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 refugees 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 (Bank 50; Platisin 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. Uniting the Nations’ definition nearly all of the migrants would be considered refugees” (Newell 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 (Tenmey 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). Setting refugees in the United States is far more expensive than setting refugees in the rest of the world such as in Europe where an allowance of $1,000 per refugee is provided (Phillips par. 3). 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 (“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 (Bank 50; Platisin 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. Uniting the Nations’ definition nearly all of the migrants would be considered refugees” (Newell et al. 8)."

The Case For Accepting Burmese Refugees

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 13). 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 freeloaders 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 (Haddadi par. 15). Over time, 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 teenage 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 face many challenges. The introduction 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.

Works Cited / Consulted

"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 (Bank 50; Platisin 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. Uniting the Nations’ definition nearly all of the migrants would be considered refugees” (Newell et al. 8)."