



VOICES OF THE DISPLACED:

Perspectives of newly arrived
Myanmar refugees in Thailand

The Border Consortium
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Introduction

Since the coup on Feb 1st 2021, the Myanmar military has killed over 4,700 civilians, detained, and imprisoned over 26,000 human rights defenders and displaced at least 2.6 million people. Heavy fighting between the Myanmar military and Peoples Defense Force (PDF) and Ethnic Revolutionary Organisations (EROs) has seen a rapid deterioration in the humanitarian situation. In much of southeastern Myanmar, heavy artillery strikes and aerial bombardments have resulted in civilian casualties as well as destroyed schools, homes, hospitals, churches and temples. Compounding the situation is the collapse of the local economy with almost half of all Myanmar citizens now living in poverty. Many villages have not been able to plant rice, depriving them of their livelihood. Many of those able to grow rice and vegetables are unable to sell them, as the roads to market have been blocked. This action was taken by the Myanmar military to deprive anti-junta forces of the supplies needed

to continue fighting. Power outages remain pronounced, and the banking system is in a state of collapse. Healthcare is dire and schools have closed. There is no social security on offer. Many have sought refuge either in the jungle or in IDP camps in Myanmar, but over 20,000 others have sought refuge in Thailand.

Thailand has over 93,000 refugees living in nine refugee camps. Yet refugees arriving after the coup, in accordance with official Royal Thai Government policy, are disallowed official access to the existing camps, with many instead kept in tightly controlled "Temporary Safety Areas" (TSA). In many cases these are clearly inadequate as suitable living spaces for families and individuals. The restricted access to these areas has posed significant challenges in ensuring adequate protection and the provision of even the most basic of humanitarian aid. Many of the newly arrived individuals have been pressured into returning, fully aware that they will not be granted long-term refuge in Thailand.

Knowing conditions in TSAs will be difficult and refuge will be temporary, many new arrivals have chosen to risk living in hiding from Thai authorities, in remote rural communities along the Thai Myanmar border.

TBC has been providing aid to these communities since the coup, however we are increasingly facing shortages in funding. Costs to provide emergency food and shelter are 7 million THB (\$190,000USD) per month, approximately 90 million baht (\$2,500,000USD) for a six-month period.

During the third quarter of 2023, TBC interviewed more than 35 households along a 700+km stretch of the Thai/Myanmar border. What follows in this report is a snapshot of the challenges and struggles that thousands of families along the border face. This is a representative sample including young families, elderly communities, people with disability (PwD), Karen villagers from rural Myanmar and Burmese school teachers from urban areas. Their backgrounds and lived experiences vary radically, but they all share the same restricted horizons, and all their voices need to be heard.

Due to issues around access and protection there has been little to no coverage of refugee populations hiding in rural Thailand. As they are unreported, they are often lacking the support that other displaced populations have.

This report features an analysis of the humanitarian situation for these arrivals, a detailed qualitative thematic analysis of their lived experience and a selection of direct testimony of refugees, highlighting both their agency and their challenges.

The overwhelming majority of this population don't have documentation and are effectively in hiding from Thai authorities. All identifying information of this population has been removed. We request you to be discreet and considered when engaging in advocacy around this population as they are living with extreme protection concerns. Photographs of persons in this report have been included with the expressed consent of those depicted. However, images have been blurred to obviate identification and security concerns.





ANALYSIS OF HUMANITARIAN SITUATION & OVERVIEW OF KEY CHALLENGES

Conditions for the roughly 20,000 refugees living in hiding in rural Thailand are dire. Most households flee with nothing in hand and can't afford sufficient food leaving some infants malnourished, risking lifelong health consequences. Numerous households cannot afford healthcare. TBC has met young children suffering from dengue, malaria and adults with chronic conditions or disabilities. Elderly persons and people with disability (PwD), many of whom had to be carried to Thailand are reliant on familial support. There are no social services to look after them beyond what local communities can manage.

While many families initially only intended to seek refuge for a short time, it is now becoming clear their stay in Thailand will be prolonged as the situation in Myanmar shows no signs of improving.

