

with international human rights standards, providing support to independent national human rights institutions and strengthening civil society and NGOs.

Human rights field officers play an integral role in the establishment of confidence necessary for voluntary return of displaced populations and act as a deterrent to human rights abuses. They should be sufficiently deployed in areas with large concentrations of IDPs and should make available information relative to the situation of IDPs and analyses of trends to, *inter alia*, host governments and the Representative of the Secretary-General on IDPs. Future human rights operations could include in their mission agreements specific provisions allowing access of human rights personnel to internally displaced populations, and should make reference to the *Guiding Principles*.

In line with the Secretary-General's 'Programme for Reform' which identified human rights as an issue which cuts across all areas of United Nations activities and set as a major task for the Organisation to fully integrate human rights in its broad range of activities, UN staff must be better trained in human rights norms and IDP concerns. This would allow them to raise protection issues on behalf of IDPs and to better integrate protection concerns with the provision of relief. Such training would also facilitate the development of common UN approaches in response to serious violations of human rights and humanitarian law that could lead to internal displacement.

Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt has worked in the field in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Rwanda and Albania, and currently works for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. The views expressed in this article are purely personal.

For a comprehensive analysis of the Kibeho crisis, see Kleine-Ahlbrandt S *The Protection Gap in the International Protection of Internally Displaced Persons: the case of Rwanda*, Geneva, Institut Universitaire de Hautes Etudes Internationales, 1996, 172pp.

1 Adelman H and Suhrke A, *Early Warning and Conflict Management*, Study II of the DANIDA Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda, The International Response to Conflict and Genocide: Lessons from the Rwanda Experience, March 1996, p 94.

2 In-Country Report, United Nations Rwanda Emergency Office, 9 February 1995.

3 See Cohen R and Deng F *The Forsaken People: Case Studies of the Internally Displaced and Masses in Flight*, pp 172-174: see pp 37 of this FMR for details.

From village to camp: refugee camp life in transition on the Thailand-Burma Border

by Edith Bowles

The Karen, Mon and Karenni refugee camps along Thailand's border with Burma have traditionally been small, open settlements where the refugee communities have been able to maintain a village atmosphere, administering the camps and many aspects of assistance programmes themselves. Much of this, however, is changing.

Since 1995, the 110,000 ethnic minority refugees from Burma have faced new security threats and greater regulation by the Royal Thai Government (RTG). An increasing number of the refugees now live in larger, more crowded camps and are more dependent on assistance than ever before. At the beginning of 1994, 72,000 refugees lived in 30 camps, of which the largest housed 8,000 people; by mid 1998, 110,000 refugees lived in 19 camps, with the largest housing over 30,000 people.

Background

Burma is home to one of the longest running civil wars in the world. Over the last 50 years, opposition organisations representing a variety of political agendas have taken up arms against the central government in Rangoon. Since 1962, the country has been run by a succession of military governments, including the current ruling junta, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). The primary victims in Burma's protracted civil war have been ethnic minority people, like the Karen, Mon and Karenni, in

Burma's rural areas. Although since 1989 most of the armed opposition groups have entered into cease-fire agreements with the Burmese government, there is still fighting along the Thailand-Burma border.

The Burmese government has one of the worst human rights records in the world. People flee to the refugee camps in Thailand from forced labour, forced relocations and military offensives. Each dry season (October-May) the Burmese military launches an offensive against the opposition armies, often displacing large numbers of refugees into Thailand. The military offensives are associated with widespread abuse of civilians, including summary execution, torture and rape, as well as looting and destruction of property. The Burmese army has also carried out massive forced relocations of rural villages, with the intention of eliminating civilian support for opposition groups or clearing ground for infrastructure projects. Furthermore, in the dry season, villagers are routinely forced to work without pay on building roads, railways, irrigation ditches and other infrastructure projects.

