

Overview

Burma, also known as Myanmar, achieved independence from British colonial rule in 1948 and had a representative government until an army coup in 1962. A military regime held power for the next 26 years, brutally suppressing dissent. Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy won a landslide victory in multiparty elections in 1990 but was denied power. Today, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate remains under house arrest.

Until 1984, eastern Burma's border areas were predominantly controlled by indigenous ethnic nationalities, who had established de facto autonomous states. But then the regime launched a major offensive, sending about 10,000 refugees permanently into Thailand. By 1994, the refugees numbered 80,000. Today they number more than 150,000.

As Burma's army expanded its hold on former ethnic territory, it undertook a massive relocation plan, destroying at least 2,800 ethnic villages in 10 years. It has planted more than 2,000 landmines, burned villages and food supplies, used rape as a weapon against women, and tortured and killed civilians.

The situation grows more desperate each day. The regime began a new offensive in November 2005, apparently to clear the territory east of Burma's new capital city, Naypyidaw. Some observers believe these are the most serious attacks since 1997.

The newly displaced number some 20,000 – thousands of whom are hiding in the jungle. Border refugee camps have received more than 2,000 new arrivals since December, and hundreds more are reported to be waiting to cross into Thailand. Aid officials are worried about how to meet the increasing demand for food and shelter in the camps, where assistance already is at subsistence levels.

Today, an estimated 540,000 of Burma's 50.5 million people are displaced in eastern Burma alone, and more than one million have fled the country – 727,100 are refugees.



Photo: courtesy of Sara Anderson

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PROFILE

REGION : Southeast Asia

TIME FRAME OF CRISIS : 1962 to present, escalating in 1984, 1990 and 2005

TOTAL POPULATION : 50,519,000

INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS : 540,000
(includes IDPs in eastern Burma alone)

REFUGEES : 727,100

CRUDE ANNUAL DEATH RATE
Per 1,000 population : 6.3 (urban) and 7.3 (rural)

LIFE EXPECTANCY AT BIRTH : 61

UNDER 5 MORTALITY RATE
Per 1,000 live births : 106

Sources: World Health Organization, Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC), World Refugee Survey 2006, United Nations Development Program, UNICEF

Map: ReliefWeb

BURMA

How the Humanitarian Community is Responding

InterAction members are among a broad spectrum of nongovernmental organizations that have worked in Burma for decades providing and/or supporting relief and development in such areas as health, anti-trafficking, HIV/AIDS, nutrition, water, sanitation, opium reduction, education, street children and gender issues.

They also assist refugees from Burma who have fled to Thailand and other Asian countries, and provide resettlement services to Burmese refugees admitted to the United States. Several have conducted and published research on the situation of Burmese refugees and IDPs. InterAction members also are engaged in advocacy for democracy, human rights, and an opening of humanitarian space in Burma and for the humanitarian and protection needs of Burmese IDPs and refugees.

InterAction members Church World Service and the International Rescue Committee are among the nine members of the 22-year-old Thailand Burma Border Consortium (www.tbbc.org), which provides food, shelter and non food items to refugees and displaced people from Burma, and also engages in research on the root causes of displacement and refugee outflows. TBBC's 2005 budget totaled just over \$25.7 million.

Advocacy Efforts

In recent months, with support from both sides of the U.S. political aisle, long-time advocates for democracy in Burma have been pressing the United Nations Security Council for a binding resolution calling on Burma's regime to:

- ☞ end its attacks on civilians immediately;
- ☞ allow humanitarian agencies to help IDPs;
- ☞ release all political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi; and
- ☞ achieve national reconciliation and restoration of a democratically elected government with representation from all ethnic groups.

In the meantime, it is essential to keep the border open for citizens for whom refuge in Thailand is the only option. More resources are needed for non-governmental organizations operating on the border. They are suffering major budget shortfalls created in large part by an unfavorable exchange rate and sharp price increases for food and non-food items needed for refugees in camps, who depend on international aid to survive.



Among InterAction Members Responding*

Action Against Hunger
 Adventist Development and Relief Agency International (ADRA)
 American Jewish World Service
 American Refugee Committee
 Baptist World Aid
 Church World Service
 International Rescue Committee
 Jesuit Refugee Service/USA
 Refugees International
 World Learning
 World Vision

*Note: This list may not include all InterAction members working in this country/region. If your organization is working in this area and is not included in this list, please email Linda Poteat at lpoteat@interaction.org.

Additional Resources

Thailand Burma Border Consortium

The Thailand Burma Border Consortium represents nine international NGOs from seven countries providing food, shelter and non-food items to refugees and displaced people from Burma. TBBC's U.S.-based members are Church World Service (www.churchworldservice.org) and the International Rescue Committee (www.theirc.org).

www.tbbc.org

U.S. Campaign for Burma

A U.S.-based membership organization dedicated to empowering grassroots activists around the world to bring about an end to the military dictatorship in Burma through public education, leadership development initiatives, conferences, and advocacy campaigns at local, national and international levels.

www.uscampaignforburma.org

U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants

The U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants addresses the needs and rights of persons in forced or voluntary migration worldwide by advancing fair and humane public policy, facilitating and providing direct professional services, and promoting the full participation of migrants in community life.

www.refugees.org

American Jewish World Service

An international development organization dedicated to alleviating poverty, hunger and disease among the people of the developing world regardless of race, religion or nationality. Resources on the Web include a special report, Forging a Better Future for Burma.

www.ajws.org