

A Place to Call Home: The Acceptance and Denial of Burmese Refugees

Alexandra Craig, Martín-Baró Scholars, University of San Francisco

Abstract

For more than 25 years Burma has been experiencing a refugee crisis due to the military government's excessive human rights violations. The argument for not accepting refugees often prioritizes the economic troubles that a country can face when taking care of refugees. Meanwhile, those who prioritize humanitarianism often appeal to human morals and argue that refugees should be accepted wherever they need to in order to be safe. This project ultimately focuses on whether Burmese refugees should be accepted into the surrounding countries or if countries should be able to deny refuge within their borders.

History

Although Burma's government currently uses the name Myanmar, the name change is not recognized by the United States because the name was changed in 1989 by the military government ("U.S. Relations with Burma" par. 8). The military government took power in 1962 and relinquished it in 2011 (Lawi Weng par. 1). Even today, they continue to have power in the country.

Seeking refuge from persecution is an act that has existed for as long as civilization itself ("Refugees" par. 1). Refugees were first defined by the United Nations in 1951 as someone who has a "fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country" ("Refugees" par. 3). Over two million ethnic peoples have migrated to Thailand after outstanding violence from the Burmese military (Banki 50; Palatino par. 2). (For the Burmese there is a very thin line between being a migrant and being a refugee since the country has some of the worst human rights abuses in the world. Under the United Nations' definition nearly all of the migrants would be considered refugees) (Newland et al 8).

The Case Against Accepting Burmese Refugees

A number of countries that are pressured to accept refugees are not economically able to. In the case of the Rohingya Muslim refugees, both Malaysia and Indonesia have said that they cannot accept the refugees for financial reasons (Tennery par. 12). A report from the Center for Immigration Studies found that United States taxpayers spend \$64,370 per Syrian refugee permitted refuge in the country (Meyer par. 1). Settling refugees in the United States is far more expensive than settling refugees in the rest of the world because extra steps are taken, such as English language classes and an allowance of \$1,000 per refugee (Phillips par. 2). It would cost approximately \$5,364 to support a refugee in a country that neighbors where they are fleeing (Meyer par. 3). It is not possible for countries such as Thailand and Bangladesh, who do not have the same international power as the United States, to spend anywhere near this amount of money on refugees. Unfortunately most refugees are concentrated in the poorer countries of the world ("Social and Economic Impact" par. 2). The United States spends only 0.015% of the total budget on supporting refugees. As Thailand has many more refugees, approximately 2.4 million refugees according to the United Nations' definition, to resettle within its borders it would cost roughly \$12.9 billion. This is 16.9% of Thailand's total budget. In order to spend this much money on supporting the Burmese refugees Thailand would have to make budget cuts that would harm its own citizens. As such it is not economically possible for Thailand to support all of the Burmese refugees seeking a place to live.

It can be hard to tell a refugee from someone pretending to be a refugee due to the rise in fake passports being spread around the world, which is a rising concern to a vast majority of the countries taking in refugees (Fisher par. 8). This issue arose more strongly after the terrorist attacks in Paris which were enacted by individuals who entered France pretending to be refugees. Although these events took place in Europe, there is a global fear of the actions that refugees are able to perform. In Burma there were riots in Rakhine state after three Rohingya men were sentenced to death for raping and killing a Rakhine woman (Haddadi par. 1). The event added to the preexisting tensions between the Buddhist Rakhine and the Muslim Rohingya, which make the Rakhine feel unsafe within the borders of their own ethnic state (Haddadi par. 4). There is also an increase of violence within Rakhine state as a whole due to the presence of the Rohingya refugees. Shortly after the trial for the murder of the Rakhine woman, a mob of 300 Rakhine swarmed a bus, killing 10 Rohingya (Haddadi par. 5). The violence that stems from the acceptance of the Rohingya shows the social dangers of accepting refugees into a country.



Figure 1 (UNHCR Logo)

The Case For Accepting Burmese Refugees



Figure 2: Rohingya "Boat People" are stateless and are not permitted the right to live in any country (Archambault).

