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Thailand: Burmese Resettlement Offering New Opportunities and Creating Complications

The ongoing resettlement from camps in Thailand is giving Burmese refugees a chance at a durable solution for the first time, yet the policies of some countries resettling the refugees are creating complications for those who will remain in the camps.

An estimated 150,000 Burmese refugees, largely from the Karen ethnic group, have lived in camps in Thailand, often for more than a decade. The refugees fled to Thailand to escape fighting between the Burmese military and ethnic insurgent groups. During the conflict they were frequently targeted by the military seeking to cut off any links between the insurgent groups and the civilian population. Refugees in camps represent just a tiny fraction of the estimated two million Burmese in Thailand.

Prior to arriving in Thailand, the refugees and asylum seekers experienced human rights violations such as torture, rape, forcible conscription of their children in the military, and forced labor. Many came to Thailand after having lived as internally displaced persons for long periods of time, and only after having exhausted all possible means of survival.

The Royal Thai Government (RTG) has not signed the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol and confines its recognition of asylum seekers to those who have fled fighting or political persecution. The refugees in the camps have restricted freedom of movement and little access to higher educational opportunities and income generation projects.

In 2005, the RTG, led by then Prime Minister Thaksin, approved the option of resettlement from the refugee camps and agreed to permit greater freedom of movement and access to education and work opportunities for refugees not opting for resettlement. There has been only limited progress made with such programs and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are currently identifying pilot projects. It is possible that they will only be carried out on a large scale after new elections in Thailand and a civilian government coming to power. Opening the camps would be of particular help to skilled and educated workers, many of whom are currently keen to be resettled overseas, as it would give them an opportunity to maximize their talents.

At present 11 countries are resettling the refugees, with the US taking in the largest number. Refugee resettlement to the US was on hold for much of 2006 due to the 'material support' provisions in the Patriot and Real ID Acts, which denied resettlement to those deemed to have provided assistance to armed groups, such as the Karen National Union (KNU), that have been fighting the Burmese military regime. Following the issuance of waivers by the Department of State in 2006, the US began resettling large numbers of Karen refugees from the camps in Thailand.

KNU combatants and those who received military training from the KNU, even if it was years ago, are not eligible for the waivers. This is despite the KNU being described by the US Department of State as, "The de facto civilian government of the Karen people in the areas it controlled, resisting the repression of and seeking autonomy from the Burmese regime." Consequently, some camp residents remain ineligible for US resettlement and families are being faced with the choice of staying in camps, or being split up.

Another resettlement related concern is that countries such as Finland, Norway and Canada are seeking the most trained and educated refugees due to their integration potential, as opposed to the US, which has opened resettlement to anyone interested. This has led to a disproportionate number of skilled workers leaving certain camps. The largest group to leave is teachers, followed by health workers and those in leadership roles.

The proportion of educated workers in the camps is so small that this is expected to have a major impact on camp management, community services and assistance projects supported by NGOs. The Committee for the Coordination of Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand has hired independent consultants to learn about the impact of resettlement on the refugees and suggest strategies for response. From

initial estimates it appears that as many as 40 percent of NGO workers could leave the camps by the end of 2007.

Some of the resettling countries have been disinclined to take large families with uneducated adults, even when they have significant protection needs. Countries taking many skilled workers should take a stronger stance on protection by accepting higher number of vulnerable cases, including former child soldiers, medical and disabled cases, and those affected by sexual and gender-based violence, regardless of their level of education.

International and local NGOs working in the camps have found it difficult to replace staff, especially medics, as there is a small pool from which to choose candidates and the training takes more than a year. The situation is further complicated by Thai government regulations preventing agencies from taking camp residents to outside institutes for training purposes. To cope with the situation, NGOs have tried recruiting Thai staff, but the cost is eight times that of hiring Burmese. It is expected that even if a replacement medic and teacher core is created, many of them may not stay for long before they apply for resettlement. According to an international NGO worker, "It is demoralizing for us to lose our best staff repeatedly. We are faced with the dilemma of very limited resources to train a new batch which may also opt for resettlement soon after the training is over."

An incentive to keep workers in the camps would be to increase their salaries, but more resources are needed for this as well as for replacement training programs. So far, none of the 11 countries resettling the refugees has expressed interest in covering the costs of training a new cadre of skilled workers.

Lack of information remains a significant problem for the refugees who have to make the choice of whether they want to be resettled. The guidelines of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) specify that the refugees cannot choose between resettling countries. Information provided to refugees, therefore, will have to be about all possible countries, regardless of whether a specific country will actually offer resettlement to the residents of a particular camp.

Currently, many countries are not providing information until after the selection mission, when the resettlement group receives a short orientation before departure. The US has placed information kiosks in each of the zones from which it is resettling refugees, and undertakes one-on-one counseling and information distribution through popular media, such as plays, but not all countries have followed suit. Those best informed about resettlement tend to be the most educated and skilled workers.

Some community-based organizations (CBOs) in the camps maintain that resettling countries have initiated little dialogue with them, which has created misgivings about the resettlement process, and a feeling of marginalization after having played a critical role in camp activities for years. A

recent document circulated by Karen CBOs noted that the organizations do not support mass resettlement. There appears to be pressure on those CBO members who want to leave and some members report being afraid to tell their colleagues that they have applied for resettlement. Agencies working with the refugees suggest that given the charged atmosphere surrounding the resettlement issue, resettling countries should provide a pre-cultural orientation and distribute information through a variety of audio-visual media and in a context and language understood by the refugees. Given the length of time that many Burmese have languished in the Thai camps, it is critical to build and maintain community support for the resettlement option.

REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:

RESETTLING COUNTRIES:

- Take into account the long term impact of many skilled refugees leaving the camps and fund accelerated training programs for replacing the workers.
- Grant increased resources for the salaries of camp workers.
- Make vulnerable refugees a resettlement priority and ensure they are not disregarded in favor of skilled refugees.
- Provide information to the refugees on the life and conditions those moving to third countries can expect there.
- Improve channels for communication between those who have resettled and those in the camps considering the resettlement option.
- Ensure that communication about resettlement with the refugees largely from rural, isolated parts of Burma are through a variety of media and in a context and language that is clear to them.
- Initiate more dialogue with community-based organizations about the resettlement process and their concerns.

THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT:

- Accept KNU members and trainees in its resettlement program.

THE GOVERNMENT OF THAILAND:

- Grant the refugees increased freedom of movement, more job opportunities outside camps, and access to higher education.
- Allow UNHCR, international and local NGOs to inform and update refugees on the resettlement process.
- Permit international and local NGOs to take refugees outside camps for training to fill the gap being created by the departure of skilled workers.

Kavita Shukla and Camilla Olson recently completed an assessment of the situation for Burmese refugees in Thailand.