

RAZOR'S EDGE:

Survival Crisis for Refugees from Burma in Delhi, India

Project Maje
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The situation for refugees from Burma in Delhi, the capital city of India, has reached a survival crisis point. About 1,500 post-1988 refugees from Burma live in Delhi. An estimated 1,300 or more are of the Chin ethnic group from western Burma, with others from western Burma's Arakan State (estimated at 30 to 50), northern Burma's Kachin State (estimated at about 100), and elsewhere in Burma (estimated at 30 to 50.) They have been gradually losing their Subsistence Allowance stipends from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to the point that such money is about to essentially vanish by the end of 2004.

The small UNHCR payments (approximately US\$30 to \$11 a month for "head of household" adults, with an additional amount for children) have been shared among the refugees for the most basic living expenses. Alternatives for income earning for the refugees in Delhi are nearly nonexistent, as refugees would have to compete with native-born Indians, and even foreigners who seem more "Indian," for scarce employment.

In October 2004, Project Maje met with members of Delhi's refugee community in the Vikaspuri neighborhood. The contacts took place in a session with representatives of refugee organizations, visits to two refugee housing units, and at a group assembly of refugees. This brief report is a summary of impressions from those contacts.

Inhospitable Refuge

Western Burma has increasingly been affected by militarization, resource extraction, religious persecution and political oppression in recent years, causing a steady refugee outflow. A new joint venture between Daewoo of South Korea, ONGV and GAIL of India, and Burma's regime, with plans to bring natural gas from offshore Burma to India, possibly by pipeline through Arakan and/or Chin State, is expected to cause more militarization and forced labor in the region, and therefore, more refugees.

The response of many Chins, and people of other western Burma ethnic groups, to human rights violations such as forced labor, village destruction, rape, and torture, has been to flee to neighboring India, particularly the northeast state of Mizoram, home to Chin-related indigenous people. Unfortunately, Mizoram has become increasingly inhospitable to the refugees from Burma. There have been instances of forcible push-backs to Burma, and other forms of harassment and persecution, most notably during July-August 2003. An estimated 40,000 to 50,000 refugees from Burma still remain in Mizoram.

Because international protection under the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), is not available in Mizoram, a relatively small number of the refugees have over the years made their way to Delhi, where there is a UNHCR office, in search of such protection. In the past, some of these refugees have gone on to be resettled in third countries, often as students. A few others (often Burmese student refugees) have succeeded in making Delhi a permanent home for themselves.

A Brick Wall

Delhi's security for refugees has dwindled as UNHCR protected status has become much harder to obtain (reportedly, only about half of the Delhi refugees from Burma currently have it) and the UNHCR Subsistence Allowance stipends have been phased out. A UNHCR representative in Delhi recently commented that the stipends had created "dependency" and had only been meant for the elderly and ill, not for all "able-bodied"

refugees. One wonders how starved a refugee must be, from being unable to compete for scarce employment with the Indian population, before one is ill enough to receive survival aid.

The Delhi refugees are well organized, and have tried to publicize and protest their plight (resulting in arrests and beatings in November 2003.) However, they have been up against a brick wall with the UNHCR, and have received little support from elsewhere, with the exception of the Other Media refugee project and a few NGOs. Although the Chins are Christians, even Christian churches and charities in Delhi can offer them little aid, as they believe their mandate is to serve the poor and downtrodden of India, not those of Burma.

There are constant reports of difficulties in getting healthcare reimbursements from the UNHCR and its “implementing” organizations. Refugees from Burma report difficulty in accessing help from a Delhi “refugee clinic,” and report deaths in their community from lack of medicine. Dozens of refugee children have had to drop out of Indian public schools because of lack of money for school fees and uniforms. Church schools have taken in some refugee children, but others are going without education.

Forced Competition

Most refugees from Burma reportedly have Residence Permits from the Indian government, but not work permits, making legal employment difficult. The UNHCR has suggested that they seek employment in the “informal sector” (illegal employment.) But the main problem is the lack of any employment niche that the Burma refugees can fill in Delhi. The educated refugees face the reality that there are always plenty of educated, English-speaking Indians to fill any position; the refugees who were farmers understand that there are always enough impoverished Indians willing to do any task or chore.

