

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THAI FOREIGN POLICY

18 MARCH 2024

CLOSED-DOOR MEETING

ORGANIZED 24-25 FEBRUARY 2024

FOR STRENGTHENING SECURITY MEASURES AND ADDRESS THE HUMANITARIAN NEEDS OF ETHNIC GROUPS ALONG THE BORDER AND ENHANCE COLLABORATION AMONG THAILAND AND ETHNIC GROUPS

56 PARTICIPANTS

FROM DIFFERENT GROUPS AND ORGANIZATIONS WORKING ON HUMANITARIAN FOR MYANMAR

11 RECOMMENDATIONS

KEY THEMATICS

FIRST: HUMANITARIAN AID
SECOND: ENHANCED ENGAGEMENT
THIRD: DISPLACED PERSON, REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM “CLOSED DOOR WORKSHOP ON ADVANCING THE THAI FOREIGN POLICY ON ETHNIC GROUPS ALONG THE THAI-MYANMAR BORDER”

Introduction

People's Empowerment Foundation co-organized a closed-door meeting with the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD), Chiang Mai University, and The Institute of Security and International Studies (Thai ISIS) on February 24–25, 2024, in Chiang Mai. The meeting aims to strengthen security measures and address the humanitarian needs of ethnic groups along the border as well as to enhance collaboration among Thailand and ethnic groups.

56 participants actively participated in the meeting, including Myanmar ethnic groups, namely, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]. Thai NGOs, Burmese NGOs, women's organizations, university academics, experts on Burma issues, and diplomats also joined the meeting.

We have observed the downfall of the Myanmar military regime and the rise of federalism among Myanmar's ethnic groups. This transformation indicates that Myanmar is undergoing significant changes, and the country will not be the same anymore, which will undoubtedly influence Thailand's policies towards Myanmar.

The main concern of the discussion was the conflict inside the ethnic areas, and the humanitarian support from the Thai side is an urgent necessity. In this regard, recommendations are to suggest that the Thai government and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Thailand develop a humanitarian mechanism with respect to the voices of local people to support more than 750,000 internally displaced people (IDP) inside Myanmar who are suffering the effects of the conflicts.

The State Administration Council's recently announced “Conscription Law” creates a massive migration movement of different age groups and families of Myanmar people to Thailand and other parts of the world, which has a severe impact on Thailand. The discussions at the workshop suggested a protection mechanism for these people to be able to live in Thailand legally and to serve their community.

The People's Empowerment Foundation serves as the secretariat for this closed-door meeting. PEF expresses gratitude for the valuable contributions of the participants and commits to actively advocating for improved Thai policies regarding Myanmar.

RECOMMENDATIONS

I. REGARDING HUMANITARIAN AID

1). Initiatives for local humanitarian mechanisms should be created, either informal/ formal channels and policies, to deliver aid to IDPs in Myanmar by including ethnic authorities, ethnic civil society organizations (CSOs), and relevant international organizations that have been working for local humanitarian assistance along the border without the involvement of the State Administration Council (SAC) and its affiliated Myanmar Red Cross Society.

With over 750,000 IDPs in Southeast Myanmar, there is an urgent need for a rapid increase in humanitarian aid. However, if that aid involves the SAC and Myanmar Red Cross Society, which is controlled by SAC, it will not be delivered based on people's needs but on SAC's political and strategic interests.

Thus, people in need in ethnic areas will not receive necessary humanitarian aid if SAC and MRCS control and manage the aid delivery. Ethnic local governance entities have been controlling their respective ethnic territories, which are mostly near the Thai-Myanmar border (such as Karen areas next to Tak Province, Karenni areas near Mae Hong Song Province, and Mon areas bordering Kanchanaburi Province). Ethnic civil society organizations have been working for humanitarian aid for their respective ethnic communities for decades and have gained trust from local communities. Hence, it makes practical sense to involve ethnic groups in any humanitarian aid initiative.

2). Creating a Joint-Humanitarian Committee

A joint humanitarian committee should be set up to include township authorities and CSOs from both Thai and ethnic groups. This committee should have regular meetings and when it is necessary due to urgent situations. There should be protocols for the sharing of information in a timely manner and means to prevent and mitigate disputes.

