

Burden or Boon: The Impact of Burmese Refugees on Thailand

by Inge Brees

In the West, refugees are increasingly regarded as a menace, especially in the aftermath of 9/11 which led to heightened securitization of migration and anxieties about ‘the other’. However, this discourse is better justified in developing countries which have to deal with mass influxes of refugees into their territory when the conflict of neighboring countries spills over their borders. In such cases, refugees can pose a security threat to the host country. For example, they can attract attacks from across the border which present a hazard to the local populations or they can be mixed in with the armed forces as in the case of Interahamwe with the Tutsi in the Congo. Relief aid can be used by leaders to control their fellow refugees and finance their own insurgent activities, which can prolong the conflict in a country of origin. Moreover, refugee camps provide a breeding ground for political radicalism, militancy, and recruitment into rebel groups. If a violent act is committed, there is often no adequate law enforcement system to punish the offenders. Since most camps are not entirely closed, the problems of crime, violence, and militarization leach out into the surrounding host community.¹ The presence of refugees can thus pose a security problem, but the host country is usually also affected on a political, economic and environmental level. For example, large numbers of refugees who are in desperate need of cash are in a weak bargaining position. They feel obliged to accept lower wages, which may have a detrimental effect on the wages and employment rates of the native population. This can result in rising tensions, as was the case recently in South Africa, where survival migrants² from Zimbabwe were blamed for declining economic conditions. Governments usually try to reduce potential tensions by compelling refugees to stay in camps.

However, contrary to this overtly negative picture, refugees can also engender positive effects in the host country, especially on the economic level. This positive impact is more often than not neglected by both the host countries’ leaders and by researchers. This article will seek to address this gap by presenting a balanced analysis of the various consequences that a mass refugee influx has on a host country. In order to achieve that goal one case was studied—the Burmese refugees in Thailand.

Inge Brees is an Associated Member of the Conflict Research Group based at the University of Ghent.

This is one of the most protracted refugee situations in the world, since the first refugee camps were established twenty-five years ago. The analysis is based on fieldwork conducted in the Thai-Burmese border region in 2006 and 2007. The paper will start by briefly explaining why Burmese people are fleeing their country and the policies they encounter in Thailand. Subsequently, the impact of refugees on the security, politics, environment, and economy of Thailand will be analyzed.

SETTING THE SCENE: BURMESE REFUGEES IN THAILAND

Burmese people flee their country for a combination of political and economic reasons. Throughout the country, people flee because of human rights abuses, such as forced labor or political persecution, and/or a total loss of livelihood opportunities due to the economic mismanagement by the junta. In addition, there are forced relocations for reasons varying from urban development and poppy eradication to enforced cultural assimilation. Forced relocations also occur in border zones to reduce potential support for insurgents. However, many of the ethnic minorities in these rural borderlands are deeply attached to their farmland. They often refuse to relocate and instead prefer to hide in the jungle whenever the army is nearby, effectively becoming internally displaced people. As this conflict continues, families often decide to flee or adopt risk-diversification strategies by sending some family members to another city or even abroad to seek employment.

Thailand is often the preferred destination for Burmese refugees because there is a high demand for foreign labor. The 2400 km border between the two countries is and has always been very porous as evidenced by the large Burmese community present in Thailand. Even though Thailand has not signed the 1951 Geneva Convention it has to a considerable extent, abided by international law related to refugees and their protection. At the national level, there is no specific law on refugees or refugee status determination. The law which has the greatest impact on asylum seekers is the 1979 Immigration Act. It states that all those who enter Thailand without papers are there illegally and are subject to imprisonment, fines,

**AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL,
THERE IS NO SPECIFIC LAW
ON REFUGEES OR REFUGEE
STATUS DETERMINATION.**

and deportation. In reality, some Burmese minority groups can seek refuge on a *prima facie* basis in the refugee camps without being fined. These ‘temporarily displaced persons fleeing fighting’ are entitled to protection and services in the camp, as long as the conditions in Burma do not allow for repatriation. In the meantime, no permanent structures can be built in the camp, the environmental impact must be kept to a minimum, and people are not allowed to leave the camp facilities to work. This compelled idleness makes the refugees feel useless and hopeless: “I just hope that the Karen people remaining in Burma do not have to become refugees too. We are like chickens, kept in a cage under the house, fenced in and being fed.”³ Anyone caught outside the camp is considered an illegal migrant and is subject to deportation, albeit often unofficial, regardless of whether or not they carry a

