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The Realities Facing Myanmar Ethnic Minorities on the Border with Thailand

UNITED NATIONS HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL (UNHRC)

Background Guide: Prepared by Alessandra and Anita

About the Authors:

Hi everyone,
My name is Anita Amankona, and I'm a fourth-year Global Studies and Political Science student. I'm deeply passionate about international development, human rights, and international infrastructure, particularly how policy and global institutions can shape more equitable outcomes.
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Hi! My name is Alessandra Suski and I am a third year Global Studies student taking a minor in Legal Studies at Laurier! In the future, I hope to go to law school or work somewhere within the field of law.

Introduction and Background

The realities facing Myanmar's ethnic minorities along the Thailand–Myanmar border reflect a protracted human rights and displacement crisis shaped by decades of armed conflict, political exclusion, and insufficient regional protection mechanisms. Myanmar is a deeply multiethnic state composed of more than one hundred ethnic groups, many of whom have historically experienced marginalization, discrimination, and violence under successive military-dominated governments. Ethnic minority communities located in border regions, particularly in southeastern Myanmar, have been disproportionately affected by conflict and military operations, resulting in sustained patterns of cross-border displacement into Thailand.

The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has identified Myanmar as a country of ongoing human rights concern, documenting widespread and systematic violations affecting civilian populations, particularly ethnic minorities living in conflict-affected areas (OHCHR, 2025). Rather than constituting a short-term refugee emergency, displacement along the Thailand–Myanmar border has evolved into a chronic condition characterized by legal precarity, restricted mobility, and long-term dependence on humanitarian assistance. For the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), this border region illustrates how unresolved conflict, restrictive migration governance, and declining humanitarian resources intersect to produce enduring human rights risks for ethnic minority populations.

Myanmar's contemporary displacement crisis is rooted in the country's post-independence political development and its adversarial relationship with ethnic minority groups. Following independence from British colonial rule in 1948, Myanmar failed to establish an inclusive political framework capable of accommodating ethnic diversity, resulting in persistent internal armed conflict between the central state and ethnic armed organizations. In response to political exclusion, cultural suppression, and the centralization of power, many ethnic minority groups mobilized armed resistance movements, entrenching conflict particularly in border regions.

Military rule, which shaped Myanmar's political system for much of the late twentieth century, intensified displacement through counterinsurgency strategies that relied on forced relocation, village destruction, and widespread human rights abuses in ethnic regions. OHCHR has noted that patterns of violence and repression against ethnic minorities have remained a defining feature of Myanmar's human rights landscape, especially in conflict-affected border areas(OHCHR, 2025). These practices were especially concentrated in southeastern Myanmar, directly adjacent to the Thai border, where civilian populations were frequently targeted as part of broader efforts to weaken ethnic armed organizations.

Beginning in the 1980s and 1990s, large-scale displacement into Thailand became a structural feature of Myanmar's internal conflicts, as ethnic minorities fled sustained violence and instability. Refugee camps were established along the border as emergency measures; however, over time these camps evolved into semi-permanent spaces of containment rather than pathways toward durable protection or resettlement. Thailand's long-standing reliance on temporary protection arrangements institutionalized this temporariness, leaving displaced Myanmar nationals without formal refugee status, restricted access to employment, and limited freedom of movement.

The situation deteriorated further following Myanmar's 2021 military coup, which reignited armed conflict across multiple ethnic regions and generated new waves of cross-border displacement into Thailand. OHCHR has reported that the escalation of conflict since the coup

has intensified human rights violations against ethnic minority civilians, compounding displacement and insecurity (OHCHR, 2025). These dynamics have been further exacerbated by reductions in humanitarian funding and constraints on aid delivery, worsening conditions in refugee camps and increasing vulnerability among undocumented populations outside them.

Collectively, these historical and contemporary factors demonstrate that the realities facing Myanmar's ethnic minorities along the Thailand–Myanmar border are the cumulative outcome of decades of political exclusion, militarization, and regional protection failures rather than a short-term humanitarian crisis.

Displacement and Life Along the Thai-Myanmar Border

Armed conflict between the Myanmar military and ethnic minority armed organizations has produced one of Southeast Asia's most protracted displacement situations. Myanmar military counter-insurgency strategies in minority-inhabited border regions have relied on coercive population control, including forced civilian relocation, generating both internal displacement and cross-border refugee flows into Thailand (Grundy-Warr & Wong, 2002). Large-scale movements intensified, following the 1988 crackdown and renewed fighting during the 1990s, contributing to the consolidation of the Thailand-Myanmar border as a long-term destination for displaced civilians, including an estimated 1-2 million Myanmar refugees and undocumented migrants in Thailand and approximately 120,000 people residing in border camps (Cardozo et al., 2004).

