
Overview of refugee situation on Thai-Burma border

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Until recently, the entire Thai-Burma border (250 km) was under ethnic control and the Burmese army only had access to Thailand through three trading gates. In 1984, the Burmese army broke through the Karen frontline attacking bases north of Mae Sot and the first refugees came into Thailand (10000 people). It was then when the BBC was formed and began working with the Thai government. The Thai government decided not to bring in UNHCR but rather asked NGOs to take care of the humanitarian needs.

The story of the last 14 years has been one of the Burmese army continuing to make more and more inroads into the ethnic territory. The beginning of the end came in 1995 when SLORC was able to take the Karen headquarters of Manerplaw and take sections of the border for the very first time. The number of refugees increased to about 100 000 people. Most of remaining ethnic territory was Karen in the southern part of the border. Last year, a major Burmese army offensive took place and all remaining Karen areas were taken by SPDC. The situation today is one where the Burmese army is now more or less in control of the entire border from north to south for the first time in history and the amount of territory controlled by ethnic groups is quite minuscule. Behind the frontline, the Burmese army is attempting to consolidate its control through massive forced relocations of villages. The army has tenuous control of the border and is trying to make sure it is maintained in the future. The result of this is that the number of refugees has grown to 115 000 in official numbers in camps and has brought many crucial problems such as the never-ending potential flow of refugees coming into Thailand from areas of forced labour and forced village relocations. With SPDC right along the border, the camps are no longer safe. Camp attacks have occurred since 1995. This has brought some significant changes to Thai policy relating to refugees. The Thais have tried to handle security

problems by trying to consolidate camps into bigger camps. Ten major centers for refugees along the border now exist. The theory is that by having larger camps, they are easier to defend but that theory is in question. Thailand is faced with an unenviable problem in that there is an endless potential of more refugees fleeing over and with more SPDC control of their homelands, there exists very little desire among these people to return home. During the last year, we've seen close collaboration between Thai and Burmese armies to stop flow of refugees across border and get them to go back. The Thai army policy of trying to get rid of this problem is by having the Burmese take control of the border so what happens inside Burma has nothing to do with them, it is an internal problem. Refugees have been forced back and many denied to cross over. In the last 12 months, there has been no new refugee policy.

The conditions of the camps have deteriorated considerably with consolidation. The Thai army has imposed strict conditions in the camps to make life difficult in the hope that the refugees will want to return. In other words, a humane deterrence policy has been applied to the camps.

In this very difficult situation, we can summarize our present concerns as these four:

- asylum is being denied to new refugees
- camps are no longer safe
- with the clampdown on conditions of camps, the concern is for the living conditions of the camps/quality for asylum
- concern that there may be involuntary and early repatriation

This has been heightened by recent attacks on the camps in March. One camp was completely destroyed by fire. The incident was a great embarrassment for the Thai army. Now there have been knee jerk responses to this problem. Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai has opened up possibility of UNHCR to have a presence on the border to have