

Responses to eastern Burma's chronic emergency

The Thailand Burma Border Consortium

Humanitarian agencies and community-based organisations are working in partnership to assist remote communities in the most contested areas of eastern Burma.

Humanitarian responses to this chronic emergency have come both from agencies based inside Burma and from agencies based in neighbouring countries and working discreetly across national borders. Government restrictions on programmes and travel by international staff in remote areas were formalised in a set of guidelines for humanitarian agencies in 2006. These government regulations have particularly restricted agencies that prioritise the field presence of expatriate staff as a protection strategy.

Ironically, the contraction of humanitarian space may present opportunities for agencies based inside Burma to reinforce coping strategies by focusing more on developing national staff and partnerships with community-based organisations. Just as cross-border operations have primarily been implemented by community-based organisations for over a decade, humanitarian responses into conflict-affected areas from agencies based in country are also now more dependent on local capacities. The international community is now dependent, for example, on surveys conducted by community-based organisations to gauge the level of vulnerability in contested areas.

There is a challenge how to increase humanitarian space in the areas of ongoing conflict of eastern Burma. For agencies and governments in dialogue with the military junta, this requires an extension of geographic access and the relaxation of restrictions on monitoring, as well as policy-level dialogue about protection of civilians from systematic violence and abuse. Until such concessions can be secured, the main way of reaching the most

vulnerable communities in eastern Burma will remain cross-border.

Cross-border assistance

Agencies based inside the country can reach more stable areas, including some internally displaced communities in government-controlled relocation sites and ethnic ceasefire areas, but the scale and scope of this assistance remain limited. Cross-border aid not only reaches these areas but is also the main means of accessing communities hiding from SPDC patrols in more unstable areas. In 2007, approximately US\$7 million was channelled into cross-border initiatives supporting livelihoods, health care, education, human rights, environmental protection, independent media and community rehabilitation.

The largest sector of cross-border assistance is support for livelihoods, including both food aid for IDP camps situated close to the border, and cash transfers for communities deeper inside Burma. The benefits of cash transfers include ease of mobility, speed and security, allowing beneficiaries rather than the aid agencies to prioritise their needs, and supporting peace building by reinforcing remote markets which maintain economic and social links across political conflict lines.

The other two main sectors are health and education. Just as humanitarian agencies based inside Burma provide technical support to relevant SPDC ministries, some cross-border assistance is implemented through, and develops the capacities of, the ethnic nationalities' own formal health and education departments. This is complemented by non-formal approaches to health and education such as support for traditional birth attendants, monastic

schooling and early childhood development programmes.

Smaller amounts of assistance are channelled towards the protection of civilians caught in conflict and the promotion of civil society. As the 'citizen-journalists' of the independent media disseminated uncensored news during the Saffron Revolution in 2007, so ethnic community-based organisations have resisted the suppression of fundamental civil and political rights inside Burma by working cross-border to document gross human rights abuses. Despite the ongoing conflict, in some communities it has also been possible to supplement emergency relief activities with social capital development and the rehabilitation of natural, physical or social assets.

Given the military regime's lack of political legitimacy, even UN agencies in Burma have challenged the relevance of neutrality as a guiding principle.¹ The use of armed escorts to secure access for delivery of some cross-border assistance is another aspect of this debate. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has recognised that exceptional circumstances exist where armed escorts are necessary for humanitarian convoys.² The context in conflict-affected areas of eastern Burma embodies these exceptional circumstances and justifies the use of armed escorts. During the past few years, similar circumstances have led NGOs to use armed escorts to deliver humanitarian aid into northern Iraq, Somalia, Chechnya and northern Kenya.

Strategic challenges

Cross-border aid programmes into eastern Burma have responded to the challenge of ensuring that aid is not inadvertently prolonging violence and abuse in three main ways. Firstly, the larger programmes are based on formalised agreements in which basic humanitarian principles and respective responsibilities



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IDPs in
hiding,
eastern
Burma,
2007.

are clarified. These agreements acknowledge that the relevant ethnic opposition party is to secure access, while decisions about the distribution of aid are the independent domain of the local humanitarian agency. Agencies also need to redouble their efforts in promoting awareness among armed non-state actors of their obligations under international humanitarian law. Secondly, risk assessments prior to, and conflict impact assessments after, the distribution of aid monitor whether there have been negative repercussions for villagers instigated by any of the armed groups. Thirdly, independent field surveys have been conducted with both beneficiaries of programmes and non-beneficiaries to get a clearer picture of the impact of cross-border aid. These surveys identified strong and positive impacts in mitigating conflict and promoting local capacities and linkages for peace.

Among the institutional challenges is the promotion of information sharing and coordination between humanitarian agencies based on both 'sides' of the conflict, that is, in-country and cross-border. While there is currently minimal overlap in existing services, this is more

due to restrictions on access and funding than to active coordination. The level of trust and dialogue between humanitarian agencies across the national borders has increased significantly over the past few years. However, efforts need to be strengthened to overcome ongoing constraints such as logistical difficulties (including restrictions on visas and censorship), political risks (by association with 'government informants' or 'rebel sympathisers') and budgetary concerns (arising from 'competing' for funds).

For donors, a strategic challenge remains how to reconcile funding needs for nation-wide poverty alleviation programmes and for emergency responses to the chronic protracted conflict in eastern Burma. The sheer size of the population impoverished by decades of poor governance needs to be balanced against the humanitarian imperative to prioritise resources for the most vulnerable groups. Pending a political solution, it would be short-sighted to confine cross-border agencies to emergency relief responses. Instead, the potential for any future transition from relief to development assistance to sustainable livelihoods

will be best served by developing a continuum of response capacities on both 'sides' of the conflict.

Meanwhile, with the international community dependent on ethnic community-based organisations to reach and assist the most vulnerable groups in eastern Burma, it is essential that donors and UN agencies recognise and support these local capacities for cross-border aid. It is equally vital that diplomatic pressure for the expansion of humanitarian space in conflict-affected areas is intensified.

This article was written by the Displacement Research Team (tbbc@tbbc.org) of the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (www.tbbc.org). The TBBC comprises 11 international NGOs providing food, shelter and non food items to refugees and displaced people from Burma. TBBC also engages in research on the root causes of displacement and refugee outflows.

1. UN Country Team, 22 April 2005, 'Strategic framework for UN Agencies in Myanmar, Yangon'. www.unicef.org/about/execboard/files/Myanmar_UNDAF.pdf

2. UN OCHA, 14 September 2001, 'Use of Military or Armed Escorts for Humanitarian Convoys: Discussion Paper and Non-Binding Guidelines' www.who.int/hac/network/interagency/GuidelinesonArmedEscorts_Sept2001.pdf