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Burmese Refugees in Thailand – Should They Stay or Should They Go?

*By Su-Ann Oh**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The future of refugees in Thailand is more uncertain now than ever before. Myanmar's political and economic reforms remain a work in progress but at the same time, the Thai government is applying subtle pressure on the refugees to return to Myanmar voluntarily.
- Given these circumstances, Burmese refugees living in the nine official refugee camps and in other parts of Thailand are faced with difficult decisions about their future: should they stay, go home, or resettle in another country?
- Despite political improvements in Myanmar, the vast majority of camp residents perceive their life chances to be much better outside Myanmar.
- At present, staying in Thailand may still be a viable option, but it is a slowly diminishing one as donors continue to reduce their funding for basic services and provisions in the camps.

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- For the majority of camp residents, resettlement is no longer a possibility. In January of this year, the USA, the country that took the most refugees, closed its resettlement programme.
- It appears that the best strategy is for the refugees to cover all eventualities—by preparing for return, finding ways to stay in Thailand and/or joining relatives who have been resettled in other countries.

INTRODUCTION

Dotted along the Thai-Burmese border are nine official refugee camps housing almost 120,000¹ refugees from Myanmar. There are others who live elsewhere in Thailand, and the total number of Burmese refugees has waxed and waned over the years, following political conflicts, the military campaigns between the Burmese army and armed ethnic groups, and the persecution of dissident and divergent voices.

Refugee camps and their residents, grudgingly sheltered by the Thai government, have been in existence, in one form or another, since 1984. University students who fled persecution in Myanmar are now middle-aged camp leaders; villagers who ran from fighting and structural violence in the ethnic states now work for camp-based NGOs; children born in these camps have grown up and begotten a whole new generation of refugees. Throughout this time, the waves of political turmoil in Myanmar have overshadowed the camps and the future of the residents, leaving them stranded on the tides of uncertainty and liminality.

Ongoing political changes in Myanmar combined with funding cuts for refugee services and provisions, the closing of the largest resettlement programme and the redirection of humanitarian assistance to Myanmar have shaken up the everyday lives of camp residents once again. They now face even greater uncertainty and anxiety about their future. Should they stay in camp and hope for the best? Should they cut their losses and leave, joining the 1 million² Burmese migrants in Thailand working in labour-intensive industries? Should they register for resettlement in other countries, a window of opportunity that has become even smaller? Or is this the time, finally, after years of exile, to contemplate going home?

REMAINING IN THAILAND

At present, staying on in the refugee camps in Thailand is still a viable option, albeit a slowly diminishing one. First, the Thai government has taken advantage of the changes in Myanmar, despite recurrent problems with ceasefire agreements (with the Kachin Independence Organisation), political prisoners, and communal violence (between Muslims Rohingya and Buddhists), to put subtle pressure on the refugees to return to Myanmar.

Second, funding for refugee provisions has been falling for several years as donors, worn out by more than two decades of providing financial support and

¹ The Border Consortium (TBC). Refugee and IDP Camp Populations: December 2013. <http://www.tbcc.org/camps/2013-12-dec-map-tbc-unhcr.pdf>. Accessed 24 February 2014.

² This is the figure for 2009 (IOM 2009, p.12). This number is for registered migrant workers only. If we include those who are not registered, the total number of Burmese migrants is likely to be much higher. International Organisation for Migration (IOM). Thailand Migration Report 2011: Migration for Development in Thailand: Overview and Tools for Policy Makers. Bangkok: IOM, 2011.

encouraged (rightly or not) by the political changes in Myanmar, cut back on their largesse. As a result, the Border Consortium (TBC), which provides food rations and other necessities to the camp residents, has had to decrease its rice rations several times over the past few years. From 15 kg per adult per month in 2008, the amount was pared down to 13 kg in 2011 and 12 kg in 2012³. Up to 2013, everyone registered in the camps was entitled to food rations. However, with continued funding shortfalls, this policy was changed last year. Households are now categorised as 'self-reliant' (able to sustain their livelihoods without food assistance), 'standard' (continue to require basic food assistance) and 'most vulnerable' (require additional food assistance). Only residents in the last two categories are now entitled to food rations.

