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LEI THAR GONE
Guest House

January 6th / Trimester Report III / September – December 2023

Dear friends,

Hannes Schmid, Founder of the Swiss Foundation «Smiling Gecko» working in Cambodia, began his yearly review with these words:

«In 2022, I spoke here about how extremely challenging the past twelve months had been. 365 days later, I would have to start this end-of-year retrospective with a similar statement. But couldn't I have done that every year anyway? We are in Cambodia and life here is demanding. This makes it all the more important to support the people here. To work with them and to help them find ways out of hardship and poverty. Because these ways do exist. I remain convinced of that.»

These words hold absolutely true for Myanmar – with additional pain and suffering caused by a brutal regime, whose army murders its own citizens as well as the brutal inflation that leaves hundreds of thousands of people wondering where their next meal will come from!

Nevertheless, at the end of this difficult year, it's time for us to pause and say «thank you» to all of you who believe that change is possible and therefore loyally support our Light of Love Foundation, either financially, with letters, gifts and kind thoughts or with your prayers and words of encouragement! You make a difference and because of YOU we persevere and keep believing in a hopeful future.

For those who are interested in a more in-depth view of the current situation, here a few links to relevant articles:

In an apparent attempt to create the impression that the sitting Buddha has become a popular religious attraction, Myanmar Junta buses in government staff.

<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-junta-buses-in-govt-staff-as-pilgrims-shun-dictators-pagoda.html>

Cash-Starved Junta Milks Myanmar Migrant Workers with New Remittance Rule

<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/cash-starved-junta-milks-myanmar-migrant-workers-with-new-remittance-rule.html>

Junta forces businesses and pubs at gunpoint to sell Myanmar beer

<https://www.irrawaddy.com/business/power-drunk-junta-tries-selling-myanmar-beer-at-gunpoint.html>

Expressing dissent online can be deadly

<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/expressing-dissent-online-can-be-deadly-in-myanmar-freedom-house.html>

Opinion: The year 2023 was not a happy one for Myanmar

<https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/commentary/2023-a-year-of-living-dangerously-in-myanmar.html>

Meanwhile at Light of Love...

Like on a rollercoaster, there have been many ups and downs during the past four months. We would like to share some of these with you:

Definitely the most important event of the trimester was Zoe's return to Light of Love on November 13th!

Her teacher training in Yangon at «Pyinya Sanyae Institute of Education» is complete and she is now doing her «in service training year». In consultation with the school's supervisors, Sr. Grace Chia and Jacinta Cardoza, who both knew and supported Eric's vision, it was agreed that Zoe could do this training at home. Other students, who are obviously much younger and don't have their «own» school, are posted to schools all over the country for their final year. Excitement was high before the posting places were announced because all the trainees hoped for a posting to LOL because they wanted to accompany Zoe!



Zoe in Dagon Seikan, the largest slum area in Yangon, where she did her teaching practice in a small local organization run by a Kachin couple. The P.S.I.E students went there once a week



Here she faced many challenges because the students, within the same class, had completely different levels of knowledge/training, were not used to a formal classroom environment and the chance of applying classroom management was very limited. But she gained Invaluable experience, learning how to be flexible and cope in spite of challenging circumstances. This will serve her well at Light of Love.

- Zoe was eager to be back at Light of Love, but was quite overwhelmed by the scope of tasks and responsibilities. Motivated and full of ideas she has many plans for improving the standard of teaching at LOL. She is observing classroom discipline, planning events, coaching teachers and students, teaching English in three grades for two periods each. Her objective is to create a 100% happy environment, where the children can practice unity and learn to accept responsibility.
- Zoe was accompanied to Yenangaung by two additional trainees from P.S.I.E. which brought the total of P.S.I.E. trained teachers (at various stages of their training) to seven. Unfortunately, one of the new trainees has had to return to Yangon because of her mother's serious illness.
- Already now, Zoe finds that the standard at LOL has improved. The students' attitude is more positive; they have developed routine in answering questions (something totally foreign to Myanmar culture!), enjoy board games and reading, willingly carry out housekeeping duties and participate on the student council.
- Regrettably we had to let go of one P.S.I.E trainee, a young woman who had done her schooling at Light of Love and was chosen for teacher training because of her excellent exams and aptitude for teaching. She disregarded the rules set by P.S.I.E. several times and gave private tuition outside the school, collecting money for lessons she gave. This led to an immediate termination of her contract during her teaching practical at LOL, which made the end especially sad.
- Plans for the pre-school, mentioned in the last report are progressing. On the local side, all paperwork is done and approved. The final OK for the grant now lies with the Magway District Office.
- Once the grant is approved, construction can begin. A Swiss company in Bern, one of whose management team members stayed at Lei Thar Gone a few years ago, donated \$3'700 for the Montessori teaching material that will be required. Some items can be ordered in Mandalay, most will have to be imported from Singapore. Thank you, Yolanda Nydegger, and Hervorragend AG!
- Martina, a P.S.I.E. teacher, trained in Montessori methods in India, is Zoe's competent advisor in all matters concerning the pre-school. Currently another P.S.I.E. teacher is in India, training to teach the Montessori curriculum to 7 – 12-year-olds. This is an encouraging development for the future.
- Some everyday tasks are accomplished with relative ease – for example the school bus license was successfully renewed in September.
- Other issues remain challenging – for example financial matters. At present, the only way to transfer money to Myanmar is via Western Union. This way hangs by a thread because personal or social WU accounts are frequently closed without notice and without a reason given. Besides this, cash withdrawals from local bank accounts are often limited, with limits varying, depending on the unpredictable regulations that apply on any given day.