registration card granted by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). People who are not fleeing from the armed conflict but are forced to relocate or suffer human rights abuses such as forced labor cannot be recognized as refugees. These people, including all the ethnic Shan refugees, are obliged to self-settle and are simply called migrants. However, the push factors are far more important in this case than the pull factors, and the choice of settlement, inside or outside the camps, is often unrelated to the reasons for leaving. Many political activists are self-settled, since most opposition work is impossible to conduct from inside the remote camps. All the Burmese in Thailand are therefore called refugees in this paper, regardless of their legal status or where they live.

Approximately 135,000 Burmese refugees live in one of nine refugee camps in Thailand, while at least two million Burmese live outside the camps. As a result, Thailand has a refugee ratio of 1:32 (refugee population to total population). The impact that refugees have on Thailand is substantial and will be analyzed in the following sections. It will become clear that while refugees affect security, politics and even healthcare negatively, presenting a burden for Thailand, the impact refugees have on the local and national economy is quite beneficial.

IMPACT OF BURMESE REFUGEES ON THAI SECURITY AND POLITICS

The management of labor and forced migration into Thailand has been developed through a national security lens, rather than one that also looks at economic and human securities. Burmese refugees and migrants, as well as other ‘non-Thais’—for instance, those from hill tribes—are seen by the government and the local population as a threat to their security, social order and public health.

While some Burmese do commit crimes in Thailand such as drug trafficking, part of the problem lies in perception. Media reports tend to feed the perception of refugees as troublemakers, heightening xenophobic attitudes. Every time a Burmese person commits an offense, it is highlighted in the newspapers, which reflects negatively on the entire Burmese refugee population. In addition, the view that Thailand is being overwhelmed by foreigners is perpetuated by the media. These ideas are often reinforced by insensitive comments by politicians. This quote from Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej illustrates this point:

The navy is exploring a deserted island to place Rohingya, a Muslim ethnic minority group from Burma who illegally slipped into the country.... To stop the influx, we have to keep them in a tough place. Those who are about to follow will have to know life here will be difficult in order that they won't sneak in.⁴ Police have no information on the number of these migrant workers, their identity, or whereabouts.’ The deputy commander of Chiang Mai provincial police advocated a special zone be set aside to accommodate migrant workers. ‘We’re dealing with a time bomb. We must defuse it before it explodes into a greater problem,’ said Pol Col Dinai.⁵

This constant negative portrayal has had a negative effect on public opinion, as indicated by a surprising finding of a study conducted by USCRI (the US Committee

for Refugees and Immigrants) and ABAC.⁶ They discovered that higher income and education levels were consistently negatively correlated with progressive or liberal attitudes toward refugees. In contrast, working class people and people with only high school diplomas were found to be more positively inclined towards refugees, whereas it is commonly assumed that these groups will have negative attitudes

TO SOME EXTENT, THE BURMESE POPULATION IS MORE PRONE TO ILLNESSES DUE TO THEIR FLIGHT AND BAD WORKING AND LIVING CONDITIONS. HOWEVER, THE REAL PROBLEM LIES IN ACCESS TO PROPER HEALTHCARE AND TREATMENT.

towards refugees because they are the ones competing with them for scarce resources.

Another perceived negative implication of Burmese flight is that the Burmese are overburdening the local health system and spreading diseases, which local leaders regard as a security issue. To some extent, the Burmese population is more prone to illnesses due to their flight and bad working and living conditions. However, the real problem lies in access to proper healthcare and treatment. While everyone, in theory, is allowed access to health centers on humanitarian grounds; in practice, there are many difficulties. First, only registered foreign workers can benefit from the thirty baht (THB) health scheme, which is a system introduced by the Thaksin government in 2001 to improve the access of poor people to hospitals. However, the families of registered workers and non-registered workers, as well as homeless Thais, are not included in this system. The doctors on duty can choose to either treat the patient or not. If they choose to treat the patient, they can ask for the full cost of the treatment or treat them for free. Unfortunately, most patients cannot afford treatment and treating them for free places a burden on the health system. However, the surge in the number of patients cannot be attributed to the refugees alone, since the introduction of the THB 30 health scheme led to an enormous rise in the number of patients throughout the country. Even if treatment were free, an illegal migrant population brings additional problems with it. For example, refugees are afraid of arrests while seeking treatment and they do not speak the Thai language.⁷ This kind of health impact can only decrease if the policy concerning access to healthcare and treatment changes and there are some signs that this is occurring. For example, the Thai Ministry of Health has developed a migrant health strategy, and part of the plan consists of working with community health workers who can act as liaisons and translators at the same time.