Other food rations have either been reduced or taken out of the basket altogether. Since 2011, fortified flour has been provided to children only; iodised salt, cooking oil and fish paste have been reduced by a third or half; sugar and chillies have been taken out completely. Only the ration for yellow split peas remains the same⁴.

Other changes in funding and resource provision have also taken place. ZOA Refugee Care, which has been in operation since the 1990s will shut down its operations this year. For many years, it supplied the bulk of funding for textbooks, teachers' stipends, building construction and other educational services for seven of the nine official refugee camps. While it has handed its operations over to several different NGOs operating on the border, there have been shortfalls in funding for teachers' stipends and other resources. Ostensibly, ZOA's closure is due to its headquarters' insistence that the organisation focus on relief work rather than on long-term development.

This will have a significant impact on camp residents. The Thai government prohibits refugees from working outside the camp, leaving the camp without permission and foraging outside for food and fuel. More people will now be attempting to leave the camp to earn an income, possibly leaving their families behind and sending money to support them. This will bring opportunities and a whole new set of challenges. Burmese migrants are employed mostly in the fishing, seafood, agriculture, agriculture processing, construction, garment, food sales and plastic industries,⁵ where the pay is low and the work conditions leave much to be desired. Moreover, migrants without proper documents face the constant threat of harassment, detention and deportation by the authorities. The more fortunate ones have been able to set up their own enterprises, gain legal documents to stay in Thailand or join family members who are already working in Thailand.

³ The Border Consortium (TBC). Programme Report July to December 2012. Bangkok: TBC, 2012.

⁴ The Border Consortium (TBC). Programme Report January to June 2013. Bangkok: TBC, 2013. The Border Consortium (TBC). Programme Report July to December 2012. Bangkok: TBC, 2012.

⁵ International Organisation for Migration (IOM). Thailand Migration Report 2011: Migration for Development in Thailand: Overview and Tools for Policy Makers. Bangkok: IOM, 2011.

Despite the cutbacks, which have been implemented gradually over the past few years, there are still many benefits to staying in the refugee camps. Since only 1 per cent of households have been identified as not requiring food assistance, the majority of households will continue to receive food rations. While the rations are hardly generous in variety and quality, they provide adequate sustenance and nourishment. In a nutrition survey conducted in the camps, only 2 per cent of the sample experienced acute malnutrition, as compared to 5 per cent in Thailand as a whole and 11 per cent in Myanmar as a whole. Chronic malnutrition in the camps was found to be the same as in Myanmar, at 41 per cent of the population⁶. Needless to say, with the cuts in food rations, this figure can be expected to rise in the future.

Besides food, camp residents have access to free clean water, sanitation, housing, medical services and schooling, community structures and services, order and security. In fact, many of these services are non-existent in villages in the eastern border of Myanmar, so much so that Burmese villagers have trekked across the border to seek medical and education services. Some Thai villagers have also sent their children to camp to learn English.

The camps are peaceful places to live in. While communal violence simmers and ceasefire agreements collapse in Myanmar, everyday life in the camps continues quietly and equably. Notwithstanding entrenched essentialist ideas of ethnicity and religion, camp residents endeavour to live together harmoniously.

REPATRIATION

In an attempt to hedge their bets, some refugees are making trips back to their villages in Myanmar to ascertain the lie of the land, figuratively and literally. Those whose homes and land have not been seized by the army or the government have been able to reclaim their property and rebuild their homes and fields in preparation for the return of their family and other village occupants. Some have made one-way trips, but many others move back and forth between their homes and the camps. In 2012, 4,389 refugees (3.4 per cent of camp residents) returned to Myanmar for this purpose, the majority of whom were individuals who left their family members behind in the camps⁷.

