

From despair, hope rises: Thai survivors wait serenely for uncertain future

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Bang Muang, Thailand --- Once, Ban Nan Khem was a fishing village. Small and remote, perched on a bay on Thailand's southwest coast, it was prosperous and pretty, lined with homes of pastel stucco.

Then came the tsunamis.

One month later, the hardest-hit village in Thailand --- one of thousands destroyed across the Indian Ocean Basin --- is a wasteland. When the breeze rises from the turquoise water, it carries the reek of dead things and a stinging concrete dust.

Ban Nan Khem is dead. But a few miles away, in a warren of tin sheets and whitewashed plywood, its 3,500 survivors have re-created their beloved village.

In the Bang Muang resettlement camp, Ban Nan Khem lives again --- a testament to the human spirit that's making itself felt not only in Thailand, but across the 11 nations where the tsunamis from a giant earthquake crashed ashore on Dec. 26.

The Bang Muang camp is a broad patch of dry earth on the main road through Phang-Nga, Thailand's most devastated province. The land belongs to the government, and the entrance winds under a billboard-sized portrait of Thailand's revered king.

Inside, the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security and a slate of volunteer organizations have thrown up rows of single-room cabins, 10 feet square, with a front door and a back door and a wide hinged window held open with a stick.

Those were the basics. The villagers themselves have added the details. They have wired the cabins for electricity and made furniture from donated lumber. They have laid paving stones to make alleys and planted flowers in pots by the cabin doors.

At one end of most of the alleys, a broad shelter has been built, a box with a sloping roof held a few feet off the ground on sturdy legs. The boxes hold TV sets. In the evening, the villagers sit and giggle at raucous Thai game shows.

Despair is taboo

More than 5,000 people lived in Ban Nan Khem before the waves came. There are few families who did not lose a loved one. Some were cooking in their kitchens and were sucked away through their broken windows. Others were out on their boats and never returned.

In the new Ban Nan Khem, the villagers do not discuss their loss. Thai culture values emotional reserve --- called jai yen, "cool heart" --- and frowns on the expression of negative emotions. But throughout the camp there are glimpses that the village has been deeply marked.

In a tent at the northern edge of the field, volunteers are leading the children through art therapy, creating paintings and batik panels a Bangkok foundation hopes to sell.

The children range widely in age, but the paintings all show the same thing: a wave, poised to crash down.

More than a dozen charities and nongovernmental organizations have moved in, done their work and in some cases moved on. No one knows how many.

The groups set up field kitchens, a first aid clinic, a school and a day care center. There are hillocks of donated clothing, more food than the villagers can eat, and free Fanta and Coca-Cola given by local bottlers.

The villagers are wearing the clothing and eating the food. But several have opened small shops, selling canned goods brought by family members who live in other towns. The impulse to buy and sell is reviving.

So are other inherently human impulses. Among the commodities distributed to the camp by the Thai government were condoms. In the mornings, the villagers bring out their household trash so that it can be carted off before the day begins. It is clear from the garbage that the condoms are being used.

"They have made it into a community," said Dr. Chris Braden, an epidemiologist from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. He has watched the camp grow in three weeks from a field of tents to the beginnings of a town.

Desire for normality

Life at the camp holds tremendous uncertainties.

The villagers do not know how long they will be there. They do not know if they will be allowed to stay together. The government fears the camp is too crowded. The villagers worry they may grow bored and uncomfortable when the April monsoons confine them to their huts and turn the fields to mud.

One thing they do know: They want to restore their lives.

In the last row of the camp, between huts 3 and 4, a long blue spar of wood juts into the walkway. It is all that remains of the boat of fisherman Nui Varee.

On the morning of the tsunamis, 45-year-old Varee and his family were in their boat out on the ocean: his wife, Chee Hantalay, his younger sons Kong and Sombat, his oldest son Noppaklao Cheaw-Chan and Noppaklao's wife and son.

The boat was anchored in water deep enough to dive for lobster. The first sign of trouble was the grate of the keel on gravel. The water had drained away, leaving them aground.

Varee cut the anchor rope and his boat ran out with the retreating ocean. When he looked up, he said through an interpreter, a wave was looming above them, as high as he could see.

The crest curled down --- but instead of capsizing the boat, it lifted it. Varee fought the currents for 20 minutes until a swell lifted the boat onto the beach.

The family tied the boat to a coconut palm and ran.

Later, Varee found the tree with the prow of the boat still tied to it.

He and his sons rescued the fragment and carried it to the camp. They nailed it to the wall and hung it with garlands in thanks for saving their lives, and then they began to plan the new boat they will attach it to.

"We want so much to return to the ocean," Varee said. "If you gave me a boat today, tomorrow I would go fishing."