- Another extremely challenging issue was and still is, the extension of the school license. In spite of the fact that the license was still valid, the Ministry of Education demanded a resubmitting of the application because of changes of form and requirements – nota bene changes instigated by them. In October, Zoe was forced to leave her classes in Yangon and return to Yenangyaung in order to update the information, take new photos and accomplish the extensive paper work. The application then had to be signed and submitted by Zoe in Magway – personally and in quadruplicate.

*Update by Therese: on 02.01.2024 Zoe received the news that her extension was **insufficient** and had to be re-submitted **again**, with a whole list of new requirements.*

- On November 21st a group of doctors and nurses from Yenangyaung Hospital came to Light of Love, as required by the Government. They checked on the health of the children and lectured them on the basics of hygiene. The feedback that Zoe received was very positive: the children are smart, they know how to answer questions and have the required basic knowledge of hygiene. They identified only one child – in grade 1 – that has a problem with her eyes and Zoe will need to take her to a clinic.
- The term ended on 21st of December and was followed by «Sports Day» on the 22nd and the «Christmas Celebration» on the 23rd. Here some photos of the two highlights:

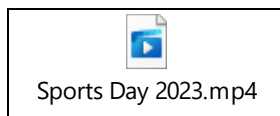


Sports Day: the children had vests in different colours to mark the various teams. Zoe bought the fabric and because the necessary sewing machine was not available in Yenangyaung, the vests were sewn by students in a convent in Mandalay – giving the convent some extra income.

The students really loved the Sports Day – a certainty easily seen by their expressions!



Here a short video that shows how much energy the children still had **at the end of the day!**



Sports Day 2023.mp4

Everybody was excited and happy for the Christmas Celebration to begin. The school was decorated by the students and the teachers



Parents were also invited to the Christmas Celebration – and they came in large numbers...



Zoe's dog Jack happily took part in the Celebration



Lots of games were part of the fun....



A festive atmosphere!

Lei Thar Gone Guest House News

As with LOL, the situation at the Guest House remains very challenging – mainly due to the absence of guests, or otherwise said – the absence of income, as well as ever-present maintenance work.

- On the positive side – after the new retaining wall was completed (photos in the last report) it was possible to repair the loose tiles in the pool, scrub the floor and walls, refill it and hope for clear blue and inviting water – definitely a successful project!



- Daily work is often interrupted by the frequent power cuts. Fortunately, the water pump can be operated with solar power, so that there is always enough water available for the plants – ensuring that Lei Thar Gone remains an attractive, lush retreat.
- Challenges facing Lyon are:
 - income tax which has to be paid even if there is no income as the calculations are based on previous years
 - the tense political situation which has become more strained because the government is short on cash because of the imposed sanctions
 - unusually heavy rainfall in September increasing worries about landslides – again! Rain also damaged bathrooms, causing various cracks in ceilings which now require repairs

- government warnings about gambling, drug abuse and weapons in hotels makes it risky to accept unknown guests
 - the labour office which regularly changes rules, laws and regulations
 - all flights from Yangon to Magway were cancelled, making travel to Yenangyaung more difficult
 - petrol is rationed and so travel becomes a challenge, lack of petrol even forcing Lyon to travel back to Yenangyaung by bus. In Yangon, he queued for petrol at 4am, waiting three hours in order to get 2 gallons (7.5lt) by far not enough to travel back to Yenangyaung
- In spite of these challenges Lyon tries to remain positive – he says «when the rainclouds go, the sun will appear» An admirable attitude under these difficult circumstances!
 - Again, on the positive side, Lyon completed a 3-day course for Applied Management For Hospitality Studies in Magway. Besides learning new things, the course provided a valuable opportunity to network with other hotel or guesthouse owners and share common uncertainties and concerns.



- A fully booked Guest House on December 2nd was another very positive experience which provided some welcome income. A doctor from Magway and his wife regularly visit Lei Thar Gone for a weekend stay. A few months ago, their daughter celebrated her engagement and on December 2nd her wedding! Four rooms stayed for two nights, ten rooms just for one. But even though it was a strenuous and demanding weekend, leaving mountains of laundry to be done, it was a positive achievement and reminded us of what used to be and will hopefully be again in the near future!

This report was written by Therese, in collaboration with Zoe & Lyon