

Layers of Limbo: Governing Vulnerable & Displaced Populations in Thailand

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General Project Overview

Objective: To conduct a theoretically informed examination of the political problems that complicate the efforts of international, domestic, and non-state actors to govern flows of refugees, migrants, and vulnerable populations in Thailand.

Abstract: In Thailand, the international community is confronted by one of the most protracted and complicated migration crises in the world. By examining this complex issue from the vantage point of a variety of stakeholders – the Royal Thai Government (RTG), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other international organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community-based organizations (CBOs), and donor governments (e.g. the United States) – our project aims to illuminate the divergent, at times contradictory, incentives that undermine cooperative efforts to find ‘durable solutions’ to protect vulnerable populations over the longer term. The project then draws from literature on experimental forms of governance to evaluate alternative pathways to overcome collective action problems that could have both theoretical and policy implications

Methodology

Methodology: The larger research design employs a “hub and spoke” organizational model. Each student researcher chose to focus on a single particular aspect of governance of forced migration in Thailand (see abstracts), producing individual literature reviews prior to fieldwork in order to provide the context necessary to collect and analyze primary source data – primarily from over 30 elite interviews with a range of stakeholders involved in the governance of vulnerable populations. This design has the advantage of allowing for individual specialization, while ultimately strengthening the team’s understanding of the central research question through the identification of cross-cutting themes and the analysis of the theoretical and policy implications thereof.



The Resource Curse: Development Displacement in Burma

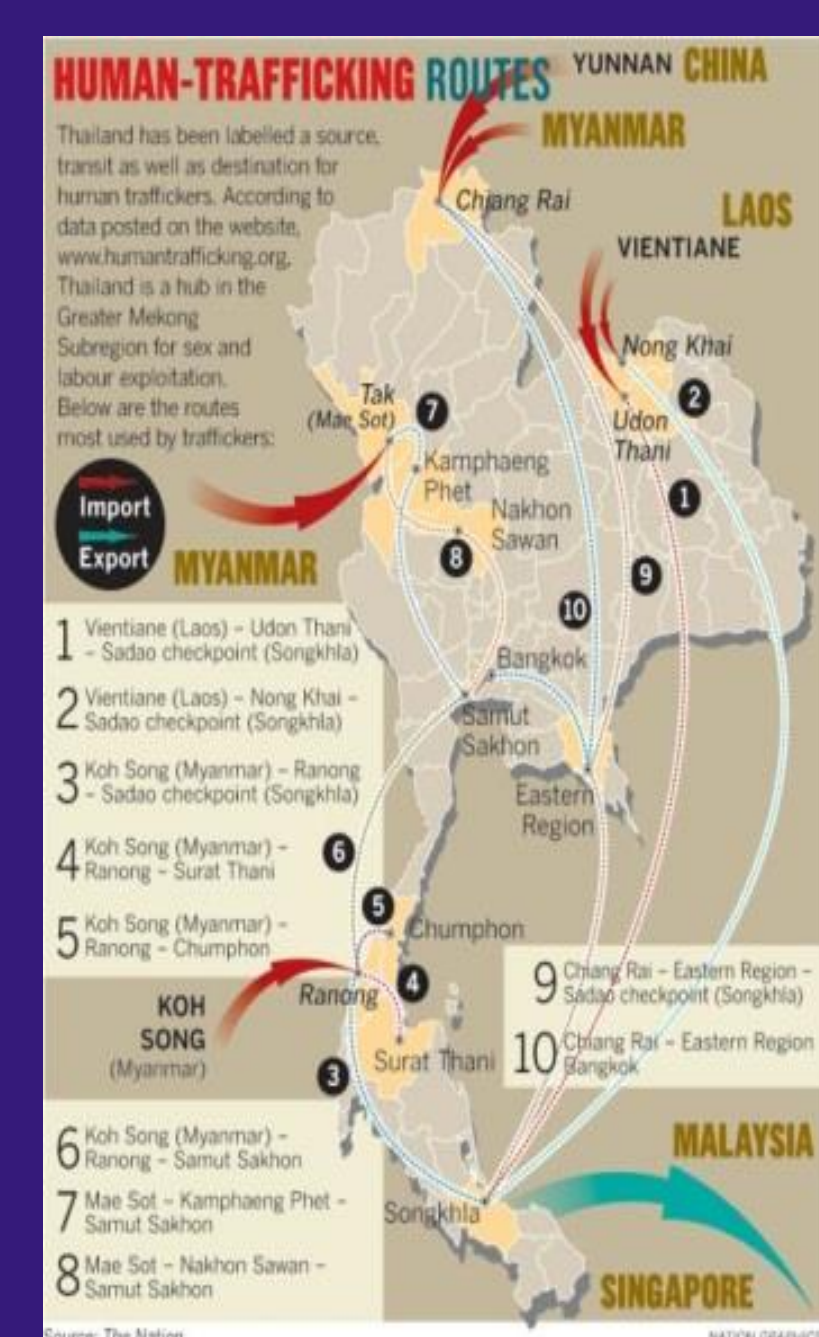
Although the Burmese refugee crisis has long been driven by the political oppression of ethnic populations, many observers overlook the critical dimension of development displacement. As one of the most resource-rich countries in Asia, Burmese energy development projects have compounded the displacement problem, forcing tens of thousands from their homes over the past three decades. This paper explores the causes and consequences of development displacement against the rapidly evolving political backdrop in contemporary Burma. As the removal of sanctions and rapid influx of Western capital ushers in an unprecedented era of energy development, serious questions remain about the capacity of the Burmese military, civilian leadership, and ethnic groups to achieve a sustainable peace. Ultimately, this study suggests that without reforming the rule of law and addressing key issues such as land rights, foreign-funded resource extraction projects will continue to displace ethnic populations in Burma and undermine prospects for long-term stability.



