

# SOMPOP JANTRAKA

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## WHY HAS SOMPOP BEEN NOMINATED?

Sompop Jantraka has been nominated for the 2013 World's Children's Prize for his almost 25-year struggle against trafficking and exploitation of children in the sex industry and other harmful forced labour.

SOMPOP grew up in poverty and started working at the age of six. His organisation DEPDC/GMS (Development Education Programme for Daughters and Communities/ Greater Mekong Sub-Region) has given thousands of poor children from throughout the Mekong Region – Thailand, Laos, Burma, Cambodia, Vietnam and China – protection and education. Many of these children belong to indigenous ethnic groups who are treated badly in their home countries and live in dire poverty. Often these children are not registered at birth, so they don't have citizenship and often cannot attend school as a result. Sompop's work has earned him many enemies, but despite death threats he has managed to build up a school and vocational training centre, two safe homes for particularly vulnerable children, a 24-hour crisis phonenumber, and a radio and TV station run by young people. Sompop saves children from being lured into the child sex trade by giving them knowledge, safety, self-esteem and faith in the future.



**Sompop Jantraka grew up in a poor family in southern Thailand and had to work to survive from the age of six. He would dig ditches and wells, mine for minerals and gather rubbish and bottles on the street to make money for food and school fees. That's why it came naturally to Sompop to begin fighting for children's rights to go to school and against the human trafficking that affects tens of thousands of children in South East Asia every year.**

**A**t the age of ten, Sompop goes with his mother to work in a mine. He and his six siblings mine for minerals and sieve and wash gravel and stones. Every time the minerals in a mine run out, the family have to find a new place to work. In some of the places there are no schools. Since Sompop is the oldest son, his parents decide that he should

stay with relatives so that he can study.

Sompop misses his family, but he loves school. His relatives are poor too, so he takes every job he can get. The days are long, but sometimes he can even afford to buy an ice-cream.

When he is twelve, a graveyard in his area is to be moved. It's his job to dig up all the old bones and clothes. Sometimes he finds coins

too! Another job for skinny young boys is digging wells. They are narrow and at least fifteen metres deep. The first time Sompop digs himself down into the darkness, he trembles in fear. He knows that other children have suffocated down wells.

**Abandoned by their father** Sompop's father abandons the family, and his mother has to support them on her own. Sompop sends all the money he earns home. He can no longer afford to eat or buy a school uniform. He almost decides to drop out. But then a new teacher comes to his school. Her name is Becky, and she is a volunteer teacher from another country.

Becky is an adult, but she still treats Sompop and the other children with politeness and respect. She doesn't





**Sompop worked all the way through school, doing anything from garbage removal to weeding to building dog kennels for his teachers.**

### **Adventure guide in the jungle**

While studying at university, Sompop works as an adventure guide for foreign tourists who want to walk in the mountains and jungles of northern Thailand. Some of the tourists work for organisations that fight for the rights of the child and against child labour. Sompop learns a lot from them. He learns even more through meeting the hill tribes in the remote mountain villages. He begins to understand more of their cultures and languages, but he also sees that many of them live in poverty and are treated badly by the authorities. It is worst for the children.

Sompop then starts to work with Michiho Inagaki, a Japanese journalist. Together they interview young girls at brothels in Bangkok. At this

time, nobody wants to talk openly about the growing sex industry in Thailand, even though thousands of tourists come here from all over the world to visit bars and brothels. Sompop is shocked by the girls' stories. They are treated like slaves. If they try to escape they face harsh punishment. Many are from poor mountain villages and have been tricked into coming here with promises of jobs as maids. Others have been sold by their own parents.

### **Gangs sell children**

Sompop travels north to the Golden Triangle, a dangerous area where the mountainous regions of Thailand, Vietnam, Burma and Laos meet. Criminal gangs have been selling drugs and weapons in this area for

beat the children, like other teachers do. Instead she uses games, comic strips, pictures and exciting stories to awaken their interest. Sompop learns English and lots of interesting things about history and culture. This helps him see the world, and his own life, in a different light. Many people are expecting Sompop to quit school soon and start working full time. It's too expensive to go to high school – all the others in his class come from rich families. But when Sompop finishes primary school with top marks, a teacher tells him about a school in another city that has places for poor students – but only if they pass the difficult entrance exams.

Sompop takes the train to the school. He doesn't know anyone in this new city, so for the first few nights he sleeps on the streets. Everything is feeling hopeless when suddenly a boy his age pops up and asks:

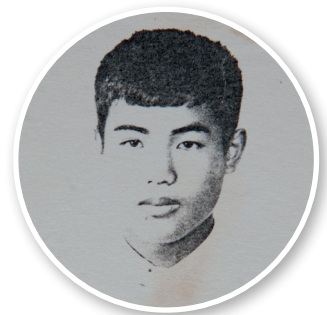
“What are you doing here?”

“Looking for a place to stay.”

“Come stay with me!”

Sompop follows the boy to a ramshackle old building behind the temple. They enter, and the first thing that

hits them is a horrific stench. Once Sompop's eyes have grown used to the darkness, he sees piles of dead bodies, coffins and old clothes all over the floor and stacked right up to the ceiling. Still, Sompop is glad to have found somewhere to sleep. For two weeks, the boys study together. Then Sompop passes the entrance exams and gets a place in the school dormitory.



