THE POLITICAL PROBLEM OF KAREN REFUGEES: THAI AND INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract— The plight of Karen refugees on the Thai-Burmese border became a major focus of international attention starting in 1984. However, while Karen refugee movements predated 1984, these movements were largely ignored at the time, and remain a scholarly blind spot. Analysis of documentary evidence and data collected from oral interviews demonstrates that Karen refugee movements into Thailand began as early as the 1950s, and that conditions for them to occur existed throughout the period of Burmese independence. These refugee movements were ignored by the international community, at first due to the remoteness of the Thai-Burmese border region, and later due to the outbreak of a larger and more politically sensitive refugee crisis on the Thai-Cambodian border. This slow-motion refugee crisis gradually increased in magnitude until, in 1984, the international community could no longer ignore it. This serves to illustrate the politically charged nature of international responses to refugee movements, and demonstrates the importance of looking beyond the official sources of host countries and the international community.

Keywords— Burma, Thailand, Karen (Ethnic Group), Refugees.

I. INTRODUCTION

The definition of the term "refugee," and the international status and recognition of refugees, are fluid and volatile issues, constantly changing with the political sensitivities of the time. Nowhere is this more apparent than in mainland Southeast Asia, a region which experienced some of the most notable refugee movements of the past century. While refugees from protracted warfare in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos between the 1960s and the 1980s attracted much attention from the international community, refugees from perpetual unrest and communal violence in Burma were all but ignored until the mid-1980s. While the volume of refugees from Burma to Thailand increased in 1984, particularly amongst the Karen ethnic group, this was not the start of refugee movement across the Thai-Burmese border. Documentary evidence, as well as the testimony of Karen community leaders living in Mae Sot on the Thai-Burmese border, shows that such movements began as early as the 1940s, and increased steadily in the 1960s and 1970s. While the gradual increase in the size of refugee movements can at least partially explain the growing international attention to the issue of Karen refugees, political factors, specifically, Burma's status as a neutral entity in the Cold War, provide an equally valid explanation.

II. DEFINING "REFUGEE"

"Refugee" is a politically charged word, and one which has proven difficult to define. The "convention definition," recorded in the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, is the closest there is to a standard definition. As per the 1951 convention, a refugee is one who, "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it."

While this is a straightforward definition, which effectively incorporates most of those who would now be considered refugees, its interpretation is subject to political considerations. The 1951 convention was created in the context of the Cold War, and was specifically designed to respond to the post-World War 2 refugee movements in Europe. These refugee movements, while often ethnic, were also frequently political, and Charles Keely (1996) notes that a major purpose of the 1951 convention was to discredit communism by facilitating the transfer of political refugees to anti-Communist nations.

However, the post-war decades quickly demonstrated that refugees were not an exclusively European phenomenon. By the end of the 1950s, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was involved in numerous locations across Africa and Asia (Gallagher, 1989). Within this context, refugees came to represent a failure of the state system (Keely, 1996). As such, they are managed by an "international refugee regime," centered upon UNHCR, and consisting of treaties, agencies, and NGOs (Keely, 1996). The preferred approach of the international refugee regime, according to Keely, is to treat refugee movements as an aberration, and attempt a return to the status quo, resettling refugees in their home country, under conditions similar to those that existed before the events that generated the refugee crisis.

In addition to the international refugee regime, the political motivations of the host country also play a large role in the treatment of refugees. Karen Jacobsen (1996) notes that relations between the sending country and the host country determine the treatment of refugees, as does the host country's concern for its international image. In addition to this, the international refugee regime was a product of Cold War politics (Keely, 2001), and as such, when examining twentieth century refugee movements, the Cold War alignment of the countries involved is an important factor.

Within this framework, it is natural that Karen refugees from Burma to Thailand would attract less international attention than refugees to Thailand from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. In 1975, the collapse of pro-western regimes in the latter three countries thrust them to the center of world attention, and ensured that the United States and its regional allies would prioritize the resulting refugee crisis. By contrast, Burma's neutral stance in the Cold War meant that refugees entering Thailand from Burma in the 1970s would not have received the same amount of international attention.

III. CONDITIONS FOR REFUGEE MOVEMENTS

The conditions for refugee movements have existed in Burma from its independence, and the Karen have always been one of the Burma's most vulnerable populations. Ethnic conflict, authoritarian rule, and the political and economic fragility of the Burmese state, have combined to create an environment in which the potential for Karen refugee movements to surrounding states is always present.

