



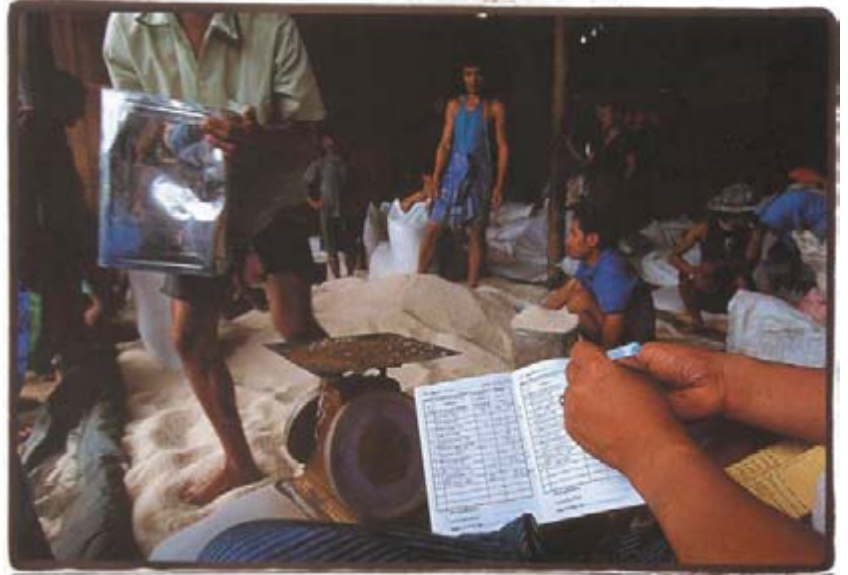
Education Kit

Refugee and Migrant Sunday 2006

Burma's Displaced Peoples

How to use this sheet:

This sheet describes why people are forced to flee and how they cope while living as internally displaced people (IDPs) inside Burma and as refugees once they cross the border into Thailand. It should be read along with the refugee solutions sheet, which describes the plight of refugees who flee and what their life is like as displaced people in Burma, and as refugees in Thai refugee camps.



Ration cards are organised by the refugees themselves to ensure that rice is fairly distributed to refugee families being looked after by the Thai-Burma Border Consortium. Photo: TBBC.

Use this sheet to:

- Understand Burma's displaced
- Reflect on the situation
- Hold class/group discussions
- Find out more and take action:
www.ncca.org.au/cws/refugees

Conflict in Eastern Burma:

Hundreds of thousands of people in Eastern Burma face a stark choice: hide in Burma's dense jungles and die slowly of starvation and disease or risk the journey across mine fields and past army patrols into Thailand's refugee camps.

- 540,000 people have been forced to leave their homes over the past decade and have not been able to return home, resettle or reintegrate in society.
- 340,000 of these internally displaced people (IDPs) are in temporary settlements or in ceasefire areas controlled by the ethnic groups.
- 92,000 are hiding in Burma's jungles from the military.
- 108,000 villagers have been evicted by the military and moved to government-controlled relocation sites.
- In 2005, 87,000 people were forced to leave their homes due to conflict and human rights abuses.
- Over 3,000 villages have been destroyed by the army in Eastern Burma.

Burma's Displaced Peoples

Nearly one million people have been forced to leave their homes in Burma in a brutal conflict between the military government and opposition groups, struggling to restore democracy, and the ethnic minorities, who are fighting for self-determination or independence.

Burma's government rules by the use of military force, suppressing dissent and promoting conflict among Burma's ethnic groups. To prevent villagers from supporting opposition groups, the military burns and forcibly relocates whole villages, killing their animals, smashing their cooking pots and destroying the crops and hidden food caches they save to feed their families.

Inside Burma and along its borders, there are now massive floating populations; people uprooted from their homes, but unable to settle or cross the border to refugee camps. Estimates of the number of internally displaced people (IDPs) in Burma are staggering, ranging between one and two million people. Had they crossed the Thai-Burma border as refugees, it would have been an 'international crisis'. Yet, while they remain hidden in the mountains and in the jungles along the border, they receive little attention.

