



EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF

INTEGRATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: TRAJECTORIES OF INCLUSION, DYNAMICS OF EXCLUSION

Policy Alternatives for the Refugees in Temporary Shelters along Thai-Burma Border



This policy brief is based upon the study on 'Policy Alternatives for the Refugee Problems in Temporary Shelters along Thai-Burma Border' which aims to understand problems of refugees who fled civil war in Burma/Myanmar and are presently staying in temporary shelters along the Thai-Burma border. The study explores the refugees' willingness, concerns, preparedness and participation regarding their repatriation. The research team selected four shelters for the study in order to understand the different social, cultural and political conditions there. Ethnographic methodology was used to collect data.

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INTRODUCTION

Who are the refugees?

The temporary shelters along the Thai-Burma border are under the responsibility of Thailand's Ministry of Interior. As Thailand has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention and does not recognize the existence of refugees within its territory, those civilians who fled across to Thai-Burma border are defined as "war-fled asylum seekers" or "displaced persons from fighting". This legal definition construes them as individuals who are in need of assistance and are unable to be self-reliant. These refugees are not allowed to leave the shelters, unless they obtain prior permission from the Thai authorities. They will be regarded as "illegal migrants", once they step out of the shelter. The assistance provided has followed humanitarian principles, which are: provision of food, shelter, clothes, medicine and education necessary for their livelihood. The temporary shelters were established thirty years ago within Thai territory. The idea was to avoid attacks by the Burmese military or ethnic armed groups against the refugees. Since the early 2000s, UNHCR

has been in charge of either transferring the refugees to third countries or preparing their repatriation with assistance from other humanitarian organizations with different capacities.

While the shelter is a closed space, it has developed itself into a settlement which has schools, church, monastery, market place and shops which sell food and necessary items. In some shelters, Muslim traders play important role in the market. Many international non-government organizations are clearly visible in the shelter. Several refugees have been engaged to work with these organizations. At the same time, the refugees have been able to negotiate permission to seek employment outside the shelters. Many can contact with their relatives inside Burma/Myanmar or in third countries, such as, the US, Australia, Finland, Sweden, etc. With the coordination and facilitation by UNHCR, some have already resettled in third countries. However, the process is quite slow as many of these refugees did not flee from their country for political reasons. After 2005, it was found that the refugees have become more ethnically diverse. Many young people came to the shelters to seek better educational opportunities.

With the political change in Burma/Myanmar from 2011 onwards and the peace process negotiations, the Thai state and other international organizations working with refugees have started to prepare for the repatriation of these refugees. However, this process is hindered by political conditions in Myanmar. To repatriate the refugees, their willingness to return, safety, sustainability, and also the refugees' dignity should be taken into account. Not all refugees would like to be repatriated. Some would like to resettle in a third country at least for family reunion. Many, especially those refugees of the older generation, prefer to return to their homeland. But their concern is whether they can find a plot of land to live on. By contrast, many refugees of the younger generation do not want to return to Myanmar as they do not have a sense of belonging to Myanmar. They have acquired skills and knowledge which they think they can use to find better employment opportunities in Thailand. As of the beginning of the year 2015, preparation for repatriation has begun in all the shelters. However, an important problem is the participation of the refugees in decision-making processes regarding their repatriation, particularly among women. More importantly, the issue of land where the refugees would be resettled is still problematic.

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

Classification of the population in the temporary shelters and considerations on their repatriation

Number of Refugee Population in the Shelters

Existing population surveys are unlikely to provide an exact number of refugees residing in the camps due to 1) regular mobility of the refugees and 2) the different objectives of the organizations which conducted the survey. The registration of the refugees was undertaken by UNHCR in 2005. UN cards were issued to these refugees. After that, there was no attempt to register the refugees in the shelters. The number of refugees increased, as this was seen as an opportunity to settle in a third country. Therefore, it is difficult to obtain exact numbers of the refugees inside the camps. According to a report of the Karen Refugee Commission (KRC), in June 2015, there were 109,423 refugees under the care of KRC. This does not comprise those residing in the Baan Mai Nai Soi and Baan Mae Surin camps in Mae Hong Son province who are mostly Karenni. It is estimated that currently there are around 120,000 refugees in the 9 shelters.

Secondly, three agencies, namely Thailand's Ministry of Interior, the UNHCR, and the Thailand Border Consortium (TBC) conducted surveys regarding the number of refugees with different objectives. This resulted in different numbers of refugees residing in the camps. The number of refugees collected by TBC was less than that of the UNHCR, as TBC made use only of the number of individuals who were eligible for food rations. Early in 2015, according to the figures of UNHCR, it was found that the population had decreased from originally 150,000 to 100,000-140,000.

Classification of refugees

According to the refugee population survey in 9 shelters, UNHCR classified the refugees in three categories. 1) Registered refugees who fled the war and hold a card; commonly known among themselves as UN card-holders, 2) those who are registered for pre-screening by the UNHCR and 3) those not registered with UNHCR.