Despite the protracted nature of this displacement, many Karen and Karenni refugees remain without formal refugee recognition under Thai law and are instead classified as temporary migrants or "displaced persons," limiting freedom of movement, access to lawful employment, and essential services (Balčaitė, 2019; Nguyen, 2023). Camps have consequently evolved into semi-permanent settlements where residents are frequently confined, reliant on humanitarian assistance, and excluded from formal labour markets, reinforcing chronic poverty and economic dependency. Migrants and camp residents frequently rely on informal or precarious employment, often under exploitative conditions, due to their lack of legal status and restricted mobility (Chen et al., 2024).

Movement outside camps may expose individuals to arrest or deportation, further constraining livelihoods and access to education, healthcare, and documentation (Balčaitė, 2019; Chen et al., 2024; Nguyen, 2023). Women and adolescents face heightened vulnerabilities, including increased exposure to early marriage, adolescent pregnancy, and unsafe reproductive health conditions amid limited services and economic precarity (Asnong et al., 2018; Koning, 2019). Daily life is shaped by restricted opportunities; with limited access to education and frequent interruptions to schooling for migrant children.

Protection gaps continue to persist; ethnic minorities face arrest and deportation if found outside the camps, while Thailand continues to engage in pushback and removals despite protection risks, leaving displaced populations in a condition of prolonged uncertainty and limited legal security (Nguyen, 2023).

Human Rights Violations Facing Ethnic Minorities

Ethnic minority communities in Eastern Myanmar, particularly Karen and Karenni communities, have endured long-standing patterns of human rights violations, linked to armed conflict and militarized governance. The Myanmar military has relied on coercive tactics to weaken resistance and consolidate control, with civilians frequently targeted (Cook et al., 2015; Koning, 2019). Reported abuses include extrajudicial killings, torture, village destruction, land confiscation, extortion, and forced displacement, including relocation into sites or camps where movement is restricted and communities are placed under military authority. Such relocation policies aim not only to remove civilian support for armed groups but also to control food supplies and labour, thereby undermining community survival strategies (Cook et al., 2015; Grundy-Warr & Wong, 2002).

Forced labour remains widespread, with civilians compelled to serve as porters, construct military infrastructure, and provide logistical support to armed forces. At times facing use as human shields, forced landmine clearing, and child recruitment (Cook et al., 2015). These violations undermine livelihoods, food security, education, and health, driving onward displacement and entrenching vulnerability (Cook et al., 2015).

Women and girls face acute risks across the displacement cycle. Sexual violence, including rape, has been documented as a tactic of intimidation and control, and women along the Thailand-Myanmar border remain exposed to exploitation and ongoing insecurity within and outside camp settings (Cook et al., 2015; Koning, 2019). The cumulative psychological impact is severe: more than 85% of Karen refugees report life-threatening war trauma, including witnessing violence and losing family members, with lasting physical and mental health impacts among displaced populations (Cook et al., 2015; Cardozo et al., 2004). These human rights violations are not isolated incidents, but form a structural driver of both displacement and protracted humanitarian need.

International Response

Humanitarian assistance along the Thailand-Myanmar border is delivered primarily by international non-governmental organizations and community-based ethnic service providers, which support camp and border populations through food and shelter assistance, education programming, healthcare delivery, and protection monitoring. Abrupt donor funding withdrawals

risk major reduction to core services; especially health clinics aand services, leading to extreme implications for camp residents' access to basic needs. This response operates within significant political and administrative constraints and remains highly dependent on external financing; service availability and coverage can contract when humanitarian budgets decline (Hou, 2024).

In the absence of durable legal protection, assistance functions largely as a humanitarian substitute rather than a rights-based framework. Most displaced persons lack formal legal status in Thailand, protection depends on administrative tolerance rather than enforceable legal guarantees, leaving refugees vulnerable to policy changes, arrest, refoulement, or deportation (Nguyen, 2023). Consequently, humanitarian aid mitigates immediate suffering but does not resolve structural protection deficits or provide long-term legal security to civilians(Nguyen, 2023; Hou, 2024).

Nevertheless, Thailand has adopted a "whole-of-government" approach to refugee management, involving coordinated action across multiple state agencies, including the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), to develop refugee screening mechanisms and management procedures. While this framework represents an effort to systematize protection, implementation remains cautious and limited. Many displaced persons continue to live in legal uncertainty without pathways to durable solutions such as local integration, safe return, or resettlement (Nguyen, 2023).

