



Uneven Humanitarianism: Abandoned Refugees along the Thai-Myanmar Border

Tani Sebro^{*}

Abstract

This essay considers the case of uneven humanitarian aid distribution along the Thai-Myanmar border, where forcibly displaced migrants from Myanmar have been abandoned by the UNHCR and international humanitarian organizations. Based upon long-term ethnographic fieldwork along the Thai-Myanmar border amongst Tai migrants from the Shan State in Myanmar, I attend to the effects of the inequitable distribution of rights and privileges in an international humanitarian system that is predicated on the neoliberal logic of uneven development. After two centuries of British colonial occupation and later Burman authoritarian rule, the ethnic minority groups along the Thai-Myanmar border are now facing another crisis – that of abandonment as NGOs search for new and more pressing humanitarian disasters elsewhere. The essay addresses a concept I call uneven humanitarianism as a neocolonial condition for peoples living in the Thai-Myanmar borderlands by specifically focusing on Tai peoples who are living in unofficial refugee camps that lost foreign funding in 2017. I argue that the ad hoc treatment and eventual abandonment of these vulnerable groups – that are currently in the midst of the world's most protracted civil war and displacement situation – constitutes a failure of the “responsibility to protect” humanitarian project.

Key Words: Migration, humanitarianism, NGOs, Thailand, Myanmar.

Introduction

If they stop helping immediately and absolutely along the border, it will become a big problem. We try to survive on our own, but we have

^{*} Tani Sebro is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Global and Intercultural Studies, Miami University, Ohio, USA. Email: sebroth@miamioh.edu
ISSN (Print): 2520-7024; ISSN (Online): 2520-7032.
www.reviewhumanrights.com

very limited opportunities. [...] We cannot change the world. In Shan we say – “take a hand” – take a hand to you to let the world know what is happening, what is really happening along the border and among the refugees.¹

–Lung Sai Leng

[...]humanitarian needs are more urgent in other parts of Myanmar, not to mention globally.²

–Duncan McArthur

In the remote village of Piang Luang, Thailand, a small unofficial refugee camp called Koung Jor is nestled only 500 meters from the Thai-Myanmar border. Koung Jor is one of six unofficial refugee- and IDP camps along the border that does not receive aid or recognition from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), or any other international or non-governmental organization. For over twenty years, the residents of Koung Jor have relied on food rations from NGOs such as The Border Consortium (TBC) and educational assistance from local grassroots organizations.³ In February of 2017, the residents of Koung Jor camp, and the remaining six IDP camps along the border learned that the support on which they relied for food rations would end within a few months. During my visit to the camp in July of 2017, camp leaders, like Lung Sai Leng, expressed their fear of starvation, a health crisis, and for the safety of returnees. The refugees' home villages remain located in the midst of the world's most protracted civil war that rages on in the peripheral states of Myanmar. Furthermore, the camp residents' villages in Myanmar have been razed, agricultural areas appropriated for opium production, and much of their lands are occupied by the Burman military forces, called the *Tatmadaw*. Camp residents lament that migrants from Myanmar are not allowed to legally work in Thailand, and they possess no land to cultivate crops. The road from Thailand to Myanmar is overgrown with jungle underbrush. Forest paths are littered with landmines. There is no way out of the refugee camp and no means of subsistence if they stay. They have been abandoned and soon, it is feared, they will be forgotten.

This paper attends to the increasing number of migrants along the Thai-Myanmar border who are systematically left behind by international funding networks that privilege certain bodies, groups and peoples over others, leading to what I call *uneven*

humanitarianism. Humanitarianism, as an ideology, came about in the 1960s and 1970s following widespread civil wars and humanitarian crises in the postcolonies. These crises were mismanaged and exacerbated by states that were ill-equipped to deal with unfolding famines, civil wars, and health emergencies in formerly colonized nations. In response to this, the Doctors Without Borders organization, and other early aid organizations were formed to provide much-needed aid where states had failed.⁴ The humanitarian consensus was to bring about a global system of charity and emergency response to crises that went beyond the Westphalian ideals – the idea that states are sovereign unto themselves and that actors in one state ought not to interfere in another's affairs. Humanitarianism promulgated the idea that actors, especially ones that are in a position of privilege, have a responsibility to come to the aid of peoples in need.⁵ Numerous scholars have criticized the humanitarian consensus as racist and ethnocentric,⁶ while others have called it a “neocolonial project”⁷ that leads to underdevelopment as a component of “dependency theory.”⁸ Drawing upon two years of ethnographic research with Burmese migrants and NGOs along the Thai-Myanmar border, I argue that the doctrine of humanitarianism often fails to account for a) the long-term and changing needs of peoples in the midst of a humanitarian crisis, b) the problem of uneven and ad hoc implementation of humanitarian projects, and c) how peripheral states remain at the center of Myanmar's political and humanitarian crises.

While recognizing the fraught power-relations between wealthy foreign donors and the neocolonial underpinnings of NGOs, I maintain that the problem with humanitarianism is not the will to act when others are suffering, but the unevenness with which humanitarian action is implemented and the powers of foreign donors to stipulate how and when support is given, and crucially – as in the case of Koug Jor – when it is suddenly taken away. As the Norwegian peace theorist Johan Galtung argues, human rights are norms that do not simply *apply*, but rather, they must *protect* the basis for human existence.⁹ So, a humanitarian regime that states its responsibility to protect the most vulnerable without also providing

enduring mechanisms to do so in an equitable way, is a failed regime. The geographer David Harvey writes about the need for theorization of what he calls “uneven geographical development” in the context of neoliberalism’s unfulfilled promise to eradicate hunger, poverty, and inequality, and he argues that the neoliberal order has only served to exacerbate global inequality.¹⁰ This essay explores the failures of humanitarian rights regimes along the Thai-Myanmar border and suggests alternative ways of structuring sustainable long-term humanitarian aid. I argue, using Kounng Jor as a case study, that if NGOs truly wish to be instruments of humanitarianism, rather than neocolonialism, they need to employ segmented and sustainable measures for pulling out of conflict zones. Much in the same way that colonial regimes often left whole nations in a state of disarray upon leaving, NGOs, when searching for new and more pressing humanitarian disasters to attend to, can leave in their wake chaos and uncertainty when foreign donors suddenly pull their funding.