Aristide Zolberg, Astri Suhrke, and Sergio Aguayo (1989) identify three sources of refugee movements in post-colonial Asia: ethnic conflict, revolutionary conflict, and authoritarian rule. All three have existed in Burma since at least the 1940s, and ethnic conflict and authoritarian rule have particularly impacted the Karen. Keely (1996) presents another three sources: the presence of multiple national identities, disagreement as to the structure of the state, and political or economic weakness. Along with the factors identified by Zolberg et al (1989), Zolberg (1983) also identifies post-colonial nation-building as a refugee generating process, with those who reject the majority nationality being subject to ethnic persecution.

Ethnic conflict between the Burmese national establishment and the Karen pre-dates Burmese independence. Under the British, the Karen were strongly associated with colonial rule. Along with other highland groups such as the Chin and Kachin, they had a strong representation in the British-led Burma Defense Force (Hall, 1981). In the early twentieth century, Karen nationalism frequently found itself at odds with mainstream Burmese nationalism. In 1921, Burmese nationalists aggressively opposed Karen communal representation in the colonial government (Po, 1928). In turn, Karen nationalists opposed the separation of Burma from British India and the establishment of home rule in the early 1930s (Smith, 1999). During the Saya San rebellion from 1930 to 1932, and again during the Japanese invasion of Burma during World War 2, competing nationalisms translated into communal violence, with Karen nationalists aiding the British, and Burmese nationalists targeting Karen communities (Smith, 1999). When Burma became independent from the British in 1948, an active Karen insurgency soon followed, and this insurgency has continued, in various forms, to the present day, making it one of the world's longest-lasting armed conflicts.

The conditions for a Karen exodus to Thailand have thus been in place since at least 1948 and possibly earlier. At the time of Burmese independence, the Karen stood as a nationally and culturally distinct group within British Burma, whose interests often collided with those of the mainstream Burmese nationalists. After independence, these tensions combined with the chaos of decolonization, political and economic unrest, and an eventual trend towards authoritarian rule to create the conditions for a steadily growing flow of refugees.

IV. REFUGEE MOVEMENTS BEFORE 1984: ORAL ACCOUNTS

In 1984, about 10,000 refugees of the Karen ethnic group crossed the border from Burma to Thailand, fleeing from a military offensive by the Burmese army. This year is listed by NGOs such as Burma Link, and by authors such as Hazel J. Lang (2002) as the year in which Burmese refugee movements into Thailand began. In truth, it was the year in which the international community began to notice refugee movements from Burma to Thailand, but not the year in which they began.

The Karen are, in fact, among the oldest refugees in Southeast Asia. In 1852, the Karen of Upper Burma fled to British territory after the Second Anglo-Burmese War (Cady, 1965), a movement which, despite occurring almost a century before the 1951 Convention, is a refugee movement by the convention definition.

Within the context of the twentieth century, refugee movements were already underway across the Thai-Burmese border during World War 2. Hazel Lang (2002) describes accounts recorded in Sangkhlaburi, on the border between Kanchanaburi Province in Thailand and Mon State in Burma, of refugees arriving during World War 2 and continuing steadily over the coming decades.

While the refugee camps along the Thai-Burmese border on which the international refugee regime focuses its attention did not exist until the 1980s,

communities of older Karen refugees, many of whom hold Thai citizenship, exist in various border towns. One such community is located in Mae Sot. The first language of this community is Karen, and many of its inhabitants do not speak Thai. The oldest member of the community claims, when asked, to have entered Thailand from Burma around 60 years ago. While she does not remember the exact date, her estimate would place her arrival in the early to mid 1950s, at least three decades prior to the establishment of the first refugee camps. While her community acknowledges her as their first member to arrive in Thailand, she did not arrive alone, but came with a group of refugees.

A look at events in Burma during these years shows that the conditions for refugee movements were stronger than ever. The Karen National Union (KNU) had been in open revolt against the Burmese government since 1949, and had been confined to the border regions for much of this period (Smith, 1999). Within this context, the eldest member of Mae Sot's Karen community made the journey across the border from her hometown of Myawaddy. It was a short journey, as the two towns stand adjacent to each other, divided only by the Moei River. She claims that she and her group were the first Karen in Mae Sot. Whether or not this is true, they would not be the last.

