

Humanitarian aid to IDPs in Burma: activities and debates

by Ashley South

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There is a need for greater understanding and coordination between groups working inside Burma and those operating cross-border.

The majority of assistance and advocacy - and most research - regarding forced migration in Burma has focused on the situation in armed-conflict-affected areas along the Thailand border. As international agencies do not have direct access to conflict-affected parts of eastern Burma, they provide aid in partnership with local agencies.

Assistance for displaced people inside Burma, sent from Thailand or other neighbouring countries is by definition illegal, as it challenges the sovereignty of the Burmese government (which most cross-border actors in fact consider illegitimate). Some cross-border activities are carried out from Bangladesh and India (very limited amounts of relief and documentation on human rights) and also from China (including low-profile medical assistance). Most Thailand-based cross-border groups work in Karen areas but also in Mon and Karenni States; security and local capacity constraints mean that much less work is undertaken in Shan State.

Cross-border programmes provide aid which may be characterised as impartial – inasmuch as it is distributed according to need – but it is far from neutral. Cross-border aid networks are closely associated with armed opposition groups, on which they rely for security and logistical arrangements. In fact, most cross-border personnel are members (or affiliates) of insurgent organisations. A number of local NGOs and CBOs are also engaged in human rights documentation and advocacy work, and capacity building with a range of opposition groups.

As Burma’s ethnic insurgency groups lost control of their remaining ‘liberated zones’ in the early/mid-1990s, civilians displaced by armed conflict could no longer settle behind the front-lines of conflict, and IDP numbers increased substantially. With the help of international NGOs and donors who had been supporting refugees in Thailand for decades, Karen and Mon IDP assistance programmes were established. By April 2002, the annual cross-border aid budget had grown to \$1m, distributed through local Karen and, to a lesser extent, Karenni and Shan groups.

Short-term humanitarian aid was intended to supplement villagers’ rice-sharing and other coping mechanisms, offering them a chance to reconstruct their communities once the

immediate crisis had passed. In 2005 several cross-border groups began to implement a range of community-based development initiatives, stimulated by the injection of significant new US Government funds for cross-border work in 2006. Several of these organisations also implemented sometimes quite extensive health and education programmes in partnership with local communities.¹

Working inside Burma

International relief and development projects in Burma are still spread very thinly. Yangon-based international organisations and UN agencies generally take a long-term incremental approach to expanding access into conflict-affected parts of the country, starting programmes in areas adjacent to state capitals and gradually moving into more remote locations, although not in the most severely conflict-affected areas. Over the past few months, however, the military government has moved to further restrict the activities of most humanitarian agencies in the country.

Very few international organisations operating in government-controlled areas of Burma implement programmes that specifically target IDPs. In part, this is due to the sensitivity of the issue; in part, it reflects a lack of appreciation of the nature and extent of the displacement crises in Burma.

From the late 1990s, international organisations in Burma began to realise the benefits of working in partnership with local NGOs and CBOs in order to gain access to vulnerable and remote communities. During this period, a variety of civil society groups emerged within and between ethnic nationality communities inside Burma, in part as a result of the series of ceasefires negotiated between the government and most armed groups. These civil society networks include religious groups and traditional village associations as well as more formal organisations.

Such local actors often have access to conflict-affected areas beyond the reach of international organisations. Their relief and development activities take the form of self-help initiatives, undertaken by extended family and ethnic clan networks, as well as more systematic programmes implemented by CBOs and local NGOs. Relief aid usually consists of food, medical supplies (including mobile outreach teams) and community rehabilitation development activities. In particular, three separate church-based networks working with IDPs have developed sophisticated capacities to assess needs, and to monitor and evaluate the impacts of assistance.

Local community leaders - who are able to engage with those holding power (eg Burma Army and ceasefire group commanders) – also undertake important protection work to improve conditions for vulnerable communities. Their interventions may involve

¹ The total amount of aid provided by international organisations in Burma is approximately \$250 million (less than \$5/person), while the budget of international agencies on the Thailand border is about \$50 million (for a refugee population of approximately 150,000 people) - of which some \$7 million is spent cross-border.

persuading authorities not to relocate civilians nor to demand forced labour from a village or to allow humanitarian access for international or, more often, local NGOs and CBOs.

Civil society actors may also pass on human rights information to contacts in Yangon or Thailand. Such informal ‘protection and advocacy networks’ help reduce the incidence of human rights abuses as, for example, army commanders may be reluctant to use forced labour in areas where this fact is likely to be passed onto advocacy groups in Thailand.

Conclusion

Agencies working outside Burma, especially opposition groups in exile and their support and lobbying networks, should be encouraged to gain a better understanding of the important assistance and protection work undertaken – despite government restrictions – by local civil society actors in Burma. Organisations working from inside Burma cannot afford to be as bold in their advocacy roles as those based in Thailand and overseas. However, the presence of local and international agency personnel in conflict-affected areas can help to create the ‘humanitarian space’ in which to engage in behind-the-scenes advocacy with national, state and local authorities.

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