Displacement Cycles

The peoples of Myanmar have faced a past century marked by cycles of harrowing upheavals, including the world’s longest ongoing civil war, authoritarian military rule, widespread poverty, and forced displacement. The first cycle of forced displacement came after the 1962 military takeover of what was then called Burma by General Ne Win, who implemented an authoritarian socialist program.¹¹ In the first displacement cycle, from 1962-1988, Burmese migrants were primarily economic migrants; often of Chinese descent; merchants and well-educated people who no longer saw a future for themselves in Burma. Those early migrants from Burma were often able to make a life for themselves on the “outside”. However, this was not the fortune of the famous “’88 generation” – the students who, after the devaluation of the Kyat in 1988, took to the streets in protest.¹² This citizen’s uprising resulted in Gen Ne Win stepping down from power and elections to be called. But a substantive change in government never materialized as the military persecuted the winner of the election, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and members of her party, the National League for Democracy, while leading a brutal crackdown on protesters that resulted in thousands dead and many more imprisoned.¹³ During this time, protesting students fled towards the Thai border to escape further maltreatment by the military and

many still remain in refugee camps or have sought asylum in Western nations.¹⁴

The last wave of forced migration, from 1990-present, has affected the peripheries of the country in dramatic ways. The military, as the supreme power in politics, sought to auto-colonize the nation by quelling the ethnic rebellions that were swelling in the peripheral states. This led to one of the largest forced displacement situations in modern Asian history, with 4.25 million Myanmar nationals living abroad and 9.39 million internally displaced migrants or approximately 20% of the population.¹⁵ With over 700,000 migrants fleeing the Rakhine State in Myanmar following the genocidal crimes committed by the Tatmadaw in 2017 and a steady stream of migrants that continue to flee from the Northern States towards Thailand, the question lingers over why humanitarian agencies are leaving the border areas in favor of doing work within the country or in other regions altogether?

The mass-exodus of NGO's and IO's from the Thai-Myanmar border-zone has been well-documented and predicted since Myanmar's historic, and highly controversial elections in 2010.¹⁶ Aid organizations, after having spent over two decades along the border, are under new directives from foreign donors to move their operations from the Thai side of the border to inside Myanmar. This transfer of aid will, arguably, bring much-needed succor to the interior of Myanmar and will bring relief to highly restricted regions that have, up until recently, been denied foreign aid. But the human cost of suddenly ceasing aid to one group in order to give to other groups within Myanmar will have a heavy toll on the refugee population that is left behind. Donors must question why they seek funding to flow towards the center and away from the periphery in Myanmar, when the major conflicts and humanitarian crises remain in the peripheries. All estimates show that the number of migrants from Myanmar into Bangladesh and Thailand have, instead of declined, risen precipitously since the 2010 Myanmar elections.¹⁷ Given the increased needs of migrants, it is puzzling that aid organizations are fleeing the border, and instead, focusing on the center of the country and the following section argues that in order to understand and ultimately be able to solve the migrant crisis in

Myanmar, humanitarian organizations ought to re-center the periphery.

Re-Centering the Periphery

Theorists of Myanmar's regime transition from autocratic military to "disciplined democracy" have emphasized that in order to understand Myanmar's democratic transition, we must also grapple with the relationship between the center of the nation – marked by the rule of Burman ex-military bureaucrats located in Naypyidaw – and the periphery, or the ethnic minority-ruled governments and military rebel groups.¹⁸ These scholars argue that Myanmar's long and mired history of successive authoritarian regimes can best be explained by recognizing how armed separatist groups, like the Tai (Shan),¹⁹ Karen, Kachin, Mon, Wa, and Rohingya, continuously pose a threat to a centralized state that never held legitimate power in the first place. Even subsequent to the 2010 and 2015 elections in Myanmar, when the National League for Democracy (NLD) procedurally gained seats in the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (Assembly of the Union), tensions between the Tatmadaw and the armed ethnic groups have risen markedly, especially in the extreme peripheries of the state. In 2015 the Tatmadaw launched offensives against rebel forces in Kokang forcing an estimated 40,000-50,000 civilians to flee to the Chinese side of the border.²⁰ Since the 2010 Myanmar elections, the Shan State Army South (SSA-S) has rejected ceasefire orders from Tatmadaw and the ongoing bloody civil war in Shan State escalated, leading to a massive influx of migrants and refugees fleeing to Thailand to avoid further violence and displacements.²¹ More recently, in the Rakhine State, what appears to be a "textbook case of ethnic cleansing" or more likely an alleged genocide of the Rohingya Muslim minority reached its apex in the fall of 2017 when over 700,000 civilians crossed the border into Bangladesh following an attack on Myanmar military outposts by the largely unarmed and untrained Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA).²² Despite consensus amongst scholars and observers that the peripheries of Myanmar continue to be mired in conflict, civil war and constantly fluctuating refugee populations, many NGO's such as The Border Consortium have lost funding and are pulling resources from IDP and refugee camps located in Thailand in order to focus their resources on internal issues in Myanmar.

