



The Brookings Institution – University of Bern
Project on Internal Displacement



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Luncheon Seminar On Policy Options for Burma's Displaced

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Refugees International

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Commentators: **Zaw Oo**, Hurst Fellow at American University's School of International Service and democracy activist from Burma
Brian Joseph, South & Southeast Asia Director, National Endowment for Democracy
Veena Siddharth, Asia Advocacy Director, Human Rights Watch.

Moderator: **Roberta Cohen**, Senior Fellow and Co-Director of the Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement

INTRODUCTION

On June 1, 2006, the Brookings Institution-University of Bern Project on Internal Displacement hosted a luncheon seminar at which the findings of Refugees International's report, "Ending the Waiting Game: Strategies for Responding to Internally Displaced People in Burma," were presented by its author, **Kavita Shukla**. Following the presentation, **Zaw Oo**, Hurst Fellow at American University's School of International Service and democracy activist from Burma, **Brian Joseph**, South & Southeast Asia Director, National Endowment for Democracy, and **Veena Siddharth**, Asia Advocacy Director, Human Rights Watch, served as commentators. **Roberta Cohen**, Co-Director of the Brookings-Bern Project, moderated the event.

Participants included representatives of the U.S. government, non-governmental organizations, and experts from research and academic institutions (see attached List of Participants).

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Roberta Cohen opened the meeting, noting that addressing internal displacement in Burma poses many policy dilemmas for the international community. She observed that the human rights and humanitarian communities have often been at odds over policy choices and posed a number of questions: Have existing policies of sanctions against Burma led to change or to hardened positions on the part of the government? What impact do sanctions have on the local population? Does engagement and investment lead to reform or do they enable increased militarization? Should democracy and human rights goals be allowed to override humanitarian aid for immediate needs? Can human rights be promoted by overlooking humanitarian need? Should humanitarian aid be linked to improved monitoring accountability and access in Burma? Some humanitarian groups have left Burma because of restrictions or interferences with their work and because of potential aid diversions; others have remained looking for opportunities. What are the most effective ways of providing humanitarian aid and protection for displaced people inside Burma? Who should the aid be given to – international organizations, the government, local groups?

PRESENTATION AND COMMENTARY

Kavita Shukla, the author of Refugees International's report, began by pointing out that in Burma it is the government itself that has been responsible for internal displacement. The government does not recognize the existence of IDPs and neither provides assistance programs to address their needs nor allows international agencies access to them. Displacement in Burma can be categorized as displacement resulting from counterinsurgency, displacement due to militarization and confiscation of civilian property in ceasefire zones, development-induced displacement, urban displacement, and displacement due to economic vulnerability and food insecurity. If economic insecurity were considered a cause of internal displacement, the numbers of IDPs would be in the millions.

The most extensive and reliable numbers of IDPs have come from eastern Burma, where the Thailand-based Thailand Burmese Border Consortium (TBBC) has been able to collaborate with Burmese community-based organizations (CBOs) to conduct cross-border assessments of displacement. These types of assessments have not been possible in northern or western Burma.

According to TBBC's most recent survey, the number of IDPs in eastern Burma is at least 540,000. This number has been disputed by some international agencies based in Rangoon that believe that figure has been inflated in order to attract more funding for cross-border activities. UNDP, which has the lead on IDPs in Burma, supports the figures of TBBC. Shukla pointed out that according to the TBBC analysis the majority of the displaced live in government or ceasefire areas and are not accessible from across the border. Cross-border agencies would therefore have little to gain by inflating such

numbers. Human Rights Watch's 2005 report on Burma estimated that the number was even higher, placing it at 650,000.

Most Burma-based assistance agencies use a sectoral approach, targeting vulnerable populations rather than IDPs as such. This is in part because some populations have been displaced for 40 years and it is difficult to determine when they stop being IDPs.

International agencies are often not able to identify IDPs, and even if they do, staff members of international agencies may have no protection training and be unable to develop programs to meet their needs. The current UN Resident Coordinator has begun to focus more on IDPs, but humanitarian access to IDPs remains limited and there are restrictions on the activities of international agencies. UNHCR is the only agency allowed by the government to become involved with the IDP issue in Burma. The agency is developing programs in the eastern border areas in preparation for the possible return of refugees and IDPs. NGOs have started to unofficially partner with CBOs to reach areas that are inaccessible to them. In some areas where IDPs are identifiable such partnerships are enabling assistance to reach them.

There is no dearth of CBOs in Burma as noted in a 2003-2004 survey by Save the Children UK. The survey calculated that there were up to 214,000 CBOs and 270 local NGOs operating in Burma. Religion has been the primary *raison d'être* for civil society initiatives in the country. Two NGOs, called Shalom and Metta, are particularly noteworthy for their capacity to implement activities across ethnic lines; however, their operational capacity is weak.

Thailand-based agencies are able to provide cross-border aid escorted by armed ethnic soldiers. However, in areas far from the border where terrain, lack of infrastructure and fear of detection prevent delivery of services, assistance to IDPs is delivered in cash. This makes monitoring difficult and makes donors reluctant to fund such initiatives. One worthwhile initiative is the use of walkie-talkies, which have proved useful in alerting people of attacks; more walkie-talkies are needed.

