

2009: 25 years on the border

For 25 years now, the Burmese Army has gradually overrun ethnic territory in eastern Burma, displacing more than a million people from their homes.

In 1984, the first large influx of mainly Karen refugees fled into Thailand as the Burmese Army wrested more control over ethnic areas in the east of the country. TBBC has its origins in that time and has been working continuously since then with the refugees from Burma who today live in nine camps on Thailand's western border.

25 years is a long time for donors to support the refugees and a long time for TBBC and other aid agencies who provide assistance on a daily basis. It is also a long time for Thailand, the reluctant host for the refugees. But 25 years must seem like an eternity for the refugees.

TBBC is marking a quarter-century of the refugees on the border and its work with them, with a Scrapbook containing

the memories, stories, poems and art of people living in the camps and 'outsiders' who have worked with or known them well.

The book will be launched during the first half of 2010. The contributions that have been submitted to this book are both amazing and powerful; for this, TBBC would like to thank those of you who shared your stories and photos with us.

“I know that we cannot rely on TBBC forever, and we don't know how long we can live here in Thailand. I want to go back to my home country, but I know the opportunity is minimal. I wish we could be more self-reliant and live our lives without depending on the help and support of NGO's so much...”

Eh Say, 56, is a community leader. She came to Mae La camp in 1995.

75,000 forced to leave their homes in Eastern Burma during the past year

TBBC's annual survey on internal displacement in eastern Burma was released in November, with documentation reflecting an increase in violence and abuse.

At least 75,000 people were forced to leave their homes during the past year, and more than half a million people are internally displaced. The highest rates of recent displacement were reported in northern Karen areas and southern Shan State.

The main threats to human security in eastern Burma are related to militarization. Military patrols and landmines are the most significant, and fastest growing, threat to civilian safety and security, while forced labour and restrictions on movement are the most pervasive threats to livelihoods. Trend analysis of interviews conducted with over 3,000 households suggests that the threats to both physical security and livelihoods have increased during the past five years.

Over 3,500 villages and hiding sites in Eastern Burma have been destroyed or forcibly relocated since 1996, including 120 communities between August 2008 and July 2009. This scale of displacement is comparable to the situation in Darfur and has been recognised as the strongest single indicator of crimes against humanity in eastern Burma.



River crossing, Shan state, 2009 (Photo: SRDC)

[Download TBBC's latest IDP survey: Protracted Displacement and Militarisation in Eastern Burma \(Zipped PDF: 5.6Mb\)](#)

Links :

[Irrawaddy special edition:](#)

[A sad sad celebration](#)

[The Irrawaddy's special edition on TBBC's 25 years of work with refugees from Burma.](#)

[TBBC: Photo slideshow. 25 years at the border Including photos from camps and quotes from refugees](#)

[The Irrawaddy](#)

[Supporting Roles](#)

[Democratic Voice of Burma](#)

[Global MP's call for UN action on Burma](#)

Refugee camp population TBBC's feeding figures as of 30 November 2009

The total feeding population by the end of October for the 9 refugee camps in Thailand was **138,246**. For more detailed information, please visit TBBC's updated population map on our web site.

Resettlement Statistics as of October 2009. Source: IOM

Since 1st January 2009, a total of **15,085** refugees from Burma left Thailand for resettlement to the following countries: USA (11,469); Australia (2,148); Norway (243); Sweden (107); Finland (192); Canada (827); New Zealand (73), Denmark (10), Netherlands (8), UK (3), Others (3).

New Influx of refugees to Thailand likely in the near future

During the last few months it appears that more concentrated efforts have been carried out by the Burmese Army and its allies to take control over ethnic territories in Eastern Burma.

Conflict has already intensified in Karen State with over 4000 Karen refugees fleeing to Thailand in June.

In the run-up to Burma's proposed elections in 2010, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) is attempting to convert the ethnic cease-fire armies into border guard forces under Burmese Army command. This has already resulted in the resumption of hostilities in the Kokang region of north-eastern Burma, and raised fears about Burmese Army deployments into other border areas.

The situation is currently volatile and new refugee flows look like a likely scenario in 2010.

Thailand's National Security Council recently acknowledged it was preparing for another mass influx of refugees due to increased conflict in Burma's border areas.

Nutrition activities in camps

To ensure the adequacy of the ration and the need for supplementary feeding for young children in the camps, TBBC monitors around 500 children below 5 years in each camp. According to WHO standards, the "acceptable" level of acute malnutrition for children under 5 years is 5%. The average rate of acute malnutrition is around 2% in camps. TBBC is closely monitoring this trend.

Staff from TBBC's Food Supplementary Programme are training health agency staff in camps to review nutrition needs and learn how to properly measure height and weight of children. Parents can learn about nutrition through health agency Community Health Educators who conduct household visits and lead occasional nutrition education campaigns in the camps. Also, parents of children enrolled in the Supplementary Food Programme can attend cooking demonstrations supported by TBBC and conducted by health agency staff.

[Download: TBBC's Annual Nutrition Survey](#)
(PDF 190 Kb)



Increased self-reliance and less aid dependency – a priority for TBBC during the coming years

Increasing refugees' self-reliance is a core objective in TBBC's strategic plan for 2009-2013, as well as in the CCSDPT (Committee for Coordination of Services to Displaced People in Thailand) and UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees) strategic plan for the same period. The CCSDPT, and UNHCR organized a seminar in November, to discuss this strategic direction with representatives from the Royal Thai Government (RTG) and donor governments.

Although RTG's policy remain clear - refugees are not allowed to legally go outside the camps, one agriculture pilot project has been allowed outside Mae La camp. At the CCSDPT/UNHCR seminar, the RTG expressed their support for income generating activities inside the camps, and encouraged initiatives by aid agencies.

For TBBC and other NGO's, this process will require long-time planning, creativity and research. "There are lot of women and men in camps with skills in agriculture, weaving and handicrafts which can be utilized for community benefits", says Krishna Acharya, TBBC's new income generation coordinator.

TBBC is already running a project for small scale gardening in camps, (read more about this in the April e-Letter this year). The challenge now is to increase the scale of these activities and introduce more pilot projects.

Internally displaced persons consulted in peace and conflict assessments

TBBC's local partners recently surveyed over 1,000 households in eastern Burma and facilitated a series of participatory workshops to consult grassroots communities about the dynamics of conflict and the potential for peace building.

The household surveys indicate that, despite the challenges, significant economic and social connections exist across political conflict lines in eastern Burma. The potential of these networks of civil society groups and grassroots communities as catalysts for peace should not be ignored.

Ongoing insecurity and the breakdown of law and order were identified during workshops as the primary concerns of internally displaced persons. These grassroots perspectives reflect a low level of confidence

that the Burmese government's "road map to democracy" will lead to peace. From the villagers' perspective, the withdrawal of Burmese Army troops and holding the perpetrators of abuse to account are fundamental to stopping the cycle of violence.

"We tried to understand the dynamics of local conflicts and look for solutions together with the affected villagers"

Field Worker, Mon Relief and Development Committee, August 2009.