As international aid organizations move from the periphery to the center of Myanmar,²³ they risk the survival and subsistence of the nearly 120,000 official refugees, the 8,257 refugees residing in IDP camps and an even higher number of unofficial refugees that live along the border. The Shan Human Rights Foundation reports in 2017 that the groups most severely affected by the aid-flight into Myanmar, are the six unofficial IDP camps located along the Thai-Myanmar border.²⁴ These six camps represent the most vulnerable and precarious victims of the Myanmar military's decades-long scorched earth campaign. Many of them have experienced first-hand the horrors of the longest-running civil war in the world. The camps contain approximately 70% women and children, many of whom live with visible and invisible injuries from years of abuse, gunshot wounds, landmine wounds and PTSD following the Myanmar military's reign of terror against the ethnic minority groups. Now they face the additional hurdle of being left behind in remote and unofficial refugee camps that receive no support from the outside world.

In September of 2013, *The Irrawaddy* reports that "Rice rations for many of the more than 120,000 Burmese refugees living on the Thai-Burma border will be reduced, due to a reduction in funding for a humanitarian organization that has provided food for them for more than two decades."²⁵ TBC says that its funding will now be redirected towards projects dealing with the return of migrants to Myanmar, as well as other projects within the nation. So far, it is unclear how they will provide aid to returnees, when there is little evidence to show that refugees are indeed able to return safely. Many unofficial refugees I spoke to in Thailand cited fear of imprisonment upon their return to Myanmar, in addition to fear of torture and lack of any means of survival if they were to return. One elderly female resident of Koung Jor expresses incredulity at the prospect of returning to Myanmar:

We live here, we are happy, we don't think about to going back. We're afraid that the Burmese military will torture us again; we don't want to go back anymore. In this village, we all are refugees; we all experienced escaping from gun.²⁶

Besides the widespread fear of military persecution, if the unofficial refugees should attempt to return to Myanmar, they run the risk of becoming mired in legal troubles if they get caught having “defected.” For the vast majority of the migrants and refugees who have fled from Myanmar to Thailand return is not an option that promises to provide any real measure of human security. As, Lung Sai Leng, a leader in the Koung Jor camp laments: “If we have to return we will not be allowed to live in our villages. So, the first thing we think is: if we have to live there, who can guarantee that there won’t be fighting [...] and how will we work and earn money when our land is filled with landmines?”²⁷ For the IDPs and resident of both official and unofficial “temporary shelter areas” along the Thai-Myanmar border, the issue of land-loss, lack of any means for subsistence and the very real dangers of ongoing fighting in the Shan State make the prospects of return an impossible option imposed upon them by policymakers, foreign donors, and the international community.

The Border Consortium (TBC), the non-profit humanitarian organization that has been supporting refugees in the Thai-Myanmar border since 1984, has been the main source of donated goods and financial support to approximately 120,000 refugees in nine camps and 8,257 IDP’s living in temporary shelter areas along the Thai-Myanmar border.²⁸ In 2016 however, TBC experienced a sharp decline in foreign donations from approximately \$23 million in 2015 to only \$18 million in 2016.²⁹ The drop in bestowments to their organization is attributed to the perceived national “reforms” in Myanmar and the idea that Myanmar is now a democracy, an idea that many camp residents refute. One camp resident commented, “The Burmese government wants to show that a lot of things in Burma are normal, but it is not true. They haven’t done anything. They haven’t made any preparations for our return.”³⁰ Donations are also exacerbated by a dramatic increase in global mass-migrations, particularly in the Mediterranean, where the Syrian refugee crisis has contributed to a rise in global refugee populations. In the years 2015 and 2016, the global migrant crisis reached an apex with 65.3 million people forcibly displaced worldwide.³¹ With approximately 40 million people internally displaced, these are the highest number of forcibly displaced persons seen since World War II.

The consequence of this sharp decline in international donations to humanitarian organizations along the Thai-Myanmar border, or “aid-flight,” has been a gradual lowering of rice and supplemental food rations and finally, a complete termination of the food-aid programs.³² TBC’s own personnel point to aid flight not just away from the peripheries and towards the interior of Myanmar, but to other regions that are experiencing intense crisis, such as the Syrian refugee crisis. Duncan McArthur, TBC’s Myanmar Program Director, is quoted saying that, “The local impact is that USAID and DfID [Britain’s Department for International Development] funds, which TBC has been channeling to support these IDP camps for the past decade, are no longer available,” and instead aid is being cut or redirected towards Syria, Iraq, Yemen or to the interior of Myanmar.³³ The villagers of Koung Jor alongside refugee and IDP populations are now calling for foreign donors to continue their support until “a genuine nationwide ceasefire is reached.”³⁴ Yet their pleas for continued support has largely fallen on deaf ears.

Left Behind: The Story of Koung Jor

Today small children dash and run about the Koung Jor camp’s temporary bamboo structures, chasing dogs and relishing the cool afternoon breezes that come over the Shan Highlands from the Burmese side of the border. To the right of the camp, looming atop a green mountainside, is a Thai military encampment. To the left, the Myanmar army, or Tatmadaw’s, military outpost. Further upland into the hills the Shan State Army struggles to maintain their strongholds against the impending threat of the Tatmadaw’s army. The military garrisons are always visible to the camp, with turrets lining the hillsides and the flags of the three nations – Myanmar, Tai, and Thai – planted firmly into the soil to territorialize and make concrete imagined lines denoting their claims to sovereignty. Their presence is always felt, sometimes with a sense of safety, and at other times with a sense of unease, but always as a constant reminder of the violence that awaits them should they attempt to cross the borderline. The border check-point is lined with meters high barbed wire and the thick underbrush conceals the unknown number of landmines planted along what once was a vibrant trading

route that connected Chiang Dao and Chiang Mai on the Thai side with Kengtung and Taunggyi on the Myanmar side. The road has long since been abandoned and now the jungle has reclaimed asphalt and fencing into its dense underbrush. The camp residents are effectively trapped between three armies, they remain citizenless, and rightness, and soon, they will face malnutrition as the last bags of rice are being delivered this month.