Problem / Implications

The situation along the Thailand-Myanmar border represents a protracted human rights problem rather than a residual humanitarian crisis. The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has identified ongoing and systematic violations against ethnic minorities in Myanmar as a primary driver of sustained displacement, particularly in conflict-affected border regions (OHCHR, 2025). For communities such as the Karen and Karenni, displacement is structural, shaped by repeated exposure to violence, including forced labour, torture, village destruction, and the targeting of civilians.

Crossing into Thailand does not resolve these risks. Instead, displacement shifts into a condition of prolonged legal and social precarity, where refugees are confined to border camps, face restrictions on movement, and lack access to formal employment or legal status. Research indicates that this legal uncertainty is systemic rather than temporary, reinforcing long-term containment rather than pathways to protection (Nguyen, 2023; Balčaitė, 2019). Since the 2021 military coup, renewed conflict has generated additional displacement while simultaneously limiting humanitarian access and straining aid delivery, further weakening protection environments (OHCHR, 2025).

For the United Nations Human Rights Council, the Thailand–Myanmar border illustrates how unresolved conflict combined with inadequate regional protection frameworks produces enduring human rights risk. OHCHR has warned that continued violations against ethnic minorities, when met with temporary protection arrangements and limited accountability, entrench displacement rather than resolve it (OHCHR, 2025).

The persistence of legal precarity has concrete consequences. Displaced populations remain vulnerable to exploitation, detention, and forced return, while prolonged exclusion from legal status undermines access to education, healthcare, and livelihoods, increasing long-term dependency on humanitarian assistance (Nguyen, 2023; Balčaitė, 2019). At the same time, constraints on aid delivery risk stabilising displacement without addressing its underlying causes, reinforcing containment rather than enabling durable solutions (Hou, 2024). Collectively, these dynamics underscore the need for sustained UNHRC attention to accountability for violations, protection gaps in host states, and rights-based approaches that move beyond long term camp based containment.

Tasks of the Committee

Given the protracted displacement crisis affecting Myanmar's ethnic minorities along the Thailand-Myanmar border, and the ongoing pattern of human rights violations driving civilian flight, the United Nations Human Rights Council has been prompted to consider the role of the international community in mitigating the harms faced by displaced and borderland populations. Delegates are encouraged to think critically about how ethnic minority communities particularly Karen, Karenni, and other border-region groups, have been affected not only by armed conflict in Myanmar but also by prolonged legal insecurity and limited protection after crossing into Thailand.

Remembering that both Myanmar and Thailand are sovereign states, delegates will be expected to propose creative and impactful solutions that meaningfully address both the immediate protection needs of displaced populations and the longer-term structural conditions that sustain displacement. In doing so, delegates may draw on powers similar to those held by the General Assembly. Proposed measures should focus on strengthening international cooperation, improving human rights monitoring and accountability, supporting civil society and humanitarian actors, and promoting protection sensitive approaches to displacement and border governance. Delegates may not authorize the use of force, impose sanctions, or exercise powers reserved for the Security Council.

Delegates should consider how UN agencies and international partners can better support ethnic minority populations along the Thailand-Myanmar border, including through improved humanitarian access, protection for women and adolescents, and expanded access to education,

healthcare, and lawful livelihoods. They should also reflect on how regional cooperation, including engagement with ASEAN, might contribute to responsibility-sharing and longer-term solutions for displaced communities. The continued instability in Myanmar and the absence of durable legal protections in host contexts make this challenge particularly complex, underscoring the need for coordinated, rights-based, and sustainable responses.

More information about the UNHRC can be found here: https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/hrc/home

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Background Guide: Prepared by Anya Russolo and Celine Pacheco

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Hello :) My name is Anya Russolo, and I'm a 3rd year student in the International Education Studies program at Laurier. I'm hoping to go into teaching when I graduate, and to obtain my Bachelor of Education! Follow your dreams! Keep being you unapologetically!

Hi, my name is Celine Pacheco. I'm in 3rd year International Education Studies Program. I aspire to become a teacher in the future, as I believe creating a safe and brave space for students is impactful.

