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# RI BULLETIN

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## A POWERFUL VOICE FOR HUMANITARIAN ACTION

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### **Malaysia: Burmese Chin Refugees on the Run**

On March 1, 2005, the government of Malaysia initiated a nationwide operation to crackdown on undocumented migrants living and working in the country. The operation is likely to have a negative impact on refugees and asylum seekers from Burma and the Aceh region of Indonesia. Chin refugees from Burma are especially vulnerable.

The Chin Refugee Committee (CRC) estimates that 12,000 Chin live in Malaysia, of which more than 9,000 are registered with the CRC. More than 2,500 Chin have applied for registration as asylum seekers with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and have been provided with documentation that identifies them to Malaysian authorities. Nearly all of the Chin in Malaysia are males. A few of the Chin --- probably more than 200 --- are unaccompanied minors, under 18 years old.

On a recent visit to Malaysia Refugees International met with several hundred Chin in Kuala Lumpur, the jungles where they were living near the new administrative center of Putrajaya, and the Cameron Highlands. Most of the Chin in Kuala Lumpur and other urban areas are employed as construction workers and those in rural areas work on plantations and farms. Many of them have been in Malaysia for several years, but few speak Malay or are integrated into the country. They are on the run, taking shelter where they can, finding employment --- and often exploited --- as day laborers, attempting to evade the police and immigration authorities, and often being subjected to detention and deportation.

RI met with one group of Chin in a high rise apartment in which 40 of them, including 2 women, live. However, most of them, fearing police raids, go to a nearby wooded area to sleep at night. In the jungles near Putrajaya, a group of 300 men live in crude huts with roofs of plastic sheeting. The settlement has been there for seven years and has been burned down four times by the police, but the Chin rebuild each time. They are fortunate to have water. A local charitable organization dug a well and occasionally a mobile health clinic comes to the settlement. In the high, cool, Cameron Highlands, where vegetables and tea are grown, Chin live in warehouses and sheds on plantations, staying out of sight of local authorities. Malaysia is a middle income country, but the conditions under which the Chin are living are often deplorable.

The Chin told RI that they came to Malaysia to escape persecution by the army and police of Burma. They told of being arrested, imprisoned, and tortured for alleged ties to the Chin National Front, an organization resisting the Burmese government, of being subjected to forced recruitment as laborers, and of being persecuted for being Christians. Most of the Chin are Baptists, but with a sprinkling of Roman Catholics, Presbyterians, and Assembly of God members. The Chin refugees left families behind and paid "agents" to assist them to escape from Burma, passing through Thailand en route to Malaysia, while often being forced to work on Thai fishing boats to pay off debts to their agents. RI did not encounter any Chin who had returned to Burma for a visit. All said it would be too dangerous. Thus, they have often been separated from their families for several years.

The Chin do not have an easy life in Malaysia. They are working illegally, jobs are irregular, bribes must be paid to local authorities and police, and there is always the fear of detention and deportation. About 120 Chin are presently in squalid detention centers in which they may languish for months or even years while their cases are being decided. Many more Chin reported to us that they had been informally deported by being dumped across the border into Thailand from where they made their way back to Malaysia. The Chin were unanimous in saying that what they most needed in Malaysia was legal protection which would prevent them from being arrested and deported and allow them to work. Their second greatest need was access to medical care.

UNHCR has built up an impressive and important presence in Malaysia and is doing an excellent job interceding with the Malaysian government to register and protect refugees from detention, deportation, and other abuses. The Malaysian government on its part has been less harsh in this most recent refugee roundup than it was in years past. But refugees still complain that the UNHCR registration process is too slow. Chin in locations distant from the UNHCR office in Kuala Lumpur, such as the Cameron Highlands, are mostly unregistered because of the cost and the risk of going to UNHCR to register. Also, UNHCR registration cards and letters are not always respected by local authorities.

The Malaysian crackdown on undocumented migrants has demonstrated that the country is heavily dependent upon migrants for labor. Many construction sites were closed down because of shortages of labor during RI's visit. It would make sense for the Malaysian government to afford protection to the refugees and asylum seekers in its country while making it possible for them to be employed legally. Both the country and the refugees would benefit.

**Refugees International, therefore, recommends that:**

- UNHCR continue its work protecting and assisting refugees in Malaysia and speed up the registration process for refugees and asylum seekers, especially in outlying areas where refugees are mostly unregistered.
- International and local NGOs and aid agencies provide humanitarian assistance to the Chin refugees in Malaysia, especially for health care. Very few international NGOs work in Malaysia and the Chin, along with other refugees, suffer from lack of access to most social services and decent housing.
- The government of Malaysia respect the rights of those registered with UNHCR as refugees and asylum seekers and potential refugees who have not yet had the opportunity to register. The government should also adopt regulations that make it possible for refugees to be employed legally. Malaysia needs the workers; the refugees need the jobs.
- The government of the United States and others --- possibly Canada, Australia, or Sweden --- consider the possibility of resettling the Chin who are unable to return to their home country soon because of the extreme danger of doing so.

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*Kavita Shukla and Larry Thompson of Refugees International recently visited Malaysia.*