Fig. 1 The Lak Teng border crossing in Vieng Heng, Chiang Mai Province, Thailand. Photo by author.

The residents of Kong Jor have experienced a harrowing past decade and a half of war and displacement. Villagers residing close to the Myanmar border, in Bang Mai Soong and Huay Yao villages, awoke one fateful night in 2002 to heavy shelling and fighting between the Shan State Army-South (SSA-S) and the Tatmadaw. The Myanmar military suspected villagers of supporting the SSA-S and began shelling directly into the villages, resulting in the deaths of six civilians, including a twelve-year-old boy, and the injury of another 12 villagers.³⁵ Subsequently, the villagers were forced to flee in haste and during the cover of night towards the Thai side of the border. Muay Sai, a mother who has been living in Koung Jor since 2002 recalls that terrifying night: “We fled to Thailand in the night – and had to go live in a refugee camp.” She was alone with her three-year-

old daughter – her husband had been captured by the Burmese military. She says, “They gave us 20 minutes to pack up everything and flee. I pushed her [her daughter] up the mountain as she cried.” Six hundred Tai civilians fled to Wiang Heng District in Thailand due to the 32-day long war that ravaged their once peaceful village. The groups took shelter in the Wat Fah Wiang Heng temple across the border. Those who did not flee were reportedly killed, tortured, imprisoned, or forcibly relocated. While Thai authorities allowed the refugees access to shelter temporarily on the monastery grounds, they denied the groups’ applications to stay permanently in a camp. The Koug Jor camp thus exists unofficially, as it is not registered by the UNHCR, leaving residents unable to apply for third-country resettlement. Approximately 350 people continue to officially reside in the camp, although this number fluctuates. Most of the camp residents, like Muay Sai and Lung Sai Leng, are in the twilight of their lives and as elderly and undocumented peoples find it near impossible to secure their livelihoods without outside support.

One of the confounding issues confronting migrants and refugees from Myanmar’s frontier areas is the difficulty that documenting human rights abuses in Myanmar entails. There are vast swaths of landmass, such as the Shan State, where foreign and even some domestic observers may not travel. This presents a number of serious challenges. It is clear that without thorough documentation of human rights abuses there is little impetus for humanitarian organizations to act. The lack of access and oversight is compounded by rampant incidences of the Myanmar military covering up human rights abuses. Some human rights abuses have been uncovered using satellite imagery of Myanmar’s Rakhine State where dozens of villages have been found razed, destroyed and villagers displaced, despite the Myanmar government denying such abuses taking place.³⁶ These images legitimize reports from subsistence farmers in Shan State who describe systematically being forced off their land, where they cultivate rice and other crops, into larger cities where their only mode of survival is in the cash economy. Often it is the dispossessed and landless villagers who have been forcibly relocated to cities that flee to neighboring Thailand. There they work in

factories along the Thai-Myanmar border, toil in the agricultural fields, do dangerous construction work, domestic work or sex work.

Uneven Humanitarianism

There is an unacknowledged and inadequately addressed humanitarian crisis underway in the Northern Shan State of Myanmar and its border-zone with Thailand. Aid has been applied in a highly discriminatory way, benefitting some “deserving” victims and excluding many others who have also been forcibly displaced as a result of Myanmar’s scorched earth campaign against its ethnic minority groups and political dissidents. Uneven humanitarianism, which can be defined as the irregular, imbalanced and ad hoc implementation of humanitarian aid programs to regions and peoples in crisis, is the rule rather than the exception along the Thai-Myanmar border, where entire ethnic groups, such as the Tai, are systematically excluded from receiving aid or even being able to apply for refugee status. Uneven humanitarianism is the result of conditions of possibility that render some bodies undesirable and underserving of life-saving relief. It is the result of processes that work to amplify some voices while silencing others. In the world of humanitarianism, not being heard, or not being seen, can be a death sentence. A slow structural death, a necropolitics of aid-flight can now be witnessed in the IDP camps along the Thai-Myanmar border where residents are facing duress and starvation.³⁷

In the late 1980s the world turned its focus towards Burma and initial attention was paid to Burman students, protesters, and human rights champions in the cities of Yangon and Mandalay. Later, in the 1990s, as the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) commenced its reign of terror against the ethnic minority groups in the peripheries of the state, the world fixed its eyes on the Karen peoples, who became emblematic of the ongoing civil war between the many ethnic minority groups and the Tatmadaw. The Karen people, many of whom have converted to Christianity have received decades-long support from faith-based missionary organizations, which has led to a stabilization of the Karen National Army (KNA) and support for refugees residing in temporary shelter areas along the Thai-Myanmar border.³⁸ Today, the focus resides on the oppressed Rohingya, who, according to numerous UN reports, are currently in the midst of what can only be described as a systematic

attempt to ethnically cleanse the Rakhine State of its Muslim denizens.³⁹ Throughout however, little attention has been paid to the Tai peoples who have been forcibly displaced from the Shan and Kachin states of North-Eastern Myanmar. This, despite them undergoing one of the bloodiest and most protracted civil wars in the world.

