



Time to Close Thailand's Camps for Burmese Refugees?

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MAE LA REFUGEE CAMP, THAILAND—Trees give way to primitive wooden homes in the rolling hills approaching Mae La refugee camp on Thailand's border with Burma. The largest camp in Thailand, Mae La, holds 50,000 refugees.

Three years ago Burma's ruling generals yielded authority to a nominally civilian leadership and initiated a series of ceasefires with various ethnic groups. The resulting peace is real but imperfect.

Today there are as many as 150,000 refugees in ten Thai camps. Overcrowded Mae La was established three decades ago when many assumed that their stay would be short.

Residents are barred from even leaving the camps without official permission. Education is difficult. People's lives, futures, and dreams are all confined by fences and armed guards.

Perhaps worse, sustenance is provided and work prohibited. This has discouraged independence, enterprise, and entrepreneurship.

With the changes in Burma serious discussions about closing the camps have begun. In July Thailand's military junta declared its objective to repatriate all refugees by 2015.

Mae La refugees I talked to wanted to return, but worried about security. NGOs observe that a national political settlement has yet to be implemented.

No doubt the concern over repatriation is genuine, but there also is a strong financial incentive for some groups to oppose the return of refugees. My friend Jim Jacobson, president of the humanitarian group Christian Freedom International (CFI), observed that "a lot of people benefit from the camps. A lot of government aid goes through the camps and trickles out."

Ironically, the supposed direct beneficiaries suffer the most. A survey by a French medical NGO found that half of adult camp residents suffered from some mental health problem. Another

consequence, say those who work with refugees, is a loss of self-sufficiency and growth of short-term thinking.

Jim Jacobson's CFI has supported health clinics, orphanages, and churches. CFI runs a school—formally the Huai Kalok Bible Institute—in Mae Sot. Karen students receive academic and vocational training, learn to work with computers and livestock, study theology, and more. He noted that students from the camps are less self-reliant and demonstrate less initiative than those from outside.

While the peace is incomplete, as camp advocates warn, the improvement is dramatic. When I last visited in 2006, any trek into Burma was fraught with danger. The Burmese military routinely attacked villages and killed residents, the refugees fleeing into Thailand.

Today Huai Kalok students go back and spend time in their villages. Indeed, said Jacobson, “we are seeing real change coming. The Karen are putting down roots.”

Last month I visited a small village called Wallay, in which new farm equipment was visible, as well as a rudimentary saw mill. “Imagine if a couple hundred thousand people returned to villages like this,” argued Jacobson.

The local pastor agreed that Burmese coming home would spur development. An official with the Karen National Union feared return would be premature, but even he acknowledged the lack of conflict.

Last month when I asked HBI students about their lives, none of them cited violence. Most of the students wrote of hearing about the school and wanting to learn. Many of their families still live in Burma.

In 2006 I asked students the same question. Almost all had lost parents and homes while fleeing the Burmese military.

Repatriation also would spur reconstruction. New homes and villages must be built. The sooner the Karen, with aid from groups like CFI, go back and start working, the sooner they will be able to recreate communities.

“The ceasefire is not perfect,” admitted Jacobson, “but it has created new opportunities.” New development and growth are evident in some Karen areas. Coming back despite the uncertainty would be “better than being human debris at a refugee camp.”

[As I wrote in American Spectator](#): “It is time to start planning for the return of refugees to Burma. Only then will people who have suffered through so much be able to prepare for a better future.”

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