The camps

The first Karen camp was established in 1984, not far from the border town of Mae Sot in Thailand's Tak Province. By 1986, there were 12 Karen refugee camps with a collective population of 18,000 people in Tak and Mae Hong Son provinces. The first Karenni camp was established in Mae Hong Son province in 1989. Mon refugees came to Thailand in 1990, after the Mon and Karen opposition bases at Three Pagodas Pass were overrun by the Burmese army.

The border is over 2,000 km long, with thousands of potential crossing points. New camps have often been established close to wherever large groups of new refugees crossed, frequently in the wake of military offensives. Individual families and smaller groups arriving in Thailand separately have gone to established camps. While some camps are located on main roads and near Thai villages, many are in remote areas. The terrain along the border is mountainous and heavily forested in places.

The camps, particularly the smaller ones, have traditionally had a village-like atmosphere. Planned by the refugee communities, the layout of camps varies a good deal. In some camps, houses are built in rows facing a main road through the centre of the camp. In others, houses are built in clusters around a network of paths. Larger camps are sub-divided into sections but there are no barriers between sections. Communal buildings, like hospitals and schools, are located in the middle of the camp or, in the case of large camps with more than one school, in the middle of sections. Most children

need to walk for no more than 10 minutes to school. Queuing for water is rare as the water supply is generally adequate and accessible, with water tanks or wells at frequent intervals. Most camps are located near streams, which are used for bathing and washing clothes. In some camps there is space for people to plant small vegetable gardens or even to rear animals next to their homes, although these activities vary depending on the quality of the soil and how strictly an RTG ban on refugee crop planting is enforced.

The size, location and openness of the camps allowed the refugees to gather building materials, firewood and food from the surrounding forests. House walls and floors are constructed out of split bamboo and roofs out of leaf thatch. (According to RTG regulations, no permanent buildings are allowed to be built.) Refugees gather edible forest vegetables, such as bamboo shoots, wild beans and leaves, to supplement their diets; they can also earn cash by selling forest vegetables, leaf thatch or charcoal.

Although RTG regulations technically forbid refugees to engage in economic activities, some refugees have been able to find work as daily labourers on nearby Thai farms or forest plantations. Other economic activities include weaving, cooking food for sale, or running small shops. Most camps have at least a few

small shops, located along the main road or scattered among the houses, and larger camps maintain significant markets.

Camp administrative systems maintained by the refugee communities themselves... have been integral to refugee autonomy and self-sufficiency.

Camp administration

As each new refugee group came across the border, they established refugee committees, with offices in the nearest Thai towns, to seek and coordinate relief assistance. The camps are administered by camp committees with a camp leader and section leaders drawn from the camp community. The school head teacher and/or representatives of the women's or youth organisations may also serve on the committee. These committees are responsible for all aspects of camp administration, including the registration of the population in new camps or recording births, deaths, and new arrivals in established camps, maintenance and sanitation, resolution of disputes, transport and referral of medical emergencies, and camp security. Ultimately, the responsibility for accountability and transparency in aid distribution, particularly food aid, also rests with them. Camp administrative systems maintained by the refugee communities themselves, rather than imposed by the Thai authorities or relief agencies, have been integral to refugee autonomy and self-sufficiency.

Assistance

The original RTG mandate for NGO assistance covered only food, medicines, clothing and other essential items. A mandate for educational assistance was added at the end of 1996. The RTG has always insisted that NGO activities remain low-profile and that there be no permanent expatriate presence in the camps. The NGOs operating along the border have also sought to create non-intrusive programmes, promote refugee self-sufficiency and minimise aid dependency. Assistance to the camps

Karenni camp, Mae Hong Son province

photograph: Edith Bowles





'Temporary site', Kanchanaburi province

ethnic group. Consequently the refugees were not only inconspicuous but attracted some local sympathy. More importantly, the refugees and the ethnic minority opposition along the border formed a convenient buffer between the Thai and Burmese armies. For NGOs, the organisation and comparative self-sufficiency of the refugees allowed for an extremely cost-effective programme. Until 1994, the food

relief programme for the whole border was handled by two expatriate field staff.