Nevertheless, in a survey conducted by the Mae Fah Luang Foundation for the UNHCR in 2013, 90 per cent of those interviewed stated that at present, they prefer to resettle in another country or stay in Thailand instead of being repatriated

⁶ The Border Consortium (TBC). Programme Report July to December 2012. Bangkok: TBC, 2012.

⁷ The Border Consortium (TBC). Updated Population Figures for Refugee Camps in Thailand show 7.1% Decrease. 3 February 2014. <http://theborderconsortium.org/announcements/2014-02-03-news-press-release-update-population-figure.pdf> Accessed 24 February 2014.

to Myanmar⁸. Apparently, they perceive their life chances to be much better outside Myanmar. According to the UNHCR, the main reasons cited were: mistrust of the ceasefire agreement, fears over their livelihoods and access to land and land rights, concerns about insufficient infrastructure in places of return, perceived lack of status or citizenship and worries over their security.

The refugees are justified in their chariness of the dependability of the ceasefire agreements. Such agreements in Myanmar have often been violated, and they have yet to lead to peace settlements. Moreover, the peace process between the government and the ethnic armed groups is taking longer than expected for a variety of reasons. First, the details of the peace agreement have yet to be agreed upon by all parties. Second, the armed groups are waiting to see if changes to the Constitution will make a difference to their position. Third, they question the wisdom of finalising a deal with the current government when there is no guarantee it will be upheld after the 2015 elections. Finally, there is great uncertainty surrounding the outcome of the 2015 elections. Given these overwhelming ambiguities, the refugees' caution and prudence are warranted.

Making the trip back to Myanmar brings its own challenges: landmines, harassment by the Burmese army and armed groups, malaria, and inadequate transport infrastructure. Staying there once one is back is another matter. The logistical and legal challenges—land confiscation and land rights, rising property prices resulting from development projects, impoverishment, the lack of infrastructure, law and order—are immense and daunting.

There has been no public or official announcement to signal the beginning of refugee repatriation or the expected closure of camps, and the UNHCR has no fixed timeline for an organised return. However, changes are afoot. The UNHCR has commissioned another survey to elicit the opinions of refugees regarding their future, insisting that repatriation will only be carried out if it is voluntary. The Border Consortium, based in Thailand, has set up an office in Yangon in preparation for repatriation. In addition, three camp sites have been set up by the Burmese authorities in Myawaddy District, southern Kayin⁹ State, to house repatriated Burmese refugees. This has occurred in conjunction with talks between Burmese and Thai authorities. This latter development is shrouded in mystery – little is known about who will be housed there, how residents will be able to earn their livelihoods or even whether returnees would want to live there.

⁸ Bangkok Post. Uncertain fate surrounds Myanmar's border outcasts. 24 February 2014. <http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/investigation/396473/uncertain-fate-surrounds-myanmar-s-border-outcasts>. Accessed 24 February 2014.

⁹ Kayin is the Burmese term for Karen.

RESETTLEMENT

Up to 2005, resettlement was not an option for the majority of the refugees in Thailand. However, in early 2005, the US Department of State selected six protracted refugee situations, including that of Burmese refugees in Thailand, based on their importance to US foreign policy and offered to resettle them in the USA. Thus, between 2005 and 2012, 64,065 refugees left for the USA, making up 70 per cent of all refugees (88,498) resettled in that time period. The rest were resettled in Australia (10,220), Canada (more than 4,000), Finland and Norway (more than 100 each)¹⁰.

When I spoke with refugees in the camps in 2006 and 2007, many were having difficulty deciding on whether to apply for resettlement. They were plagued with doubts and fears about having to learn a new language, moving to a foreign country, getting a job, and leaving behind family and friends. Moreover, many had lived in camp most of their lives and had never visited big towns or cities. With the Thai government's prohibition on the use of the Internet in the camps, the residents had little idea of what it would be like to live in the USA or in Finland.