What accounts for this mode of actively not seeing? For this willful abandonment of the Tai, one of the world's most vulnerable minorities? The UNHCR and the Thai government has precluded forcibly displaced peoples from Myanmar from lodging refugee claims, placing them in a precarious situation of living either in one of Thailand's "temporary shelter areas" or risking life as a clandestine migrant worker in Thailand's shadow economies.⁴⁰ The Tai have never been given the kinds of international succor that the Karen, ethnic Burman or the Rohingya have been given. There are three main explanations for Tai people's exclusion from receiving humanitarian aid. Firstly, the Tai are Theravada Buddhist and ethnically similar to the Thai, therefore perceived as less vulnerable and more easily assimilative to Thai culture. Tai is the progenitor language of Thai and the *Tai Yai* (Great Tai), as they are called in Thailand, have been living in Upland Southeast Asia, including in the Lanna territories, long before colonial boundaries arbitrarily delineated a Thai-Burma border. Secondly, their refusal to convert to Christianity and lack of strong ties to international relief agencies and religious missionary organizations have kept their plight outside of the purview of international donors.⁴¹ Lastly, a strong ethno-nationalist armed separatist movement in the Shan States may also have contributed to their exclusion from aid. As a nation that has, even before colonial times, seen itself as separate from ethnic Burmans, Thai, or any other group, the Tai have fostered a robust ethno-nationalist movement organized around the imagined nation they call *Merng Tai*. The myriad Tai groups that live throughout Upland Southeast Asia are militarily, aesthetically and affectively tied to the common project of self-governance and self-determination, and this desire to not be governed by others and instead live self-sufficiently, has affected their ability to receive foreign aid.⁴² The ongoing civil war in Shan State has cut the region off from the world,

whereby no travel for either tourism, research or humanitarian aid is permitted. All this has led to an active forgetting and eventual abandonment of a people whose humanitarian needs are dire.

Conclusion

Myanmar is currently recovering from a harrowing past century, marred by the horrors of British imperialism, Japanese military occupation, and later the ascension of an autocratic military regime primarily made up of the Burman ethnic majority. Since the notoriously authoritarian nation held elections in the fall of 2010, the world heralded Myanmar as suddenly and mysteriously open. *Foreign Policy* published an article entitled “Waiting for the Myanmar Miracle” which claimed that the 2010 election of the National League for Democracy, more than twenty years after their 1990 victory was stolen from them by the military junta, “rights a historical wrong.”⁴³ The final “opening” came September 14th, 2016, when The United States announced it would lift most trade sanctions against Myanmar. After the freeing of the nation’s political symbol of democracy, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the Southeast Asian nation is undergoing a contentious ‘reconciliation’ phase.⁴⁴ As major humanitarian organizations shift their focus towards the center of Myanmar, the peoples living on the margins of the nation, such as the Tai in Shan State, are contending with the sudden disappearance of multi-million dollar NGO support organizations, leaving in their wake destitute populations that become vulnerable to trafficking, military recruitment, illicit and exploitative industries, malnutrition and lack of education.

As NGOs and IOs leave the Thai-Myanmar border for other, more pressing humanitarian crises, they leave in their wake chaos and widespread human insecurity. I argue that if NGOs truly wish to be instruments of humanitarianism, rather than neocolonialism, they need to employ segmented and sustainable measures for pulling out of conflict zones. The whims of foreign donors imperil lives and have dangerous impacts on non-governmental organizations. NGOs need to have long-term strategic plans for leaving vulnerable and precarious populations behind in war-zones and border zones. The model of grassroots organization here provides a stronger resiliency to the shock of a volatile foreign-aid-industrial complex, which is aligned with Arjun Appadurai’s vision of a “grassroots

globalization”⁴⁵ that contains an architecture of mutual and constant communication between communities, academics, researchers, NGO’s, IO’s and governments to identify, in real time, humanitarian needs and sustainable long-term methods for aid-implementation.

In 2005, all member countries of the United Nations (UN), along with key international relief and aid agencies, agreed to sign a document entitled “The Responsibility to Protect” or the R2P at the UN General Assembly meeting. The document called upon “the international community” to “commit ourselves, as necessary and appropriate, to helping States build capacity to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity and to assisting those which are under stress before crises and conflicts break out.”⁴⁶ In lieu of the R2P commitment, the uneven humanitarianism we observe along the Thai-Myanmar border should be considered wholly unacceptable and an indictment of a failed humanitarian project that sways with the winds of political fashion and leaves in its wake human catastrophe. The UNHCR, governmental and non-governmental organizations cannot selectively prioritize groups because they have strong advocacy networks, or due to their religious orientation or because of global media sentiment at the time. They must provide assistance, relief and asylum to groups due to observed needs and they must provide aid sustainably, though fostering independent livelihoods, securing land and by fortifying a means of survival before food rations are suddenly disappeared, as it now has been for 8,257 IDPs along the Thai-Myanmar border. If humanitarian organizations continue to implement aid unevenly it will constitute a failure of the “responsibility to protect” project and it will constitute a failure of us all to, as they say in Tai, “give a hand” to those who need it the most.

Notes:

¹ Lung Sai Leng. Interview by the author. Tape recording. Chiang Mai Province, Thailand, July 16, 2017.

² McArthur, Duncan. (Program Director, The Border Consortium’s Myanmar Division), interview by Brennan O’Connor. August 16, 2017. “Looming End of Rations Leave Thousands with Uncertain Future.” *Frontier Myanmar*.

<https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/looming-end-rations-thousands-uncertain-future>.