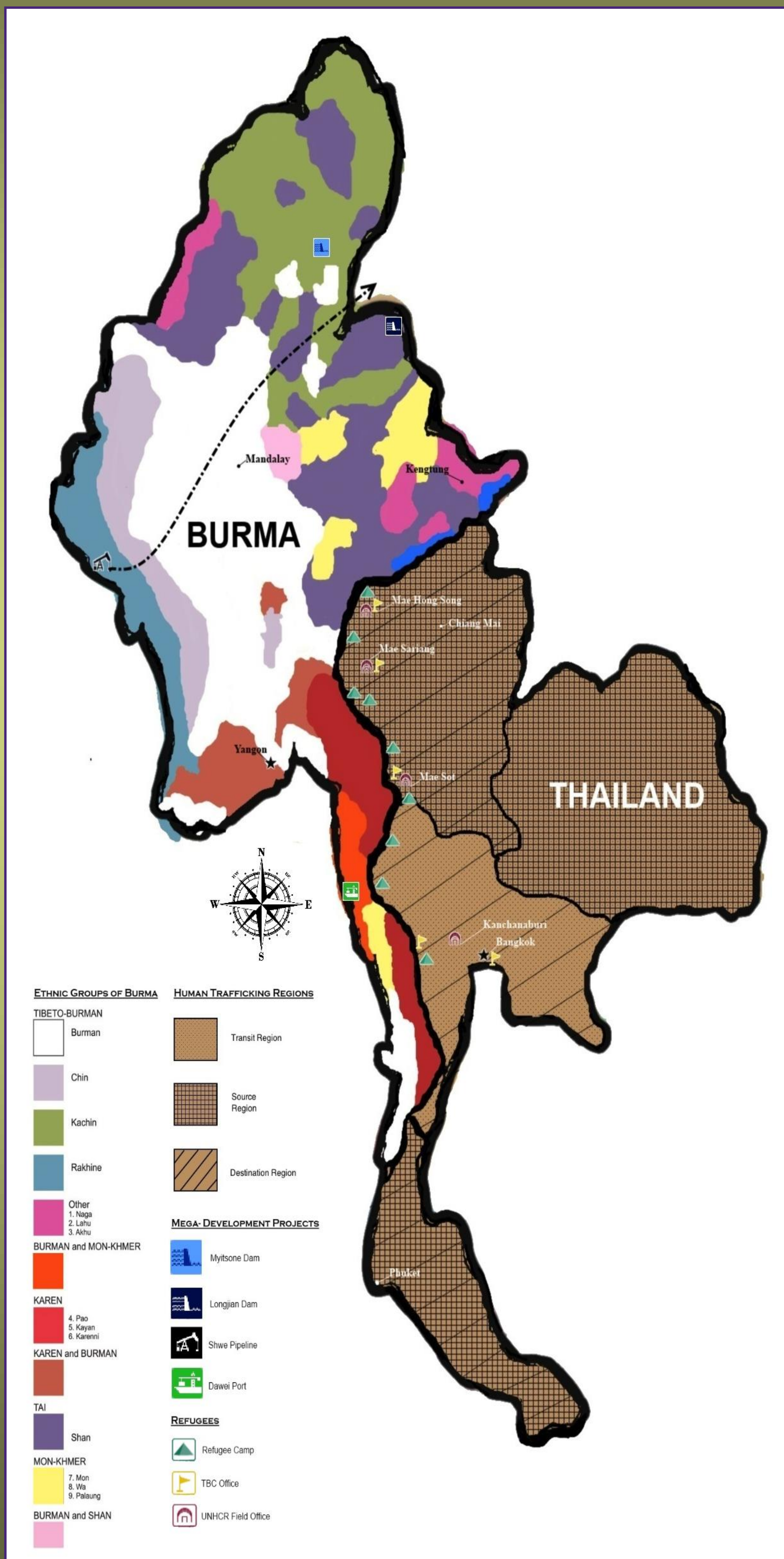
Burmese Refugees: Rethinking Durable Solutions

