

CHAPTER I

Introduction and Methodology



Thailand is a country which has played host to refugees for centuries. Mon, Karen, Chinese, Khmer and Lao have all either migrated or been forced to Thailand as a result of various conflicts throughout the ages. Perhaps the most recognized group of asylum seekers in the Kingdom were those fleeing the war in Indochina. The sheer numbers of the ethnic mix of Thai, Lao, Hmong, Khmer, Chinese and Vietnamese present on Thai soil were perceived by the Royal Thai Government as a legitimate threat to the security of the state. The issue central to Thai fears was that the refugees would provide a pretext for Vietnamese aggression.

The Indochinese have all but returned since 1993. Just a relative handful of Vietnamese and Lao, mainly Hmong, remain in the border camps or separate communities. The Royal Thai Government, after the signing of the Paris Peace Accords which brought some semblance of a resolution to the conflict in Cambodia, said that no more refugees would be accepted into the nation and as a consequence, no new camps on the Thai eastern border have been established to date.

On the opposite border, however, a quiet war has been raging for nearly fifty years. It has not received the international attention which the Vietnam War drew to the Indochinese because it was never a central interest to the contestants of the cold war. The United States and the former Soviet Union were never involved to the level that they had been elsewhere in the region. Conflict, both political and military, coupled with human rights violations has nonetheless displaced nearly 100,000

Burmese into over twenty-five camps on Thai soil and another 300,000 plus illegal workers into locations ranging from Thai construction sites and brothels to universities and businesses. The country which has produced this considerable outflow of humanity is the Union of Myanmar or Burma.

This once prosperous nation has, until recently, received little international coverage except during its suppression of the 1988 student-led uprising, where hundreds of protesters were shot, and when political opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of Burmese national hero General Aung San, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize while under house arrest in Rangoon.

The displaced persons from Burma have received even less attention. They were overshadowed by the Indochinese in both numbers and political significance. For this reason, precious little research has been conducted concerning Thai policy towards them or, for that matter, in any subject in their regard. The most well known contemporary writers on the subject of Burma are both journalists. Martin Smith authored **Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity**, a thoroughly researched work examining the roots of ethnic conflict in Burma. Smith has also completed works on Burma for Article 19 (an organization dedicated to the promotion of freedom of speech) and a 1995 publication on ethnic minorities for Anti-Slavery International. The second author, Bertil Lintner, is probably best known for his coverage of Burma for the weekly **Far Eastern Economic Review**. He has published on the events leading up to the 1988 popular demonstrations in his book **Outrage** and was one of the first journalists to penetrate the northern expanse of the country to meet with the ethnic minority armies based there, an experience he recounted in his 1987

Valleys of Jade. Both authors tend to examine Burmese domestic politics with the refugee receiving minimal attention as a peripheral issue. Even the Thai, except for a handful of human rights activists and academics, have all but ignored the subject.

Due to this dearth in analysis of a significant historical component of Thai refugee politics, this study shall examine Thai policy towards the Burmese displaced persons within the period of 1988 to 1993.

The period 1988 to 1993 was selected because 1988 was the first time that a considerable number of visible ethnic Burman refugees arrived at the border and, more importantly, in Bangkok. Previously, Thai policy was relatively static, choosing to support the refugee and ethnic minority army communities as a buffer between Thailand and the Communist Party of Burma as well as the socialist Burmese central government. 1988 also proved a key turning point in this policy for some sectors of the Thai administration. This may have been related to emphasized national security concerns within the economic sector which subsequently effected policy toward the displaced persons.

It was in 1991 that Thailand officially declared its policy of "constructive engagement" which was still intact, though shaken, approaching 1996. The selection of this period, thus, shall also allow for an examination of Thai refugee policy though the pivotal year of 1988 through the development of "constructive engagement" and will likewise investigate the history behind the term, its nature in the Thai context, and whether it has achieved its objectives. Constructive engagement may prove to have been a defensive measure rather than being truly concerned with political change in Burma.

