

INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE

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Life in Exile: Burmese Refugees along the Thai-Burma Border

The International Rescue Committee serves thousands of refugees and other uprooted peoples from Burma, who began crossing into Thailand in large numbers in 1984. Currently, more than 500,000 Burmese are internally displaced persons (IDPs) within eastern Burma, while another 154,000 are living in nine refugee camps in western Thailand and at least 1.5 million are dispersed along the border areas.

Their numbers continue to grow because of ongoing human rights violations by Burma's ruling military junta, along with desperate economic conditions and the Burmese army's control of ethnic nationality areas in the eastern part of the country.

IRC's assistance along the Thailand-Burma border covers a variety of sectors: comprehensive primary health care; education; local civil society capacity building; water and sanitation; funding for food distribution; legal assistance; income generation; psycho-social support; advocacy; and gender-based violence prevention and response. The IRC also runs a robust funding program for community-based organizations that provide humanitarian assistance to thousands of Burmese displaced along isolated border areas.

IRC is a member of the coordination body for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Thailand, known as the Committee for the Coordination of Services to Displaced Person in Thailand or CCSDPT. The CCSDPT and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) have jointly issued a comprehensive plan for addressing the needs of displaced persons on the Thai-Burma border. IRC supports these recommendations outlined in that plan and summarizes many of its conclusions within this position paper.

Context to the Displacement

The situation in Burma, specifically in eastern Burma, continues to worsen. Last year an estimated 82,000 people were forced to leave their homes, reflecting the disregard by Burma's governing body, the State Peace and Development Council

(SPDC), of their responsibility to protect Burmese citizens from harm¹. Military rule and economic mismanagement have resulted in widespread poverty and barely functioning health and education systems. Burma's so-called National Convention, which ostensibly is the SPDC's "road map" to democracy, moves into its fourteenth year with no conclusion in sight. Additionally, without meaningful participation from many of the ethnic nationality groups and with the exclusion of the National League for Democracy, this process lacks legitimacy.

Burmese Refugees in Thailand

Despite a global trend to challenge the protracted confinement of refugees in camps, all Burmese refugees in Thailand are officially required to stay within camp boundaries. This requirement has been progressively enforced over the years. Currently, about 154,000 Burmese refugees reside in nine camps in Thailand and are almost entirely dependent on international assistance. Most refugees have no access to employment opportunities, forest products, or external education or occupational training. Refugees caught outside the camps are liable to arrest and deportation.

As the security situation in Burma continues to deteriorate, new asylum seekers continue to arrive in the camps. Camp boundaries have long been demarcated and fixed, resulting in overcrowding. Although conditions vary considerably among camps, in several camps housing standards are significantly below UNHCR minimum standards.

Long-term confinement in the camps has had a negative psychological impact on camp residents, resulting in increasing and serious mental health needs. As a new generation of refugees grows up entirely within a camp environment, the need to address the special health, physical, and social requirements of youth and adolescents is particularly acute. The situation has also growing protection concerns, particularly regarding levels of violence and the administration of justice in the camps.

Over the last two years, NGOs together with UNHCR have been successful in advocating with the Royal Thai Government for refugees to have opportunities to earn an income, have access to legal assistance, and pursue education and skills training. In 2006, the Thai government gave NGOs permission to support limited occupational training activities for refugees. The government made commitments to improve education in the camps and to experiment with employment outside the camps, as well as to issue individual ID cards to all registered refugees. While these developments represent a major breakthrough and offer the possibility for refugees to become more self-sufficient in the future, such initiatives will take a long time to have a significant impact on camp life. In the short term, additional resources are needed to establish programs. At the same time, funding for existing programs must be protected. As Burma is still a

¹ Internal Displacement in Eastern Burma: 2006 Survey, Thailand Burma Border Consortium, pg 20

refugee producing country, any reduction in refugee programming would increase mortality.

Impact of Resettlement

Refugee resettlement to third countries, particularly the U.S., is now a durable solution for some Burmese refugees. Approximately 4,500 camp residents departed for the U.S. in 2006, and numbers are expected to increase significantly in 2007 and 2008. As return to Burma and integration in Thailand are currently not viable, resettlement is a very positive development for a percentage of the refugees.

Resettlement is not yet keeping sufficient pace with the birth rates and the rate of new arrivals to have a significant impact in reducing camp populations. However, because of the profile of refugees being resettled, the impact has begun to be felt and will increase as departures continue. The majority of refugees seeking resettlement are educated and skilled workers, community leaders, teachers, and staff in NGOs and community-based organizations. Organizations have had to compensate for the loss of such human resources and are facing the daunting challenge of trying to maintain essential services such as health care and education despite the decrease of skilled workers. NGOs are also incurring significant costs to run training programs to replace refugee employees who are being resettled.

Burmese “Migrants” in Thailand

More than 1.5 million mostly undocumented Burmese in Thailand are considered “migrants”² and are living in severely marginalized conditions. Like the Burmese in the refugee camps, these so-called migrants have fled Burma because of economic and political repression. For this population, the barriers to health care and education for their children are formidable. The migrant assistance communities, with very encouraging leadership from the Thai Ministries of Health and Education, are developing national health and education strategies to mainstream migrants’ access to these services into Thai national policies. In the interim, however, the Thai government relies heavily on the international community to support migrant assistance programs.

Internally Displaced Burmese

While the need for humanitarian assistance to Burmese in Thailand is apparent, what is less well known is the tremendous need for such assistance in eastern Burma, where some 500,000 Burmese are internally displaced. Despite the expansion of aid programs inside Burma in the early 2000s, the conflict-affected

² Evidence is suggesting that many so-called economic migrants may actually have legitimate claims as refugees, citing political persecution as motivating factor for leaving Burma.

areas along the Thai border remain a critical gap.³ Unfettered and complete access to these areas from inside Burma is unlikely, at least in the near future.

Future Prospects

The political and human rights situation inside Burma shows no improvement. While it is very difficult to predict refugee and IDP flows, the political, military and economic realities of Burma indicate that the state of affairs for uprooted Burmese will not change significantly. The potential for wide-scale human rights abuses and displacement remain likely in the coming years. It is therefore essential that all basic services of food, shelter, health and education to refugees, migrants and IDPs be maintained, not only for humanitarian reasons but also to ensure that Thailand continues to keep the doors of asylum open for new arrivals. Sufficient funding and an overall strategy for the Thai-Burma border are essential.

Recommendations to all Donors:

- Ensure that current basic services are maintained, and improve them where necessary to meet international standards while additional resources are found to support new initiatives.
- Establish a more formal, coordinated response to both funding and policy priorities that support the CCSDPT/UNHCR's Comprehensive Plan strategies.
- Respond to the effects of resettlement on remaining camp residents and create a strategic response to mitigate impacts.
- Expand support to local organizations with greater access to displaced populations along the border than that available to international NGOs.
- Support new initiatives for income generation and other projects aimed at improving the protection environment in the camps, particularly for women and children.
- Broaden support in Thailand to include local organizations supporting and advocating for all Burmese in Thailand who are without documentation and living outside the refugee camps.

Recommendations to the Royal Thai Government:

³ "Myanmar: New Threats to Humanitarian Aid", Update Briefing, Asia Briefing N°58, International Crisis Group, 8 December 2006, pg. 4.

- Continue to work in cooperation with the CCSDPT & UNHCR's Comprehensive Plan strategies that aim to improve the protection environment, camp living conditions, and access to education.