For these refugees return is not an option. Many we spoke to said they feel trapped. Their lives are on hold. They cannot return to Myanmar yet cannot stay here in these conditions. There are limited avenues for their future. Resettlement for this population is not currently available.

This population faces myriad challenges. An overview of these is shared below.

Lack of Legal Documentation

The overwhelming majority of households interviewed stated they have no passport or paperwork allowing them to stay in Thailand. Under Thai law they are considered illegal immigrants, not refugees. While many have contacted UNHCR, they have not been given UNHCR refugee status or legal protection, just a phone number they can call if they are being deported. This compels families to live on the fringes of society. Families' undocumented status confines them to the shadows, hindering their access to basic services, employment, and legal protection. This invisibility amplifies vulnerability, as they navigate their existence in perpetual fear of authorities. As a refugee said "We have to hide from Thai authorities due to a lack of paperwork. If we see them coming, we have to run away." Many refugees we have spoken to have highlighted the fear they face when seeing members of the Thai authorities. While refugees have reported some local low ranking police have sympathy for their situation, others regularly hassle them for bribes to stay in Thailand, attempt to scare them or force them to return to Myanmar. It places them at large risk of abuse and exploitation. Certain local identification cards, which offer limited protection within a village, have offered some refugees a form of stability, but these are unofficial, liable to change and still require refugees to pay an amount each month to remain free.

Economic Instability and Limited Employment Opportunities:

The families face a cyclic struggle with sporadic, low-paying jobs, and limited access to markets, all of which help create financial precariousness. Irregular job opportunities, often below minimum wage, compound economic instability. The unpredictability of work availability leaves families on the brink of poverty, with earnings insufficient to meet basic needs, creating a cycle of financial vulnerability. Many refugees report being able to find four to five days of work a month; not enough to support their families. As one refugee states, "We only have occasional work opportunities in the fields, but this is not enough for us to survive." On average, daily labourers receive between 150-200 Thai baht a day, but travel and lunch costs can take away from take-home pay. In one case, TBC heard a local landowner was paying just 50 baht a day for their labour, and then subtracting 10 baht for lunch costs.

While some refugees from rural backgrounds can engage in agricultural work, working on plantations or farms, some work for themselves and turn to local forests to find and sell vegetables; for example foraging for bamboo shoots which they can sell for 14 baht a kilo and can collect up to 20 kilos a day. However, this work is seasonal and requires access to forests. Many refugees from urban areas are unable to participate in such work. TBC spoke to high school teachers from urban areas in southeastern Myanmar, who stated they can work neither in the fields nor in construction as they don't have the skills required. Yet the work they are skilled to do, such as teaching or working in a bank or an office, is no longer available to them. Refugees often have to take on harder, more dangerous work. If they complain they can lose out on work. Nor do they receive health insurance or protection from their employer if they get injured at work. Other refugees who are elderly, PwD, have a chronic illness or who were injured in the fighting reported they are physically unable to engage in the limited employment avenues available to them.

Inability to return home.

Almost every household TBC spoke to declared a desire to return home, yet none were able to. Conflict was the initial driver for them to leave. Many have homes and villages that have been damaged by the conflict. They may have a Myanmar Military base or a PDF base near their villages or live in a strategically important area. Airstrikes and conflict have continued across southeastern Myanmar since the coup and show no signs of slowing down. Some live close to the border and can hear gunfire and artillery in their old villages. Others return for a day and see the devastation continuing and have seen their farms or roads littered with landmines.

Numerous households said that even if the fighting stopped, they could no longer afford to return home. They don't have the savings required to not earn an income for the many months it would take to re-establish abandoned farms, businesses or other work. As the local economy has contracted, so has availability of labour. The price of food, particularly rice, has massively increased exacerbating issues around household's budgets and lack of savings. "We spent all of our money we had in getting to Thailand," a refugee tells TBC, "now we have no money to afford the journey back and no way

to buy the seeds I need to restart my rice farm." The conflict has reversed decades of progress of development and means many refugees require not just the end to the conflict, but a significant improvement in the economic opportunities in southeastern Myanmar before they can feasibly consider returning.