**Sompop and his organisation work to prevent trafficking and protect children from the mountain regions of Thailand, Burma, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and the Yunnan province of China. This is called the Mekong Region, and there are many dangerous gangs here who trade in drugs, weapons and people across these borders.**





almost a hundred years. These gangs have now started buying and selling children and women too. The centre of the trafficking industry in this area is in the small town of Mae Sai, by the border with Burma.

When Sompop comes here for the first time, in 1989, there are almost 60 brothels in this small town. The girls there are abused and made ready to live their lives as brothel slaves. They are told never to say where they come from, or their real age. They are given fake ID documents and sold to tourist resorts in Thailand and countries like Malaysia, Japan and Singapore.

One evening in Mae Sai, Sompop meets a tourist from Australia who has been com-

ing to Thailand for the last fifteen years to buy sex with young girls. He takes Sompop on a tour of the town. The man knows girls at almost every brothel. He jokes with the children, making funny faces and making them laugh. Many of the girls call him 'daddy'! But he exploits many of them, even ten-year-olds. And he's not one bit ashamed.

"They should be in school," says Sompop.

"No," says the man. "They can't go to school because they have no money and nobody wants them."

"Maybe," says Sompop. "But that can be changed!"

### Many earn money through the girls

Sompop starts travelling around the hill tribe villages. Wherever he goes he meets people who earn money

through trafficking. Some parents sell their own daughters. Some believe that the girls are going to work at hotels or restaurants while others may know that they will end up in the sex industry. Some people get paid for information on which girls might be for sale. Taxi drivers transport the victims to the border, while law enforcement officials are bribed to turn a blind eye. Even the religious leaders don't protest. Most villages have hardly any girls left over the age of 13.

"What are you doing?!" says Sompop to the villagers in dismay. "Don't you have any children who want to go to school?"

The villagers laugh at Sompop. They think it's good that the children go away to work, and they nod towards a

few teenage girls from the Akha peoples, who have changed from traditional dress to jeans. They are ready to leave the village. Sompop asks the girls: "Do you want to go to school?"

"Yes," replies one of them, "but my mother already accepted some money, so I can't."

Sompop points at some younger girls and asks:

"What about them?"

"They'll go next year," someone explains.

"She has been booked already," says one of the villagers.

Sompop realises that some children need extra protection. For example, children whose parents drink or take drugs. Or who have a parent with HIV or AIDS, or another serious illness, and who need money for medicine.

Mae, 12, from Burma and Julie, 15, from China, live at one of Sompop's safe homes for girls. Neither of them can live with their parents. Mae's mother is dead and her father has had to move hundreds of miles away to find work. Julie's mother is very ill. At Sompop's home in the city of Mae Chan they are protected from the criminal gangs who are on the lookout for vulnerable girls, and they can go to school instead of working.



## Earning from children's

EVERY CHILD who is sold and exploited is surrounded by adults earning money from their misery. Sompop calls it a 'bloodsucker cycle' where adults suck every penny they can get out of their children.

Parents often get an 'advance' on the children's 'wages', which the children need to work to pay off. But high interest levels mean that the debt quickly grows and can never be paid

back. The children become debt slaves.

- Agents, people in the villages, give tip-offs on vulnerable children, and also get paid to turn a blind eye.
- Taxi drivers take the victims to the border, and also get paid to drive customers to brothels and bars.
- Traffickers who are linked to criminal gangs earn money by buying and selling children like commodities.





It is worst for the children who have already been sexually abused, sometimes by their stepfathers. They are seen as damaged goods, and people think that makes them well suited to working as slaves in the sex industry.

“Nobody cares, or takes this problem seriously,” thinks Sompop. “People think they’re ‘only children’. But I’m going to save as many girls as I can. And the only way to do that is to get hold of them before they are sold to the traffickers. After that it’s too late.”

**Campaign of persuasion**

Sompop finds 35 girls from different villages who are soon to be sent away. He tries to persuade their parents to let them go to school instead, and offers to pay the school fees. He pleads and shouts, nags and asks: “Are you just

going to give up all hope.”

The situation becomes like a competition between Sompop and the traffickers.

Finally, Sompop goes home and manages to scrape together the money for school fees and uniforms. When he returns to the villages, half of the girls have disappeared already. Their parents couldn’t wait. But there are 19 girls left. Most of them live far and have trouble getting to and from the school in town every day. Some of the girls need protection from violent stepfathers, drug abuse in the family, or threats from criminal gangs. So Sompop has to arrange school and accommodation for all the girls. He talks with the parents again and says that they must sign a contract, just like the traffickers.



Many of the girls come from Burma (Myanmar).

“I promise to take care of your children as though they were my own daughters, for at least three years. You promise that they will be allowed to finish school. If you break the contract, you have to pay the money back.”

All the parents sign the contract. This is the beginning of Sompop’s own organisation: Daughters Education Program.