³ The primary grassroots organizations providing educational support for Kounj Jor are the Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN) and The Branch Foundation.

⁴ Belloni, "The Trouble with Humanitarianism," July 2007.

⁵ Walzer, "On Humanitarianism."

⁶ Minear, Scott, and Weiss, *The News Media, Civil War, and Humanitarian Action*.

⁷ Belloni, "The Trouble with Humanitarianism," 2007.

⁸ Frank, "The Development of Underdevelopment."

⁹ Galtung, *Menneskerettigheter*.

¹⁰ Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism*.

¹¹ Fink, *Living Silence in Burma*, 29. Following the student uprisings of 8/8/1988, the military junta, calling itself The State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), changed the nation's name from Burma to Myanmar. Most nations and organizations, including the United Nations, now use Myanmar. Both terms are arguably historically correct as *Bamar/Myanmar* are cognates of one another. I refer to Burma when speaking of the state pre-1988 and Myanmar post-1989. However, it should be noted that a majority of my research collaborators from Shan State still refer to the nation as Burma.

¹² Zaw Oo, "Exit, Voice and Loyalty in Burma: The Role of Overseas Burmese in Democratising Their Homeland," 235.

¹³ Fink, *Living Silence in Burma*, 55.

¹⁴ Zaw Oo, "Exit, Voice and Loyalty in Burma: The Role of Overseas Burmese in Democratising Their Homeland," 236.

¹⁵ International Organization for Migration, "Myanmar."

¹⁶ Norum, Mostafanezhad, and Sebro, "The Chronopolitics of Exile."

¹⁷ Shan Human Rights Foundation, "As Conflict Escalates in Shan State, Aid Must Not Be Cut off to Shan-Thai Border Refugees"; Migration Policy, "The Opening of Burmese Borders"; Gebhart, "Reacting to Reforms in Burma, Donors Leave Refugee High and Dry"; Aw, "6,000 Shan Refugees Left in Limbo as International Funding Ends"; Aung, "The Friction of Cartography: On the Politics of Space and Mobility among Migrant Communities in the Thai-Burma Borderlands."

¹⁸ Jones, "Explaining Myanmar's Regime Transition"; Woods, "Ceasefire Capitalism."

¹⁹ Scholars referring to the Tai peoples of Upland Southeast Asia most commonly use the word Shan. Shan, however, is an exonym that the Tai peoples themselves largely reject. The Burman ethnic group use the word Shan, a corruption of the word Siam, to refer to the Siamese (Thai) people, with which the Tai are linguistically and culturally similar, but historically

distinct. The term Tai refers to the heterogeneous group of peoples who are descendants or speakers of the proto-Tai language and include the Tai Yai, Tai Lue, Tai Dam and many other Tai/Dai ethnolinguistic groups. I use Tai in order to honor the wishes of my research collaborators from the Shan State in Burma, a vast majority of which responded that they prefer foreigners to use the endonym Tai, rather than the exonym Shan when referring to the peoples of Shan State and its diaspora.

²⁰ Hui, "Tens of Thousands Flee War, Airstrikes in Kokang Region."

²¹ Some estimates indicate that there are approximately 1 to 2 million Burmese migrant laborers working in Thailand, but this figure does not account for the potentially higher number of forced migrants and migrant workers living in Thailand clandestinely. McGann, "The Opening of Burmese Borders: Impacts on Migration."

²² Peel and Reed, "UN Calls Myanmar Violence 'Textbook' Ethnic Cleansing"; Lintner, "The Truth behind Myanmar's Rohingya Insurgency."

²³ Larkin and Dunlop, "Burma's Forgotten Refugees."

²⁴ The Shan Human Rights Foundation's report also indicates that the villages of origin for the refugees have been razed, occupied by Burmese soldiers and Burmans from the lowlands or are threatened by massive infrastructure projects, such as dams, mines and oil pipelines that the Burmese government is orchestrating in concert with China's One Belt One Road Initiative. Sharma and Kundu, *China's One Belt One Road*; Shan Human Rights Foundation, "As Conflict Escalates in Shan State, Aid Must Not Be Cut off to Shan-Thai Border Refugees."

²⁵ Saw Yan Naing, "NGO to Cut Rations for 'Self-Reliant Refugees' on Thai-Burma Border."

²⁶ Anonymous. Interview by author. Tape recording. Chiang Mai Province, Thailand, July, 2017.

²⁷ Lung Sai Leng. Interview by author. Tape recording. Chiang Mai Province, Thailand, July 16, 2017.

²⁸ Thu Thu Aung, "Continue Aid for Displaced Camps."

²⁹ IRIN, "Should I Stay or Should I Go?"

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ UNHCR, "Global Forced Displacement Hits Record High."

³² IRIN, "Should I Stay or Should I Go?"

³³ O'Connor, "Looming End of Rations Leave Thousands with Uncertain Future."

³⁴ Thu Thu Aung, "Continue Aid for Displaced Camps."

³⁵ Shan Human Rights Foundation, "As Conflict Escalates in Shan State, Aid Must Not Be Cut off to Shan-Thai Border Refugees," August 30, 2017.

³⁶ Bhattacharjee, "Myanmar's Secret History Exposed in Satellite Images."

³⁷ Sebro, "Necromobility/Choreomobility: Dance, Death and Displacement in the Thai-Burma Border-Zone."

³⁸ Horstmann, "Ethical Dilemmas and Identifications of Faith-Based Humanitarian Organizations in the Karen Refugee Crisis."

³⁹ Al Hussein, "OHCHR | Darker and More Dangerous: High Commissioner Updates the Human Rights Council on Human Rights Issues in 40 Countries"; Cumming-Bruce, "Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar Is 'Ethnic Cleansing,' U.N. Rights Chief Says."

