – most were able to matriculate and, in general, we funded even those who weren't able to attend school, so they are prepared to return when able. The good news is that we expect most

schools on the international calendar to be open this coming fall. We would like to thank all of you who have sustained your funding of our operations at BREF. **Without you, hundreds of children displaced from their ancestral communities in Burma would be without hope.**

The coup by the Tatmadaw military junta in Burma in early February 2021 will impact our operations in the coming year. Reports from our volunteers inside Burma are that some schools have suffered shelling and families have again been displaced from their communities. We will keep funding these schools as they struggle to rebuild. We expect some Burmese national scholarship students to have difficulty getting proper documentation, so they attend schools in Thailand, given the hostilities in the Thai/Burma border region. While we may experience some delays in matriculation, these students will be funded when they are able to attend.

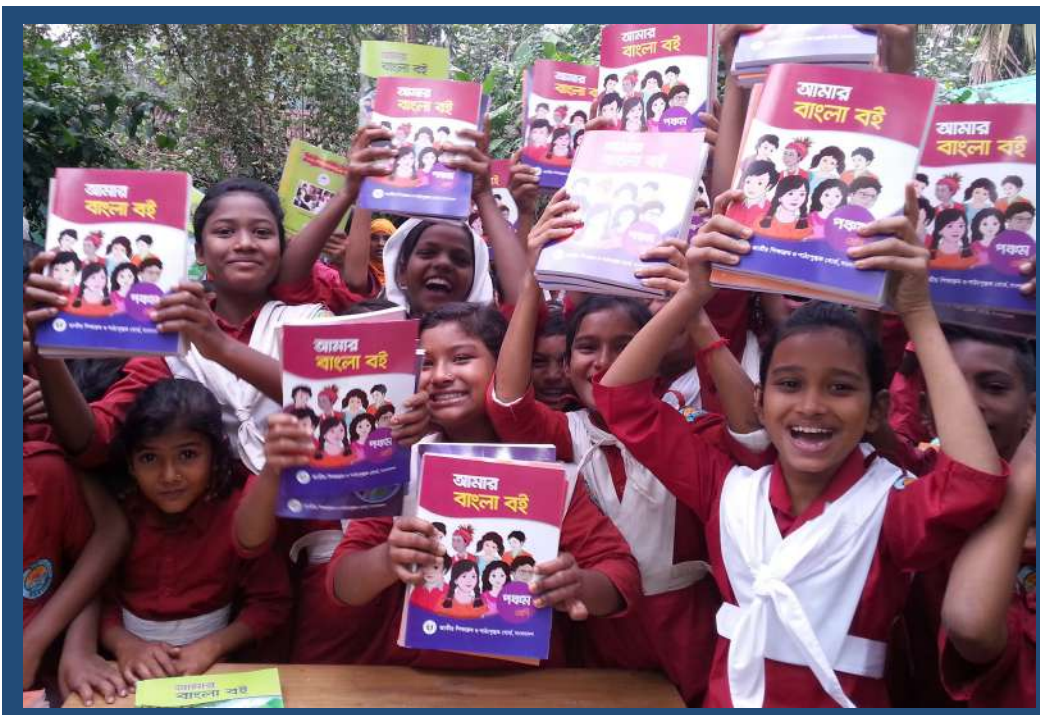
When schools were closed, "small-batch" learning became the norm.





Educating Rohingya refugee children in Bangladesh.

Our donations in 2020 totaled \$198,563, down more than 5% from the previous year. Some of this decline resulted from our decision to discourage “directed gifts” that went beyond our core mission. Unrestricted gifts allow us to fund our students more equitably based on need. In addition, our donor base dropped from 330 to 271, primarily due to the aging demographics of our supporters and, last year, a reduced emphasis on recruiting new benefactors during the pandemic. As we emerge from the worst of it, we would love to encourage you to mention BREF to your philanthropic friends. We believe our biggest selling points are **our focus on education, targeting some of the most disadvantaged refugees in the world, a devoted volunteer network, and low administrative expenses.**



