

CHAPTER VIII

Conclusions

Displacement of population from Burma to Thailand is not a new phenomenon. Historically, these people have been absorbed in the Thai populace or pushed back across the frontier to their homelands. For years, this practice was all but ignored by the outside world. It was only in the wake of the tragic 1988 uprisings in Rangoon that the public eye was drawn to the distant borderline between Burma and Thailand.

Though this new found attention may have advanced the anti-Rangoon cause to the international arena, the Thai domestic and regional agenda shifted to their disadvantage. At the close of 1988, the most salient variable within the Thai security calculus became the economy. The Chatchai administration recognized that the supply of essential natural and energy resources in Thailand was waning significantly and worked to gain access to foreign sources. After the disastrous flood in southern Thailand, the government had to identify alternatives to Thai timber. Thailand's fishing fleet, the seventh largest in the world, had also depleted Thai fishing stocks. And lastly, the rapid rate of development severely taxed traditional sources of energy for the Kingdom. As a result, General Chavalit led his own personal charge to Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam as well as Burma where supplies of these resources were yet abundant. Equally important was that Thailand gain access to the virtually untapped markets of the sub-region ahead of competitors. The Vietnamese and Burmese represent well-over one hundred million people who required the most basic materials and household items.

Concurrent with the switch in policy interests, the economic and security utility of the ethnic minority groups along the Burmese border had seriously declined for the Thai. Since 1984, they had been progressively losing ground to SLORC troops and in 1988 lost several key trading posts; threats by the Karen, Mon and Wa to disrupt Thai resource interests did not help to enamor them in the eyes of their neighbor. Thailand has only sided with the various anti-Rangoon organizations as long as they were useful to the Thai state. It would be a mistake to believe that there existed some sort of ideological or brotherly solidarity, beyond friendly local relationships, which could surpass the interests of the state. The combination of all factors has led to a progressive move toward alliance with the Burmese government.

Burma played and continues to play a significant role as a source of natural and energy resources and a market for Thai products. This in mind, the Burmese displaced persons, both on the border and in Bangkok, acted as a source of irritant between interest groups in Bangkok and the Burmese government in Rangoon. The SLORC has raised the issue of Thai support for insurgents since just after World War II and recently, in late 1995, went so far as to pin good relations to the cessation of Thai cross-border support to these groups.

The Burmese students have been another sensitive issue between the two capitals. These youth carried their anti-SLORC campaign to the streets of Bangkok, lacking both unifying leadership and political savvy, and unswervingly resisting any form of authority. Their actions and insistence upon being loud and visible brought them immediately into conflict with the Thai government and security officials resulting in the construction of the Safe Area and a gradually intensifying crackdown on student

movement in the city. The presence of politically active elements hostile to the neighboring regime is a relevant security threat.

The security agenda, encompassing access to markets and natural resources, public health concerns, crime and the more conventional territorial/military issues, has been central to Thai policy toward the Burmese refugees. Thailand is dependent on Burma as a market and supplier of natural resources, but the Thai equally wish to avoid military conflict on any scale.

The Thai state is in transition from cycles of elected civilian government and military-led autocracy to a more democratic system. Challenges to the civilian regime remain from the institution of the military. Though these seem to have diminished, the civilians avoid predicaments that could be interpreted as crises - the classic justification for military coup d' etat in Thailand. The displaced persons have indirectly caused the Thai to lose economic profit and strained relations between capitals which may contribute to a crisis scenario.

Security is still defined in terms of the success and survival of interest groups, each interest group or regime having its own interpretation and goals. Disparities of agenda certainly exist between institutions, groups, and individuals concerning Burma and the displaced persons.

Despite security concerns, policy appears less uniform when examining the situation at the border. Significant disparities exist between policy issued from Bangkok and practice at the local level. This stems from a lack of centrality of the military command and the Thai government in general. Officers on the border, though they undoubtedly follow the commands of the superiors, nonetheless follow their own

agenda when no directive is delivered from Supreme Command. The problem has been that although interests have moved to Rangoon, some Thai interest groups have not yet divorced themselves from the ethnic minority and political dissident groups which continue to harry the SLORC. It would appear that Thailand has been practicing a policy of political hedging: normalizing relations with the SLORC but not severing relations with the opposition. Elements of the public and private sector still hold sympathies for and maintain business relations with the Karen, Mon, Karenni, and Shan lining the border. Some officers yet perceive the SLORC as a socialist/communist regime which remains a threat to Thailand ideologically and perhaps militarily.¹

As pertains the displaced persons, the policy makers have continuously pressured them to agree to a return. Bangkok, fatigued both by an extended presence of refugees on its soil and Rangoon harping upon Thai support for anti-SLORC elements, is anxious to close this chapter. The SLORC has accused Thailand on numerous occasions of harboring insurgents. In many cases, trade has continued with the ethnic minorities, many of whom own businesses and/or homes in Thailand, but another issue which Rangoon has tied in is that of the refugees. Not to be confused with the hundreds of thousands of displaced persons/ clandestine migrant workers, SLORC considers the refugees in the dozen odd camps along the border "insurgents in disguise." The camps fall under the administration of the ethnic minority organizations and have been a source of recruitment, resources, recuperation and retreat. The KNU, NMSP, and KNPP have traditionally recruited young men and women to serve in their armies; medicine and food often slips across the border from the camps; injured or sick

¹ Interview with military officer.

soldiers can come to the camp for some care or be referred to local hospitals; and when a base is overrun by Burmese Army troops, the insurgents can flee across the border to safety. The SLORC may perceive this as interfering in its internal affairs. This is not to say that providing humanitarian assistance to the refugees should be interpreted as an act of aggression, but one should also not presume that the camps are in any way neutral.