Inadequate Housing Conditions

Substandard living conditions underscore the families' vulnerability to environmental and health risks. Families residing in bamboo structures with no doors contend with monsoons and mosquitoes, exposing them to health hazards. Inadequate shelter adds to the myriad challenges, contributing to their overall precarious living situation. In monsoon season, there was a noted increase in cases of malaria along the border, exacerbated by the lack of proper walls or a sealed roof, meaning refugees can do little to stop themselves getting bitten when at home. One refugee told TBC, "We live in this bamboo house we made ourselves, but we don't have the materials to finish building the walls, so I'm worried my children will get sick from a mosquito."

Other houses are built near stagnant water, increasing chances of mosquito bites and the risk of dengue. Houses are also often unsafe, with rusted nails, unsafe construction and built with salvaged materials. Therefore, they are often not structurally sound, meaning they can be damaged during storms or heavy weather, some have been built near rivers which have burst their banks and damaged houses.



Educational Barriers for Children

The cost of education, coupled with the lack of documentation, serves as a formidable barrier to children's access to schooling. School fees are a significant expense, combined with the need to buy their school uniform and pay for their lunch, means many refugees are unable to send their child to school. As one refugee told TBC, "My children do not attend school as I can't afford their lunch fees." This is a commonly reported issue that perpetuates cycles of poverty and stifles their educational development.

Issues around documentation have also been reported. While most schools take children regardless of their legal status, some schools will not take children without documentation. If the child is over a certain age, then their lack of Thai language will mean they cannot attend school. These barriers can pose significant hurdles for refugees. TBC has met with families of children who have not been able to attend school for over two years which will have a dramatic impact on children's long-term future and prospects. It also means the children are less likely to be able to learn Thai which is reported as a vital skill in accessing future employment opportunities within Thailand.

Inability to Access Healthcare

Almost every refugee household TBC spoke to mentioned difficulties or inability to access healthcare. The costs involved was the most cited barrier to healthcare. While some were able to purchase social security, allowing access to local Thai healthcare, the costs involved were often too expensive, leaving families only able to buy insurance for their children, or one adult. Another barrier was the need to travel, sometimes considerable distances to health clinic to access healthcare. Given the majority of refugees do not have proper documentation or a legal right to stay in Thailand, this meant running the risk of arrest, deportation, re-outright and being forced to pay bribes with money meant for healthcare. Others require a permission letter from local household leader before they can access healthcare at the local government hospital.

For those refugees who are able to navigate the financial challenges and can make it to a clinic without being detained by the Thai authorities, linguistic challenges often made it harder for them to adequately communicate with the medical staff and receive the treatment they needed. Some refugees also reported discriminatory attitudes from Thai medical staff, and many felt they didn't not receive proper care or attention.

Due to the considerable challenges some refugees reported having to cross back into Myanmar and walk for several hours through parts of the jungle that still have fighting, just to reach an affordable medical clinic. Some adults cannot afford to take time off work to seek treatment. Many are unable to receive any treatment and reported being sick with chronic illness and having to hope their health improves on its own. TBC interviewed many refugees with long term illness and TBC has seen sick and malnourished babies with dengue, whose parents cannot afford treatment. In the last monsoon, an outbreak of malaria along the border exacerbated such issues. It was common to speak to refugee households who were unable to purchase medication to treat cases of malaria in their family. As one refugee household told TBC, "My child has dengue, but I can't access any healthcare or medication for him. I must hope he can recover on his own. I can't look after him during the day as I have to go work, so I leave him with my son to take care of."

Communication and Language Barriers

The majority of refugees are Karen and speak S'gaw Karen. Many lack Thai language. Within their community along the border they can get by as such communities are often majority Karen, but they have limited communication ability outside such communities.

Similar issues exist for the smaller Burmese refugee population, many of whom only speak Burmese. One family told TBC they cannot communicate with either Thai or Karen communities. While there are many Burmese living in Mae Sot, they were unable to travel there and are stuck living in a small Karen community, with whom they cannot communicate with. "We feel stuck here" A Burmese speaking family told TBC, "all our neighbours are Karen, we can't communicate with them and if we leave the village, they are all Thai. It means we haven't been able to find any work since moving here, or even speak with those in the village."