3). Aid should be allowed to cross the border at least 5 days a week

The volume of aid, both food and medical, needs to increase dramatically to avoid more casualties and suffering in Myanmar and the influx of refugees to Thailand. The proposed humanitarian committee should manage and monitor the delivery of aid, including the terms and conditions for decision-making. Therefore, this committee aims to reduce the burden of the border military units in decision-making.

4). Create more official border trade channels in the Tak and Mae Hong Son provinces to benefit both Thai and ethnic communities.

The local communities inside Myanmar are heavily conflict-affected, and consequently, the trading system is disrupted. In order to supply necessary goods and support the self-reliance capacity of local communities inside Myanmar, their trading opportunities with Thailand should be encouraged,

especially those along the Thai-Myanmar border, such as Karenni, Karen and Mon. This will serve to increase trade between the two countries and the transportation of humanitarian aid, which will also benefit the Thai economy.

5). There should be mutually agreed principles on humanitarian aid based upon internationally agreed practices.

RECOMMENDATIONS

II. REGARDING ENHANCED ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN THAI AUTHORITIES AND ETHNIC GROUPS

1). Thai authorities (border authorities) must engage and coordinate with different ethnic groups along the border for the delivery of humanitarian aid.

Currently, the State Administration Council (SAC) lacks control over these border areas; the Thai government should emphasize on the importance of establishing stronger ties with local ethnic entities for effective humanitarian aid distribution.

Besides, ethnic civil society organizations have been delivering aid to their people for decades and have gained the trust of local citizens, thus, with these decades-long experiences and capacity, the local organizations are the most suitable stakeholders to deliver the aid effectively.

2). There should be a cabinet resolution to establish a formal committee to deal with Myanmar issues.


This committee should take the form of an interagency task force and should comprise both government officials, academics, and civil society representatives. The committee shall deal with broad categories of issues regarding Myanmar, such as the right to work, the right to education, etc.

RECOMMENDATIONS

III. REGARDING DISPLACED MYANMAR REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS IN THAILAND

1). Thailand should prepare for the increase in migration caused by the Conscription Law in accordance with rights-based principles.

Asylum seekers fleeing conscription should not be deported as that will send them back to a real risk of persecution. Thailand has a legal mandate under international and domestic law to **prevent forced returns and non-refoulement**. Many people of conscription age are fleeing with their families, knowing that the junta will arrest their families as punishment. Therefore, Thailand needs to prepare for an influx of refugees of various ages.



Thailand should provide more exit permits for refugees who have been accepted for third-country resettlements. Some refugees have been accepted for resettlement but have been waiting for over two years for an exit permit. Any fear that more refugees being resettled will act as a 'pull factor' is misguided since it is hard to stop migration, and refugees have been entering Thailand since after the coup. Increasing the number of exit permits will relieve the backlog of individuals who have already been approved to relocate to a third country and are currently awaiting departure.

2). Provide temporary stay/work permits to asylum seekers

This would give the Thai authorities more control over migration as well as tax profits. At present, for the Thai authorities, the number of asylum seekers fleeing to Thailand through informal routes is challenging to estimate and, hence, gain no tax from their work. Temporary stay/work permits will not act as a 'pull factor' for refugees. They are fleeing to save their lives; therefore, the flow of migration to Thailand will be persistent until the conflicts in Myanmar are brought to an end.

The Thai government should provide temporary stay/work permits to asylum seekers, including newcomers, due to the conscription law since a majority of them, including professionals, migrate to Thailand due to insecurity but with skills and experience. If Thailand provides such permits, Thailand's economy can be contributed to by such professionals' workforce in Thailand for industries where they belong.

3). Thailand should work to improve the lives of those on the border in areas such as health, education, and agriculture in collaboration with ethnic groups.

This will reduce the risk of the spread of disease due to the lack of vaccination programmes in Myanmar for about four years. Children and youth from Myanmar should be given better and more accessible education opportunities in Thailand. This will mean allowing the establishment of more health and education facilities and allowing Myanmar health officials and teachers to work in them, which in turn will relieve pressure on Thai facilities.

4). Provide technology support for agriculture and border trade to the ethnic groups along the border.

This would enhance their resilience and ability to support the development of communities inside Myanmar that are in proximity to the Thai border by supporting their agriculture and exporting these agricultural products to the Thai side. The well-being of local communities inside Myanmar has potential impacts on reducing the migration population to Thailand.