Though not apparent from the interviews with Thai respondents, the largest security risk in the border region comes from armed-conflict inside Burma rather than refugees inside Thailand. In the past, the refugee camps in Thailand have been attacked from across the border, resulting in the death of several Thai nationals. While these large-scale attacks have not occurred since 1998, occasionally the war still spills across the border. For example, in 2001, the dry season offensive of the

Burmese army against the Shan State Army-South spilled over into Thai territory, causing many people to flee their homes and Thai soldiers to shell the Burmese side of the border. More recently, there were skirmishes between the Karen National Union (KNU) and their breakaway faction, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), in the area neighboring the Tak province of Thailand. As a result, a Thai village located just across the river from the conflict had to be evacuated. Thai soldiers and rangers were called in to protect the evacuees and to be present in case any troops wanted to cross the border. While these skirmishes have resulted in an extensive control of the cross-border area by the DKBA, it is unlikely that their victory will be the end of the problems. On the contrary, the DKBA wants to defeat the KNU in Thailand as well and has threatened to destroy Nu Poh camp. Therefore, the worried residents of Nu Poh camp slept with their bags packed, just in case they would need to run again. The security of both the refugees and the Thai locals in these border villages is continuously affected by the war inside Burma.

Besides the direct impact of contentious politics, the indirect impact of such politics, such as large demonstrations or political violence, is also felt by Thailand. Thus, bilateral relations between Burma and Thailand deteriorated sharply as a result of violent actions at the Burmese embassy and a Ratchaburi hospital by armed Burmese opposition forces in 1999 and 2000. Refugees, political activists, and insurgents are a visible diplomatic liability to Bangkok. More recently, the arrival of hundreds of Rohingya, an ethnic minority group from west Burma, and the new trial of Aung San Suu Kyi caused Thai Prime Minister Vejjajiva to say that the Burmese regime “remains a hideous blight” on the Asian map. The Burmese junta replied, “It is global knowledge that [Thailand] provides fertile soils to Myanmar absconders, insurgent groups and anti-government political groups.” He added that, “the cessation of conflict in Burma ‘rests on the cooperation of the neighboring other country.’”⁸ The presence of refugees, activists, and rebels remains a very sensitive topic in the bilateral relationship, despite the fact that Thailand is Burma’s largest trading partner. Despite Thailand’s official stance towards the Burmese opposition forces, at the local and more discrete level there has always been a lot of space for negotiation, since the presence of these opposition forces serves as a bargaining tool for Bangkok as long as the situation inside Burma remains volatile.

Lastly, Burmese refugees could, in theory, also have an impact on internal politics in Thailand because they affect the ethnic balance of the country. The Karen people constitute 46 percent of the entire hill tribe population in Thailand, and this percentage has increased due to the Karen refugee influx. In some cases, this has resulted in increased confrontations of the state with previously oppressed minorities, or it has exacerbated pre-existing ethnic tensions. For example, Van Damme found that

**IN THE CASE OF THAILAND,
NO EVIDENCE WAS FOUND
THAT THE REFUGEES’
PRESENCE HAS HEIGHTENED
THE POLITICAL DEMANDS OF
THE DISADVANTAGED HILL
TRIBE PEOPLE IN THAILAND.**

the arrival of Mandingo refugees from Liberia increased ethnic tensions with the forest tribes in Guinea.⁹ In the case of Thailand, no evidence was found that the refugees' presence has heightened the political demands of the disadvantaged hill tribe people in Thailand. There is no support for greater Karen autonomy in Thailand, nor any kind of Pan-Karen nationalism.

In sum, the refugees do have an impact on the health care, criminal, and political situations in Thailand. However, for the large majority of refugees this is due to reasons outside of their control. The elements that negatively affect the Thai population often have the same negative impact on most refugees. Only a small section of the refugees are politically active or engaged in rebel or criminal activities.

ENVIRONMENTAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACT OF BURMESE REFUGEES

Refugees can have a large impact on the local natural environment because of their need for housing and survival. Certainly the initial refugee influx often causes environmental damage due to unrestrained deforestation, harvesting of food and the still poorly organized aid agencies. However, this has not been the case in Thailand. The refugees trickled in over a long period of time and negotiated over land with the local population, while NGOs merely had to deliver minimal assistance. Only later on, when security worsened and refugees were assembled in camps, tensions concerning the environment arose.¹⁰

Village communities became urban centers, as camps expanded from a maximum of 6,000 people to today's average of 17,000 refugees.¹¹ NGOs have incrementally increased the rations to diminish detrimental effects on the environment, but most refugees still leave the camp to supplement their rations. They forage for bamboo shoots, beans, mushrooms, firewood, leaves for the roof, etc. The collection of common property resources (CPRs) as well as some criminal offenses have led to tensions with the local population. As a form of compensation for the loss of territory and CPRs, local communities receive benefits from NGOs in the form of improved infrastructure, rice, and non-food items. While the large refugee camps do have some impact on the environment, the tensions with the local population are usually based on the use of CPRs rather than on real environmental damage. Moreover, the refugees' environmental impact is minimal, when compared to commercial agriculture, forestry production and government-enforced restrictions on customary land use and rotational cultivation.¹² The perception that refugees are the cause of certain problems seems to matter more than the objective evidence.

In contrast to these tensions regarding the camps, no problems were recorded in our research between rural self-settled refugees and local residents. This is not as surprising because various studies have proven that large camps are a far bigger burden on the environment than a dispersed population of self-settled refugees.¹³ An explanation for this finding is that the patterns of settlement do not only have a direct but also an indirect effect on the host population. They set the parameters of refugee interaction with the host community, implying that limited contact will limit the possible exchange of knowledge on local government regulations, local

customary rights and collective arrangements concerning the use of CPRs.¹⁴

Even if the refugees have some impact on the economy of the settlement region due to their use of natural resources, the largest impact of the Burmese on the Thai economy depends on their potential as laborers. The Thai economy experienced a substantial transformation because of the ever-increasing presence of Burmese labor, on which large segments of the economy became dependent. However, in the aftermath of the 1997 economic crisis, Burmese and other migrants were blamed for taking Thai jobs, which resulted in large-scale deportations. The result was a steep increase in bankruptcies of companies along the border since they were unable to find Thai replacements for the Burmese workers. Similarly, large 2003 deportations from the Pai district, close to Chiang Mai, resulted in a shortage of labor in the agricultural and tourism sectors.¹⁵ These findings already indicate that the protective measures were ineffective. There is no substantial evidence for the idea that the Burmese people have a negative impact on the country when compared to the added value they bring to the country. Instead, Burmese refugees make a significant contribution to the Thai economy. They contribute directly in the form of low cost labor and indirectly, by enlarging the market for local suppliers and attracting international aid. Many of these contributions have never been recognized, but they are essential to understanding in a balanced way how refugees affect Thailand.

IMPACT OF REFUGEE LABOR ON THE THAI ECONOMY

The Thai economy is in desperate need of foreign labor, mostly in the labor-intensive sectors. This is clear from the official request by Thai employers, in June 2006, to register 1,333,703 foreign workers.¹⁶ Many Burmese are employed in the textile and fishing industries as well as in agriculture, which coincides with important exports such as textiles, footwear, fishery products, rice and rubber. Certainly these sectors need cheap foreign labor to retain their competitive position in the international market, and the low prices of these products keep the national inflation rate low.¹⁷ In addition, Burmese people often work in construction, the domestic sector, tourism and catering. It has been calculated that, if migrants are as productive as Thai workers in each sector, their total contribution to output would be around US \$11 billion, or 6.2 percent of Thailand's GDP.¹⁸ If they were less productive, contributing only 75 percent of Thai workers' output, their contribution would still be about five percent of Thai GDP.

This dependency on foreign labor is not likely to change anytime soon. To increase the eagerness of Thai citizens to work in labor-intensive sectors would require more investments in technology, which is unlikely.