All refugees who don't speak Thai face significant challenges. This inability to speak Thai hampers their ability to navigate legal processes and limits their interactions with local authorities. It is also difficult for those attempting to learn, as they are hiding from the Thai society, meaning they have limited opportunities to interact with Thai speakers and learn. Nor are there materials available for them to study.



Psychological Strain

Families grapple with profound hopelessness, fuelled by the emotional toll of displacement and an uncertain future. The interviews highlighted the psychological toll families endure. Many interviewees described their flight from Burma and the fear and stress it caused. One interviewee told TBC he had to hide in the jungle for 10 days, hearing soldiers and heavy fighting nearby. Others told TBC of airstrikes on their village or those who had been maimed or killed by landmines. Many families living on the border state they can hear the gunfire and heavy artillery in the night-time, which is likely to retraumatise some refugees.

These interviews also revealed a pervasive sense of despair about their future due to the lack of stability and an inability to plan. "I feel hopeless. My future is stuck" a father tells TBC. "As a parent, it is very difficult for us, our hearts break for our children. What life will they have? We hope they don't have to suffer like we have, but they are suffering now."

No study has been carried out, due to issues around access, but likely there is significant mental trauma in this population group, including PTSD and depression. Access to mental health counselling is non-existent. This is likely to put immense strain on families and lead to an uptake in unhealthy coping behaviours, such as alcohol abuse.

SELECTED INTERVIEWS

Family 1

On the outskirts of a small town, Naw ---, lives in a bamboo house her family built by hand. The roof is made from donated plastic sheeting. Six people live in this house: Naw -- her husband, grandmother, her three children and one grandchild. They fled their farm in Karen State in April 2023, after heavy fighting reached their village. The fighting has continued every day since they left, meaning it's not safe for them to return. But it's not safe to stay in Thailand either.

Naw - built her house on someone else's land. The landowner initially let them live there on the condition they work on his land without payment. This week he told them they must leave next month. He hasn't told them why. This has made



Naw - panic. They have no idea where they can go next. They don't know people in the village and cannot afford to rent a house.

While there are occasional work opportunities on nearby farms and plantations, offering up to 200 baht (\$5.5) a day, the work is not regular. Her husband is the only one able to work but he often works just four days a month. This is not enough to provide for the family.

They have been in a financially precarious position ever since fleeing Myanmar. To get to Thailand Naw- had to use all her family's savings. They had to pay local smugglers 1,500 baht (\$42) per person to avoid the Myanmar army and Thai authorities on the journey. Even when they arrived, they still had to hide from Thai authorities as they have no paperwork, and she doesn't speak Thai. She never leaves the house and her children do not attend school.

The only assistance she receives is the rice, cooking oil, tinned fish and beans provided by TBC. After paying the smugglers to get her family into Thailand, she cannot afford medicine for her children when they get sick. As her house has no doors and is situated near a lake, she is worried about malaria, which is currently endemic along the border. One of her children has already got sick. She believes he has dengue, but Naw -- can't afford to go to hospital to get tests or medicine.

If the situation in Myanmar recovers, Naw-- wants to return to her farm in Karen State, but she says, "I have long given up hope for that". She worries about her rice farm in Myanmar as no one is looking after it. Even if the fighting stops, she couldn't return as it would take months of work on her farm before she could grow crops again, months in which she would have to rely on the savings she doesn't have.

"I want to return to my farm and live in safety", Naw -- says, "I can't afford to stay here, and I can't afford to go back".



Family 2

In a small village in western Thailand, a Burmese family from Tanintharyi lives in a small concrete house on the edge of a village. The husband and wife were both schoolteachers, but they joined the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) after the coup. They fled after their CDM activity placed them at risk. Since they left Myanmar, conditions back in their village got worse. It was recently declared to be a "black zone" by the Myanmar military, who have restricted all supplies to their village in a form of collective punishment to starve out the resistance movement. There is no food left in their village and, if they return, they would be at risk of arrest, torture and death for their political involvement.