The discourse surrounding the Thai/Burma refugee crisis routinely invokes the humanitarian language of neutrality and “durable solutions” to the “problem” including repatriation, resettlement, and local integration. This study asks whether the framing of these solutions, and the humanitarian discourse in which it is embedded, may have unintended consequences. Its specific aims are threefold: 1) to access the practicality of the three durable solutions; 2) to determine the degree of impartiality and ambition of humanitarian organizations working within the Burmese refugee crisis; and 3) to examine the effect this has on achieving a solution. Based on analysis of interviews with leading experts and officials from many of the organizations vested in this issue, the study argues that the “durable solutions” are misleading and are rather “durable delusions.” The paper ultimately contends that the humanitarian community has failed those they attempt to protect with regard to all three categories of study. The durable solutions are impractical and frame the issue such that the refugees are themselves the problem, which inherently cripples any possible chance for a real solution.

Exploitation, Inc.: Labor Trafficking in Southeast Asia



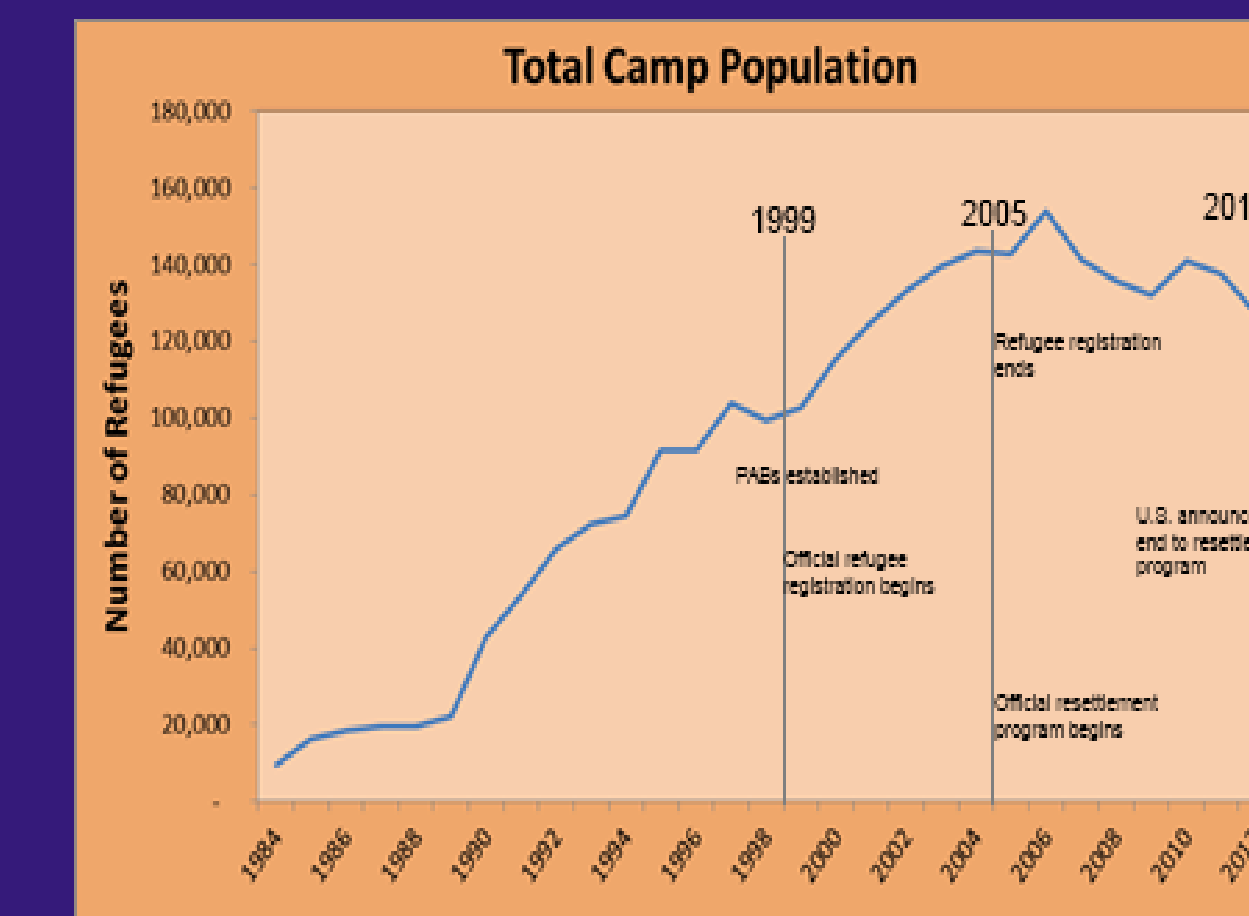
Many observers associate human trafficking with the sex trade. Although sex trafficking remains a serious problem, such a narrow association leaves out the estimated 21 million victims of labor trafficking, which constitutes approximately 70% of the total trafficked population worldwide. This problem is particularly pronounced in Asia, where 30% of total global profits from trafficking are generated. Drawing on over 30 interviews conducted in the summer of 2012, this study examines the conditions that have allowed labor trafficking to flourish in Southeast Asia, with an emphasis on the forced labor problem in Thailand. It identifies the key factors that have fueled labor trafficking in the region, particularly the role of regional migration patterns, push and pull factors fueled by poverty and economic opportunity, and the Thai government’s insufficient response to human trafficking. It concludes by highlighting some best practices in counter-trafficking efforts in Thailand.