In construction, Thailand already has a relatively high level of labor-saving technology, and the need remains for skills that cannot be performed by machines, such as welding and laying cement. For smaller companies, the costs of introducing labor-saving technologies are considered prohibitive...In the face of a lack of strong incentives by the government, it can be expected that employers will delay as much as possible substituting machines for imported labor.¹⁹

The Royal Thai Government (RTG) does not give incentives to replace foreign labor with improved technology. On the contrary, the use of migrant workers is actively encouraged as an incentive for economic decentralization, which was necessary to diminish the over-concentration of development in and around Bangkok.²⁰ The goal was to promote export-oriented, multinational enterprises in border zones as key agents of industrial development. As such, they would encourage regional growth and reduce local poverty. Therefore, labor-intensive industries were encouraged to move to border towns with investments in infrastructure, soft loans, tax benefits and the available migrant workers as a cheap labor force. Through registration systems, foreign labor could be hired officially.

In general migrants are working in some of the least attractive jobs previously filled by Thai workers. Economic growth, a declining fertility rate, the extension of basic education to secondary schools and the subsequent changing preferences for skilled jobs, together with the increasing availability of foreign labor facilitated the exit of Thais out of these jobs. One could argue that the Burmese push unskilled Thais out of the market by accepting lower wages, but this would result in a rise in unemployment rates in areas with a large influx of refugees compared to areas with fewer refugees, which is not the case. "Unemployment in Thailand is concentrated in young people with low levels of education; people with very similar characteristics to migrant workers. However, the provinces with the highest unemployment rates have the lowest numbers of migrant workers."²¹

In addition to the refugees' contribution in the form of low-cost labor, the economy benefits substantially due to the extension of the market. The numerous self-settled refugees enlarge the market, by consuming local goods and generating a demand for Burmese products, as well as communication and transport facilities (spin-offs), to keep in touch with their family in Thailand, Burma or the wider diaspora. Martin calculated that if a total of 1.8 million foreign workers remit as much as half of their money, their expenditure in Thailand would still increase the Thai GDP by \$2 billion.²² Furthermore, while refugee workers earn too little to pay taxes on labor and income (which would require a minimum wage of THB 8,300 per month), they do pay VAT (value added) taxes on the goods and services they buy in Thailand, as well as registration costs if they receive a work permit (THB 500 million in fiscal year 2006). These fees are deducted from their wages, and result in the refugees paying 8.3 percent of their wages to the Thai state in taxes. In addition, even camp refugees extend the local suppliers' market. In all the camps, there are refugee businessmen who manage to strike deals with nearby bigger markets for wholesale quantities of food, which are later redistributed through little shops in the camp.

IMPACT OF REFUGEES ON THE LOCAL POLITICAL ECONOMY

Another stakeholder in the labor context is the local power-holders. Provincial governors, district officers, army, and camp commanders need to adapt the refugee and migration policy to local circumstances, in which access to work by illegal migrants is essential for both the Thai population and the Burmese refugees. Local

and regional leaders realize the need for foreign workers in their area, not in the least because of their close links to powerful employer lobbies, such as the Chamber of Commerce and the Federation of Thai Industries. Since their members are large contributors to the local economy, the employer lobbies have considerable local media coverage and political influence. Politicians and businessmen are thus closely related, which implies that even unregistered refugee work is tolerated in practice. On the other hand, there are arrests and deportations because local authorities want to be seen as complying with national laws. Moreover, the Thai army has a lot of influence concerning border and refugee matters and may decide to push refugees/migrants back into their home countries, despite local economic needs.

The value of the Burmese refugees is very clear in the border town of Mae Sot, which has been transformed from a mere trading post into a sizeable industrial zone with a booming economy. This transformation can be attributed to several factors, among which is the presence of refugee workers.²³ Garment factories and agriculture flourish in Mae Sot, using Burmese labor while avoiding problems with sanctions that would arise if they settled inside Burma. The case of Mae Sot proves Wilson's point that an influx of refugees into underpopulated areas benefits the host country on the condition that the area is under the control of the host government and that the infrastructure allows the local market gain to positively affect the national economy. The promotion by Bangkok of industrialization in the border areas has benefited the national economy, but unfortunately those export-oriented industries have little linkages with the local indigenous economy.²⁴

Nonetheless, in contrast to Maneepong's position, large factories are not the only beneficiaries of the refugee presence.²⁵ Local people in the border regions have been hiring Burmese people for centuries, for seasonal agriculture work or for the domestic service industry. They even contact the refugee camp committee in order to secure the number of refugee workers they need for farming or infrastructure projects. Also, the work of the Burmese people as domestic servants helped Thai women enter the labor market. Locals profit from the increased labor potential, even if this has little to do with Bangkok's decentralization policy.

