



for Human Rights, Democracy & Development in Burma

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Thailand to Force 3,000 Karen Refugees Back to Burma?

Summary

3,000 ethnic Karen refugees who were forced to flee into Thailand in June 2009 are facing forced return to Burma starting on February 5th 2010. Although the Royal Thai Government and local and military representatives have officially stated that they will not force people to return, in practice they are applying significant pressure on the refugees to return. They have been kept in difficult conditions in two temporary camps, Nong Bua, (also called No Bu), and Mae U Su, in Tha Song Yang close to the Thailand-Burma border.

Background

The Karen refugees were forced to flee their homes in June 2009 when the Burmese Army and Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), an ally of the Burmese military dictatorship, attacked an area in the Pa'an district of Karen State Burma, on the Thailand Burma border, which was under the control of the pro-democracy Karen National Union (KNU). The attack was seen as part of the dictatorship's ongoing offensive against the Karen people and the Karen National Union. Taking this border area was also strategically important as it helped to close a border through which information about human rights abuses reaches the world.

There were significant human rights abuses during the military offensive. The Burmese Army and DKBA used hundreds of people as slave labour, and two teenage women were gang-raped and killed.

Of the 3,000 refugees approximately 1,200 came from the Ler Per Her camp for internally displaced people. The Burma Campaign UK had previously visited this camp and interviewed people there, who described fleeing their villages because of human rights abuses and military attacks by the DKBA and Burmese Army. The camp itself had moved twice in the past because of attacks by the DKBA and Burmese Army. Many of the rest came from DKBA controlled areas because of human rights abuses including forced conscription, slave labour, and theft of food. Many of the 3,000 refugees now facing forced deportation back to Burma have already been forced to leave their homes four times or more.

Situation in the Temporary Camps

While it is important to acknowledge the positive response of the Thai government in allowing the refugees into Thailand, from very early on it was clear that the Thai authorities did not want them to remain for long. They were not allowed into the long established camps such as Mae La, where there are facilities such as health centres and schools, or to build homes and facilities at the new temporary camps that would have improved conditions. The refugees were kept in two temporary camps, and not allowed to build proper homes as shelter, or use traditional roofs for the school made from La Tur leaves, which keep buildings cool. The living conditions meant that diseases such as measles and eye infections, especially among children, are very common.

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Some refugees and aid workers saw this as part of the way the Thai authorities were 'encouraging' them to return to Burma.



Child with eye infection at Nong Bua temporary refugee camp.

The Danger of Returning

Refugees returning to Burma face many dangers. The most immediate danger is landmines. These have been laid in Ler Per Her and the surrounding area, and there is no record of where they have been laid. No organisation is able or willing to attempt to de-mine the area.

Already some people who have tried to return to their homes in the area have been killed or injured by landmines. On 18th January a pregnant women who returned stepped on a landmine and was seriously injured.



Injured leg of the pregnant women injured by landmine on 18th January.

The area to which people would be forced to return is now under the control of the DKBA, an organisation which is guilty of committing horrific human rights abuses against civilians, including widespread use of forced labour, executions, torture and mutilations, forced recruitment of soldiers, including child soldiers, theft and extortion, and forced taxation at extremely high levels, making survival very difficult.

In addition, those forced to return would face serious humanitarian problems, such as accessing proper food and safe water.

There is also a lack of housing. The Thai authorities claim that 30 homes in Ler Per Her are suitable for use, not nearly enough for all the refugees. On January 26th the Thai military made 50 of the refugees go back to Ler Per Her to prepare it for people to return. Twenty of the refugees taken for the work were women, and there were also children under 16 years of age. Because of landmines they were too afraid to walk around. DKBA soldiers told them not to leave the main narrow path or go near any of the houses. After two hours the Thai military took them back to the temporary camp.

Thailand's Broken Promises

Thailand is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, but had nevertheless allowed the refugees into Thailand, and then stated that they would not force the refugees to return. This was greatly appreciated by the refugees and the international community. As recently as 13th

January the Tha Song Yang District office hosted a meeting at which the UNHCR, aid agencies, a local KNU representative, DKBA, local Thai Black Rangers commander, Chief of District, Border Police and National Security Council were present. They stated that while those who wanted to return to Burma would be encouraged to do so, those who did not would be relocated to Mae La refugee camp. This is the option favoured by the refugees themselves and the agencies assisting them.

However, at a meeting of Thai officials the next day, including with high military officials and Tak Province officials, at which only the UNHCR was allowed to attend, it was decided that the refugees would not be relocated to Mae La, and would instead be asked to leave or have to stay in the temporary camps.

Forcing People to 'Volunteer', and Playing Games With Words

Surveys of the refugees by their own leaders and agencies have found only one family who wish to return. However, the Thai authorities claim there are 126 people who want to return. Families are facing increased pressure to return, with regular visits by officials and military who treat refugees in an aggressive and intimidating way. There are fears that the refugees are being bullied, afraid to say no to the officials. At the same time officials may be deliberately misinterpreting the refugees. Many say that they do wish to return to Burma, but only when it is safe to do so (which it is not at the present time). The Thai authorities may decide this is agreement to return now.

Conditions in the camps are also being made more difficult. Permission for ongoing food distribution is uncertain. According to one recent report military authorities have said that they wish to distribute rice supplied by the Thailand Burma Border Consortium. However, the list of refugees that they have is not accurate, and so there is a danger many people will no longer get food. Constant rumours and uncertainty such as this create unnecessary stress for the already traumatised refugees.

New Military Offensives Against Karen Civilians

The Thai authorities are taking this action at the same time as the Burmese military dictatorship is stepping up its attacks against Karen people. In the last week of January, 2,000 Karen people were forced to flee their homes because of new offensives by the Burmese Army taking place in Toungoo, Mutraw/Papun, and Nyaunglebin Districts of Karen State. The Thai government would be sending refugees back to Burma where the military regime is committing war crimes and crimes against humanity against Karen civilians.

What Will Happen Next?

Thai authorities change their position very regularly. The latest reports received by Burma Campaign UK are that on the morning of 5th of February military trucks will arrive at Nong Bua to take the first so-called volunteers to return to Burma. Thirty families are expected to be taken. There are expected to be regular deportations after that, first at Nong Bua, then Mae U Su.

What should happen next?

Most of the refugees themselves say they would go back to Burma if they could, even if it meant great hardship, but it simply is not safe for them to do so. They would prefer to stay where they are, or go to another camp.

Thailand should keep its word and allow the refugees who do not wish to return to stay in Thailand. Aid agencies say that for those who wish to go there, there is space in Mae La refugee camp for them.

Longer term Thailand should take a stronger line with the Burmese military dictatorship and DKBA, which are responsible for attacks on civilians forcing them to flee to Thailand, so causing the current crisis.

Key Players

Tak Province Governor – Thailand - Samert Loylah

The Tak Province governor appears to be the key decision maker, and could decide to let the refugees stay.

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British and Other Governments

Governments around the world should ask Thailand not to deport the refugees, and offer more financial support for refugees in Thailand.

United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR)

The UNHCR seems to be failing in its duty to protect these refugees. Even at a very early stage the UNHCR appeared to be along with Thailand's preference for the refugees to return to Burma, despite the obvious dangers and the clear preference of the refugees not to return yet.

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