The house they live in now was lent to them by a CDM supporter living abroad. They arrived from Myanmar five months ago but have struggled to adapt to life in Thailand. Unlike the majority of refugees along the border they are Burmese and don't speak Thai or Karen. This makes accessing work, education and healthcare very difficult. Compounding the problem, as they have spent all their lives in an urban area as teachers they don't know how to work on a farm or collect bamboo shoots to sell at the local market. The husband, U-- has health problems so can't work in construction. They cannot support themselves so rely entirely on donations.



U-- says he doesn't know how much longer they can live in this house. The owner could ask for it back anytime. They have nowhere to go and no money to rent somewhere new.

They have no documentation so dare not leave their house. They have contacted UNHCR multiple times but haven't received any support. Their only hope is for resettlement to the US, but U-- complains they aren't high profile enough to be considered. UNHCR has long stopped emailing him back.

His children cannot go to school. "We are stuck in limbo", U-- says, "We are worried we will be stuck like this for years to come."

Family 3

A large extended family lives in a wooden house a few kilometres from the Burmese border. They fled here late in 2022, after multiple artillery strikes attacked their village and they could no longer work. In Myanmar they used to work on a rubber plantation where they had to work at night. Since the fighting started, they had to stop. Saw—says the Myanmar military suspected that anyone outside at night-time was a member of a PDF and would arrest them. To keep his family safe, they decided to seek refuge in Thailand.



It wasn't easy to get to Thailand, Saw—'s 90-year-old mother cannot walk and had to be carried. In this rural area there is no healthcare for her, and they can't afford to send her to a hospital. They are also worried of being arrested on the way as they have no paperwork. This means a family member has to stay home and look after his mother and provide the constant care she needs.

The family do not have a lot of money. The husband Saw-- cannot find a job. A few years ago, surgery left him unable to work in agriculture or construction. Occasionally his granddaughter looks after ducks or pigs for a local farmer, but she must skip school to do so and makes very little money. Saw-- has heard there are other villages he could move to get to work, but he can't go because of his mother. "We don't know what we will do" Saw—says, "but we will take care of our family." They are completely reliant on outside help. Saw-- says they need regular assistance to have enough rice and food to eat just to survive.

Saw-- has family back in Myanmar who wants to come join them, but he has had to tell them no. They cannot support themselves, let alone others. But he feels very bad about not being able to provide for his family back home.

Saw—says, "We feel the world has forgotten us for Russia, Ukraine, Israel and Gaza. But we need help. We watch the news and never see news about Myanmar, and we wonder why not? Does the media not care about us? We ask the world not to forget us as we need help too. When we live in Myanmar, we have to worry about fighting. When we live in Thailand, we have to worry about being arrested or deported. No matter where we go, we always have to worry."

Family 4

Deep in the jungle, far away from the nearest village but not far from the Myanmar border, lives a family of six. The house is built on the banks of a small stream. The stream floods after heavy rain. Living in a remote location was a deliberate decision. Here they are out of site from Thai authorities. They have no paperwork or ID which would allow them to stay officially in Thailand. They have been living here for over a year.

They fled from their home in Dooplaya District in Karen State, when fighting between Myanmar military and the Karen National Liberation Army reached their village. It took the family two days to walk from Myanmar to their current location. The mother, Naw – says "if the fighting stops, we want to go back, but we can hear gunshots and artillery fire every night, so we know we cannot go back home. Some in our family are old and can't walk fast, so we worry we won't be able to run away from the fighting in time."

They are safe from the fighting in Thailand. Yet life isn't easy. They have had numerous health concerns, which they cannot afford to treat. The mother has chronic stomach pain, and the grandmother has trouble with her vision. Naw's—youngest child has had seizures but, as they can't afford medicine, they have

to hope their child recovers by himself. They are also worried about malaria - three other refugees living nearby have had malaria recently - but they cannot afford mosquito nets.

Naw's—husband and oldest son can work on a nearby bamboo plantation, but the work is tough and only sporadically available. Most days there's no work. The money they can make goes to buying food. They receive rice, cooking oil, beans, and tinned fish from TBC, but get no other support.

