



AIPP GROUND REPORT

THAI-MYANMAR BORDER CRISIS



On February 1st 2021, Myanmar's Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and Commander-in-Chief led a military takeover which deposed the democratically-elected civilian government and plunged Myanmar into a political and economic crisis.

The coup triggered a massive uprising, bringing hundreds of thousands of protesters to the streets to demand a return to democracy, while civil servants have boycotted work in a bid to shutter the junta's administration.

The anti-coup movement has reportedly killed more than 720 people with some 3,100 activists, journalists and dissidents detained as of mid-April. Intensifying violence has driven fearful civilians in Myanmar to seek asylum in Thailand, and to a lesser extent India.

Reports from the ground are contrary to the Thai government's official stance of accepting refugees. AIPP's sources at the Thai-Myanmar border reported that Thai local officials and military have continued to block refugee access to the country, in some cases preventing the dispatch of vital supplies.

The flashpoint is also between Myanmar's military and ethnic armed groups. Air raids targeting Karen army camps, government offices and public infrastructure such as schools and hospitals has acerbated an intense situation.

In late April, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), the armed wing of the Karen National Union (KNU) seized two out of three Myanmar army bases opposite Mae Sam Laep village.





This incident provoked further air strikes two weeks ago. Air strikes at the Salween River border since last April by the Tatmadaw targeting KNU territory, has deepened a humanitarian crisis, leading to an influx of about 3000 Karen Displaced Peoples.

On the 10th and 11th of April, AIPP visited Mae Sam Laep village in Mae Sariang district, Ma Hong Song province, in what has become the focal point of the crisis locally, to observe and evaluate the situation in consultation with local organizations and civil society groups, in order to provide contextualized aid to the Karen Displaced Peoples.

Around 70,000 Displaced Peoples from the conflict are currently stranded at both sides of the Thai-Myanmar border, leading to a second attempt by them to cross the Salween River to stay temporarily in Thailand. A situation that is allegedly unwelcome to the Thai authorities, resulting in a pushback of around 2000 people (of the 3000 people who have crossed over to Thailand – according to our sources) on the 8th and 9th of May. A claim the Thai authorities deny saying they have the situation under control with enough supplies for Displaced Peoples on both sides of the border.

Our sources revealed that on-ground tactics resorted to by the Displaced Peoples to counter the pushback by the Thai military and surprise attacks by the Myanmar junta, have further impeded relief work. In the wake of a pandemic, impending starvation and disease including emotional and psychological trauma is compounding the crisis. The Displaced Peoples, most of whom are vulnerable Indigenous Peoples including women, children and the elderly, are reliant on food and medical supplies almost exclusively from the Thai side are having to confront harsh weather conditions. Their makeshift living arrangement offering little resistance and protection.

Local organizations and civilians on the Thai side of the border have formed the backbone of relief work being carried out. They allege a lack of support from the local Red Cross, heightened surveillance, and risks to their lives, stating that civilian boats have been shot at multiple times. They suggest letters of authority and flag issued by the Red Cross would alleviate the risks considerably and even offer a long-term solution in ensuring relief work is not interrupted. On 17th April, the Myanmar junta opened fire at four civilian boats with Thai flags hoisted transporting relief materials according to our local sources. On the 23rd of April, the junta once again fired warning shots at a civilian boat carrying Thai border patrol officers claiming that was a “misunderstanding”.





These incidents have deepened concerns among civil society organizations involved in relief work.

Being forced to conduct relief work in a clandestine manner, has also posed barriers to documentation of accurate numbers of Displaced Peoples in each location which has led to disorderly distribution of relief supplies. An official passage, therefore is the need of the hour in order to ensure delivery work is undertaken systematically.

Global organizations such as International Rescue Committee (IRC), International Organization for Migration (IOM), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) have expressed their interest in offering help, but the situation remains in limbo.

To this effect, five civil society organizations submitted a statement to the Voice of America, OHCHR Asia Pacific office expressing their concerns to the governments of Thailand, Myanmar, ASEAN countries, and global community.



The local community has galvanized support and managed to transport relief materials despite the risks involved. A source said, **“There are many check points across the Salaween River Basin (Myanmar side). If they see us, they will shoot at or arrest us. But when thousands of lives are at stake, why should the fear for our lives or stop us in crossing the border and deliver food?”**

The Indigenous Peoples Alliance for Justice and Peace, Thailand issued a [statement](#) calling on Thai authorities to extend support to the those seeking refuge in Thailand on humanitarian grounds and to allow civil society organisations to deliver aid. Similar statements were issued by many organizations keen on finding a [resolution](#).

However, the Defence Ministry's spokesperson insisted that over 2,000 people who had fled to Thailand have been provided shelter and the military had set up a "safe zone" in Mae Hong Son province to accommodate them.

The status quo and in the inaction of the Thai government to open an official channel for humanitarian assistance to the victims of the political conflict, including blocking the involvement of international organizations. Expressing his exasperation at the lack of cooperation from the authorities and the time constraint, an eminent local leader the said, **“As always, strategic political issues and economic interests between governments takes primacy over humanitarian emergencies. And resolving matters through diplomacy takes time. But for us, we cannot stay still and do nothing because many lives are at stake, including pregnant women, children and the elderly.”**

Representatives from local organizations have expressed their concerns and frustrations over the inaction of the local authorities stating, **“Our belongingness to our lands has been stripped, so we are people without borders (refugees from Myanmar). We are ready to volunteer for Red Cross, but they are neither working nor allowing us to work for them”.**





However, on 17th May, a coordinating Committee/working group was set up to respond to the situation of the Displaced Peoples from Myanmar, reflecting the intent of the Thai authority to settle this locally. The working group representatives are from Mae Hong Son provincial authority, Mae Sariang Provincial authority, Military, local CSOs, UNHCR, Department of health in Mae Hong Son.

This committee will be the official channel responding to the issue. The committee at this juncture is brainstorming strategies- both short and long-term to support the Displaced Peoples from Myanmar. AIPP will continue to work closely committee through local and IP representatives in finding a sustainable solution to the issue.

AIPP will continue to follow up with the organizations working on the ground, the official coordinating committee to continue to monitor the situation and for exploring potential international collaborations and interventions.



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Photos courtesy: Emergency Relief Working Group