Another member of the Karen community in Mae Sot recalls internal displacement within Burma during this period. In 1949, the KNU almost seized Rangoon, but were repulsed at Insein, a town just to the north. The informant in question states that her mother was pregnant with her during the Siege of Insein, and that her family was forced to flee to the eastern border region, for fear of persecution, following the end of the battle. With internal displacement to border regions occurring within Burma proper, it logically follows that refugee movements would occur from the border regions as the tide continued to turn against the Karen.

V. REFUGEE MOVEMENTS BEFORE 1984: DOCUMENTATION

Many of these early refugee movements remain undocumented, due to the porous and poorly controlled nature of the border. However, the general trend was noted in contemporary accounts. They present an image that matches the oral accounts, with internal displacement giving way to gradually escalating refugee movements over the decades leading up to 1984.

The written accounts begin in the 1960s, a decade in which Burma turned to authoritarianism under the military government of Ne Win. The first of these accounts of which the author is aware, is an analytical description of Thailand in the early 1960s. In this account, D. Insor (1965) notes that Karen "sought refuge in Thai frontier areas" as a result of ethnic civil war in Burma. This account corresponds chronologically with the institution of the brutal Pya Ley Pya, or "Four Cuts," a counter-insurgency plan implemented following the Ne Win coup in 1962, which led to an escalation in internal displacement and the start of large-scale refugee movements into Thailand (BERG, 1998).

The written record also provide evidence of rapidly escalating refugee movements in the 1970s. In 1975, about 8,000 Karen fled across the Salween River into Thailand, a movement almost as large as the 1984 migration, and one which led to the establishment of a permanent refugee camp at Pa Daeng (BERG, 1998). In this period, the presence of refugees on the Thai-Burmese border was noted by officials and became an issue in Thai-Burmese diplomatic relations. In 1977, the Thai government acknowledged the presence of Christian minority refugees from Burma in Thailand, enumerating them at about 5000-6000 individuals. Thai Foreign Minister Upadit Pachariyangkun visited Rangoon and worked out an agreement to prevent rebel groups from making use of Thai territory, and promising that displaced persons from Burma would not be allowed to engage in "subversive or hostile acts" while in Thailand (Moscotti, 1978).

It can therefore be seen that refugee movements occurred from Burma to Thailand as far back as the 1950s, and possibly earlier. These refugee movements came to number in the thousands, and, while they were rarely documented, they did not go entirely unnoticed within Thailand. Nonetheless, they eluded the notice of the international community. Part of this is likely due to the relatively small magnitude of the refugee movements, as well as the fact that they were occurring in the remote border regions of Thailand and Burma, a zone controlled only loosely, if at all, by the national governments in Bangkok and Rangoon, and far beyond the notice of the outside world. However, when one pays attention to the larger political context of the time, it becomes clear that other events in the region held the attention of the international community, to the detriment of the situation in Burma.

VI. KAREN REFUGEES AND THE THAI GOVERNMENT

In the early 1950s, around the time that the oldest member of Mae Sot's Karen community entered Thailand, the Thai government did not effectively control its Burmese frontier. Thai government efforts to control the frontier region began in the 1950s and accelerated through the 1960s and 1970s, a process parallel to the intensifying conflict between the Karen and the Burmese army on the other side of the border. Therefore, while the situation of the Karen intensified in Burma, Thai control over, and attention to, the Burmese border also intensified. Either of these processes can serve to explain the growing attention

to Karen refugees. However, in these years, Thailand's policy was mainly directed towards its eastern frontier, and dealing with events on the western frontier was not the highest priority.

A member of the Karen community in Mae Sot describes the Thai-Burmese border in the 1950s as a wilderness. Thailand established the Border Patrol Police (BPP) in 1953 in an effort to consolidate its border region, but the BPP did not begin to make a serious effort to control the border until the early 1960s. Even then, they focused the majority of their attention on Thailand's eastern frontiers, and the Lao border in particular (Race, 1974). Communism was anathema to the Thai nationalist rhetoric of the time (Thongchai, 1994), and Laos was an active battleground in the Cold War, while Burma was neutral. Therefore, the Lao border, and the eastern frontiers in general, took higher priority.