The displacement stems from military offensives against ethnic resistance groups and the imposition of forced labour and forced relocation. Under the military's "four cuts" strategy - which

aims to prevent aid to these ethnic resistance groups by cutting food, finances, communications, and recruits - entire villages of Karen, Karenni and Shan people along the Thai-Burma border are forcibly uprooted and moved to "relocation centres". There, they live under military control and forced to work as porters for the army or for new development projects that are meant to benefit the people they displace.

Pursued by the Burmese military, families are hunted down like wild animals or starved into submission. This is Burma's dirty war, one that has raged for over four decades, with little attention from the international community.

Many have fled, but Burma's military and Thai border guards often prevent them from crossing into Thailand so they end up hiding in the mountains or in the dense jungle along the border, constantly shifting from place to place to avoid the military.

The Thai-Burma Border Consortium

Those who manage to cross into Thailand usually end up in one of the 10 refugee camps run by the Thai-Burma Border Consortium (TBBC), which provides food and shelter to 140,000 refugees and is supported by Christian World Service, the aid and development organisation of the National Council of Churches in Australia.

The TBBC's operations are exemplary. Unlike many other refugee camps, which are run by UNHCR, the TBBC camps are run by the refugees and it is the refugees themselves who do most of the work. Organising committees are elected by the refugees to keep track of the people, arrange for vermin-proof storage in the rainy season, arrange ration books for each family, distribute food and supplies, maintain security and arrange for camp schooling. There are only 17 staff for 140,000 refugees.

But the refugee camps along the border are no longer safe. Since the buffer zone along the border was removed, attacks on the camps have increased. Not so long ago, refugees could work in neighbouring fields and grow vegetables, being reasonably self-sufficient. Now they have been fenced in by the Thai government and are almost entirely dependent on the TBBC.

TBBC at a glance:

- 140,000 refugees in 10 camps
- Church agencies mostly fund the camps
- Refugees manage the camps
- 17 non-refugee staff co-ordinate TBBC work
- Refugees depend on other refugees to organise and provide camp services
- There is no UNHCR presence in the camps

Thailand's 'refugee encampment' policy

Thailand's policy of keeping refugees contained within remote border camps has not really changed since Indochinese refugees started arriving over 20 years ago. Fearing it would only encourage more refugees if it allowed refugees to work and move freely, Thailand, like many other countries, decided to restrict refugees to remote camps and prevent them from working.

Restricted to camp and unable to work, Burmese refugees could neither become self-reliant nor integrate into Thai society. Lack of security outside the camps also made it impossible to cultivate crops for extra food and money. As such, they are forced to depend on international aid to survive.

The Thai-Burma Border Consortium has been encouraging the Thai government along with UNHCR to provide refugees with more educational and training opportunities, and permission to work in the hope that one day refugees will be able to become self-reliant regardless of whether they stay in Thailand, return to Burma or are resettled in another country.

Internally Displaced People

Burma's IDPs face a far more insecure future. They are trapped in an ongoing internal conflict, without a place of safety to stay. The government views these uprooted people as 'enemies of the state' and retains ultimate control over their fate.

Unlike for refugees, there is no legally binding international convention on IDPs. While the international community has agreed to a set of Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, until recently, the international community has been reluctant to intervene in internal conflicts to ensure IDPs get the protection they need as governments do not wish to upset other states.

This is the story of Burma's slow and grinding genocide: of people used as human minesweepers, farmers forced to work to their death as porters and slaves for the army, and of the hundreds of thousands who have died silently while hiding in the jungles from malaria, HIV Aids and starvation.

TAKE ACTION !

In the Study and Action Guide, you will find out how you can take action and find out more about the situation in Burma and what organisations are doing to help.

Christian World Service, which is part of the National Council of Churches in Australia, has worked with the Thai-Burma Border Consortium for over 20 years, reflecting its concerns for displaced people and the worsening human rights situation in Burma.