Their children can go to a nearby Thai school, although it is a challenge to afford uniforms and lunches, yet Naw—is determined that her children have an education.

As we talk with them it starts to rain, and the rain comes into the house. The roof is an old plastic sheet, which is now heavily worn. "I want to buy some zinc sheets for the roof, but they will cost 150 baht (\$4.1) which we cannot afford."



Family 5

In a small farming village, a family of five resides in a small concrete house on the edge of a plantation. They fled from Myanmar a few weeks ago. The Myanmar military had stopped all transport on the road into their village, so no supplies or food could be delivered. Saw--- decided to flee with his family after the military started to check all houses in his village for PDF soldiers. He was worried they wouldn't believe he didn't support the PDF. Even if he could convince them he wasn't a member of a PDF, the military had also started to forcibly recruit villagers into the army. "I decided to run away" Saw—says, "as I don't want to fight for the Myanmar military against my community."



As they fled, they had to avoid many military patrols, so Saw—and his family had to hide in the jungle for 10 days before they arrived in Thailand. The situation in Thailand is difficult, there is little work and Saw—cannot speak Thai.

"We cannot go back," says Saw--. "There is no market to sell goods and buy foods anymore so even if the fighting stops, we cannot make a living. After we fled, we are worried the military will think we went to join the PDF, so we may be arrested if we return."

As a result, Saw—is trying to build a new life in Thailand for his family and he hopes his children can grow up in safety, but it isn't easy. "There is little work in Thailand. We don't like it here and want to go back, but we cannot. We have to make a new life here for ourselves."

Family 6

Saw – has been living on the outskirts of a village since February 2022 after being displaced by heavy fighting between the Myanmar military and the KNLA. As Saw- has not been able to find work in Thailand, to support his family he must undertake great risks. He often goes back to his small farm in Karen state. It takes just over an hour to walk back. Here he harvests his vegetables and sells them inside Myanmar. He is not alone; many refugees have no choice but to return to their farms.

Saw—says the KNLA have promised to stop fighting during the harvest season to allow farmers to harvest their crops. But the Myanmar Military did not, so the fighting continues. As the fighting and artillery fire is often the heaviest at night, it's not safe for him to stay overnight, which is why he brought his family to Thailand. However, even in the daytime it's not safe.

The Myanmar military has planted thousands of landmines all over his village and his farmland. He doesn't know where they are. So far, he has been lucky, but several farmers in his village have lost their limbs, and therefore their livelihoods, by stepping on these landmines.

Despite the risks, he continues to cross the border. "If I don't harvest the vegetables in time" Saw- says, "my crops will be ruined. Then how can I support my family?"

CONCLUSION

As conflict in Myanmar drags on and violence continues in southeastern Myanmar, the factors that forced these refugees to leave Myanmar endure. They are no closer to being able to return home and remain stuck on the margins of society in Thailand, unable to build a life of stability, dignity and one where they can meet their daily needs and live in safety and security without the constant risk of refolement.

Making it worse, there is no likely future policy change that will help facilitate their stay in Thailand. The Royal Thai Government's policy on new refugee arrivals is unlikely to change in the near future, regardless of what happens with the resettlement of in-camp refugees. Their future most likely remains as it has been the last few years: living on the margins of society, under high protection risks.

This population needs urgent support. While TBC is not the sole provider of support, it is one of the few. Yet fundraising and advocacy activities for such populations is complicated by the very real need for security and being discreet. Public fundraising campaigns are simply not possible. In the past, large advocacy campaigns conducted by human rights groups around the interaction with local Thai authorities and newly arrived refugees, being able to purchase so called police cards, caused a significant backlash and led to increased repression of refugees and a curtailment in their ability to move and work. Public advocacy therefore can have a negative effect on the lives of the most vulnerable, risking a violation do no harm. What this means is fundraising for such populations, which is more crucial than ever, is more fraught and complicated than ever.

They have remarkable dignity, agency and ability, but need greater support.

If you are interested in supporting this population, please reach out to TBC.