Along with a young teacher, Alinda, Sompop establishes a school and a home for the girls, in the town of Mae Sai. Things are tough to begin with, not only because they don’t have enough money. The girls have poor self-esteem and are afraid. Sompop encourages them to learn more about themselves and the world around them. Sometimes he almost weeps



# misery

- Pimps and owners of brothels and bars take almost all the money the children earn.
- Some local guides take tourists to bars and brothels and get a percentage of the money they pay. Many global travel companies also earn money from child sex tourism.
- Some banks lend money to brothel owners and trafficking networks and earn interest.
- Some religious leaders do not protest when children are sold and, according to their faith, they don’t turn down gifts of money, even if the money comes from trafficking.
- Some doctors are paid to write false health certificates for the children.
- Some law enforcement officials and civil servants are bribed to turn a blind eye to trafficking.
- Some politicians are linked to the trafficking industry and criminal gangs, for example, treating the criminals well in return for donations to their election campaigns.



A lot of people everywhere make money from child trafficking.







➔ **MOD, 12, belongs to the Akha hill tribe. Her family fled to Thailand from Burma before she was born. Mod's father died when she was very young, and her mother is too ill to take care of her. In the village where Mod grew up with her grandmother, many people drink too much. Arguments and fights often break out in the evenings. Girls of Mod's age, from poor families, need to be protected from the traffickers, otherwise they are at risk of being sold and exploited, sometimes in the sex industry. That's why Mod now lives at Sompop's safe home for girls, near the border with Laos. Her grandmother misses her, but she knows that Mod has a chance of a better future if she gets an education.**

for them. He wants to shake them and shout: "Wake up! Get moving, speak up, say what you think, stand up for yourselves!"

This is when Sompop decides that his school has to be different.

"Ordinary schools might be fine for children who have a good life already," he says to Alinda, the teacher. "But our children need more. They have to learn to read, write and count, but more than anything they need skills and knowledge that will help them through life. They're safe here at school but they can't stay here for ever. That's why we will teach them about trafficking, and the rights of the child, and about their own culture. Then they'll be able to protect themselves."

**"We're going to kill you!"**

Sompop begins to speak openly about the need to end trafficking, for example, in newspapers and with politicians. Before long he has made some powerful enemies among the people who earn a lot of money through human trafficking. The telephone

rings in the middle of the night and threatening voices hiss: "Leave town, or we'll kill you" and "We're going to burn your school to the ground". Sompop is not afraid for his own safety, but he's worried about his wife and two young children. So for almost ten years, he doesn't dare to live with his family, out of fear that they might be attacked. He meets

up with them in secret, in another town.

Law enforcement individuals visit Sompop several times. They are angry, and they say that he is destroying Thailand's reputation. He has to stop saying that children are sold as slaves and forced to work. He must not criticise the police, the army or the politicians. But Sompop will not be silenced:



## Spirit house gives protection

Outside Sompop's schools and safe houses in northern Thailand there are miniature houses called 'spirit houses'. These exist all over Thailand, for spirits that are said to guard everything from homes and schools to paddy fields, factories, football pitches and temples. Every day, people light incense and leave fruit, flowers, soft drinks and sweets beside the houses, for the wellbeing of the spirits.





Sompop uses his knowledge and his sense of humour to help children to believe in themselves and become the leaders of the future.

“We can’t just sweep this problem under the carpet. This is reality!”

**The fight continues**

Today, almost 25 years have passed since Sompop began his work. The first 19 ‘daughters’ are adults and many of them now work with Sompop as leaders and teachers. Other ‘daughters’ have founded their

own projects, forming part of Sompop’s large network, and are fighting trafficking throughout the Mekong Region. Together, Sompop and his young students have built up a movement that has given protection and education to thousands of poor children. But much remains to be done. Every year, tens of thousands of children

still become victims of trafficking.

“We’ll never give up. It pains me to see girls locked up and abused in the brothels. With every child we save, we make the future a little better,” says Sompop. 🌍



## How Sompop and his organisation work

Here are some of the things Sompop and DEPDC/GMS run:

- A school for hundreds of poor children who would otherwise be forced to work and would be at risk of being sold to traffickers. As well as ordinary school subjects, they are taught useful life skills.
- Safe homes for children who are unable to live with their families because of the risk of being sold or exploited, or who have been orphaned or abandoned.
- Leadership training for poor children and young people from the hill tribe groups.
- A radio and TV station where children can learn to use the media to make their voices heard, and raise awareness of trafficking and the rights of the child, in the native languages of the mountain peoples.
- An open evening school for older youth, parents and monks in the border area between Thailand and Burma.
- Schools and organic agriculture projects in the poor mountain villages.
- Campaigning to influence legislation and attitudes to children and trafficking.

## Colour instead of uniform!

In Thailand, almost all school children wear school uniforms and even have a particular school hairstyle (short for boys, mid-length for girls!) but Sompop wants his school to be a place of freedom. The children are allowed to dress however they want, but just for fun, the school has its own colour scheme that the children can follow if they want!



Tuesday: Pink

Monday: Yellow

Thursday: Dark blue sports jersey

Wednesday: Sky blue

Friday: Traditional clothes



Susanae, 12, crosses the border from her homeland, Burma, to Thailand every day. She and other poor Burmese children receive free education at Sompop's school. This also protects them from human trafficking and child labour.

# Susanae



## Child rights radio!

SUSANAЕ AND HER FRIEND JAN KAM are about to broadcast their first radio program on the school radio station: Child Voice Radio! There is a lot to keep track of. "The hardest thing is changing between talking and music, putting the volume of one up while turning the other down!"