While the direct labor contributions of the refugees are most important, the indirect effects of the refugees are also worth noting. The mere presence of the refugees generates benefits for the Thai people because they attract international attention to regions that are normally ignored by the public. The refugees attract aid agencies, their staff and resources, which provide important services for the vulnerable local people in these border areas. In fact, the zones where the refugee camps are located are some of the least developed in Thailand. In 2007, the Tak and Mae Hong Son provinces rank last of the seventy-six provinces in Thailand

**ON THE OTHER HAND,
THERE ARE ARRESTS AND
DEPORTATIONS BECAUSE
LOCAL AUTHORITIES WANT
TO BE SEEN AS COMPLYING
WITH NATIONAL LAWS.**

according to the UNDP Human Achievement Index.²⁶ Therefore, it is necessary for NGOs to relieve local people from the additional pressure caused by refugees, which is also required by the RTG. Most NGOs have a Thai community support component in their program, which allocates resources to the needy Thai people surrounding the refugee camps. For example, Thai Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) dedicated approximately 16 million THB to Thai communities in 2006, in the form of goods such as mosquito nets, blankets and rice. In addition, deplorable roads are upgraded by international aid money and the locals have access to the camp clinics. These supplies need to be purchased from Thai businessmen—sometimes local businesses, sometimes companies in other areas of Thailand—if local suppliers cannot provide the quantities needed. The TBBC, which is the largest NGO on this border in terms of operations, paid approximately 831 million THB (US \$25 million as of November 26, 2009) to Thai suppliers in 2006.²⁷ In addition, these NGOs provide jobs for local staff and spend a lot of money in the country on office supplies, work visas, transport, property rentals, and more. In sum, the local population clearly benefits due to the extension of the consumer market by the camps, self-settled refugees and humanitarian agencies. As Crisp argues, “Refugees can certainly have a disruptive effect on host communities, especially in the early days of an influx. In the longer term, however, the presence of refugees and humanitarian agencies would appear to have a catalytic impact on local trade, business, transport and agricultural production.”²⁸

Local law enforcement personnel also have a stake in the refugees’ presence since many police officers demand cash bribes from employers as well as from legal and illegal foreign laborers. The refugees’ illegality and subsequent vulnerability bolsters corruption, which is an unintended consequence for the local economy. Bribes vary from a few hundred to thousands of baht, putting refugees deeply in debt to anyone who paid for them. Contrary to what one would assume, the dusty border town of Mae Sot is a very popular station for policemen, as it is well known to be a lucrative posting. If refugees were no longer accepted, these various sources of income would disappear. Therefore, it would not be in the best interest of the local government to apply the national government laws to refugees and foreign labor too strictly for both economic and political reasons.

CONCLUSION

Thai public attention is focused on the impact of Burmese refugees on the local healthcare system, crime and the environment. Over the years, dissatisfaction and xenophobia have increased in many circles fueled by negative media reports, false rumors of coalitions with secessionists in the southern provinces and the perpetuated idea of refugees as troublemakers. Therefore, Thai hospitality to the Burmese refugees is steadily decreasing. In February 2009, the Thai army towed hundreds of boats filled with hundreds of Rohingya refugees—a minority group from West Burma—back to international waters after having removed the boats’ engines. The refugees were left there to wash ashore in another country or die. The

national humanitarian civil society²⁹ and international outcry following this event led to a more cautious attitude by the newly installed Thai government. They promised to investigate the event, meanwhile inviting UNHCR to talk to the remaining Rohingya. However, as a result, over one thousand Thais started protesting in Ranong, a Thai border town, to impede the asylum of the Rohingya, saying that these might join the uprising in the south. The Thai government also used the subsequent media reports to reemphasize that they have reached their maximum capacity for refugees.