Because the SLORC views the refugees as a particular threat, they have been targeted in what appears to be an extension of the Four Cuts campaign. These tactics have been brutally successful in Burma proper, but one main source of supplies and support remains - the refugee camps. Nonetheless, government troops obviously can not enter Thailand and force people to return to Burmese soil at gunpoint, so it would appear that the Karen splinter group, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army has been given a mission to destabilize the camps and kidnap Karen leaders. The attacks will cause damage to the camps, limit their supplies, terrorize the residents and maybe cause the camps to be moved by Thai officials. Some camps have been consolidated to provide more security but the majority are still vulnerable and attacks against foreign relief workers and/or Thai villagers can not be discounted.*

Concerning protection of the displaced persons, the UNHCR has been able to do little in its regard or in insuring a safe return to Burmese soil. The UNHCR actually has little power to wield against a state if that state refuses to follow the principles defined by the UN convention. Its most effective tool in this case is to use the Thai

* Admittedly, some of the attacks occurring over the past months have been for looting and not political purposes.

desire to become an important member of the world community. Thailand is quite cautious and sensitive with matters concerning its international image; condemnation over its treatment of displaced persons is something it would rather avoid.

Relief organizations have served part of the protection role reporting abuses to the UNHCR but they are also powerless to influence events along border. These NGOs are in a much more tenuous position than the UN and therefore, too much criticism of their Thai hosts could lead to rescinding of permits or expulsion from the country as organizations "unfriendly" to Thailand.

Repatriation is also occurring under less than ideal circumstances with the Mon being coerced into a return absent international monitoring to spots just across the border, changing their status to internally displaced persons; and the Karenni having returned but meeting with a new offensive in only a matter of months. But repatriation and talks of repatriation continue.

There thus remains a classic standoff between sovereign rights/national security and humanitarianism, the latter losing the battle. To reiterate, there is little the international community can or is willing to do in the event that a state refuses to adhere to the principles codified in international refugee law. Humanitarianism is only available when it is not an inconvenience or a liability. Andrew Shacknove wrote "...refugee policy has always been at least one part State interest and at most one part compassion. Appeals based solely on upon compassion, solidarity, or rights are only occasionally successful."² "When interests of State," he continued, "are fundamentally

²Shacknove, Andrew. From Asylum to Containment. *International Journal of Refugee Law*. 1993. 517.

at odds with other values, as is increasingly the case with asylum, then it is unlikely that compassion, solidarity or human rights will prevail."³ National security will always eclipse humanitarianism and the current state-oriented international system necessarily allows for governments to persist in this priority. Thailand has chosen its own path at times counter to the UN convention and has received little more than a mild scolding from a few Western diplomatic missions and the UNHCR.

But the question which remains begging is has the Thai policy objective of discouraging escalation been fulfilled? That depends on what officials intended as the ultimate goal of the policy. If it was to expel all Burmese displaced persons from Thai soil, then it has failed miserably. 300,000 plus Burmese illegal immigrants are testimony to that. They have likely left their country for reasons ranging from economics and politics to religion and forced labor and are welcomed by Thai small scale industry which is suffering a dearth in laborers for the dirty, demanding and dangerous positions that locals have shunned. These are also displaced persons, but are those which the Thai lack an effective means of regulating.

If the policy was to remove a political eyesore from the Thai frontier, then it is working. The Mon are expected to repatriate in early late 1995/early 1996 and the Karen may then become the next target of combined Bangkok/Rangoon pressure. The Burmese student movement is slowly fizzling out as they struggle for identity in the wake of Aung San Suu Kyi's release and in the absence of any SLORC approach for negotiations. The students are in increasing numbers reporting to the Safe Area as their security in Bangkok and the border declines.

³Ibid. 518.

Regardless of the current movements back to their country, Burmese displaced persons in Thailand will be an on-going challenge to security until a durable repatriation may take place. The Mon are returning concurrent with new arrivals in their camps and the Karenni, who had signed a cease-fire and returned a portion of their refugees, were attacked by the SLORC in breach of their agreement. Rangoon will also not desist in its perception of the refugee camps as providing essential support to insurgent groups. Until there is an effective political resolution, economic reform, and improvement in the standard of living of the Burmese, durable repatriation will remain elusive. No amount of push-backs or threats will keep the refugees from coming if they are determined to do so.

Until this repatriation can be realized, Thailand should not shy from its duty as a member of the international community to provide protection to the disenfranchised. Many of the asylum seekers in the camps are not politically or militarily motivated, but the dilemma remains of how to effectively separate them from the insurgent administration. As long as the relationship remains, SLORC will certainly refuse to differentiate between the two.

In conclusion, the Burmese displaced persons in Thailand will remain a problematic policy issue for the Thai and one of the most contentious challenges to relations between the neighbors and thus to the security of certain Thai groups until an environment conducive to sustainable return exists in Burma.