Sompop believes that using the media is a good way for children to make their voices heard. That's why the children learn to make radio and TV programs at school. The TV programs are shown on the school's YouTube channel. Child Voice Radio is broadcast throughout the border area between Burma and Thailand, in the different languages of the hill tribes, six days a week. The students are the DJs and they decide what to talk about. They make programs about everything from children's rights to news and music. Susanae already knows what her next program is going to be about.

"We want to talk about things that happen at school, and about health," says Susanae, who also wants to talk about what life is like for children in her home village.

"If I didn't attend Sompop's school I would have to work. In my village, the rights of the child are not really respected. I wish that my parents didn't work so much, so that we would have time to talk to one another. Sometimes adults are not good at listening to children – they just shout at us instead. Maybe because they're tired."



5.30 a.m.

Wake up in Burma!



08.00 a.m. Cramped but cosy

A rickety old school bus waits near the border for all the children to squeeze in.

08.30 a.m. Sawadee! Hi!

The day begins with singing in the schoolyard, under the Thai flag.



09.00 a.m. Language learning

Susanae loves learning new languages like Chinese and English.



06.00 a.m. Pedal to Thailand

Susanae cycles towards the border, picking up her schoolmates on the way.

07.00 a.m. Cross the border

The children used to have to swim across the river to get to school in secret. But now everyone knows about Sompop and his school. The people at the border trust Susanae to come back to Burma in the afternoon.



11.30 a.m. Lunchtime chat

Susanae tells her big brother Pek what's happening at home. He is doing Sompop's leadership training course for young people, and he lives at the school.





# crosses the border to get to school



## Midday Rubber band games

Who can jump the highest? In a game called Yang you push the rubber band down with your feet while it's being held above waist height!



## 12.30 p.m. Clean-up time

Susanae and her school friends are helping to keep the schoolyard nice and tidy.



## 14.00 p.m. Cooking lessons

In the afternoon there are practical lessons where the students learn wood-work, sewing, weaving, computing and cooking. Today Susanae is making a delicious banana dessert!



## 5.30 p.m. Homework!



## 4.00 p.m. Race against time!

The Burmese children hurry to the border, which closes at six o'clock. Once Susanae arrived too late and had to sleep at school!



## 9.00 p.m. Good night!

After a long day it's easy to fall asleep beside her little brother, mother and father.





# Fanta protected from

Fanta is eight years old when her father disappears. Her mother says that he has a new job in a far away place, but he never sends any money home and it's hard for the family to survive. The traffickers are always searching for poor girls like Fanta. In some villages in her area, there are hardly any girls over the age of 13 left.

It takes time for Fanta to realise that her father really is gone. He hasn't been at home that much recently, because he took a second wife. Fanta belongs to the Hmong people, who have a tradition that men can have several wives. Fanta thinks this is unfair, because women aren't allowed to have several husbands. Her father begins by moving between his two families, but one day he just doesn't come back.

"Why does dad never come home?" asks Fanta.

Her mother replies that he's working far away from home and doesn't have time. But it just doesn't make sense. If he's working, why does he never send any money home? The family hardly have enough money to buy food and all the children have to stop going to school. One day, Fanta's mother says that Fanta and her little brother Sak are going to have to go away.

"You're going to live at a temple where they take good care of orphaned children," she says. She explains that





# traffickers



One night fourteen years ago, Fanta was born in the family's house, built from bamboo with a roof of palm leaves. The house only has two tiny rooms, but according to Fanta's mother, her Father still managed to sleep through her birth!



Fanta and her family have hung a fabric amulet above the front door to protect their home against evil spirits!

she can't take care of them any longer. Their older siblings can work, but Fanta is only ten years old and Sak is eight.

"It'll be better for you, you'll be able to go to school there," says their mother when they start to cry.

## Overcrowded temple

Fanta and Sak move to the temple, dozens of miles away. They have to squeeze into dormitories with 200 other children who also come from poor Hmong villages. They

are given food and they can go to school, but Fanta is homesick.

"There are too many children and not enough adults, they can't take very good care of us," says Fanta to Sak.

One Saturday morning, Sak and his friends sneak out and run down to the river to play. It's against the rules for the children to go there, because they can't swim. Sak and his friends peel fruit and throw the skin in the water to see whose floats the fastest. Suddenly one boy trips and falls over the edge, down into the swirling waters. Sak jumps forward and grabs his hand, but he is pulled down into the water too. The boys struggle desperately, but they can't stay afloat. When their

friends see them disappear under the surface they run as fast as they can back to the temple.

"Help! They're drowning!"

Fanta rushes to the river with the other children and the monks. She runs along the riverbank, scouring the waters, but it's too late. The only thing she sees is one of Sak's shoes, bobbing on the surface. After many hours of searching, they find the boys. When their bodies are laid out next to one another, Fanta can't believe that Sak

is dead. He looks like he's sleeping.

## Helping the spirits

When Fanta comes home with her little brother's body, her mother says she doesn't have to go back to the temple. Fanta is glad about that, despite her grief.

The funeral goes on for three days. Her little brother's body is dressed in the finest Hmong clothes and laid in



## Pet beetle

The youngest children in Fanta's village have big beetles as their pets and toys!





➤ a wicker coffin. The villagers sing special songs and play drums. When the coffin is carried to the burial ground, a torchbearer leads the way, so that Sak doesn't get lost on the way to the spirit life.