As the 1960s and 1970s progressed, the refugee movements from Burma to Thailand intensified, but so too did the situation in Indochina. With the fall of pro-western regimes in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam in 1975, refugees began to flood across Thailand's eastern borders. These refugees came in numbers far beyond anything that would ever occur on the Burmese border, with over 200,000 refugees arriving in the first two years of the crisis alone (Lang, 2002). In addition to representing a greater humanitarian crisis, the Indochinese refugees heralded a new phase in the Cold War, and brought with them fears of growing Communist influence in the region. In short, as the refugee crisis on the Burmese border grew too large to ignore, the Thai government was distracted by a greater crisis on its eastern border.

Pragmatic and ideological political concerns thus guided Thai policy towards the refugee crises of the 1970s onwards, at least as much, and possibly more than, humanitarian concerns. A similar approach can be seen in the response of the international community.

VII. KAREN REFUGEES AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

As discussed above, the term “refugee” is an inherently political concept, defined in the context of the Cold War. As such, Thailand's response to the growing refugee crises of the 1970s, very much mirrors the international community's response.

1975 marks the start date of foreign interest in refugees in Thailand. In this year, in response to the escalating refugee crisis on the eastern border, the Thai government reluctantly agreed to let UNHCR establish a presence in Thailand (Lang, 2002). The UNHCR's attention, like that of the Thai government, was firmly focused on the crises on the eastern border. It is possible that they were aware of the Karen refugees on Thailand's western frontier, but if they were, they did not prioritize them. While this was likely due to difference in scale between the two refugee movements, the Burma Ethnic Research Group notes that refugee camps on the Burmese border were expanding rapidly in this period (BERG, 1998).

In addition, the difference in scale does not explain why the international refugee regime took no interest in refugees from Burma to Thailand prior to 1975. We have established above that such refugee movements did, indeed, take place, and that they grew more and more intense as the years went on. In 1975, it will be recalled, a refugee movement of 8,000 occurred from Burma to Thailand, leading to the establishment of a permanent refugee camp. This was hardly less than the refugee movement of between 9,000 and 10,000 in 1984 that scholars and NGOs label the start of the Karen refugee crisis.

Ultimately, two factors drew the attention of the international community away from the Thai-Burmese border, and towards the refugee camps in eastern Thailand. The first was the larger and more protracted nature of the Indochinese refugee crisis. The second was that, according to the ideological politics of the Cold War, the Indochinese refugees could be seen as a moral victory for the anti-Communist west.

CONCLUSIONS

In the late twentieth century, Thailand became the haven for two groups of refugees: those fleeing an ethnic conflict to the west, and those fleeing an ideological conflict to the east. The ideological refugees fled from an international conflict, the Cold War, which happened to have an active front in Southeast Asia. As such, the refugees themselves became a sort of ideological battleground, attracting massive international attention. By contrast, the ethnic refugees fled from a domestic conflict, little known and little noted at the time outside the borders of Burma. Two explanations, neither entirely satisfactory, can be offered as to the differences in the international response to the two refugee crises. As noted above, the most obvious reason may be that the Indochina refugee crisis was of a far greater scale than the Karen refugee crisis. It is clear, however, that politics also had much to do with it. For Thailand and the United States in particular, the fear of a Communist advance, as well as the need for a moral victory against the triumphant Communist governments of Indochina, made the Indochina refugee crisis an issue that needed to be dealt with quickly and publicly. By contrast, the Karen refugee crisis was a situation without any noted global political implications. While those who were aware of the situation certainly felt ample sympathy for the Karen, there was no deliberate effort to either publicize their situation or alleviate their suffering.

This lack of attention to the Karen prior to 1984 has led to the establishment of a mythology of sorts,

which says that the Karen refugee crisis only began in the year that the international community began to pay attention to it. The evidence shown above has demonstrated that this was not the case, and that the Karen refugee crises began at least as early as 1948. On one hand, the international community and the Thai government cannot be blamed for prioritizing the greater humanitarian crisis that eventually occurred on Thailand's eastern border. On the other, however, the fact that the Karen refugee crisis went unnoticed for so long demonstrates the importance of looking beyond immediate political concerns. Had the Karen come to the international community's attention sooner, more could possibly have been done to help them in the early years of their refugee movements, and the seemingly intractable refugee situation which exists today on the Thai-Burmese border could have been alleviated in the long term.

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