

needs of the most vulnerable when operating through NGOs.

Donor recognition of the need to support community-based organisations and NGOs inside Burma marks something of a shift in policy. As with IDPs elsewhere in the world, it is those not living in camps and not recognised as displaced who are most excluded from access to services.

The International Development Committee recommends a quadrupling of aid for Burma. The real challenge for donors, however, is to find effective development partners able to provide good SRH services within the country in addition to those NGOs working across the Thai-Burmese border.

John Bercow (BERCOWJ@parliament.uk) is a Member of the

UK Parliament and is Chairman of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Democracy in Burma. He is also a member of the UK's International Development Committee.

1. www.burmacampaign.org.uk/total_report.html#8
2. UNFPA, 2007
3. www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/international_development.cfm
4. www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmselect/cmintdev/1070/107002.htm
5. <http://myanmar.unfpa.org/projects.htm>

A sense of home in exile

Sandra Dudley

Material objects and the physical actions of making and using them are a fundamental part of how forced migrants, far from being passive victims of circumstance, seek to make the best of – and make a home in – their displacement.

The Karenni are the second largest grouping remaining in camps in Thailand and by late 2007 numbered around 23,000, about 13% of the total Burmese refugee population.¹ Humanitarian conditions in Karenni State are by all accounts dire, even by Burma's low standards.

The Karenni refugee leadership is dominated by the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), which has remained committed to armed opposition to the Burmese regime. There are also various other armed groups vying for control of territory, resources and people inside Karenni State. High-minded ideology is often lost as conflict and its civilian consequences become a way of life and ultimately contribute to patterns of displacement. In the four years between 1996 and 2000, for example, it is estimated that more than 15% of Karenni State's population were displaced because of military activity.²

The basic structure of assistance provision to Karenni refugees has changed relatively little in the past 12 years, despite increases in the refugee camp population, camp mergers and the tighter physical and legislative confinement of all border refugees since 1998. The increasing impact of UNHCR's large resettlement programme, whilst an understandable approach

to a prolonged refugee situation, has also augmented anxieties and tensions within the camp. Unsurprisingly, Karenni refugee life is increasingly problematic – and, as a result, all agencies appear variously to be identifying and seeking to address a significant rise in both mental ill-health and social and legal problems.

'Materialising' exile

Displacement inevitably complicates and changes people's relationships with objects and places, as well as with each other. In order to live as 'normally' as possible within a new place, Karenni refugees seek to make it as familiar in material ways, and as like the old, as possible. In so doing, they are attempting to connect two points in space (the refugee camp 'here' and the pre-exile 'there') and two time periods (the displaced 'now' and the pre-migration 'then'). The connections are continually being renewed through ritual practices, clothing, food and myriad everyday activities.

Essentially, this is about creating a sense, however flawed, of 'home' – somewhere people feel is comfortable and intrinsically linked to who and what they perceive themselves to be. While it is unhelpful for relief agencies and anthropologists alike to idealise the worlds that refugees have left behind, refugees

often do precisely that. It renders the experience understandable and the present more bearable.

The cultural experience of displacement is reflected in how refugees act in the physical world of which they are a part. How, for example, does life in the camps relate to cultural aesthetics about the 'right' or 'best' way to live and feel? In what ways do the memories and imagination of the home that has been left behind influence the ways in which refugees seek to create a sense of home in the camp? What particular material objects and aspects of the physical environment (if any) are important in these processes, and why? What does it physically feel like to be a refugee?

At least three elements in human interaction with the physical world have become particularly significant in Karenni forced displacement. Firstly, opportunities to repeat physical actions familiar from the past, such as building houses and other creative processes possible in the camp, are important – and not only because they ameliorate the boredom and anxiety of displacement and provide necessary physical objects. They may be comforting in their familiarity, enable the structuring of time, and provide distraction and a sense of doing the best one can. They also allow the continued development and practice of valued skills. Furthermore, the reassurance provided by utilising subconscious cultural knowledge to use one's body in established ways, while hardly unique to



Suthep Kritsanavarin for TBBC, 2007

Karenni
refugees in
Site 1/Ban
Mai Nai So
refugee camp,
Thailand.

refugees, does have particular importance in forced migration as another means of simultaneously preserving continuity with the pre-exile past and adjusting to the loss of some of life's rhythm. Indeed for Karenni refugees, being busy, be it in making things such as textiles or baskets, teaching or cooking, is

a key component of mechanisms for coping with displacement.

Secondly, material forms such as photographs can stand for past personal and communal experience and create connections with that past. Many people possess photograph albums, for example, which include

images not only of friends and activities in the camp but also of persons and places significant in life before displacement. The value of such artefacts is evident in both their continued existence in the refugee camp and in the ways in which they are kept and frequently engaged with in private or with visitors as a springboard for remembering and re-telling the past.

Thirdly, as well as being an important vehicle for memory and link to the past, photographs and other personal objects, as with building houses in a familiar style and weaving traditional textiles, also enable Karenni refugees partially at least to colonise or possess a new place within which they otherwise feel inadequately at home.

A better understanding of these cultural and material processes would contribute to more effective and sympathetic assistance for refugees.

Sandra Dudley (shd3@le.ac.uk) works in the Department of Museum Studies, University of Leicester.

1. Thailand Burma Border Consortium 2007 'Burmese border refugee sites with population figures: November 2007', www.tbtc.org/camps/2007-11-nov-map-tbbc-unhcr.pdf

2. Human Rights Watch 2007 'Burma: army attacks displace hundreds of thousands' <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2007/10/25/burma17168.htm>

Technology in the borderlands

Rachel Sharples

Displaced Karen in the borderlands are taking advantage of new technology not only to maintain connections with their homeland but also to inform the international community of human rights violations.

A key connection between the borderlands and homeland is their shared subjection to atrocities arising from military conflict. Displacement has provided opportunities and space to advocate against human rights violations – and this has been facilitated in particular by the presence of international networks and new technology in the borderlands. These have

provided previously unimaginable opportunities to access the international community, including UN mechanisms, sympathetic governments and funding sources. By accessing international networks the Karen are able to appeal to a wider audience while at the same time maintaining a close geographical and emotional attachment to their people and culture. At the same time they have learnt a number of skills – including the ability to negotiate complex global structures and to communicate cross-culturally – which will serve them in an increasingly globalised community.

New technologies such as blogs, websites and multimedia have allowed Karen activists to reach more diverse audiences with targeted messages. In turn, increased knowledge of Karen injustices, whether it is a sympathetic audience or an audience that can equate it with their own experiences, has created networks of solidarity.

Rachel Sharples (sharples.rachel@gmail.com) is a PhD student at RMIT, Melbourne. She is studying how displacement has impacted Karen constructs of identity and culture along the Thai-Burma border.