"Everybody has three spirits," says Fanta's mother. "One is reborn, one guards the body, and one is a spirit that guards our home."

Fanta is certain now, that she'll finally see her father. Surely he will come to her little brother's funeral? But he doesn't turn up. Something really is wrong.

Fanta is allowed to start going to the little village school. Her mother and her older siblings work hard so that they can pay her school fees.

Two more years pass, until one day her mother suddenly says:

"Tomorrow we will see your father. He's in prison."

At first Fanta is speechless.

"Why didn't you tell us before?"

"I didn't want to make life harder for you. If you had known that your father was in prison you wouldn't have



Fanta's parents and older siblings come from Laos. Fanta was the first in the family to be born in Thailand.

been able to concentrate on your school work."

Fanta doesn't agree. She is sad that her father is in jail, but even more sad that nobody told her.

### Prison visit

Fanta's mother explains that her father has been sentenced to 25 years' imprisonment for drug smuggling. He says he's not guilty, and that may be true. He was arrested by the police at the border between Thailand and Burma, in the

city of Mae Sai. Gangs sometimes take advantage of poor hill tribe people there.

Sometimes they conspire to frame people like Fanta's father for crimes that the gangs have committed. The punishments for drug crimes in Thailand are among the toughest in the world.

"If you plead not guilty, you run the risk of being sentenced to death. We couldn't afford a lawyer. When you are poor you have no chance," says Fanta's mother.

It takes two hours to travel to the prison in town. They have to walk the last bit of the journey, past high white walls with barbed wire and broken glass along the top. There is a long queue outside the entrance to the prison and Fanta is surprised to see so



Traditional Hmong clothes.

### Fanta's wardrobe

Fanta belongs to the Hmong people, who have lived in the Mekong area for hundreds of years.

"We have our own culture, language and clothes. These days I don't wear Hmong clothes all that often. Most of the young people prefer jeans and casual clothes for everyday wear. But to join in with our festivals you have to wear traditional clothes. My mother made my beautiful clothes. I really like getting dressed up!"



This work hat protects against dirt and dust!



School uniform!





### Fanta, 14

**Lives:** At Sompop's home for girls at the border with Laos.

**Likes:** Drawing and painting.

**Happy when:** Playing sport!

**Angry when:** Children are forced to work.

**Favourite food:** Pumpkin soup, oranges and strawberries.

**Dream:** For all children to be able to go to school!

**Wants to be:** A volleyball star.



Comfortable everyday clothes!

many children. She thought she was the only child with a parent in prison.

Four heavy metal doors clang shut behind Fanta. Her father's name is shouted out, and a guard shows them into a small room. It is divided by a wall with a window in it. Fanta and her father begin to cry as soon as they see one another.

Her father lifts the telephone handset on his side of the glass. First he talks with Fanta's mother, then with her older brother. Fanta thinks about all the things she'll say when it's her turn. But suddenly a voice announces through the speaker: "Five minutes left!". Fanta's father is only allowed a one-hour visit, once a year. When the time runs out, neither Fanta nor her little sister has had a chance to talk to him.

### Protection from gangs

Fanta's mother can't read or write, and she remembers how sad she was that she couldn't go to school.

"When I was your age I was already married," she tells Fanta. "We fled from Laos to Thailand before you were born. In the mountains in Laos there were no schools or roads, nothing to eat, and no jobs. The Hmong people were treated badly. We couldn't survive there. Don't be foolish like your mother! Work hard at your studies. If I had the chance I'd start school now, even though I'm old!"

Fanta is in her final year at the little village school. Her family can't afford to send her

**When Fanta goes home to visit, she helps her mother in the fields and collects wood. They get up at 4.30 in the morning, eat breakfast and make a packed lunch.**

**"We leave the house at six o'clock and walk to our field. It takes almost an hour. Then we work all day. But I don't get tired – I'm really strong."**



to study in the city, where the schools are expensive. Just when everything seems hopeless, P'tu, a woman from the city, comes to visit the village. She is the principal of a home for girls who need extra protection and support. The home was founded by Sompop Jantraka and his organisation.

**Fanta and her mother miss one another a lot. But her mother wants Fanta to go to school and to be protected from the traffickers. That's why Fanta has to live many miles from her home village, at Sompop's safe house.**

"Girls like Fanta need to be protected from the traffickers," explains P'tu. "Fanta is just at the age the gangs are looking for. If she stays in the village, there is a high risk that she'll be a victim. In some villages in this area, there are hardly any girls left who are older than 13 or 14."

### The last night

Fanta's mother is worried about sending her away. She'll never forget what happened to Fanta's brother Sak. But P'tu lets Fanta visit the







### Mushrooms against trafficking

Fanta and the other girls at Sompop's home grow a popular kind of mushroom and sell them. The money goes towards the fight against trafficking!

home and the school several times. She and her mother decide that she will move there.

The night before she leaves, Fanta sleeps beside her mother for the first time since she was little. Her mother holds her tight and whispers in the darkness.

"Be a good girl and work hard at school. Don't fall in with the wrong crowd. And try not to miss me too much. I'm sure rich children are good at lots of things but they don't know anything about how to harvest corn or sow rice. You are strong, you can do anything!"

The next morning, Fanta's mother wakes her extra early so that they can spend as much time together as possible before her departure.