Shukla underscored that while there should be an increase in humanitarian aid, it should not come at the expense of either Burma-based or Thailand-based agencies (i.e. funding should not be pulled from either category of agency). Burma receives less humanitarian aid per capita than almost any other country in the world, including others with repressive governments such as Laos, Cuba, and Vietnam.

Aung San Suu Kyi's position on aid has been somewhat ambiguous. Suu Kyi has called for assistance to Burma to be accountable and transparent, but on occasion, she has also advocated against aid inside Burma.

There has been controversy over whether aid really reaches the intended populations in Burma or whether it is misdirected and manipulated by the regime. Humanitarian agencies acknowledge that they pay a 10 percent tax on food bought in by the World Food Program (WFP) for internal distribution, but deny other allegations about aid being

misused. They also point out that it is impossible to bypass government structures when seeking to have national level initiatives.

Critics of increased aid have said that international aid frees the regime to spend more on the military, instead of, for example, on health or education. Aid agencies operating in Burma respond by pointing out that without their programs, some populations would be left without any assistance or protection, as it has been found that in areas where there is presence of UN or INGO expatriate or local staff the regime curbs abuse. . International organizations in Burma often work in areas where the government is not present and where the need is great. The agencies emphasize that they carry out their programs independently to reach the most vulnerable populations and that there is indeed space to maneuver and expand humanitarian activity, in some cases with dedicated staff in government ministries, particularly at the local level.

The position of Refugees International on aid is that donors should provide more humanitarian aid to Burma, that more NGOs should consider becoming involved because of the poor humanitarian situation and the limited reach of cross-border efforts, and that aid agencies should continue to operate in Burma, with internal benchmarks. Their rationale for international assistance to Burma is that aid is needed to respond to a variety of humanitarian crises, including HIV-AIDS and avian flu, and control the spread of these crises in the region; that aid is necessary to strengthen the capacity of CBOs and NGOs operating in areas that are off-limits to international organizations; that aid can lay the foundations of democracy and contribute to a “bottom-up” social and political transition; and that aid can help create a national identity and be used for conflict-resolution and peace-building initiatives.

Refugees International would urge the UN to expand its in-country operations and develop a strategy for Burma. This strategy should include: the training of staff in protection issues; making Burma a priority for OCHA’s Internal Displacement Division; and having the RSG on the Human Rights of IDPs begin a dialogue with national authorities and help to identify a focal point in the government on the issue of internal displacement. Refugees International would urge donors to increase cross-border funding and to use more flexible requirements on monitoring when providing funding for CBOs in Burma.

Zaw Oo began his comments on the report by highlighting the danger that Burma posed to regional stability if its crisis intensifies and spills across borders, noting that it is a crisis that has been occurring for 30 years without a solution. Oo described Aung San Suu Kyi’s position on aid as being in favor of humanitarian assistance as long as it is transparent and reaches the needy.

He underscored the need to acknowledge the root causes of the conflict and to link relief to long-term development strategies. He pointed out what he called a puzzling trend: that IDP and refugee outflows have increased during an ostensibly more peaceful recent period in Burma. He explained this by focusing on the rapid expansion of the Burmese military – now the largest army in Southeast Asia – which has relied extensively on

forced recruitment and has left the military without the capacity to manage its internal affairs. The military is in charge of development projects and its members are expected to live off the land, earning very poor salaries. This situation has led to increased human rights violations against villagers. Oo encouraged more assistance to CBOs and felt that a comprehensive strategy of incentives and disincentives would be the best strategy in Burma. Although he did not see many possibilities for expanded humanitarian aid, the Refugees International report identified possible ways.

Brian Joseph first noted the tremendous challenge of coming up with recommendations for the case of Burma and commended Refugees International for engaging and devising recommendations for such a difficult situation. He praised the report for highlighting the link between politics and displacement in Burma, agreeing that displacement is entirely internally driven and the result of military policy.

He considered problematic, however, simply calling for an expansion of humanitarian aid. Burma, he noted, is very different from other countries for many reasons, among them that there is a clearly identified opposition – the NLD, which has made its position on aid well known over the years. There is not a single sector in Burma where the regime has acted in the interest of its own people. It is one of the most repressive regimes in *all* areas of freedom.

He wondered what development aid could realistically accomplish under a regime like this and disagreed with Refugees International's rationale for aid expansion. He was not aware of any study that links humanitarian aid to democracy. He found troubling the idea that aid could be thought of as a tool of national identity building in Burma, where there are so many ethnic identities.

Joseph observed that the report did not issue any real challenges to the government. Why didn't Refugees International call for the same kind of strong action as it did in Darfur?