People do not seek refuge unless they have a reason to leave their home country. This fact seems to be often forgotten by the general public when speaking of refugees. Burma's government has performed countless human rights violations over the past 50 years: "arbitrary arrest, unlawful killings, sexual violence, torture, enforced disappearances and destruction of livelihood" (Gill 11). Amongst the wrongdoings directly implemented by the military, there has recently been a sharp increase in religious intolerance within Burma. The intolerance has created violence particularly between the Buddhist and the Muslim populations. Laws that were passed in 2015 contained human rights violations such as discrimination based on gender and religion. The government has continued its arrests of people who are peacefully practicing their rights, such as student protestors and those who work in the media. There is also continued violence within the state even though the government and the ethnic groups came to a ceasefire agreement in 2012 ("Myanmar 2015/2016" par. 5-22). Karen refugees have said they felt as if they were treated more like animals than like humans by the Burmese army (Bartholomew et al 1127). It is important for refuge to be accepted to remove people from situations that put their livelihood at risk.

Refugees work hard to get what they need to survive. They are not a group of freeloading people. It takes hard work and dedication to be able to perform the work that refugees do in their daily lives. According to Christine Lagarde, the head of the International Monetary Fund, accepting Syrian refugees into European countries can benefit their economies by bringing in more workers, especially in the case of Germany (Ferro par. 11). While Christine Lagarde is speaking of the Syrian refugee crisis, the same could be true for Thailand or other countries near Burma. Although presently Burmese refugees do not have the right to work in Thailand, they have the potential to create a stronger work force within the country ("Burmese Refugees in Thailand" par. 1).

Women are often mistreated both inside Burma's borders and as they become refugees. Due to the desperate feelings that accompany being a refugee, refugee women are some of the easiest targets for human traffickers (Seltzer 280). As of 2002, it was found that 20,000 Burmese women were refugees living illegally within Thailand as workers in the sex industry (Lang 12). Many Burmese women move to places where they can get jobs and most of the jobs available to them are domestic service and prostitution (Newland et al 6). Other women, often Rohingya, are sold into marriage in order to pay for their trip across the border. Some women that marry the men that help them escape Burma agree to do so but others are forced into marriage at ages as young as the early teen years (Buckley par. 1-6). This situation is becoming increasingly common as Rohingya are floating in the waters surrounding Burma since they are not welcome within any country (McKurdy and Mohsin par. 1). Rohingya women are doing whatever they can to escape their current living situation which includes marrying complete strangers. Instances such as these will continue to exist until there is proper acceptance and treatment of migrants and refugees within their new country of residence.

Conclusion

It is important to accept refugees into countries where they are safe. Talking about refugee issues is important but it can not be the only effort taken. While there is a possibility of negative economic impacts should there be steps taken to find a safe place for refugees, refugees are humans that need protection. Even so, it is not reasonable for a single country to support all of the refugees that are leaving a neighboring country. It is possible to ease the economic disparity through further funding from the UNHCR or the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Further funding would involve further assistance globally. In order to help the Burmese refugees Thailand needs to sign the United Nations' 1951 Refugee Convention. Doing so would provide stronger aid.