Two girls from other villages are already sitting in Ptu's car when she arrives. As they jolt off down the bumpy dirt track, Fanta waves goodbye to her family and friends.

When they arrive at Sompop's safe home for girls, Fanta unpacks, chooses a bed and learns the names of her new friends. That night, she falls asleep in an instant.

### Misses her mother

After a few months, Fanta feels at home at the center in Chiang Khong. All the girls attend a school close to the home, and in the evenings

and weekends they learn about problems that are common in the hill tribe villages. They discuss drugs and alcohol and illnesses like HIV and AIDS. They learn about the rights of the child, as well as practical skills like cooking and sewing. Fanta is happy here, but she misses her family.

"I'm worried about my mother. She needs my help in the rice fields. But I have to go to school and she supports me," says Fanta.

Fanta has seen her father one more time since that first visit. This time he wasn't behind a pane of glass, he was out in the prison yard. They could hug one another and talk.

"I love my father and I miss him, but I wish he had never left us. I think it's wrong that men have more power than women in my village," says Fanta. "Boys and girls should be treated equally. If I get married in the future, I won't agree to my husband having more wives."

Fanta's father still has many years of his prison sentence left.

"I think the punishments here are too harsh," says Fanta. "The families that are left behind out here can't manage. I admire my mother and the way she has taken such good care of us. Without her we wouldn't have survived."



At Sompop's safe house for girls, everyone helps to cook, clean and wash clothes.

"Even boring tasks become fun when we do them together," says Fanta.



The girls help one another with their homework after dinner.

## Children who need protection

CHILDREN LIKE FANTA, who belong to the indigenous hill tribes of northern Thailand, Burma, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia and the Yunnan province of China, are often poor and their rights are not respected. There is a high risk that they will be tricked by traffickers and forced to work, for example in the sex industry. Some children need extra protection, such as children like Fanta who have one parent in jail.

At the home there are also girls who have:

- parents and/or siblings who work in the sex industry
- drug or alcohol addiction in the family
- parents with serious illnesses, such as HIV or AIDS
- been subjected to sexual abuse
- fled their homelands because of oppression and/or poverty and do not have a residence permit.





## Dangerous area for children!

CHIANG KHONG is beside the border with Laos. More and more traffickers are looking for children in this area, especially since Sompop and others began their successful fight against the criminal gangs near the border with Burma. Sompop has built a safe home in Chiang Khong to protect the most vulnerable children, the ones who are at risk of being sold to traffickers if they stay in their villages.

Sompop's colleagues travel around the villages telling children and their parents about the rights of the child and about what can happen to children if they are sent to big cities and tourist resorts to work.

## Fanta is a sport freak!

FANTA LOVES PRETTY MUCH all kinds of sport.

"I want to be a professional athlete when I grow up. My dream would be to play



volleyball for Thailand! I don't think anyone from the Hmong tribe has ever played at such a high level – I might be the first!"

Fanta plays volleyball for her school.

"We compete against other schools and we have won several times. I'm at my happiest when I'm playing some kind of sport. I really love competing and I never give up. I always keep fighting, because I love to win!"

Fanta also loves table ten-

nis, football and most of all wicker ball, or takraw (which means ball in Thai). Takraw is an ancient and very popular Thai sport which is like a mixture of volleyball, football and martial arts, and is played with a rattan ball.







The girls in the village love to play ball games!

### Apia, 12

"I often have to take care of my younger brother and do the house-work, because my mother has to work so much."

**Likes:** Maths and Burmese. It's good to be able to count, for example when you go to the shop!

**Loves:** Cycling. Especially cycling fast down steep hills.

**Happy that:** My father has been released from prison and lives with us again.

**Wants to be:** A singer.

**Dream:** To be able to go to university. I also want all the children in my village to be able to go to school.



### H, 12

"I love my parents, but they are old and sick so we are very poor."

**Likes:** Studying Burmese, reading books and magazines, writing and playing ball games!

**Wants to be:** A doctor. I have asthma and my doctor helped me feel better.

**Angry because:** So many children are not able to go to school. They have to take care of younger siblings or move away to work.

**Happy when:** My brother comes home so the whole family is together.



# Angkana's secret struggle

Angkana was eleven years old the first time she crossed the border from the dictatorship of Burma to attend Sompop's school in Thailand. Now, twelve years later, she is following in Sompop's footsteps and helping Burmese children get an education. But she has to work in secret, and does not want to show her face. Burma can still be a dangerous place to fight for the rights of the child.

"Sompop's school was so different," explains Angkana. "We were taught both theoretical knowledge and practical skills. And I learned how to think freely!"

The poor border areas of Burma are mostly populated by hill tribes.

"We have the lowest level of education in the whole of Burma," says Angkana. "There is no money, and there are far too few teachers."

**Girls making a difference**  
When Angkana was 15 she attended Sompop's first ever leadership training course,





Angkana is following in Sompop's footsteps by working in secret to help the children in Burma's mountain villages. She doesn't want to be recognised and so that's why she doesn't show her face when she's talking to H, Amoko and Apia.

with girls from all over the Mekong Region (Thailand, Burma, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos). They called themselves the Mekong Youth Net.

"We learned about our countries and cultures, about how to interview children and how to set up an organisation. We also studied human trafficking and the rights of the child."

