

Repatriation Falls Down on Burma Side – Fails to Deliver Refugees’ Safely and with Dignity

Karen News  • July 26, 2019  61  4 minutes read



Earlier this July, 157 refugees more from camps along the Thai-Burma border returned to Burma. This was the fourth group officially to voluntarily return facilitated by UNHCR and government officials from Burma and Thailand.

As with previous returnees, the new group went to the Kyauk Lone Gyi reception center located in the Burma border town Myawaddy and welcomed by government officials and non-governmental organizations.

Colonel Myo Min Naung, the Minister of the Karen State Security and Border Affairs said in his speech at the reception ceremony, “We are very glad to welcome the refugees, who at one time fled the country’s internal conflicts and are now voluntarily repatriated. The government is warmly welcoming the people who came back to their home land. Repatriated Myanmar refugees will be supported by government and civil society organizations.”

Refugee advocates said the Burma government needs to do more than make welcoming speeches if they are to meet international standards. In a report released by the Karen Human Right Group in June 20, 2019 documented the situation of refugees previously returned. Testimonies from repatriated refugees in the report claim their return was anything but dignified. The refugees told KHRG of how conditions once they reached the Burma side of the border went bad.

The KHRG report said despite conditions on the Thai component of the process being “adequate once on the Burma side the refugees faced “transportation delays, unsafe and uncomfortable travel conditions, and lack of water and fresh food.”

KHRG said the process on the Thai side of the border was managed by “UNHCR, the IOM and the Thai Volunteer Defense Corps [who] provided them with transportation, accommodation and food.”

A field officer working with refugees told Karen News reports from returning refugees indicated the process was anything but dignified as laid out in a media release from UNHCR in 2018 that said “UNHCR works to ensure that any returns are voluntary, safe and conducted in a dignified manner.”

A refugee, named in the KHRG report as Naw X explained the ordeal she experienced. “In Thailand, transportation and food were adequate and provided on time. But in Myanmar, there were delays, no drinking water and we were given stale food. The organisers told us that the car would arrive at 8:00 am, but it didn’t. We waited until 10:00 am, but no one picked us up. We and our children were hungry, but we did not know where we could buy food because it was our first time there. In the evening, we thought that we would have to spend the night there [...] but people [in charge] told us we had to leave. We had to travel during the night and sleep on the back of a truck in the cold. I got sick and my throat is still sore to this day. The drivers repeatedly stopped along the road for up to two, three hours at a time.”

A media statement released on April, 22 2019 by the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs said a Joint Technical Working Groups on Myanmar Displaced People had been “tasked by both Permanent Secretaries of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of the two countries to propel the return process and to discuss how to enhance dynamism of the voluntary, safe dignified and sustainable return.”

Way Lay, KHRG’s senior advocacy coordinator told Karen News that as they are advocating for the safe and dignified return of refugee, their report looked at what refugees experienced and the challenges they faced in the areas they had been returned to.

Way Lay said research indicated, safety and basic service provisions are still inadequate in the return areas in Karen State. Despite these areas been chosen by refugees, government services had not provided appropriate work opportunities, education or health services.

“We talked to returnees and documented their experiences and the conditions. Most common challenges the returnees faced were safety, sustainable livelihood opportunities and a lack such of education and health services.”

Way Lay said returned refugees did acknowledge receiving material support from government departments, UNHCR and other non-governmental organizations once they returned. However, when they arrived at their destinations, their safety and a lack of basic services caused huge challenges for them to overcome and restart their lives.

KHRG reported inconsistencies in the money and goods refugees were promised to return and in what they actually received.

A woman explained to KHRG her experience. "Before we returned, we were informed we would get between 500,000 and 1,000,000 kyat (US \$ 325 to \$ 650) in Myanmar, but we only received around 430,000 kyat (US \$ 280). The household items we received are of bad quality and we don't have enough of them for all of our family members. The flip-flops were broken after three days. Maybe they just gave us these [items] to maintain their reputation."

The government in regional media reports claimed they had provided all the necessary services to the repatriated refugees. Xinhua, a Chinese news site reported on April 23, 2019, "as a strategic cooperation, the Myanmar government has inked a memorandum of understanding with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to provide returning refugees with education, health services, clean water, infrastructure and vocational training."

Saw Bweh Say, secretary of the Karen Refugee Committee that coordinate service provisions in the Karen refugee camps said that he hopes the related agencies do their best in facilitating the repatriation process and he doesn't want to see returned refugee face unnecessary problems in resettling.

"We are happy for those who can make their decision to return and we hope they don't face problems throughout their return process. We believe that for each time the voluntary return takes place, the UNHCR negotiated all the process with both governments, so there shouldn't be any issue. As KRC, we are not involved, but are informed by related agencies."

The KHRG report called on the UNHCR, Myanmar government and aid providers to make sure refugee and displaced people returns were "genuinely voluntary, safe, sustainable and with full respect for the dignity of returnees."

 Post Views: 14

 Tags

Refugees

Repatriation