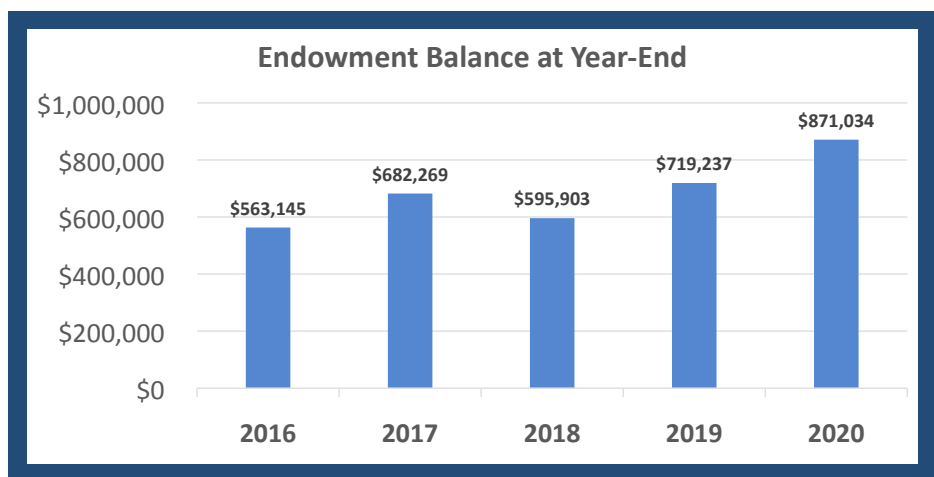
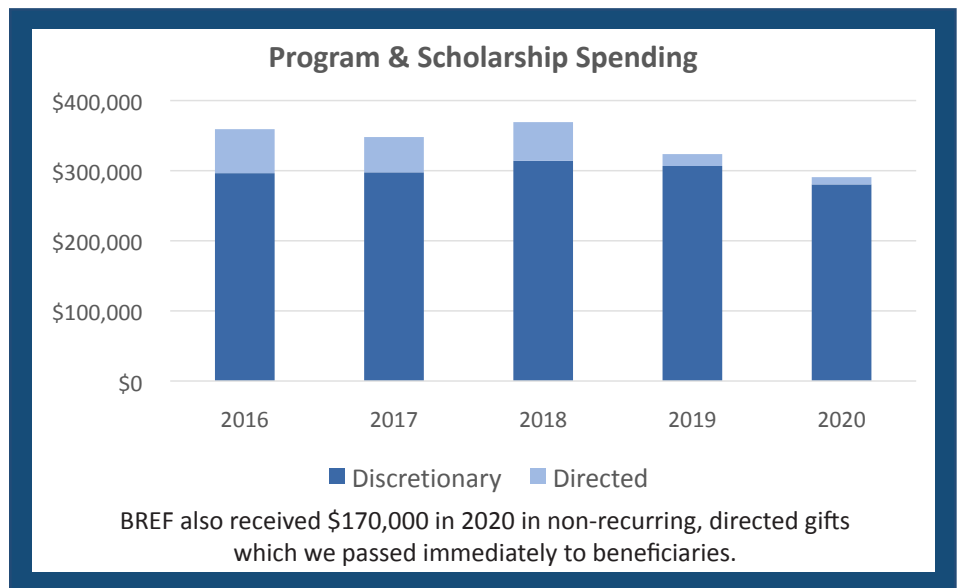
These children in Bangladesh are excited to start the school year with new textbooks.

Overall support for our programs and scholarships remained quite steady due to a growing contribution from our endowment, which grew 21% in 2020. We were able to support all program (school) budget requests and to maintain scholarship students at levels consistent with the recent past. **BREF distributed a total of 158 scholarships in 2020, 62 for vocational and high school study and 96 at the university level.** We had 62 students receive their degrees: 27 from secondary schools

(vocational/high school), 28 from universities and 7 from diploma courses. At the university level, education (a 5-year program for a teacher’s certificate) and nursing were the most popular courses of study, among many others.

In Thailand, BREF directly supported language and computer literacy programs for high school students in the Mae La Refugee Camp. These programs are designed to prepare students for further study or for finding a job. **At the Mae La camp we started a program linking English language students (virtually) with volunteer ESL teachers to practice conversational English.**