Many of Angkana's friends of the same age had left Burma to work in Thailand.

"When their parents went looking for them, they were gone without a trace. While studying on Sompop's course, I suddenly realised that my friends had probably become victims of trafficking."

### Helping Burmese children

Today Angkana herself works in secret to defend children's rights in Burma.

"It can be difficult and dangerous to run an organisation

here, so we have to be extremely careful. I seek out the very poorest children who have a difficult home life. There is a high risk that they will be forced to stop school and start working. Some of their parents are sick or addicted to drugs. I give them money towards school fees and food, and take them to the doctor. I also tell the whole family about the dangers of sending children to work in Thailand."

Angkana gathers information about how life is for children living in the border area, which she gives to Sompop and his organisation, to help them plan their work better.

"I look up to Sompop and the others who were my teachers at his school," says Angkana. ☺

Apia on her bike.



### Amoko, 12

"I have six siblings and our dad has to work really hard for our sakes. My older siblings work too. I'm scared that soon I'll have to stop school to work and take care of my younger siblings."

**Likes:** Studying Burmese.

**Wants to be:** A teacher.

**Likes:** Being with my family and watching TV. One house in our village has a TV and we children usually gather there!

**Dream:** To travel and maybe move to Rangoon, the capital of Burma. And to build a playground in our village.



H, Apia and Amoko often play clapping games!

## Hill tribes' hard life in Burma

For a long time, Burma has been ruled with an iron fist by a military regime from the largest people group in Burma, the Burmese. The regime has persecuted all those in the country who fight for democracy, as well as all those who belong to different ethnic groups. The hill tribes, like the Akha and the Karen, have been treated particularly badly. Children's schools have been shut down, villages have been burnt to the ground, food deliveries have been stopped and the hill tribes have been exploited through forced labour. As a result, many of them have fled to Thailand. Now the situation in Burma has improved a little. Many political prisoners have been released, such as democracy champion and the World's Children's Prize patron, Aung San Suu Kyi. But the hill tribe peoples do not yet dare to believe that their lives could get better.





# Mae not allowed to swim for Thailand



**Bang! A shot echoes around the tiled walls and the girls dive down into the water from their starting blocks. Mae, 12, is the first to reach the other end. But her joy doesn't last long.**

“I love winning. It’s as though all the tiredness just runs off me,” says Mae, pulling off her wet swimming cap. “But afterwards I feel sad.”

Today Mae is competing in the regional championships in northern Thailand. The winners go through to the national youth championships. All of them except Mae.

“I don’t have Thai citizenship, although I’ve lived here my whole life. Whoever comes second will get my place.”

## Doesn't exist

Mae belongs to the Akha hill tribe. Her parents fled to Thailand from Burma. They

were poor and couldn’t find jobs. Eventually they started selling drugs to survive, but were caught by the police and sentenced to life in prison. At first Mae lived with her mother in the prison, but after a while she was able to move to Sompop’s home for orphaned and abandoned children.

“I started school and received food, love and care. They became like my new family. Still, it always feels like something is missing when you can’t live with your own parents.”

## Water brings health

Mae and the other girls at the

home had had difficult lives, and they often fell ill. Sompop had heard that water could have a healing effect, and took them to a swimming pool in town. But the man at the entrance desk looked irritably at the little girls in their torn clothes.

“They are not allowed in our pool – they look dirty,” he said.

Sompop was furious. He found another swimming pool, but the adults there said mean things too. Some parents didn’t want their children to share a pool with the children from the mountains.

“I’m going to build the best swimming pool in northern

Thailand,” said Sompop to his wife. “And any child who wants to swim in it can do so.”

Sompop used the last of his money to get the swimming pool built. Now the children could swim every day, and it soon became clear that Mae was fast as an arrow in the water.

## Mother died

After several years in prison, Mae’s mother fell ill and died.

“My father had his sentence cut. Now he’s working in China,” says Mae “I wish I could live with my dad all the time, but he wants me to be able to go to school. He’s very proud of me.”

When Mae started winning medals, many people were surprised.

How could a hill tribe girl swim faster than the rich children from exclusive private schools?

“That makes me proud! Even if I can’t swim for Thailand I can still swim for the Akha people!”

TEXT: CARMILLA FLOYD PHOTOS: KIM NAYLOR



Sompop often visits the village to talk with children and parents about their crops and their schoolwork.

## Sompop’s school for

Among the paddy fields outside the city of Mae Chan in northern Thailand, a whole village has been built by refugees from Burma. These families from the Akha hill tribe have fled poverty and forced labour. Life in Thailand wasn’t easy for them either, before Sompop came to their aid.

“AT THE BEGINNING we weren’t allowed to go to school and we had nothing to eat,” says Boo Su, 10 years old.

Nobody in the village has a Thai residence permit, not even the children who were born here. It’s hard for the villagers to find work. They don’t speak very good Thai and they

don’t have permits to move freely outside the village.

“If we leave the area, we are harassed by the police,” explains Boo Su’s father.

Even so, none of the villagers want to go back to Burma.

“The army forced us to work over 200 days a year for free,” says one of the village



Mae has an ID card that states that she is not a citizen of Thailand.