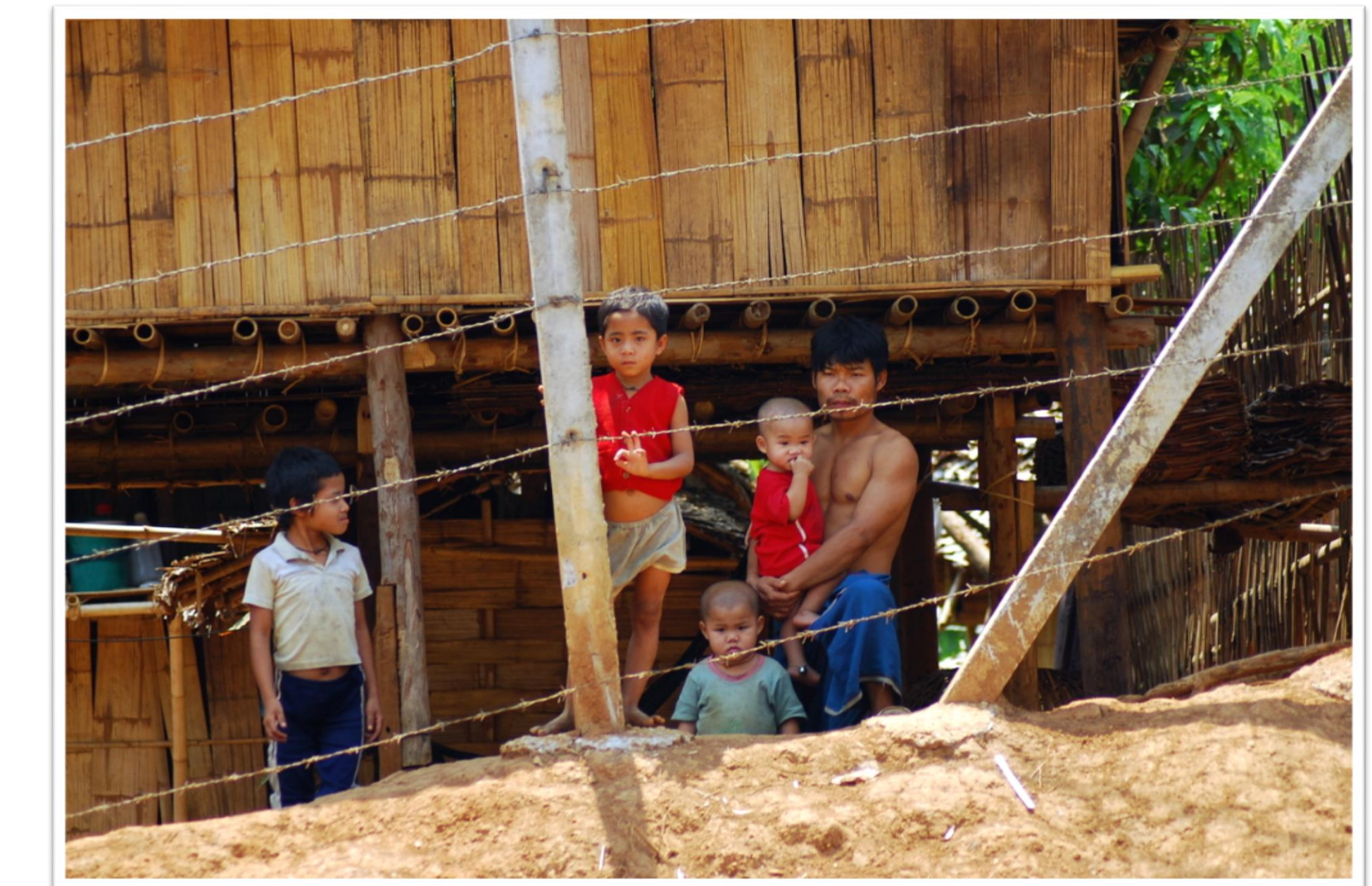


Figure 3: A family of Burmese refugees living in a Thai refugee camp (4 Burmese Refugees in Thailand).