The treatment of the Rohingya influx was unacceptable, but it is correct that Thailand is already hosting a large Burmese population. When assessing the refugees' impact on security and bilateral political relations, the picture is not necessarily good. The mere presence of the millions of Burmese, as well as the contentious politics of the Burmese opposition forces, put Thailand in a difficult diplomatic position with Burma—even if the activists' and rebels' presence is strategic and therefore tolerated.

Moreover, the Thai border population is severely affected by the rebellion and counterinsurgency tactics across the border. While most refugees are not implicated in these actions but rather are victims, too, these problems are attributed to all refugees. Also, the impact refugees have on the local healthcare situation is of concern. A change in policy to improve de facto access to healthcare could significantly improve this situation.

The most significant change the presence of Burmese refugees has brought is in the economy. Entire sectors of the Thai economy, notably several export industries, have become dependent on foreign labor. Burmese refugees positively contribute to the Thai economy; directly by enlarging the labor force, and indirectly through an extension of the market and by attracting foreign aid. In that sense, Burmese refugees are more of a boon than a burden. Nevertheless, there may be differences in economic impact between provinces. For example, while several studies conclude that the foreign workers do not have a negative impact on Thai employment, the area around Bangkok might be an exception. In this area, Burmese workers do compete for the same jobs with poor Thai nationals from northeast Thailand.³⁰ Also, there can be regional economic differences within the provinces.

Controlling the refugees and their impact on the settlement area has been a key policy concern of the Thai government. As a response to perceived and real threats, they have encamped UNHCR-registered refugees and martial law was declared in some provinces to contain the self-settled Burmese in delineated areas. However, what is clear from this research is that enforced encampment of refugees is usually not a solution to the problems caused by a mass influx, regardless of what states argue and hope for. Moreover, these policy-imposed restrictions severely curtail these people's basic human rights and endanger their human security. Despite UNHCR's effort to put protection and burden-sharing firmly on the international

**BURMESE REFUGEES
ARE MORE OF A BOON
THAN A BURDEN.**

agenda through the Convention Plus Initiative, nothing has changed for refugees. There is an urgent need to continue this dialogue and come to an agreement about the basic level of protection for both refugees and people in refugee-like situations in a way which respects human rights.³¹

Notes

- ¹ K. Jacobsen, "A framework for exploring the political and security context of refugee populated areas," *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 19, no. 1 (2000): 3-22; Salehyan and K.S. Gleditsch, "Refugees and the spread of civil war," *International Organization* 60, (2006): 335-366.
- ² A. Betts and E. Kaytaz, "National and international responses to the Zimbabwean exodus: implications for the refugee protection regime," *UNHCR, New issues in refugee research* 175, July 2009.
- ³ Interview with Karen refugee at Mae Ra Ma Luang camp, January 23, 2007.
- ⁴ W. Nauam, "Samak wants Rohingya put on an island," *Bangkok Post*, March 28, 2008.
- ⁵ E. Fry, "Vigilantes take to the streets of Chiang Mai," *Bangkok Post*, February 22, 2009.
- ⁶ USCRI and ABAC, *Attitude of Thai people towards refugees living in Thailand*, Bangkok, USCRI, Unpublished report, 2007.
- ⁷ P. Isarabhakdi, "Meeting at the crossroads: Myanmar migrants and their use of Thai healthcare services," *Asia and Pacific Migration Journal* 13, no. 1 (2004): 107-126; V. Suwanvanichkij, "Displacement and disease: The Shan exodus and infectious disease implications for Thailand," *Conflict and Health* 2, no. 4 (2008) <http://www.conflictandhealth.com/content/2/1/4>.
- ⁸ R. Smith and F. Wade, "Thai-Burma relations under 'unprecedented' strain," *Democratic Voice of Burma*, June 12, 2009.
- ⁹ Van Damme, "How Liberian and Sierra Leonean refugees settled in the forest region of Guinea," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 12, no. 1 (1999): 36-53.
- ¹⁰ Jacobsen, "Refugees' environmental impact: The effect of patterns of settlement," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 10, no. 1 (1997): 19-36.
- ¹¹ S. Thompson, "Community-based camp management," *Forced Migration Review* 30, (2008), 26-28.
- ¹² Gallasch, "Taking shelter under trees: refugee protection and sustainable forest management, Thailand," Draft report *Thailand: Friends without borders* (2001).
- ¹³ E.G. Kok "Self-settled refugees and the socio-economic impact of their presence on Kassala, Eastern Sudan," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 2, no.4 (1989): 419-440.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid* 10; Jacobsen, "Refugees' environment impact: The effect of patterns of settlement," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 10, no. 1 (1997): 19-36.
- ¹⁵ A. Vicary, "Employment and poverty in Mae Hong Son province, Thailand: "Burmese" Refugees in the Labour Market," *Burma Economic Watch* 1, (2006): 60.
- ¹⁶ Migrant Assistance Program, "Migrant Worker Policies," <http://www.mapfoundationcm.org/Eng/registration.html>, (accessed: January 2, 2008).
- ¹⁷ A. Revenga (ed.), *Labor Migration in the Greater Mekong Subregion. Synthesis Report, Phase one* (Washington: World Bank, 2006); P. Rukumnuaykit, *A synthesis report on labour migration policies, management and immigration pressure in Thailand* (Bangkok: ILO, 2009).
- ¹⁸ P. Martin, *The contribution of migrant workers to Thailand: Towards Policy Development* (Bangkok: ILO, 2007).
- ¹⁹ T. Caouette, et al. (eds.), *Labor migration in the Greater Mekong Subregion. Learning across boundaries project* (Bangkok: Rockefeller Foundation, Southeast Asia Regional Program, 2006).
- ²⁰ C. Maneepong, "Regional Policy Thinking and Industrial Development in Thai Border Towns," *Labour and Management in Development Journal* 6, no.4 (2006).
- ²¹ A. Vicary, "Policy governing migrant workers in Thailand: an examination of policy and its critics," Paper presented at seminar in Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, February 21, 2003, 18.
- ²² *Ibid*, 16; P. Martin.
- ²³ Other factors are the inclusion in the RTG's border development scheme, its location on the Asian Highway and the situation of the civil war across the border.
- ²⁴ K. Wilson, "Enhancing refugees' own food acquisition strategies," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 5, no.3/4 (1992): 226- 246.
- ²⁵ C. Maneepong, "Regional Policy Thinking and Industrial Development in Thai Border Towns," *Labour and Management in Development Journal* 6, no.4 (2006).