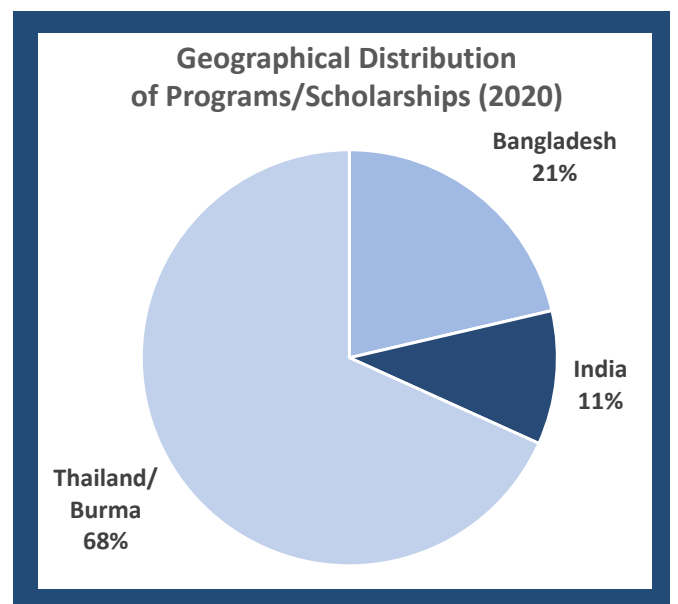
In Bangladesh, BREF supported educational assistance to Rohingya refugee children in partnership with a UK NGO, Children On the Edge (COTE). In their annual report, COTE noted that, after three years, “Rohingya remained trapped and stateless on the Bangladeshi border.” The COVID crisis required COTE to respond creatively. They produced and distributed videos and leaflets with information on sanitation, masking, and social distancing, becoming a crucial source of public health messages. With schools closed, “small-batch, home-based learning” allowed teachers to stay connected with students and check



on their well-being. In addition, COTE’s digital team developed an “all-Rohingya language library of lessons, the only comprehensive set of educational lessons available in Bangladesh or Myanmar.” BREF specifically assists COTE in providing educational services.

In India, BREF distributed a total of 447 scholarships to support education for Chin refugees from Burma. Most of the students live in the Indian state of Mizoram. Students’ eligibility was based on the ability to show significant financial need, as well as academic ability and drive. 195 scholarships were given to children from grades K to 7 whose parents struggle to pay for the costs of textbooks, uniforms and exam fees. 154 scholarships were directed towards high school students (grades 8 to 10), and 42 of these students are graduating in 2021. BREF distributed 76 university prep-level (Grades 11 and 12) scholarships. 38 of these students are graduating in 2021 and will be able to apply to university programs anywhere in India. BREF financially supported 22 university students. Students

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who were awarded these post-secondary scholarships would have been unable to – or with much difficulty – obtain the funds necessary to study at a university. In spite of delays caused by the pandemic, seven of the university students studying in India are graduating as planned in 2021. Six students studying inside Burma (two of whom were scheduled to graduate) were unable to complete their academic year due to university closures (COVID), compounded by disruptions caused by the ongoing military coup.



This photo, taken in 2019, shows the Class 8 through 10 cohort in India's northeastern city of Aizawl.

Teaching English to BREF Students

Gideon Brunson starts his week by waking up at 4am every Monday to teach BREF students English. Why so early? Gideon lives in Cape Town, South Africa and his students are teenagers attending the ALCC School in the Mae La Refugee Camp along the western border of Thailand, thousands of miles and several time zones away. He says “Every single time I have a session with the three youngsters, I walk away feeling energized and motivated. Even though I am the teacher, I am learning so much from them.” Gideon’s passion for teaching is fueled by his students’ enthusiasm and improvement in the English language. In one of his favorite classes, his students told him of their hopes and dreams for the future: to be a teacher, a nurse and a soldier.



BREF students learning English from Gideon, over 10,000 km away!

The Brackett Refugee Education Fund, established in April 1997, is a small not-for-profit foundation organized to help educate refugees. Currently the Fund is concentrating its efforts on refugees from Burma in India, Thailand and Bangladesh. Our trustees are Russell Brackett (Interim Chair of the Board and Executive Director), Dianne Becker, Brian Brackett, Penelope Brackett, Paulo Flor, Melinda Jackson, John Littleton and Mark Sommer. The Fund has 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status, EIN 16-1523586. It seeks support from friends, family and foundations. In order to make most efficient use of the money it receives, the Fund has adopted the following policies:

- All administrative and communication costs will be supported by the trustees;
- Living and travel expenses of trustees and volunteers, while on business for the Fund, will be donated by themselves;
- The Fund will not sell or give away the names and addresses of any of its contributors;
- Although the Fund is happy to receive contributions at any time, only one fundraising campaign will be made each year;
- The Fund has no paid employees, so administrative and fundraising expenses are very low, typically less than 4% of total expenditures; and
- Because the trustees donate far more than required for administrative purposes, every dollar you donate will go towards helping people receive an education.



COVID-19 prevention practices became a habit for the children.