Is the Backseat Better? The History of the UNHCR on the Thai-Burma Border

As the international organization responsible for governing refugee affairs, the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) is typically granted a considerable amount of authority in refugee crises. However, given that Thailand is not a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention and the unique historical origins of the Burmese refugee crisis, the UNHCR has been forced to take a more backseat role along the Thai-Burma border. While much of the literature examines the power and pathologies of the UNHCR, few have analyzed the question: is the UNHCR necessarily the appropriate governor of refugee aid? Drawing on historical institutionalist insights and over 30 elite interviews conducted in the summer of 2012, this study aims to fill this gap by examining the evolution of the unconventional role of the UNHCR along the Thai-Burma border. Its findings suggest that a more restricted UNHCR role may, in fact, have significant upsides because it empowers more community-based governance and allows the agency to concentrate on what it does best: protection work.

Province/City	TBC			NOI	UNHCR
	Verified Caseload*	Feeding Figures*	Population*	Population*	Population*
Chiang Mai	207	207	584	584	
Wang Heng (Ethnic Shan)					
Min Hsing San	8,240	6,895	12,844	12,755	10,211
Ban Mae Nai Soi	1,708	1,708	3,442	3,377	1,819
Ban Mae Surt	6,532	6,566	12,881	12,881	4,480
Mae La Dee	17,518	7,339	14,855	14,852	9,229
Mae Na Ma Luang	27,000	27,000	44,100	43,600	30,887
Subtotal					
TBC					
Mae La	22,740	22,389	45,127	44,783	29,289
Umpang Mai	7,267	7,027	14,814	14,575	10,346
Noi Poo	7,249	6,707	13,865	13,756	8,483
Subtotal	37,256	36,123	73,707	73,114	48,118
Sancharaburi					
Ban Don Yang	1,820	1,827	3,447	3,447	2,075
Tham Hin	11,421	3,143	6,987	6,264	4,264
Total	67,723	44,025	100,743	100,162	62,054



Community-Based Management: An Alternative Approach to Refugee Governance

Given the protracted nature of the Thai-Burma refugee crisis and the unique political and historical context in which it evolved, NGOs have assumed a leading role in governing refugee affairs along the Thai-Burmese border. Over time, these NGOs developed an alternative model for refugee governance that differs from the more conventional and hierarchical aid models used around the world. This study examines the nontraditional community based management (CBM) approach to refugee governance found along the Thai-Burma border where NGOs work in partnership with the refugee community through capacity building programs that enable refugees to self-govern. Through formalized education, livelihood programs, and vocational training opportunities these refugees effectively manage the camps, distribute food, and run the camp justice system. Drawing elite interviews with relevant NGOs, IOs, and aid agencies in Thailand, this study explores the potential for person-centric development and localized efforts in refugee governance. While daunting challenges in refugee governance continue to exist, the findings suggest that a CBM model and accompanying decentralized camp management strategies offer more potential to be effective in both the short- and long-term than traditional, top-down models of humanitarian assistance.