This classification has some advantages for preparing the selection of refugees who are eligible to be transferred to a third country. It is also helpful in separating the ones who arrived in the camps before 2005 from the ones who did arrive after. However, the classification for repatriation should also take other details into account, such as, ethnic identity, religion, gender, age, skill and their knowledge, and health status including disabilities. Though this detailed information may be available in UNHCR system, the point is to use this information in formulating policy for repatriation.

Though most of the refugees are Karen and Karenni, after 2005, refugees with different ethnic backgrounds have been found. For example, in some camps, the Muslim population accounts for 15%. By repatriating them to Myanmar, those involved in the repatriation process should also consider the refugees' willingness to return as the refugees might face ethnic exclusion or safety issues. Some ethnic groups treasure their ethnic identity highly and would like to maintain their ethnic identity and ethnic language. There are also concerns over the recognition of education certificates among those who graduated from school in the camp.

To prepare for repatriation, one should understand refugees' social, political and psychological background. **Firstly**, the Burmese government's perception on ethnic groups as "insurgents" is a result of more than six decades of conflicts between the military regime and ethnic groups. Some ethnic armed groups have already signed the National Ceasefire Agreement. However, several ethnic armed groups, such as, KnPP, KIO, etc., have not signed. The problem of integration is highly important. **Secondly**, many refugees have had traumatic experiences regarding the government and military regime. To achieve successful repatriation, refugees' livelihood should be ensured. Furthermore, their war-related trauma has to be treated. This also included psychological effects of domestic violence among women. **Thirdly**, normally ethnic refugees have a certain "imagination" regarding their nation state and ethnic homelands. It is still doubtful if they will share a "national imagination" with the Burmese majority. Hence, the repatriation should also address forgiveness, national reconciliation, and importance of ethnic identity, language, culture, and principles of federalism. **Fourth**, some refugees are not willing to return to their home country until "a real peace" has been achieved. Most of them do not "trust" the current government of Myanmar. **Fifth**, youth refugees or those who were born and grew up in the camp do not share an imagination of "home" or "homeland" regarding Myanmar. Therefore, they are not willing to "return" to Myanmar as they have no ties with it and share a different worldview.

Preparation for repatriation

UNHCR, which is involved in the preparation process of the repatriation, has classified repatriation as follows: 1) spontaneous repatriation 2) facilitated repatriation and 3) promotion repatriation; all are expected to be completed by 2017.

International organizations have provided vocational trainings such as cooking, baking, motorbike repair, hair dressing, organic farming and construction work to prepare the refugees for their repatriation. However, such training courses are not based on actual market demands but instead are based on assessments by the organizations involved. Some organizations cooperated with schools inside Myanmar to jointly develop a curriculum. In that way, students in the camps are able to obtain accredited education.

Social and political conditions in repatriating the refugees

Some people in Myanmar see refugees as a group who did not share their suffering and now just return after the conflict has ended. Some refugees, particularly those who migrated to Thailand after 2005, sold their land and migrated to reside in the shelter. When they resettle in their home country, they would still be able to obtain allocated land. This can lead to conflict in the process of repatriation. These issues should be recognized for sustainable re-integration.

A main concern among the refugees is the question of suitable farm land as their former land might have been confiscated or be contaminated with land mines. In addition, parents and students voiced concerns over the accreditation of their education they received inside the camps. Burmese language competency is also a major problem for these students when they want to continue their education in schools in Myanmar.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy recommendations for development of refugees prior to the repatriation to Myanmar

Since the conflicts between the Burmese military and ethnic armed groups have not yet ended and the National Ceasefire Agreement has not yet been successfully completed, concerns over the safety and sustainability of repatriation have resulted in the repatriation process still being pending. However, some refugees have already voluntarily decided to return home or undertaken a preliminary survey for resettlement near the border.

Meanwhile, the economy along the border areas has experienced a boom since the plan for the border areas of Tak Province as a “Special Economic Zone” has been initiated. The emerging situation could be advantageous for some of the refugees. But, they might just become part of a cheap labour force in the industrial sector. The others might find work in the expanding agricultural sector, e.g., corn farms, rubber plantation. These farms pose the risk of further forest encroachment. It is also questionable whether the border development would be sustainable.

So far, most international non-government organizations working with the refugees have been providing “humanitarian assistance” to these refugees. As a consequence, the refugees tend to depend on external aid, although some have tried to find ways to help themselves. There is a need to change INGOs’ “humanitarian assistance” approach to a “participatory development” approach.

To achieve this,

1. The refugees have to be perceived as individuals who are able to participate in the development; their potential and local knowledge are explored. The support and revitalization of such knowledge has to be practiced as everyday-life skills. Such skills can range from organic farming, to craftsmanship like weaving, traditional medicine, art, blacksmithing, basketry. Furthermore ritual leaders should be encouraged to perform the traditional rites.