Works Cited / Consulted

- 4 Burmese Refugees in Thailand. 2014. *Current Issues in Refugee Education*. Web. 5 Apr. 2016.
- Archambault, Christophe. *Rohingya Women Cry as They Sit on a Boat Drifting in Thai Waters off the Southern Island of Koh Lipe*. 2015. *Huffington Post*. Web. 6 Mar. 2016.-2.
- Banki, Susan. "Contested Regimes, Aid Flows, and Refugee Flows." *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 28.2 (2009): 47-73. *German Institute of Global and Area Studies*. Web. 27 Feb. 2016.
- Barany, Zoltan. "Exits from Military Rule: Lessons for Burma." *Journal for Democracy* 26.2 (2015): 86-100. *Project MUSE (Johns Hopkins University Press)*. Web. 28 Feb. 2016.
- Bartholomew, Theodore T., Brittany E. Guedel, and Neeta Kantamneni. "A Dream Best Forgotten: Karen Refugees' Phenomenological Experience of Pre-Migration Trauma and Stress." *The Counseling Psychologist* 43.8 (2015): 1114-134. *SAGE Journals*. Web. 1 Mar. 2016.
- Brees, Inge. "Refugees and Transnationalism on the Thai-Burmese Border." *Global Networks* 10.2 (2010): 282-99. *Wiley Online Library*. Web. 25 Feb. 2016.
- Buckley, Chris, and Ellen Barry. "Rohingya Women Flee Violence Only to Be Sold into Marriage." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 02 Aug. 2015. Web. 29 Feb. 2016.
- "Burmese Refugees in Thailand." *U.S. Department of State*. U.S. Department of State, 2016. Web. 24 Feb. 2016.
- Cohen, Shawn, and Ramin Asgary. "Community Coping Strategies in Response to Hardship and Human Rights Abuses Among Burmese Refugees and Migrants at the Thai-Burmese Border." *Family & Community Health* 39.2 (2016): 75-91. *Civild*. Web. 31 Mar. 2016.
- "Discrimination in Arakan." *Human Rights Watch*. Human Rights Watch, 2016. Web. 28 Feb. 2016.
- Ferro, Shane. "Why Refugees Are Good for Europe's Economy." *Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, Inc., 12 Oct. 2015. Web. 16 Feb. 2016.
- Fiddian-Qasmieh, Elena, Gil Loescher, Katy Long, and Nando Sigona, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*. 1st ed. New York, NY: Oxford UP, 2014. *Oxford Handbooks Online*. Oxford University Press, 2014. Web. 29 Feb. 2016.
- Fisher, Matthew. "Even Syrian Refugees Say It's Not Easy to Identify the Fakes among Them." *National Post*. National Post, Postmedia Network Inc., 15 Nov. 2015. Web. 17 Feb. 2016.
- Gill, Fiona Shaista, and Samuel Changyong Ku. *Human Rights and Statelessness: The Case Study of the Rohingya in Myanmar*. Thesis. National Sun Yat-sen University, 2014. Sizihtwan, Taiwan: National Sun Yat-sen U, 2014. *EThesis*. Web. 29 Feb. 2016.
- Haddadi, Anissa. "Myanmar: Three Muslims Sentenced to Death for Rape and Murder of Buddhist Woman." *International Business Times*. IBTimes Co., Ltd., 19 June 2012. Web. 26 Feb. 2016.
- Hamlng, Amie. "Rohingya People: The Most Persecuted Refugees in the World." *Amnesty International*, 7 Oct. 2015. Web. 24 Feb. 2016.
- "It's Not Just Syria: Refugee Crisis Is 60 Million and Growing." *Wery Corp*. Mercy Corps, 01 Oct. 2015. Web. 16 Feb. 2016.
- Lang, Hazel J. *Fear and Sanctuary: Burmese Refugees in Thailand*. Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Southeast Asia Program, Cornell U, 2002. Print.
- Lawi Weng. "Shan Ceasefire Signatory Seeks Answers After Burma Army Attack." *The Irrawaddy*. Irrawaddy Publishing Group, 5 Jan. 2016. Web. 27 Feb. 2016.
- Meyer, Ali. "Resettling Middle Eastern Refugees Costs Taxpayers \$64,370 Per Refugee." *The Washington Free Beacon*. The Washington Free Beacon, 19 Nov. 2015. Web. 01 Mar. 2016.
- "Myanmar 2015/2016." *Amnesty International*. Amnesty International, 2016. Web. 02 Mar. 2016.
- Newland, Kathleen, Ellen Jorgenson, Mary Anne Schwalbe, Louisa Conrad, and Erin Kenny. *Fear and Hope: Displaced Burmese Women in Burma and Thailand*. Rep. Ed. Mary Diaz, Maha Muna, and Diana Quicc. New York, NY: Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2000. *Refworld*. Web. 28 Feb. 2016.