UNHCR training programs in computers and language skills are viewed as unrealistic, long term oriented when short term survival needs are unmet, and not addressing the problem of competing for jobs with Indians. Even other refugees, such as those from Afghanistan and Bhutan, seem to have a better chance at fitting into Indian society and the demands of urban life, than do the Chins and other Burma refugees in Delhi.

To make matters worse, the Burma refugees for the most part don’t “look Indian” (in the non-Northeast India sense) and thus stand out in their slum communities as targets for harassment and violence. Refugees have been beaten and murdered by criminals in Delhi, and refugee women have been victims of sexual assault in the slum neighborhoods. The few refugees who have found employment, for instance as security guards, have often been swindled out of their pay by employers.

Most refugees are now reportedly reduced to scavenging for discarded food at night after the vegetable markets have shut down. They live crowded into one-room flats they call “refugee camps,” often behind on the rent and in impossible debt to credit-lenders. The situation is extremely frustrating, dangerous and frightening for the Delhi refugees. At present their only source of hope is the possibility of third country resettlement.

While there is some sense that third countries do want to take in this small population of refugees, there are reports that the UNHCR or Indian government have not smoothed the way to this solution, and are not willing to provide the necessary “exit visa” documents. A particular concern may be the “magnet” effect -- if all of the Delhi refugees are rescued to third countries, then this may draw more from Mizoram to Delhi. Steps such as extending more protection and security to the refugees already in Mizoram, should be taken to deal with this possibility. Of course desperate people are not fleeing Burma in hopes of a new life on another continent -- they are fleeing in immediate fear for their safety. If safe havens can be established in border areas and coexistence and conflict-resolution can be promoted in Mizoram, it is unlikely that the number of refugees will build up again in Delhi.

Case Studies

The following five cases illustrate the challenges faced by refugees in Delhi and how they struggle to meet needs such as food, shelter, and healthcare. The individuals are all from the Matupi region of southern Chin State.

Flat A:

1. 44 year old man, was a primary school teacher in Chin State. In 1988 he was a democracy demonstration leader in Matupi. That September he fled to Mizoram, where he was a farmer. In 2003 he was evicted in Mizoram with his wife and five children, and then came to Delhi, but cannot find any work. The one-room flat costs 2,800 rupees a month (about US\$55.00) and is shared with 30 people including 13 children; they were two months behind on the rent (owed to a credit-lender.) Some sleep on the rooftop due to lack of space. The children go to a Seventh Day Adventist charity school. The children suffer from headaches, diarrhea and coughing. There is no money for medicine. The people in the flat purchase the cheapest grade of rice. They eat rice twice a day, sometimes as soup, with salt and chili, sometimes with lentils. He is praying that the UNHCR will help them.

2. 22 year old woman, mother of three children. A farmer with fourth-standard education. In August 2002, her husband, a village headman, had to give rice to Chin National Front (CNF) rebel soldiers. Burma's Military Intelligence found out about that, so the couple fled to Mizoram. In Mizoram they worked in road construction and sold vegetables. Local people there made trouble for them, so they fled to Delhi in 2002. They applied for UNHCR refugee status but were rejected with no reason. After long unemployment, her husband has recently found work as a temporary substitute dishwasher at a tea-stall six days a week, for 500 rupees (about US\$11.00) a month. Their baby had pneumonia, and they have no money for treatment. She hopes for democracy to come to Burma so they can return, and hopes for her children to be educated.