Camp consolidations, restrictions and 'temporary sites'

Since 1995, however, there has been a transition from small, open camps with high levels of refugee self-sufficiency to larger, closed camps and greater aid dependency, particularly in the Karen camps. The change is due in part to the drastic deterioration in security in the Karen camps.

Until 1995, *de facto* protection for the refugee camps was provided by the ethnic minority opposition armies based along the Burma side of the border. However, between 1995 and 1997, almost all the opposition-held territory along the border was captured by the Burmese army, leaving camps vulnerable to attack. More importantly, the Democratic Kayin Buddhist Army (DKBA), a splinter group from Karen National Union (KNU), formerly one of the largest opposition groups in Burma, has carried out dozens of attacks on refugee camps. Backed by the Burmese army, the DKBA appears intent on destroying the KNU and driving the Karen refugees back to Burma. Dozens of refugees and Thai villagers have been killed or kidnapped, five camps have been completely burned down, and millions of Baht in cash or property

is sent through the refugee committees which, in conjunction with the camp committees, oversee the distribution of supplies. Recognising the ability of the refugees to maximise their resources, whether from forest products, garden plots or income-generating opportunities, assistance originally included only rice, salt, fish paste, mosquito nets and blankets, with sleeping mats and cooking pots provided to new arrivals as needed. Yellow beans have also been provided where there is a large number of new arrivals or a demonstrated nutritional need for them, such as in a camp where soil or weather conditions are so poor that kitchen gardens are untenable. The system of assistance delivery works on trust and cooperation between the refugee populations and aid agencies. There are no outside enumeration systems, such as counting heads or marking people with paint, during registrations or food distribution.

An unusual aspect of the situation is that UNHCR has played no role in assistance or, until recently, protection. The RTG has always maintained that the people in camps on the Thailand-Burma border are not 'refugees' but 'displaced persons', to whom the RTG is offering 'temporary shelter'. As Thailand is not a signatory to the United Nations 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees, UNHCR cannot officially recognise the refugees without invitation from the RTG, which the RTG has consistently refused to grant.

Advantages

For many years, the system of small, open camps spread out over hundreds of kilometres, many of them located in under-populated areas, had advantages for all parties and particularly for the refugees. Refugees could use water and forest products without placing a strain on local resources, at the same time maintaining their traditional foraging, cultivation and building skills, without needing to rely entirely on NGO assistance. Furthermore, the small size of the camps and the style of administration - with committee members chosen entirely from the refugee community - allowed each group to maintain their cultural traditions and social structure, despite displacement.

Overall, the camps provided a context where families were in part self-sufficient, the majority of children attended primary school, there were few social problems or conflicts, malnutrition was rare, and the communities could live according to their own traditions. Health was, on the whole, good, and community morale and pride were tangible: families planted flowers around their well-maintained houses, and ceremonies in schools, churches and monasteries were carefully planned and well-attended.

The establishment of small, unobtrusive camps also suited the RTG in the early years. In many areas, people on both sides of the border belong to the same

belonging to refugees or Thai villagers have been stolen. With the emergence of the DKBA, protection has become the most important issue for the Karen refugees.

The RTG has responded to the DKBA incursions in a number of ways. Arguing that a few large camps are more easily defended than many small camps, the RTG has developed and partially carried out a policy of camp consolidation. In 1995, seven Karen camps were combined into two, then consolidated again in early 1998 into Mae La camp, with a population of some 30,800. In 1997,

regular rations. The moves themselves cause insecurity as refugees lose access to their gardens and opportunities to forage, while having to expend more energy in moving and re-building.

Other new restrictions seem to be aimed at further lowering living standards in the camps and/or deterring new refugees. For example, Tham Hin (8,000 residents) and Ban Don Yang (1,500), both established in 1997 in Kanchanaburi provinces, have been designated 'temporary shelters'. Almost one year after the camps were set up, refugees have still not been allowed to

protection and assistance has grown. As economic cooperation between the RTG and the Burmese government has grown, the Burmese opposition groups and refugees along the border have gone from being a convenient buffer for Thailand to an increasingly intolerable embarrassment to both countries. On one occasion during the 1997 dry season offensive, several hundred Karen men and boys were *refouled* by the Thai army into an area of active conflict. Since then, some other groups of new arrivals have also not been allowed to cross the border or enter camps, but have had to stay in the forest or in *ad hoc* camp sites. The RTG has made it plain that it would like to see the refugees repatriated as quickly as possible, leading to fears that the refugees may be coerced into repatriation before there is any solution to Burma's ongoing political crises.

