

Don't forget refugees as war continues to ravage Myanmar

by Naomi Brooks

4 February 2025



Students in Ban Mae Surin camp participated in a poster competition, marking World Breastfeeding Day 2023

Photo Credit: [The Border Consortium](#)

The Mae La refugee camp was first established 40 years ago on the Thai-Myanmar border, and today many refugees living there do not know life anywhere else. Without a right to work in Thailand, the majority Karen population is forced to endure a life inside the camps, hoping for permanent resettlement, for a change in Thai policy or for Myanmar to become a safe place to return to. Until then, they rely on humanitarian assistance from donors like Australia (currently the third largest donor) to continue to ensure they can eat, shelter, wash and receive education, healthcare and livelihood assistance.

But a short visit to Mae La at the end of 2024, to meet local partners of one of the Australian Council for International Development's member organisations, showed me that this is not a group taking pity on themselves. The leaders of Mae La told us proudly about the governance structure, leadership positions, women's groups, ethnic representation arrangements and activities they have established. A village-like system has been adopted drawing on existing cultural practices to manage the camps, with elections of leaders held every three years. This system, which has been enabled by [The Border Consortium](#) (TBC), consisting of nine international non-government organisations supported by the generosity of foreign government and individual private donors, is highly cost effective. It currently costs roughly US\$186 to feed, house and provide technical support to one refugee per year under the TBC model, compared to thousands of dollars, or more, in similar settings across the globe.

As stated by one community leader:

Refugee-led camp management gives us elastic flexibility and freedom compared to when the camps were first run by the Thai military ... it helps us practice a democratic system. Leaders are diverse. They are representative of Karen, Muslim, special groups, diverse religions, women and youth.

It is an overwhelmingly positive operation in an otherwise desperate situation.

In the border town of Mae Sot, Thailand, the population of Burmese, Karen, Rohingya and Hmong residents is larger than the Thai population. This town, the meeting point before we head with local partners to the Mae La camp, is abundant with diversity, displaying influences from across Southeast Asia in a melting pot that they all call home despite, for those from Myanmar, a lack of legal documentation.

The Thai people have broadly embraced those displaced from Myanmar, but government policies lag behind. Unable to gain the right to work in Thailand and contribute to the community, **100,000 refugees remain stuck** in nine camps spread across the border due to a Thai government that is unwilling to integrate this population into wider Thai society, despite already being home to millions of Myanmar migrant workers, many of whom are found in Mae Sot.

The military junta, known as the State Administration Council or SAC, overthrew the democratically elected government in Myanmar four years ago this week – the latest upheaval in five decades of conflict between democratic forces and military-led governments. The events following the military coup on 1 February 2021 were characterised by bloodshed, displacement, hunger and widespread pain and grief. As at December last year, 19.9 million people were estimated to need **humanitarian assistance** within the country, over one-third of the population. Among them are 6.3 million children and 7.1 million women. 15.2 million people are facing acute food insecurity. The education and health systems are often disrupted and are on the brink of collapse. Over **6,000 civilians** have been killed since this latest military coup.

In addition, displacement is widespread. Three million people have been displaced nationwide. According to TBC, the nine camps on the Thai-Myanmar border have **increased in population size** by 31% since the coup, from 81,305 in January 2020 to 106,454 at the end of December 2024. And this is a fact often forgotten — that displacement did not begin with the 2021 coup but, for some, many decades earlier. These camps opened in 1984, with many current Karen refugees having been displaced since an insurgency that began a year after the country's independence back in 1949. This is also why, despite any future peace, the situation in Myanmar will remain dire for many. On top of the current coup causing mass economic disruption, a high number of landmines being laid, limited healthcare, education and economic opportunities, there remain ethnic divisions which have not yet healed — it is not clear whether some sections of the refugee population will ever be able to return to Myanmar.

So, what next for the refugees patiently waiting, their lives on hold, in the Thai-Myanmar border camps? Roughly 50% of them are of working age. Many were **born and raised in Thailand**; a significant number speak Thai and express a desire to

work in Thailand — to contribute to the economy of a country which has provided them with shelter and safety. Instead, education services delivered in refugee settings are currently not recognised by the Thai education system, creating barriers to accessing wider opportunities, and refugees are unable to leave the camp for work or study. There is no reason these people should not be able to do so rather than being reliant on external aid.

Refugees are not and should not be viewed as being passive recipients of aid. They can be educated, skilled, resilient individuals who thrive in incredibly challenging circumstances, as demonstrated by the TBC self-management model. As **stated by** TBC's Executive Director Leon de Riedmatten:

Integrating refugees into the Thai workforce is not just an act of charity — it is an economic imperative. Refugees bring with them a wealth of skills and experiences that can inject fresh energy and innovation into the Thai economy ... Allowing refugees to integrate would enable the Thai government to redirect resources currently used to manage refugee camps towards other critical areas. This shift would not only be more cost-effective but would also reduce the security risks associated with long-term refugee camps, which can sometimes become pull factors for further migration.

Australia can play a key role here. With cross-partisan support for Myanmar policy since the 2021 coup, and long-term assistance to the displaced population, it would also benefit the Australian Government to see progress beyond what seems to be a temporary solution without end in the refugee camps. Aid can be funnelled to many parts of this crisis right now, but some quiet diplomacy with our Thai allies on what is next for the integration of these refugees simply makes sense for the stability of the region and, most importantly, for the future of the 100,000 people who deserve a permanent place to call home.

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Link:

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