2. The education system inside the shelters has to be accredited by both Myanmar’s and Thailand’s Ministries of Education. The notion that education in the refugee camp is not under the responsibility of Thailand’s Ministry of Education should be reviewed so that the quality of education can be recognized by both parties. Approximate 1,200 babies are born each year and education should be provided to them. Thereby, they will be raised to become knowledgeable and socially responsible individuals.

3. Instead of waiting for opportunities to become available for the refugees to work in the “Special Economic Zone” along the border, a **Border Develop Plan for Local Integration** should be developed. In these shelters, there are adolescent refugees who are educated at secondary level

and some have obtained vocational training. They can speak languages used along the border. If they are given further training to understand the concept and skills in participatory development, they can potentially help other refugees to integrate into local communities. They can also work as development workers in local communities along the two sides of the border, building their capacity in environmental conservation and sustainable development. This can help the refugees integrated into to local communities. Sustainable community development can be an alternative to SEZ. An establishment of Consortium of Thai-Myanmar Universities for Border Development can provide appropriate training for Volunteers for Border Development”.

4. When repatriating the refugees, inclusive participation in the preparation for their repatriation should be encouraged. Consultation at different levels is important. The issue of refugees along the Thai-Burma/Myanmar should be brought to the attention of UN organizations, EU and ASEAN, AICHR (ASEAN Inter-Governmental Commission on Human Right) theoretically should be involved in making policy recommendation for repatriation, but in practice, it has not been constrained by their norms and regulations in making decision.

Thailand’s Ministry of Interior and National Security Council should be encouraged to discuss the matter bring to attention to Myanmar’s counterpart, especially the Ministry of Border Affairs. Support from ethnic armed groups such as KNU, KnPP should be sought for prior and during the repatriation process to ensure peaceful co-existence among different groups. Participatory sustainable border development should be promoted urgently as an alternative model of development and local integration. This can be carried out in collaboration with international organizations such as UNHCR, Thailand National Human Right Commission (NHRC), AICHR, universities near the border, and local NGOs and CSOs as well as the refugees themselves.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

Run by a consortium of five European and four Southeast Asian institutions, coordinated by the École française d’Extrême-Orient, SEATIDE aims to take a new look at the benefits and risks of integration processes in Southeast Asia.

Main scientific objective

Integrative processes offer the promise of economic and cultural development, the free movement of people, the promotion of citizenship and knowledge networks with extensive links with the wider world. At the same time, failure to take advantage of these benefits can result in processes of exclusion that undermine national/regional frameworks, and entail risks in the fields of human development/security, including the danger of framework disintegration.

In examining these processes, SEATIDE’s research will be informed by an awareness that dynamics of exclusion should be studied in tandem with dynamics of inclusion to produce holistic analyses of integrative processes and their contemporary forms, which take into account long-term local perspectives.

Research capacity building

By reinforcing European research on SEA, the project will contribute to the coordination of EU-ASEAN scholarly exchange, the improvement of networking capacity, and the promotion of a new generation of field researchers on SEA.

Methodology

The project will conduct field research and produce analyses that take into account local knowledge as well as macroeconomic studies and expert perspectives. Qualitative and quantitative data will be presented in case studies structured by a common analytical framework, centred on but not restricted to four SEA countries (Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia), with a unifying focus on transnational issues.

PROJECT IDENTITY

PROJECT NAME	Integration in Southeast Asia: Trajectories of Inclusion, Dynamics of Exclusion (SEATIDE)
COORDINATOR	Yves Goudineau, EFEO, Paris, France, direction@efeo.net .
CONSORTIUM	Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient – EFEO – Paris, France University of Hamburg – UHAM – Hamburg, Germany Centre for History and Economics – CHE – University of Cambridge, UK Tallinn University – TU – Tallinn, Estonia Università di Milano-Bicocca – UNIMIB – Milano, Italy Universiti Sains Malaysia – USM – Penang, Malaysia Universitas Gadjah Mada – UGM – Yogyakarta, Indonesia Chiang Mai University – CMU – Chiang Mai, Thailand Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences – VASS – Hanoi, Vietnam
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FURTHER READING	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Chayan Vaddhanaphuti & Amporn Jirattikorn (eds), <i>Transcending State Boundaries, Contesting Development, Social Suffering and Negotiation</i>, Chiang Mai, Regional Centre for Social Sciences and Sustainable Development, Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University, 2011.- Leider, Jacques, 'Domination and Dereliction: Exploring the State's Roles in Burma', <i>The Journal of Asian Studies</i>, 71, 2, 2012: 361-370.- Livingstone, Decha Shrestha, Omkar L & Aekapol Chongvilaivan (eds), <i>Greater Mekong Subregion, From Geographical to Socio-economic Integration</i>, Singapore, ISEAS, 2013.- South, Ashley, <i>Ethnic Politics in Burma: States of Conflict</i>, Singapore, ISEAS, 2009.- South, Ashley & Kim Jolliffe, <i>Forced Migration and the Myanmar Peace Process</i>, UNHCR Research Paper No. 274, Geneva, 2015.