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Realities Facing Ethnic Minorities on the Border

The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) is an intergovernmental body within the United Nations, responsible for promoting and protecting human rights globally. Established in March 2006, the UNHRC is composed of 47 member states that discuss human rights issues and strengthen the assistance of fundamental freedoms. Through reports, they have indicated that

Myanmar's ethnic minorities along the Thai border continue to experience significant challenges. Armed conflict has continued to be on the rise globally and has continued to spread into civilian spaces. The UNHRC also expresses that inequalities within and between countries are deepening as conflict, under-investment in crucial services, and economic barriers hinder progress (UNHRC, 2025).

This has contributed to approximately 68.5 million people forcibly displaced, the majority being women and children being disproportionately represented (UNHCR, 2018). These harmful effects include conflict, displacement, and related violence. Evidence from camp- and clinic-based settings highlights maternal and child mortality, malnutrition, intimate partner violence, trauma, and unmet healthcare needs. Linking specifically to maternal healthcare delivery, Perera et al. (2022) demonstrates that access to community-based reproductive health services is highly limited for displaced mothers along the Thailand-Myanmar border. This has resulted in increased low birthweight deliveries and pregnancy outcomes. The Thailand-Myanmar border region has become home of the longest-standing refugee and migrant populations globally, and with this, the ethnic health system presents the opportunity to examine how community-led healthcare models can respond to displacement and systemic gaps.

Information / Background of Myanmar-Thailand Border

The 2,400+ kilometre Myanmar-Thailand border is a major Southeast Asian passage stretching from Laos to the Andaman Sea, often defined by mountains and rivers. It also is characterized by migration and ongoing conflict-related displacement, along with over 80,000 refugees across nine camps (UNHCR, 2025). It is difficult to understand present day ethnic minority realities without looking at the historic Myanmar-Thai relations. Burma (current day

Myanmar), was under British colonial rule for a century, after it gained independence in 1948 it was hopeful for a bright future. However, they saw sectarian violence, militarization and poverty. It is argued that early leaders failed to sustain religious inclusion in the Burma constitution, contributing to the marginalization of minority populations, instead embedding provisions that privileged Buddhism and contributed to the marginalization of non-Buddhist religions minorities (Crouch, 2021). This foundational exclusion laid the groundwork for decades of conflict, forced displacement and the cross-border movement of ethnic minorities into neighbouring Thailand.

During more recent displacement, Thailand did not formally recognize Myanmar refugees. As explained in *Protecting the Human Rights of Refugees in Camps in Thailand: The Complementary Role of International Law on Indigenous Peoples*, Thailand is not party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 protocol. The country, as a member of the United Nations, is obligated to cooperate with the UNHCR in its responsibility to protect refugees in the camps. However the Thai government has not been willing to cooperate with the UNHCR and has continually reduced the role of UNHCR, particularly in the Thai-Burma border refugee camps (Nguyen, 2023). The refugee camps throughout the border are designated as 'temporary shelters', reinforcing the perception of displacement as short-term, despite the prolonged nature experienced by individuals and families who have lived at these sites since the mid 1980's (United Nations Network on Migration, 2024)

Problem: Gendered Issues

Gendered inequalities along the Thailand-Myanmar border are produced through the interaction of armed conflict and forced displacement, and women and girls have been disproportionately affected by Myanmar's decades-long history. Scholars note that women constitute the majority of displaced civilians who experience violence Myanmar. Studies found

that women who fled home destruction or deprivation were more likely to perceive oppression. Women born in Myanmar also experienced potential violence at the border, including severe livelihood and security threats. These threats were most prevalent among women that experienced the most forceful and abrupt displacement (Koning, 2019). Upon arrival in Thailand, these vulnerabilities are not resolved but instead reshaped. The Thai government refusal to grant formal refugee status has created conditions to legal precarity and reinforces gendered economic dependency and limits women's access to opportunities and upholds hierarchies. Gendered inequalities intersect with particular forms of violence and displacement experienced by ethnic minorities, qualitative research in Kayah state found that women's mobility was more restricted than men's due to fear of violence and gendered social norms that restrict women to the domestic sphere (Wilkins, 2017). Military counter-insurgency campaigns conducted by the Tatmadaw (the official armed forces of Myanmar) targeted civilian villages through forced relocation, forcing entire communities to flee toward Thailand. Women were disproportionately affected during this process, experiencing heightened exposure to sexual violence, forced labour, and the loss of social protection networks during displacement (South, 2011). Women's rights are further constrained by barriers to healthcare, education, and political participation.

