



Book Review:

Supang Chantavanich and Aungkana Kamonpetch,
editors

Refugee and Return: Displacement Along the Thai-Myanmar Border

Mosbach, Germany: Springer, 2017

Jerrold W. Huguet

Consultant on Population and Development, Bangkok, Thailand

Email: jwhuguet@yahoo.com

For more than a century, Siam, and later Thailand, has provided refuge to persons fleeing conflict and political persecution in Burma. As fighting flared between the central Government and States representing ethnic minorities along the Thai border, thousands of Karen, Karenni, Shan and Mon persons fled Burma between 1984 and 1986, and were provided shelter by the Thai Government. Another wave of refugees arrived following the suppression of student protests in Burma in 1988. Because some smaller shelters close to the Thailand-Burma border were at risk of attacks from across the border, the Thai Government consolidated the shelters into nine camps: four in Mae Hong Son Province, three in Tak Province, and one each in Kanchanaburi and Ratchaburi Provinces.

Thai law, however, makes no provision for “refugees” and the Thai Government considers those persons coming from Myanmar (the country name was changed in 1989) to be “displaced persons fleeing fighting” and the camps to be “temporary shelters”. The number of people in the nine shelters peaked at 131,549 in 2006. After many of the displaced persons had been in the shelters for more than 20 years, in 2005 the Thai Government began to concede that their situation was no longer temporary. The Government permitted the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to begin interviewing the refugees for resettlement in

third countries. In order for resettlement not to be a pull factor that would attract even more persons, however, the Thai Government stipulated that only persons who were registered in the shelters in 2005 were eligible for resettlement.

Beginning in 2006, more than 100,000 persons were resettled to third countries, the great majority to the United States. While the official shelter populations had declined to a total of 95,330 at the end of 2010, the number of newcomers exceeded the number resettled so that the total camp population was estimated by The Border Consortium (TBC) to equal 141,076 at the end of 2010. Since the resettlement programme was completed in 2014, the discrepancy between the numbers registered by UNHCR and the TBC caseload has essentially disappeared. At the end of 2016, the Ministry of Interior and UNHCR-verified shelter population stood at 102,607 persons.

UNHCR considers durable solutions to refugee situations to comprise resettlement to a third country, local integration, and repatriation. As the resettlement programme has been closed and the Thai Government does not entertain the idea of local integration, the only feasible solution to the refugee situation along the Thai-Myanmar border appears to be repatriation. The book under review carefully examines the potential for repatriation, taking into account the policies of the Thai and Myanmar Governments, the situation in the areas that the refugees had fled from, and the attitudes toward returning held by the refugees themselves.

The chapters of the book are written by the Director and staff members of the Asian Research Center for Migration, Chulalongkorn University, and by Myanmar and Laotian M.A. students who were enrolled in a course on "Migration as a Development Issue" taught by the lead editor, in the faculty of political science at Chulalongkorn University.

The first chapter is written by the editors and summarizes the current protracted refugee situation along the Thailand-Myanmar border. The second chapter is written by Min Ma and Vongsa Chayavong, and reviews the resettlement and repatriation of refugees from Lao People's Democratic Republic during the 1980's and 1990's. Although Lao PDR is a much smaller country than Myanmar, the number of refugees from there

was much greater. A total of 320,000 refugees from Lao PDR were resettled in third countries between 1975 and 1995, with more than two thirds of them going to the United States. This chapter describes the physical, legal and material insecurities faced by refugees upon their repatriation to Lao PDR during the late 1980's and early 1990's. The repatriation programme was not a success at the beginning stages because of the remaining insecurities. The two respective Governments worked together, however, to alleviate many of the problems. UNHCR supported returning refugees with cash and food assistance. Eventually, about 24,000 families were repatriated to Lao PDR and another 12,000-20,000 individuals returned spontaneously.

In chapter 3, Lahpai Nang Sam Aung and Hkawn Ja Aung question whether Myanmar has become a "post-conflict society" that would permit the sustainable repatriation of approximately 100,000 refugees. They consider that the transition to a post-conflict society consists of three stages: the initial response, transformation, and fostering sustainability. They argue that, despite the election victory of the National League for Democracy (NLD) in November 2015, the 2008 Constitution is a barrier to resolving the political conflicts between the central Government and the various ethnic groups because of the highly centralized structure of government provided by the Constitution. The authors conclude that Myanmar is only in the transformation phase of achieving a post-conflict society. For the peace process to be sustainable, a greater role for various ethnic groups in a democratic framework will be necessary.

In chapter 4, Nwe Ni Win Kyaw and Ni Ni Win review the challenges of reintegration facing returnees to Myanmar. They note that the Myanmar Government has no procedure to accord citizenship to children born outside of the country, which would affect a high percentage of returnees. Securing a livelihood will also be difficult for returnees because many villages in their home regions have been destroyed by decades of conflict. Returnees may also find it difficult to secure land tenure after having been away for many years. Educational enrolments in rural areas in Myanmar are lower than in the shelters in Thailand. The provision of health services in rural areas is also inferior to the standards to which the refugees

in shelters are accustomed. The authors also emphasize that many of the areas of conflict were mined and that removal of mines has not yet begun.

In the final chapter, the editors analyze the potential for voluntary repatriation. The Myanmar Government has indicated that refugees may return when they wish to. The UNHCR office in Bangkok issued a document in 2012 entitled “Framework for Voluntary Repatriation: Refugees from Myanmar in Thailand” and updated the document in 2014. UNHCR surveys in the shelters have found, however, that only a minority of the refugees wish to return as yet. In September 2014 about 790 persons returned voluntarily but spontaneous return has been minimal. The authors conclude that many ethnic groups in Myanmar do not yet have political security and that “Refugees cannot be assured about their safety if they decide to return” (p. 53).

This book is a valuable summary of the protracted refugee situation prevailing along the Thailand-Myanmar border, and analysis of the obstacles to voluntary repatriation. Although the Thai Government has not indicated any interest in the local integration of displaced persons from Myanmar, the book could well have explored some acceptable options. Thailand currently hosts more than three million migrant workers, mostly from Myanmar. Given the demand for migrant workers in the Thai economy, it would seem reasonable to offer work permits to those displaced persons who would be willing to leave the shelters to take up employment.