- Palatino, Mong. "Myanmar's Refugee Problem Is Worse Than You Thought." *The Diplomat*, 17 June 2015. Web. 19 Feb. 2016.
- Parpatt, Erich. "Cabinet Approves Bt2.72-trillion Budget for Fiscal 2016." *The Nation*. www.nationmultimedia.com/Thailand, 29 Apr. 2015. Web. 01 Mar. 2016.
- Perrin, Andrew. "Thai Families Partners in Child Sex Trade / Border Area's Products Are Drugs and Daughters." *SFGate*. Hearst Communications, 6 Feb. 2002. Web. 29 Feb. 2016.
- Phillips, Amber. "Here's How Much the United States Spends on Refugees." *The Washington Post*. The Washington Post, 30 Nov. 2015. Web. 01 Mar. 2016.
- "Quick Facts: What You Need to Know About the Syria Crisis." *Wery Corp*. Mercy Corps, 05 Feb. 2016. Web. 16 Feb. 2016.
- "Refugee Camps." *Burma Link*. Burma Link, 2015. Web. 27 Feb. 2016.
- "Refugees." *UNHCR News*. UNHCR, 2016. Web. 12 Feb. 2016.
- Seltzer, Alexandra. "Human Trafficking: The Case of Burmese Refugees in Thailand." *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice* 37.4 (2013): 279-93. *Taylor & Francis Online*. Web. 1 Mar. 2016.
- Shwe Nyaw. Personal interview. July 2013.
- "Social and Economic Impact of Large Refugee Populations on Host Developing Countries." *UNHCR*. UNHCR, 2016. Web. 1 Mar. 2016.
- Soergel, Andrew. "7 Stats From Obama's Budget Proposal." *US News*. U.S. News & World Report, 02 Feb. 2015. Web. 02 Mar. 2016.
- Tennery, Amy. "Why Is No One Helping Myanmar's Rohingya?" *The Great Debate* RSS. Thomson Reuters, 17 June 2015. Web. 24 Feb. 2016.
- Thailand; Bureau of the Budget; *Thailand's Budget: In Brief Fiscal Year 2015*; Office of the Prime Minister, 2015; Web; 6 March 2016; Table 1-2.
- UNHCR Logo. 2016. *UNHCR*. Web. 5 Apr. 2016.
- "Thailand: Refugee Policies Ad Hoc and Inadequate." *Human Rights Watch*. Human Rights Watch, 13 Sept. 2012. Web. 02 Mar. 2016.
- "U.S. Relations with Burma." *U.S. Department of State*. U.S. Department of State, 2016. Web. 24 Feb. 2016.
- Beaubien, Jason. "Barring Syrian Refugees From The West Would Be Bad For The Middle East." *NPR*. NPR, 18 Nov. 2015. Web. 17 Feb. 2016.
- Beauchamp, Max. "Beyond Bigotry: Unraveling Ethnic Violence in Rakhine." *New Mandala*. New Mandala, 19 Dec. 2013. Web. 25 Feb. 2016.
- Broten, Lisa, Syed Irfan Ashraf, and Ngozi Agwaziem Akkino. "Traumatized Victims and Mutilated Bodies: Human Rights and the 'politics of Immediation' in the Rohingya Crisis of Burma/Myanmar." *International Communication Gazette* 77.8 (2015): 717-34. *SAGE Journals*. Web. 29 Feb. 2016.
- Campbell, Charlie. "Burma Accused of Ethnic Cleansing" of Rohingya Muslims." *TIME*. Time Inc., 23 Apr. 2013. Web. 29 Feb. 2016.
- Lee, Sungkyu, Sunha Choi, Laurel Proulx, and Jennifer Cornwell. "Community Integration of Burmese Refugees in the United States." *Asian American Journal of Psychology* 6.4 (2015): 333-41. *Psycnet*. Web. 1 Mar. 2016.
- McConnachie, Kirsten. "Rethinking the 'Refugee Warrior': The Karen National Union and Refugee Protection on the Thai-Burma Border." *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 4.1 (2012): 30-56. *Oxford Journals [Oxford University Press]*. Web. 29 Feb. 2016.
- "Myanmar Country Profile." *BBC News*. BBC, 17 Nov. 2015. Web. 19 Feb. 2016.
- Myanmar. *The Military Regime's View of the World*. Rep. no. 28. Brussels, Belgium: International Crisis Group, 2001. *International Crisis Group*. International Crisis Group, 7 Dec. 2001. Web. 29 Feb. 2016.
- Oh, Su-Ann, and Marc Van Der Stouwe. "Education, Diversity, and Inclusion in Burmese Refugee Camps in Thailand." *Comparative Education Review* 52.4 (2008): 589-617. *JSTOR*. Web. 29 Feb. 2016.
- Siddiqui, Usaid. "Myanmar's Buddhist Terrorism Problem." *Al Jazeera English*. Al Jazeera Media Network, 18 Feb. 2015. Web. 29 Feb. 2016.