

Forced displacement of Burmese people

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This issue of FMR aims to help bring the crisis of forced displacement of Burmese people back into the international spotlight.

With the 'Saffron Revolution' of September 2007, Burma was catapulted into the centre of international attention. It was briefly headline news as people monitored the regime's response and watched for hints of progress towards democracy and the restoration of rights. With little action on either front (and no visible resurgence of violence or protest), interest has since waned.

The September protests, led by Buddhist monks, were sparked by a sudden increase in oil prices which had a serious impact on the already impoverished population. After a few days, the government violently ended what it called the "disruption of stability". Governments around the world condemned the crackdown and the UN Secretary-General sent Special Representative Ibrahim Gambari to negotiate with the Burmese rulers. At the same time, however, China and Russia used their right of veto in the UN Security Council to block discussion of matters which they considered to be internal to Burma, no 'threat to international security' – and therefore outside the mandate of the Security Council.

Most reports on Burma explain that the conflict started in 1988 when the Burmese junta cracked down on nationwide demonstrations. But is that really when it all started? How about the moment when the army took power in 1962? Or before that, after independence from the British in 1948, when some of the ethnic minorities were granted autonomy while the plight of others was ignored – who then, predictably, took up arms to fight this inequality? Stating that conflict only started in 1988 ignores the call for (cultural) autonomy by the ethnic minorities

that started decades earlier. What is certainly true is that refugee and IDP numbers rose considerably at the end of the 1980s, in the aftermath of the demonstrations of 1988, and with the loss of territory by the ethnic armies and the country's growing economic emergency.

Today, displacement is widespread. In June 2007, the ICRC issued a rare public condemnation of the Burmese military government's actions, saying that they have "helped to create a climate of constant fear among the population and have forced thousands of people to join the ranks of the internally displaced, or to flee abroad." Close to half a million people have been displaced internally over the last decade on the eastern border alone. In addition,



millions of Burmese have crossed into neighbouring countries. In Thailand there are an estimated two million Burmese trying to make a living. If they are fleeing armed conflict or political persecution, they can receive protection and assistance in refugee camps. Those who fled after November 2005, however, are ineligible for protection, due to the moratorium on refugee registration. They have no choice but to stay outside the camps, where they are considered illegal migrants, subject to arrest and deportation.

There are good reasons why Thailand maintains such a strict demarcation between refugee and migrant status. Those inside the camps not only get protection and assistance but also have access to resettlement programmes – a recognised pull factor. Thailand has had to carry the burden of refugee inflows from neighbouring countries for decades and prefers to keep tight control on its ability to respond according to its own interests. That is why Thailand has still not signed the Geneva Convention and why they call refugees 'temporary displaced persons fleeing fighting', to emphasise that their stay in Thailand will come to an end as soon as conditions in Burma are conducive to return.

The exact number of Burmese refugees in other countries bordering Burma is unknown but Bangladesh, India, China and Malaysia have all had to deal with substantial influxes of Burmese citizens. As Thailand receives the bulk of the refugees and is the base for the vocal Burmese opposition, many of the articles in this issue of FMR focus on the Thai situation and the ethnic Karen. This should not be seen to underplay the plight of Burmese refugees in other countries or IDPs in other areas inside Burma. There is simply less information available on them – a gap that needs to be addressed.

In terms of durable solutions for this refugee population, the current focus is on resettlement. As a form of responsibility sharing, several Western countries have agreed to accept groups of Burmese refugees. This is resulting in large-scale movements from the Thai camps to the West, with some additional cases from Bangladesh

and India. Several articles in this issue explain how resettlement, while ensuring protection for the refugees concerned, raises issues for community management of the camps and is causing tensions within the refugee population.

Thoughts on other durable solutions, such as repatriation or local integration, are missing, however. Even if repatriation is currently impossible, agencies should at least consider the possibility of unexpected changes in Burma which would lead to massive population movements. Early planning is imperative. At the same time, more thought should be given to the alternative solution of local integration. Although most host countries are against this option, my own research indicates that many Burmese people are already integrating, against the odds, and are an economic asset to their host countries. An open debate on all durable solutions and immediate improvements to the 'closed' camps are urgently needed for the sake of both the Burmese refugees and their host populations.

Given that Burmese people are displaced throughout the region, this humanitarian crisis will require regional solutions. UNHCR could be encouraged to set up a consultative committee involving all refugee-receiving countries to discuss and coordinate a common approach towards Burmese refugees – even if a comprehensive plan of action is currently impossible due to the actions of the Burmese junta. But, as Loescher and Milner state, this is only part of the solution: "A humanitarian response to the needs of refugees in the region is not a substitute for engaging in the question of resolving the conditions in the country of origin that continue to force refugees to flee."¹ The efforts of the UN Special Representative to push for dialogue between the different stakeholders in Burma are essential if Burma's large-scale displacement is ever to end. But from his latest visit to the country in March 2008 it is clear that the prospects for genuine dialogue remain gloomy.

In January 2008 the junta suddenly announced that the National Convention had drafted a Constitution, on which the Burmese

population has to vote in a national referendum. Elections will be held in 2010. Finally a positive move? Maybe so, but with a lot of caveats. Opposition to or campaigning against the National Convention and the referendum are regarded as treason, and incur a penalty of several years' imprisonment. Additionally, opposition leader and Nobel Peace Prize Winner Aung San Suu Kyi is barred from taking part in the elections because of her marriage to a British citizen. When Gambari requested that international monitors be allowed to observe the referendum, this was immediately rejected and he was accused of bias in favour of the opposition. The carving out of both humanitarian and political space thus so far remains extremely difficult.

We would like to express our thanks to the numerous academics, UN agencies, NGOs and human rights organisations who have written for this issue – and to the refugees and IDPs themselves who wrote from inside the conflict zones and the refugee camps to make sure their views were heard.²

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1. 'Protracted refugee situation in Thailand: towards solutions'. Presentation given to the Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand, 1 February 2006.

2. For their protection, the names of most refugee contributors have not been given; these articles have instead, at their request, been attributed to their organisation.

Burma v Myanmar

Using the name Burma, rather than the official name Myanmar, is a politically sensitive choice, as the opposition and several Western countries refuse to recognise the name change instigated by the junta. Most Burmese people still use the old name in private conversations, which is why 'Burma' is used here. Contributors to FMR were free to choose which name to use. The term 'Burmese' is used for any person originally coming from Burma, while the term 'Burman' is used for people from the ethnic majority group.