...the official caseload has shrunk while the number of refugees without protection and assistance has grown.

nine other camps were combined to form three camps of between 8,000 and 10,000 people each. In early 1998, another seven, relatively small Karen camps were consolidated into three camps with populations ranging from 4,000 to 7,000. In December 1993, 55,000 Karen refugees lived in 19 camps; by 1998, approximately 90,000 Karen refugees lived in 12 camps, seven of which had over 6,000 residents. It is possible that eventually all the Karen camps will be consolidated into a few large camps, although in some areas the consolidations have faced stiff refugee resistance. Additionally, the RTG has deployed Thai militia in the camps. In 1997, fences were erected around six of the largest Karen camps, including Mae La, and strict controls placed on the movement of people in and out. Furthermore, it is likely that the RTG will allow UNHCR to set up a number of permanent offices on the border.

While the new restrictions may serve to protect the refugees, they have also severely cut into refugee livelihoods and self-sufficiency. No longer able to go out of the camps to forage in the forest or earn a cash income, and living in camps too crowded for gardens or livestock, many Karen refugees are now more dependent on NGO assistance. Where refugees are not allowed to cut bamboo or gather firewood, NGOs have had to provide building materials, cooking fuel and supplementary food, such as yellow beans and cooking oil, in addition to the

build houses but only bamboo platforms with a roof of plastic sheeting - insufficient protection in both dry and rainy seasons. Queues for water are much longer than in other camps, space is considered inadequate, and overall conditions are far worse than in other camps on the border. The camps are completely closed: refugees are not allowed to go out of the camps and access is strictly limited. In older camps the once flourishing markets have been drastically scaled back; no 'luxury' can be sold, only small, inexpensive items.

The new restrictions and controls, while carried out in the name of refugee protection or creation of 'temporary' camps, also give the RTG more direct control over the refugee communities. Some fear that these measures may be aimed at facilitating an eventual repatriation. An obvious solution to the problems posed by the DKBA would have been to relocate the camps further inside Thailand, well away from the border. However, this solution was unacceptable to the RTG which feared that it would encourage the refugees to feel more settled in Thailand, rendering any repatriation effort logistically, and politically, more problematic. Finally, the consolidations reduce the number of refugees living in the camps. With each camp move, some refugees have dispersed into forested areas, gone into Thai towns, or even made their way back to Burma. As a result, the official caseload has shrunk while the number of refugees without

Conclusion

In addition to creating new needs and deterring asylum seekers, the drastic changes, particularly in the Karen refugee camps, have had other, less tangible, social effects. The refugee and camp committees were able to manage the camps and maintain low levels of social conflict because the camps were small and disagreements could be resolved within the community itself. With the establishment of larger camps, social problems have become more significant. While increased rations can address food insecurity, there is also a clear loss of morale. Tensions rise as soon as there are rumours of impending camp moves. People stop tending flower beds and crops or repairing their homes when they learn they have to move. The education of children is disrupted, leading to higher drop-out and failure rates. The cultural and administrative autonomy, self-sufficiency and village atmosphere which had previously been integral to life in the camps are rapidly being lost.

Edith Bowles is currently a consultant at Pathfinder International in Boston, USA. As Burma Project Officer for the Jesuit Refugee Service from 1993 to 1996, she worked on food aid, education, and information/advocacy programmes in refugee camps along the Thailand-Burma border.

1 The military government changed the official name from Burma to Myanmar in 1989. As 'Myanmar' is therefore associated with the military government, it is not accepted or used by development or human rights organisations, or by Burmese opponents of the regime.