The decision to resettle was made even more difficult because the refugees were not permitted to choose the country they wanted to resettle in. Upon registering, they did not know if they would be sent to the USA or to Norway. Moreover, there was no way to know if they would be resettled until the very end, making it difficult for them to prepare for their new lives. Further, if they were rejected, they would have been ineligible to apply to resettle elsewhere.

Additionally, not all refugees are eligible for resettlement and each country has its own eligibility criteria. Only those who registered with the UNHCR before 2005 are eligible. The Thai government, in an effort to discourage people from crossing the border into Thailand to seek resettlement opportunities, prohibited the UNHCR from registering refugees after 2005. This did not stem the flow though. For example, in 2005, more than 140,000 people were registered in the camps, but by 2014, although almost 90,000 had been resettled, there are still 120,000 refugees living in the camps.

Nevertheless, for the majority of camp residents, resettlement is no longer a viable option. In January of this year, the USA—the country that took the most refugees—closed its resettlement programme. There is another option though: the UNHCR in Malaysia is permitted to register new refugees by the Malaysian government. While this would provide refugees with the chance of being resettled, the financial capital required to travel to Malaysia, the threat of being detained and deported, and the difficulty of acquiring refugee status present formidable obstacles.

¹⁰ United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). Resettlement of Myanmar Refugees from Thailand (as of October 2013).

Life for a resettled refugee is not a bed of roses either. Many went with high hopes of learning and perfecting their English, furthering their education, obtaining a meaningful job and learning to drive. Unfortunately, the exigencies of life as a low-skilled migrant have quashed many such humble dreams. Many have found themselves working in menial jobs, not having the time to learn the language of their new country, being hampered by their lack of educational certification and being relegated to the lowest rungs of the social ladder in their new communities. Depending on which country they are resettled to, they have access to varying levels of government support in the form of housing, employment and education.

While resettlement has enabled refugees and their families to leave the liminal existence of the camps, it has had an adverse impact on the refugee camps as a whole. The most skilled and educated residents were among the first to be resettled. Teachers, medics, trainers, community leaders and organisers left in droves, creating a brain drain and a vacuum in the most important sectors in the camps – education, health and camp management. Schools began recruiting anyone they could find to replace teachers who had been resettled. With insufficient time to train new teachers and inadequate teacher trainers (those with experience had been resettled), the quality of the teaching suffered. The refugee camps, which had built up experienced and skilled personnel over the years, began to suffer from an acute shortage of trained professionals. This has compounded the challenges brought about by reduced funds, and accelerated the downward spiral of conditions at the camps.

CONCLUSION

Refugee camps have been in existence in Thailand for more than three decades. Set up as temporary structures, their maintenance is dependent on the beneficence of the Thai government and the munificence of donors. Changes in funding and resource provision from these sources have rendered such an arrangement unsustainable. Although the refugee camps have provided sanctuary, a stable community, satisfactory educational and medical services and a place where people are able to lead meaningful and purposeful lives, they are still spaces of sovereign, temporal and spatial limbo, i.e., holding spaces which do not provide political solutions.

The Thai government's eagerness to relieve itself of a thirty-year-old burden, and recurrent cuts in donor funding herald their decline. If the political, economic and social challenges in Myanmar can be resolved satisfactorily, the dismantling of refugee camps in Thailand will indeed be a cause for celebration. The refugees will be able to go home, safe in the knowledge that they will not have to flee again, that their rights will be upheld, that there will be peace, and that they will be governed by the rule of law.

Until that is the case, the refugees are seeking other solutions. Hampered by limited information and bewildered by the sheer number of variables and their possible outcomes, camp residents are faced with difficult decisions about their future. In an effort to cover all eventualities, some have decided to hedge their bets by employing multiple strategies simultaneously. Families have sent male adults back to Myanmar either permanently or periodically to prepare for the eventuality of return. Some other member of the family might at the same time be sent to work in Thailand to support the family in camp and/or to secure a home. Meanwhile, the family might make enquiries about joining relatives who have resettled in other countries. Actions speak louder than words, and these strategies announce clearly that, for the refugees, now is not yet the time to go back to Myanmar.

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