⁴⁰ Yang, "Life and Death Away from the Golden Land: The Plight of Burmese Migrant Workers in Thailand"; Verma et al., "Between 'Voluntary Migrants' and War Refugees."

⁴¹ Comparatively, the Karen, Akha and other animist or non-Theravada Buddhist groups were more likely than the Tai to convert to Christianity Schendel, "Christian Missionaries in Upper Burma, 1853–85"; Horstmann, "Ethical Dilemmas and Identifications of Faith-Based Humanitarian Organizations in the Karen Refugee Crisis."

⁴² Sebro, "Dancing the Nation: The Politics of Exile, Mobility, and Displacement Along the Thai-Burma Border."

⁴³ Green and Twining, "Waiting for the Myanmar Miracle."

⁴⁴ Gallo, "Myanmar's Suu Kyi Holds First 'National Reconciliation' Meeting," November 19, 2015; Myoe, "The National Reconciliation Process in Myanmar," 2002.

⁴⁵ Appadurai, "Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination."

⁴⁶ United Nations General Assembly, "Responsibility to Protect in the Outcome Document of the High-Level Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly."

References:

- Al Hussein, Zeid Ra'ad. "OHCHR: Darker and More Dangerous: High Commissioner Updates the Human Rights Council on Human Rights Issues in 40 Countries," September 11, 2017. <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22041&LangID=E>.
- Appadurai, Arjun. "Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination." *Public Culture* 12, no. 1 (2000): 1–19.
- Belloni, Roberto. "The Trouble with Humanitarianism." *Review of International Studies* 33, no. 3 (2007): 451–74. doi:10.2307/40072187.
- . "The Trouble with Humanitarianism." *Review of International Studies* 33, no. 3 (July 2007): 451–74. doi:10.1017/S0260210507007607.
- Bhattacharjee, Yudhijit. "Myanmar's Secret History Exposed in Satellite Images." *Science* 318, no. 5847 (2007): 29–29.

- Cumming-Bruce, Nick. "Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar Is 'Ethnic Cleansing,' U.N. Rights Chief Says." *The New York Times*, September 11, 2017, sec. Asia Pacific.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/11/world/asia/myanmar-rohingya-ethnic-cleansing.html>.
- "Ethnic Militias Decide Not to Sign Myanmar Government's Cease-Fire Agreement." Washington D.C.: Radio Free Asia, February 24, 2017.
<http://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/ethnic-militias-decide-not-to-sign-myanmar-governments-ceasefire-agreement-02242017145929.html>.
- Fink, Christina. *Living Silence in Burma: Surviving Under Military Rule*. New Edition edition. Chiang Mai, Thailand : London ; New York: Zed Books, 2009.
- Frank, Andre Gunder. "The Development of Underdevelopment." In *Latin America: Underdevelopment or Revolution*. New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1966.
- Gallo, William. "Myanmar's Suu Kyi Holds First 'National Reconciliation' Meeting." News. Washington D.C.: Voice of America, November 19, 2015. <https://www.voanews.com/a/myanmar-aung-san-suu-kyi-nld-reconciliation-meetings/3064779.html>.
- . "Myanmar's Suu Kyi Holds First 'National Reconciliation' Meeting." VOA, November 19, 2015. <https://www.voanews.com/a/myanmar-aung-san-suu-kyi-nld-reconciliation-meetings/3064779.html>.
- Galtung, Johan. *Menneskerettigheter: vestlige, universelle eller begge deler?* Humanist, 1997.
- Gebhart, Gennie. "Reacting to Reforms in Burma, Donors Leave Refugee High and Dry." *The Seattle Globalist*, September 12, 2014.
<http://www.seattleglobalist.com/2014/09/12/burma-refugee-reforms-donors/28933>.
- Green, Michael, and Daniel Twining. "Waiting for the Myanmar Miracle." *Foreign Policy*. November 12, 2015. Accessed May 31, 2017.
<https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/11/12/waiting-for-the-myanmar-miracle/>.
- Harvey, David. *Spaces of Global Capitalism: A Theory of Uneven Geographical Development*. London ; New York, NY: Verso, 2006.
- Horstmann, Alexander. "Ethical Dilemmas and Identifications of Faith-Based Humanitarian Organizations in the Karen Refugee Crisis." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 24, no. 3 (September 1, 2011): 513–32.
doi:10.1093/jrs/fer031.

