

Crisis on the Burma Border

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by Ashley South

The brutal and ongoing suppression of the 'saffron revolution' has refocused international attention on the appalling human rights and political situation in Burma. Civilized people have been shocked by the images of Buddhist monks and other civilians being arrested and killed on the streets of Yangon and other cities.

Understandably, revulsion at the actions of the SPDC military regime has led to calls for firm action to be taken against the generals who have mismanaged Burma for nearly half a century (since the military takeover of 1962). The challenge facing the international community is how to persuade the junta to better respect the human, civil and political rights of citizens. Whether this requires reform of the military government - and some kind of gradual transition to democracy - or a more abrupt form of 'regime change' is debatable. What is clear, however, is that Burma needs change - and soon.

In the meantime, for people living in rural areas, not much has changed in recent months. Communities continue to be subject to a range of abuses committed by the Burmese military and government, and sometimes by armed nonstate groups. The situation is especially difficult for ethnic nationality people living in areas affected by armed conflict, or who are threatened by the construction of large-scale infrastructure projects, such as hydropower dams, and whose livelihoods have been undermined by natural resource extraction (logging and mining), or because their land has been confiscated by the army or other powerful actors.

It is of the utmost importance that the international community does not forget the plight of these people. Today in Burma, more than 500,000 internally displaced people (IDPs), most of whom come from the Karen, Karenni, Mon, Shan and other minority groups, are among the most oppressed and needy people in the country. Also of concern are 150,000 refugees living in ten camps in Thailand, as well as some two million migrant workers in the kingdom (most of whom also come from Burma).

In recent weeks, some international donors have responded to the situation in Burma by committing additional money to humanitarian projects inside the country, implemented by international and local agencies working in government-controlled areas. This is an entirely appropriate response. Burma receives much less foreign aid per capita than other countries with similar development and poverty indicators. I have long argued that more aid should

be targeted at needy groups in Burma, and that assistance projects should be implemented in partnership with local civil society networks, and - where appropriate - with some state agencies, such as the departments of health and education.

However, foreign aid to Burma should not be seen as a zero-sum game. Assistance to vulnerable groups inside the country should not be provided at the expense of communities in the border zones. Refugees and IDPs in eastern Burma and Thailand remain in need of international protection and assistance. However, the international NGOs which have for over two decades supplied the refugee camps in Thailand, and directed international awareness of the plight of IDPs in Burma, are currently experiencing a serious funding crisis.

The Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) is the main NGO responsible for providing food and shelter to displaced people from Burma. Over the past few years, the TBBC and other NGOs have worked with the refugee communities to ensure a greater degree of participation in the governance of the camps, on the part of women and various minority and non-elite groups. Today, the refugee regime on the border stands as an example of 'best practice': the various communities represented in the camps enjoy a degree of ownership over administration and the distribution of relief supplies which is unusual in refugee situations around the world. However, these achievements are in danger of being undermined, as the TBBC is being forced to cut supplies to the refugee camps, due to a chronic lack of funding.

The donors who have for so many years supported the TBBC and other NGOs working with refugees along the Thailand border should continue to do so. With increasingly large numbers of refugees taking up the 'durable solution' of resettlement in third countries, the camps may be closed within a decade. In the meantime however, thousands of people still flock to the border every month - although the Thai authorities are making it increasingly difficult for them to gain access to the refugee camps.

Since the late 1990s, the civil war in Burma has entered its final stage. The few remaining armed groups still at war with the SPDC are facing a desperate situation, and the civilian populations living in areas under their influence or control are more vulnerable than ever. Given the dire humanitarian situation along the border, IDPs and refugees in and from Burma deserve our continued support. Now is not the time to abandon the long-suffering people of the borderlands.

Ashley South is the author of several books and reports on Burma