²⁶ UNDP, "Thailand Human Development Report," (Bangkok: UNDP, 2007), www.undp.org.th, (Accessed January 16, 2008).

²⁷ Justin Foster, Program Support Manager TBBC, e-mail message to author, March 22, 2007.

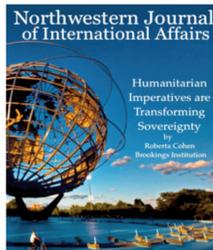
²⁸ J. Crisp, "No solutions in sight: the problem of protracted refugee situations in Africa," *UNHCR, New Issues in Refugee Research* 75, (2003): 9.

²⁹ The new government faced this fairly popular backlash as their soft position towards the army's actions was in contradiction to their claims to be the party of human rights.

³⁰ P. Martin, *Thailand: Improving the Management of Foreign Workers* (Bangkok: ILO/IOM:2004), 992.

³¹ This paper is based upon the following study: I. Brees, "Livelihoods, integration and transnationalism in a protracted refugee situation. Case study: Burmese refugees in Thailand." Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Ghent, Faculty of Political and Social Sciences, Centre for Third World Studies, (2009).

The
NJIA
 Northwestern Journal
 of International Affairs



The *Northwestern Journal of International Affairs* is accepting admissions for its Winter 2010 issue.

We are an endowed, undergraduate research journal that publishes exceptional academic articles, manuscripts and theses submitted by scholars, experts and students of relevant disciplines from a wide variety of fields and universities. seeking to expand knowledge and raise awareness of contemporary topics in international affairs and politics.

In the past, the NJIA has published works by academics from a wide range of institutions, including the Brookings Institution, the New York University School of Law, the American University in Cairo and Balikesir University in Turkey.

Submissions may be mailed to Northwestern Journal of International Affairs, 1902 Sheridan Road, Evanston, IL 60208 or preferably e-mailed to njia@u.northwestern.edu. Works must be in standard MLA or CMS format and cannot be longer than 10,000 words to be considered for publication.

Additional information about the Journal, including an archive of previous issues, can be found at <http://groups.northwestern.edu/njia/>.

Deadline for submissions is February 1st, 2010.