Looking at reproductive care access for refugees in the border area, the barriers are closely linked to legal status and human rights violations. Looking at transportation needs, necessary work leave, language barriers, stigma at health facilities, or fear of arrest or deportation on the way to a facility (Koning et al., 2021), access to reproductive and maternal healthcare shows how legal status and human rights violations directly shape health outcomes for displaced women. Studying maternal healthcare delivery within actively displaced populations is

challenging, despite being frequently portrayed as passive victims, displaced women have often been at the forefront of responding to gender-based violence. As one UNHCR feature notes, though refugee women were seen as vulnerable or helpless, they are strong protectors and communities. Refugee-led initiatives along the Thai-Myanmar border demonstrate that women are not only affected by gender-based violence but actively organize solutions when given resources (Siegfried, 2021). Refugee-led initiatives along the Thai-Myanmar border demonstrates that when provided with resources and institutional support, women actively organize responses to gender-based violence, health access, and community well-being.

Problem: Education and at-risk youth care

Education for ethnic minority children from Myanmar living along the Thailand-Myanmar border has functioned not only as an area of learning, but as a critical form of protection linked to displacement, statelessness, and extensive conflict. Migrant and at-risk children, many of whom are Karen and other ethnic minorities, face significant barriers to accessing formal Thai education systems. These barriers include lack of legal status, language barriers, mobility due to forced migration, and discrimination. As a result, non-formal and community-based migrant schools play a central role in meeting both educational and child-protection needs.

In relation to children and youth, the UNHRC has underscored the importance of education as both a human right and a form of protection for displaced ethnic minority populations. Scholars have shown that migrant schools along the border play a vital role in supporting the overall wellbeing of at-risk youth. Kaji et al. (2016) expresses that migrant schools frequently function as ‘service delivery points’ for children who are excluded from state systems, specifically those described as “hard-to-reach migrant populations.” This highlights

how schools become key access points for basic healthcare, including immunization services. Although overall vaccination coverage among migrant school children remained below Thai national averages, the authors found that “approximately 83% of the children… received all of the offered vaccinations in a timely manner” through school-based programs (Kaji et al., 1041). This demonstrates the capacity of migrant schools to as well reduce barriers to essential health services in the pathway of education.

The protective function of migrant schools has also extended to socio-emotional support and child safeguarding. By providing stable routines, trusted adult supervision, and peer networks, these institutions trying to provide higher education offer a sense of normality in otherwise unstable displacement contexts. Scholars argue that such environments can avoid the risk of child labour, exploitation, and early marriage, which overly affects displaced and undocumented youth. In this way, migrant schools operate not only as educational institutions, but as multi-purpose protective spaces that integrate learning, health, and social support, reinforcing the UNHRC’s framing of education as a critical intervention for the protection and long-term well-being of displaced children and youth (UNHRC, 2025).

Beyond access and care, education is also closely tied to identity, well-being, and community resilience. Gyi and Waters (2023) show that Karen mother-tongue based education along the Thai-Burmese border strengthens cultural identity and supports a sense of belonging among displaced youth by positioning language as central to both learning and community survival. Scholars argue that mother-tongue based education allows Karen children to “see themselves reflected in the curriculum,” stating that ethnic identity in contexts where displacement and marginalization often lead to culture removal (Gyi and Waters, 2023). For at-risk youth who have experienced violence, forced migration, or prolonged insecurity, such as

culturally grounded education contributes to emotional stability, community cohesion, and collective resilience. These components are then often protected in protracted displacement settings. The UNHRC has similarly emphasized education as a protective factor of involvement, noting that an inclusive and culturally responsive learning environment can decrease distress, reduce protection risks, and reinforce unity among refugee populations. In this sense, education functions not only as a tool for skill development and future livelihoods, but also as a critical source for preserving identity along ongoing displacement.

Response by Committee and Tasks

In this context, the United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees plays a protection oriented role in responding to the displacement of Myanmar ethnic minorities along the Thailand-Myanmar border. The biggest barrier is the lack of formal refugee recognition in Thailand undermines this protection, and between January and March of 2024 the UNHCR provided legal services to 250 individuals and facilitated 14 individuals with access to the Thai justice system (UNHCR Multi-Country Office Thailand, 2024). Myanmar refugees in border camps remain dependent on humanitarian assistance and community-based service provision, and there are limited options available. In June 2024, the High Commissioner for Human Rights met with civil society organizations and a diverse range of Myanmar diaspora, they were appealing for greater assistance and funding to be delivered across borders directly through grassroots organizations and other community mechanisms. They indicated to the High Commissioner that traditional crossborder aid deliveries would most likely fail to reach people in need due to disagreements between military and opponents who should undertake the service delivery, especially in conflict-affected areas (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2024).

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