Objectives

The first objective of the thesis is to examine Thai policy toward the Burmese displaced persons and the term “constructive engagement”, with an aim to identify the policy process as it is effected by internal and external factors. Where do policy directives originate and what are the reasons for taking a certain path as regards the refugees? The thesis expects that there is no set policy formation structure for the Burmese displaced persons, but rather that policy results primarily from group interests instead of from any concerted government considerations.

The second goal is to consider the concept of refuge, specifically the definition of the displaced persons, by the various agents involved and to determine where the Burmese case fits in the definition. International organizations and non-Thai actors may have different definitions of displaced persons and which rights they should be provided.

The final objective is to determine the historical causes of flight of the Burmese displaced persons. Though the issue has frequently been discussed in circles responsible for providing assistance to the Burmese or amongst those concerned with human rights, the data is by no means centralized. This work will hopefully pull together a sizeable proportion of the disparate data into one source on which future research may build.

Methodology

To achieve these goals, existing literature was surveyed and a history from secondary sources compiled. This information was then cross-checked through

extensive interviews with related groups and individuals at the border and in Bangkok. Discussions were held with Thai public officials from a number of sectors (military, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Office of the Prime Minister), relief workers from NGOs, officials from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, and refugees themselves in order to assess events from a variety of perspectives.

Though over forty some interviews were conducted, over ninety percent of those interviewed preferred to remain anonymous. The issue of Thai-Burmese relations and the related issue of displaced persons is extremely sensitive, no one wishing to be on the public record. The situation of NGOs is tenuous as is that of the refugees themselves while Thai officials do not wish to criticize superiors or release information without their consent. Throughout the thesis, there is necessarily little direct reference to people unless they have specifically stated that their names could be included. In the majority of the problematic cases, references are made to an anonymous position rather than a persons name, as is the journalistic practice for protecting the identity of sources. In other instances, when I was unable to make any sort of competent reference, I was forced to disregard bits of information. This, coupled with an unwillingness of some to be interviewed at all, served as the principal constraints on research and is the reason why the thesis relies heavily upon citations from the local and international media. Citation from the media also may seem unbalanced when observing the perponderance of quotations from The Nation, but this Thai daily provided more valuable and in depth information on border issues than any of the other local papers.

In light of the protests over the Indochinese refugee camps, one might question the relative absence of Thai villagers views. The situation of Burmese displaced persons both in terms of relief assistance, demographics, and political impact differs greatly from that of the eastern border. There, displaced persons were kept in densely populated closed camps. The Burmese camps, conversely, range up and down the 2000 km plus border, few having more than 5,000 occupants. The relief agencies and the Thai government have additionally made a conscientious effort to maintain a level of development and material possession consistent with that of local villages. NGOs also provide similar health and sanitation services to local effected villages. A further consideration also is that many of the ethnic groups from which the displaced persons comes are also found on the Thai side of the border and therefore assimilation with local villagers is not problematic. As a result of these considerations, little attention has been paid to the local populace, as they have suffered little if any ill effects from the influx of displaced persons.

The format of the thesis shall consist of one chapter on the conceptual framework, four chapters dedicated to specific periods of the refugee policy development, one chapter for the primary analysis and findings, and the final to the conclusion. The first of the historical chapters will provide backround to the issue while the latter three will detail events within the specified temporal scope of study. The descriptive chapters are divided into four sub-sections each, the first, **Bangkok and Rangoon**, focussing on the diplomatic context at the time; **Border**, on the events occuring along the common boundary and the displaced persons, primarily ethnic minorities, seeking refuge there; **Students**, on the activities and policies aimed toward

the group of Burmese youth which arrived in Thailand after the tumultuous events of 1988; and, at the conclusion of each chapter, **Summary and Analysis**, emphasizing the significance of that period.

Usefulness

It is hoped that this thesis, in addition to providing a history of the Burmese displaced persons, will prove valuable to the understanding of Thai refugee policy and by doing so contribute to academic knowledge on the Thai decision making process.