

NEWS

Protests raise hopes

By Courtney Whalen

The Packet & Times

As Buddhist monks, students and activists continue to stage peaceful protests against the ruling junta in Myanmar (formerly Burma), Cathy and David Downham of Washago hope it's a turning point in a country where human rights

See A11 for more on Myanmar. abuses are the norm. The couple are the founders of Project Umbrella Burma, which works to deliver basic health care, education and a measure of security to displaced Karen children from Myanmar living in refugee camps in Thailand.

The Downhams work closely with the Karen, one of two ethnic groups who continue to resist the ruling junta and are therefore targeted.

"Karen is actually experiencing ethnic cleansing," said Cathy Downham.

Through their work, the Downhams have seen and heard tales of forced labour, villages being burned, supplies and livestock taken, rape and intimidation.

It's a plight the Downhams



Packet photo/Courtney Whalen

David and Cathy Downham pose with photos of some of the children they've worked with through Project Umbrella Burma.

have been trying to raise awareness of for years.

"It's international neglect if you want a quick word for it," said David Downham. "The world should be ashamed."

Cathy Downham said refugee camps in Thailand hold 150,000 people who have been driven from Myanmar.

Although the monks have always been an active group, Cathy Downham said their involvement in these protests will put the ruling junta in a difficult position in a country with a Buddhist majority.

"If they attack or suppress or imprison the monks, then

they will go directly to Buddhist 'hell,' and the people will rise up," she said. "If they don't suppress, then (the people) will rise up because they will no longer fear them."

The Downhams will head back to Thailand later this year, but will be watching as the story develops.

"Hopefully, some negotiations will result," said David Downham. "If some negotiations happen, then we hope the ethnic groups are involved."

For more on Project Umbrella Burma, visit www.projectumbrellaburma.com.

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