### Apia, 12

**Lives:** At Sompop's swimming home in Mae Chan.

**Happy when:** I win!

**Sad when:** I'm not allowed to compete in the Thai national championships.

**Loves:** My father, Sompop and my 'family' at the home.

**Wants to be:** A chef and a professional swimmer.

**Dream:** To swim in the Olympics. And to fight against trafficking, and for children's rights.



Mae has won lots of trophies and medals.



Mae and her friend Julie share a room at the home.



## Akha children

chiefs. "They took our food and livestock, and they beat us if we protested. Some rebel soldiers, who were fighting against the regime, treated us just as badly."

### Sompop built a school

Sompop heard that the children in the Akha village had no food and no school. He contacted one of his old students, a girl who belongs to the Akha tribe. She and Sompop started a school in the village, and an organic farm. Every family now has a little bit of land, where the children can learn to look

after their crops using traditional Akha methods along with their parents.



## Hat reveals age!

When an Akha girl becomes a teenager, she swaps her simple child's hat for an adult woman's headdress. It will change throughout her life, as she gradually decorates it with embroidery, beads, tassels, fur, feathers, silver coins and rings. Every headdress is unique, and the heavier it is, the more things it has hanging on it, the older the wearer is!

Boo Su, 12, wants to become a doctor or a teacher when she is older.



Boo Su's mother in her traditional Akha clothes.





# Adults don't understand young people

“MY MOTHER IS PROUD of me and my education because she can't read or write,” says Jan Nuan, 15. “Even so, sometimes she wants me to quit school and start working. That makes me sad. My father wants me to finish school so I can have a better job and life.”

Jan Nuan thinks adults don't know enough about trafficking.

“There are gangs that kidnap children and force them to work. I'm worried about my younger sisters. My parents work a lot and sometimes they have to leave us home alone for several days. They say we should lock the doors and not open them for anyone, but it doesn't feel safe.”

Jan Nuan's favourite thing is being with friends. She hates it when her parents fight.

“Adults don't understand us young people, and they often just do what they want. Sometimes I cry, alone in my room. But the teachers at Sompop's school are great listeners. There, I've become less shy and better at expressing myself. Sompop teaches us about life, and how to be more independent.”

Jan Nuan likes to study!



The young people on Sompop's leadership training course have to practice staring into one another's eyes. It's hard for them not to drop their gaze, as they usually do.

# Future leaders!

“Look one another in the eyes! Don't stare at the ground!” Sompop calls out to the young people doing leadership training at his school in Mae Sai. The young people from the mountains are not used to showing confidence. But Sompop says: “You are the leaders of the future!”

## B-boy is best!

“SOMPPOP IS A GREAT teacher and full of fun. He helps me to think and focus better,” says Nut, 15. He has started the school's first b-boy crew!

“I've learned some tricks from older friends and from YouTube. My favourite dance crew is called Jabbawockeez. They dance like they don't have any bones in their bodies!”

Nut's dream is to travel abroad to dance, but right now that's impossible. He was born to Burmese parents in Thailand and he has no birth certificate.

“I can't even travel outside Mae Sai without a special permit. The police have checkpoints where they



check everyone who is travelling south.”

“There are lots of problems with drugs and criminal gangs in Mae Sai,” says Nut.

“I often see girls at restaurants in tight clothes and short skirts, and I know they have to take guests to private rooms. I worry about my little sister, and I'm teaching her everything I can about how to protect yourself from trafficking.”

Nut





# Jan Hom wants to stop children from being sold



Jan Hom says many Thai people are prejudiced against the hill tribes.

“For example, they say that my people, the Tai Yai, are thieves! That makes me feel hurt and angry!”

When Jan Hom was eight, a man visited her foster parents' home. He said he would pay them if they let their daughter work at a restaurant in town. They said no.

“I WAS LITTLE and I didn't really understand. Now it makes me scared, thinking about what could have happened. If I had gone with him I probably wouldn't be alive today. So child trafficking is an issue that's close to my heart. I tell everyone I meet about it.

If we raise awareness we can stop more children from being sold and exploited. Many children from Burma are easy targets. They can't read or write and know nothing about their rights. They can't get jobs so they have to take illegal work. My neighbour's daughter travelled to Bangkok 20 years ago and disappeared. They still don't know if she's alive or dead. And I have lots of friends who have disappeared. Only one has come back. She said that in Bangkok she was locked in a room, and then taken to another country with some other girls. She doesn't want to talk about what happened there, but I don't think it was good.”

## Given away

Jan Hom's father died shortly after she was born in Burma. Her mother married again and had to move to the mountains with her new husband. She couldn't take Jan Hom with her.

“My mother asked our neighbours to bring me up as their own child. They were happy, because they really liked me, and their own daughter had died.”

Jan Hom and her foster parents live in a small bamboo house in Mae Sai, which Sompop's organisation helped them to find.

When Jan Hom was twelve, her mother came to visit from Burma for the first time.

“I was so happy. I had never understood why she didn't want me. She said it was difficult to give me up, but that she knew the neighbours loved me a lot and would give me a good home. Mum slept in my bed, and she cried and held me tight all night long.”

“I get so engrossed in stories about detectives, vampires or young people's lives!”

“I like Thai, Japanese and Korean pop music!”



“Knowledge can prevent more children from being sold. Many children don't know how to read or write, and don't know anything about their rights,” says Jan Hom.

Jan Hom and her foster father in front of the family home.