With respect to Refugees International's recommendation that the NLD raise awareness internally of the problem of displacement, he pointed out that since there is no independent media in Burma, it is unclear how any type of public information campaign could occur. With respect to the recommendations for action to be taken by UN envoys and Special Rapporteurs, he pointed out that the regime has not responded to the international community's pleas for better behavior, even when coming from Kofi Annan himself. Why would the regime respond to carrots at this point, he asked, when these have been dangled for so long? With respect to the recommendation that Burmese officials be invited to global forums on internal displacement so that they understand that they are not the only ones dealing with the problem, he emphasized that Burma does not need to recognize that it has an IDP problem, it has *created* the IDP problem. Burma requires a different approach. The Global Fund and MSF pulled out and, in fact, Burma is the only place in the world where the Global Fund has pulled out. Why should others be able to do what these agencies failed to accomplish?

Veena Siddharth said that Human Rights Watch agreed that the humanitarian crisis in Burma is worse now and demands a response. However, she questioned whether the expansion of aid could really control the spread of the displacement crisis in the region. She reiterated some of Joseph's points, including cautioning against making a link between aid and national identity. Siddharth was curious to know more about what it means to be a CBO (i.e. what type of registration or allegiance is required). She questioned whether CBOs could be neutral. She did not think that the fact that Burma receives the least amount of aid per capita was a meaningful statistic, noting that populations in countries that receive greater aid per capita were not necessarily better off. Moreover, the comparison to other restrictive governments such as Cuba and Vietnam was not entirely appropriate – Burma is different. Speaking about the Global Fund, Siddharth noted that Burma is not the only country from which the Fund has withdrawn; it pulled out of the Ukraine as well. Finally, Siddharth noted the report focused primarily on building the case for increased humanitarian aid but neglected to focus adequately on exactly *how* this should be done.

DISCUSSION

One participant voiced surprise that there was no mention of China and asked whether there was evidence that Chinese immigrants were displacing Burmese (including ethnic minorities). Shukla responded that while Chinese immigrants were not displacing people, they were increasingly taking over jobs and in other ways increasing the economic vulnerability of the Burmese. As to China's attitude toward IDPs in Burma, it was noted that at the UN China generally neither supported nor criticized initiatives surrounding internal displacement (e.g. the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement). Their overall position however was against interference in the internal affairs of other countries.

According to a Burma expert at the meeting, the central problem in Burma was not democracy but ethnic minority relations. This was a problem that would continue to trouble the country even with a democratic government. He reiterated that Aung San Suu Kyi was ambiguous about humanitarian aid to these groups.

The question of how many CBOs and international groups Refugees International had met in Burma was posed. The RI team met with about 30 international agencies and donors and 3 or 4 CBOs; these groups reported having autonomy in their actions.

Refugees International was asked if it would place any conditions on their recommendation that there be increased humanitarian aid programs to Burma. Shukla responded that the recommendation for increasing aid did not include conditions. Another participant asked, as Joseph had, what would have to occur in Burma for Refugees International's recommendations to be more robust like in the case of Darfur – with blue helmets on the ground.

Joel Charny of Refugees International responded by speaking of his experience in Cambodia in the 1980s. He noted that despite perceptions to the contrary, the

government there was not monolithic and there was indeed some space in which to work and establish relations. In Burma, as well, the government is not monolithic and some space exists, but the UN has not yet adapted a strategy to take advantage of the openings that are present.

Brian Joseph responded that while the government in Burma is not monolithic, the military leader is as powerful as a king. He agreed that the challenge is to find the openings that exist, but when even the most basic programs (e.g. Global Fund's AIDS and disease programs) fail, it is difficult to see how this can be done.

With respect to the recent visit to Burma by UN Under Secretary General for Political Affairs Ibrahim Gambari, Joseph believed that it had no impact within Burma, although it would lead to greater attention in New York. Burma, he noted, has consistently snubbed the UN.

Shukla responded, emphasizing that the goal of the report had been to identify practical recommendations for what could be done in Burma to help IDPs. In Refugees International's view, there is indeed space in which to work and shortcuts can be found, but funding is needed. The purpose of the recommendation to bring Burmese officials to forums on internal displacement was to make the issue less politically sensitive by showing that this is a situation that other countries are dealing with as well, and make the government realize that it should allow humanitarian agencies to access the displaced. She emphasized that despite the fact that the government is unpredictable, aid agencies are making a big difference in the lives of people on the ground, and this is what is important. Shukla also said that it is not possible to describe in a public document how humanitarian aid is reaching sensitive areas through partnerships between international and local organizations. She encouraged people to travel inside Burma to obtain first hand information on IDPs and the impact of humanitarian aid.

Cohen closed the seminar by recalling her experience in Ethiopia during the 1980s, when despite the warnings she received from the US government that she would not find space in which to work, she successfully opened the US Public Affairs program. Just because it is a difficult case and people believe that there is no space for successful assistance, it does not mean that agencies and the international community should not try.

-Prepared by Joy Miller

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Dawn Calabria, *Refugees International*
Ruth Cernea, *Anthropologist*
Patricia Chaplin, *U.S. Agency for International Development*
Joel Charny, *Refugees International*
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Veronika Martin, *InterAction*
Jana Mason, *International Rescue Committee*
Christna Moon, *U.S. Campaign for Burma*
Steven Most, *Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement*
Brooke Okland, *National Democratic Institute for International Affairs*
Susan O'Sullivan, *U.S. Department of State*
Anne Richard, *International Rescue Committee*
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