- Hui, Echo. "Tens of Thousands Flee War, Airstrikes in Kokang Region." *DVB Multimedia Group*, February 12, 2015. <http://www.dvb.no/news/tens-thousands-flee-war-airstrikes-kokang-region/48271>.
- International Organization for Migration. "Myanmar." *Myanmar - International Organization for Migration*, February 2, 2015. <https://www.iom.int/countries/myanmar>.
- IRIN. "Should I Stay or Should I Go?" *IRIN*, June 20, 2016. <http://www.irinnews.org/news/2016/06/20/should-i-stay-or-should-i-go>.
- Jones, Lee. "Explaining Myanmar's Regime Transition: The Periphery Is Central." *Democratization* 21, no. 5 (July 29, 2014): 780-802. doi:10.1080/13510347.2013.863878.
- Larkin, Emma, and Nic Dunlop. "Burma's Forgotten Refugees." *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 63, no. 6 (November 1, 2007): 32-39. doi:10.1080/00963402.2007.11461118.
- Lintner, Bertil. "The Truth behind Myanmar's Rohingya Insurgency." *Asia Times*. September 20, 2017. <http://www.atimes.com/article/truth-behind-myanmars-rohingya-insurgency/>.
- Maung Aung Myoe. "The National Reconciliation Process in Myanmar." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 24, no. 2 (2002): 371-84.
- . "The National Reconciliation Process in Myanmar." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 24, no. 2 (2002): 371-84.
- McGann, Nora. "The Opening of Burmese Borders: Impacts on Migration." Washington D.C.: Migration Policy Institute, February 20, 2013. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/opening-burmese-borders-impacts-migration>.
- Minear, Larry, Colin Scott, and Thomas George Weiss. *The News Media, Civil War, and Humanitarian Action*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1996.
- Norum, Roger, Mary Mostafanezhad, and Tani Sebro. "The Chronopolitics of Exile: Hope, Heterotemporality and NGO Economics along the Thai-Burma Border." *Critique of Anthropology* 36, no. 1 (March 1, 2016): 61-83. doi:10.1177/0308275X15617305.
- O'Connor, Brennan. "Looming End of Rations Leave Thousands with Uncertain Future." *Frontier Myanmar*, August 16, 2017. <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/looming-end-rations-thousands-uncertain-future>.
- Peel, Michael, and John Reed. "UN Calls Myanmar Violence 'Textbook' Ethnic Cleansing." *Financial Times*. September 11, 2017. <https://www.ft.com/content/c867eff4-96e3-11e7-a652-cde3f882dd7b>.
- Sai Aw. "6,000 Shan Refugees Left in Limbo as International Funding Ends." Shan State, Burma: Shan Herald Agency for News, August 31, 2017.

- <http://english.panglong.org/2017/08/31/6000-shan-refugees-left-in-limbo-as-international-funding-ends/>.
- Saw Yan Naing. "NGO to Cut Rations for 'Self-Reliant Refugees' on Thai-Burma Border." *The Irrawaddy*, September 20, 2013. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/ngo-cut-rations-self-reliant-refugees-thai-burma-border.html>.
- Schendel, Jörg. "Christian Missionaries in Upper Burma, 1853–85." *South East Asia Research* 7, no. 1 (March 1, 1999): 61–91. doi:10.1177/0967828X9900700103.
- Sebro, Tani. "Dancing the Nation: The Politics of Exile, Mobility, and Displacement Along the Thai-Burma Border." Dissertation, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, 2016.
- . "Necromobility/Choreomobility: Dance, Death and Displacement in the Thai-Burma Border-Zone." In *Event Mobilities: Politics, Place and Performance*, edited by Kevin Hannam, Mary Mostafanezhad, and Jillian Rickly, 95–108. New York: Routledge, 2016.
- Shan Human Rights Foundation. "As Conflict Escalates in Shan State, Aid Must Not Be Cut off to Shan-Thai Border Refugees," August 30, 2017. <http://progressivevoicemyanmar.org/2017/08/30/as-conflict-escalates-in-shan-state-aid-must-not-be-cut-off-to-shan-thai-border-refugees/>.
- . "As Conflict Escalates in Shan State, Aid Must Not Be Cut off to Shan-Thai Border Refugees." Accessed August 31, 2017. <http://www.shanhumanrights.org/eng/index.php/333-as-conflict-escalates-in-shan-state-aid-must-not-be-cut-off-to-shan-thai-border-refugees>.
- Sharma, B. K., and Dr Nivedita Das Kundu. *China's One Belt One Road: Initiative, Challenges and Prospects*. Vij Books India Pvt Ltd, 2016.
- Soe Lin Aung. "The Friction of Cartography: On the Politics of Space and Mobility among Migrant Communities in the Thai-Burma Borderlands." *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 29, no. 1 (2014): 27–45.
- Thu Thu Aung. "Continue Aid for Displaced Camps: Karen Organization." *The Irrawaddy*, September 12, 2017. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/continue-aid-displaced-camps-karen-organization.html>.
- UNHCR. "Global Forced Displacement Hits Record High," June 20, 2016. <http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2016/6/5763b65a4/global-forced-displacement-hits-record-high.html>.
- United Nations General Assembly. "A/60/L.1: Responsibility to Protect in the Outcome Document of the High-Level Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly," September 2005.

[http://responsibilitytoprotect.org/world%20summit%20outcome%20doc%202005\(1\).pdf](http://responsibilitytoprotect.org/world%20summit%20outcome%20doc%202005(1).pdf)

Verma, Nishant et. al. "Between 'Voluntary Migrants' and War Refugees: The Health of the Shan Burmese Migrant Workers in Northern Thailand." *Journal of Immigrant and Refugee Studies* 9, no. 4 (01 2011): 452-59. doi:10.1080/15562948.2011.616819.

Walzer, Michael. "On Humanitarianism." *Foreign Affairs*, July 1, 2011. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2011-07-01/humanitarianism>.

Woods, Kevin. "Ceasefire Capitalism: Military-private Partnerships, Resource Concessions and Military-state Building in the Burma-China Borderlands." *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 38, no. 4 (October 1, 2011): 747-70. doi:10.1080/03066150.2011.607699.

Yang, Bryant Yuan Fu. "Life and Death Away from the Golden Land: The Plight of Burmese Migrant Workers in Thailand" 8, no. 2 (2007). https://www.unodc.org/cld/bibliography/2007/life_and_death_away_from_the_golden_land_the_plight_of_burmese_migrant_workers_in_thailand.html

Zaw Oo. "Exit, Voice and Loyalty in Burma: The Role of Overseas Burmese in Democratising Their Homeland." In *Myanmar's Long Road to National Reconciliation*, edited by Trevor Wilson. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006.