3. 20 year old single man. He was in class 10 in school in Chin State when the CNF forcibly recruited him. He wanted to study, not to be in the rebel army, so he fled their camp. The Burma military captured him and accused him of being a CNF supporter, tortured him and told him to show them the way to the camp. He was wounded in a battle between the two sides, and fled to Mizoram. He has a gunshot wound, and still suffers light sensitivity due to the torture by Burma military. In Mizoram he worked as a dishwasher in a tea-stall, could not labor in the sun because of his eye damage. He was worried about deportation back to Burma from Mizoram. In September 2004, he came to Delhi, and has a UNHCR interview scheduled in December. He has had no work since coming to Delhi and has been getting treatment at a clinic with money a friend sent to him from Mizoram. He noted that "inside Chinland, so many people suffer torture, forced labor, rape, invisibly. All people should know that Burma needs to change, there needs to be democracy so people will get their rights."

4. 23 year old woman. In Burma she suffered from gynecological problems, but the Burma army forced her to work as a porter carrying their supplies. She tried to refuse, but they made her do it many times, so in 2000 she went to Mizoram by herself. There she got married in 2001 to another refugee, a farmer. They farmed in Mizoram until the deportation campaign, then came to Delhi, where they were rejected for UNHCR protection. Her husband is still looking for a job; he does not speak English or Hindi, which makes it especially difficult. Two months ago she had an abortion and has experienced fatigue, headaches and a nerve-burning sensation since. Her two year old daughter still suffers the effects of malaria that she contracted back in Mizoram and vitamin deficiency (appears obviously malnourished.) She wants democracy, and refugee status, and a good education for her children.

Flat B:

5. 26 year old man. He was raised an orphan in his uncle's house. He was a farmer when he was taken by the

Burma military as a porter. During a battle in 1999 between the Burma military and the CNF, he was injured. His hand and lower forearm had to be amputated. He still has problems with the stump but can't afford treatment other than some tablets given to him by an NGO clinic for the refugees. In 2003 he fled to Delhi and was rejected for UNHCR protected status; he had an appeal interview in September '04. He lives in a one room flat with 13 other refugee men, ages 25 to 35. Most of them are working as dishwashers, but he cannot due to his injury. They share a 50 kilogram bag of cheap rice, which lasts them about three weeks, with chilies, and sometimes cabbage or potatoes. He requests that churches pray for those suffering inside Burma, and to pray for the UNHCR to help the refugees.

Conclusions

While this brief report cannot supply the solution to the plight of the Burma refugees in Delhi, or evaluate the UNHCR's role there, a few basic suggestions can be offered:

- * The UNHCR should resume survival assistance stipends to Burma refugees in Delhi, should resume granting official recognition of Burma refugees, and should encourage resettlement efforts.
- * A proactive UNHCR presence in Northeast India could help to prevent abuses against refugees, and could decrease the "magnet effect" of the Delhi office.
- * Mizoram's government, organizations and citizens must ensure the safety of refugees from Burma, with a halt to harassment and repatriation.
- * Communications with UNHCR "implementing partners" need to be improved, and the refugee community needs to be consulted more about its actual needs.
- * Emergency charity aid for the survival needs of Burma refugees in Delhi should be encouraged. (See contact information below.)
- * Efforts should continue towards finding niche employment for Burma refugees in Delhi.
- * Urban survival training, including expanded gleaning/recycling possibilities, may be of benefit for the Burma refugees in Delhi.
- * Efforts need to be made for conflict resolution and mutual familiarization with the Indian slum population in Vikaspuri.
- * Third country resettlement for the Burma refugees in Delhi should be put on the "fast track."

Contacts and Resources:

Note: the Chin/Christian groups below will also provide connections to Kachin, Rakhine and other ethnic refugee populations in Delhi.

Chin Human Rights Organization (can provide a detailed background report and direct aid links), contact chokhlei@hotmail.com
<http://www.chinforum.org>

The Other Media, Delhi Refugee Desk, contact refugeedesk@theothermedia.org

Christian Solidarity Worldwide, contact ben@csw.org.uk
<http://www.csw.org.uk>

Background article:

"Burmese Caught between Poverty in India, Oppression at Home"

Ranjit Devraj, Mizzima News, Oct. 29, 2003

http://www.burmatoday.net/mizzima2003/mizzima/2003/08/030802_india_mizzima.htm