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Refugee return must be voluntary, insists UNHCR

By Cherry Thein | Monday, 22 April 2013

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As international funding for the refugee camps in Thailand starts to decline, UN refugee officials have repeated assurances that any return to Myanmar must be voluntary, based on each individual's informed decision, and must take place in safety and dignity.



A refugee walks past wooden houses at the Mae La refugee camp on the Thai-Myanmar border. Photo: AFP

Both the Thai and Myanmar governments have agreed that they will abide by those principles.

But the issue has started to heat up as international donors, noting the signing of ceasefire agreements in some of the country's long-running conflicts, have started to reduce their funding for the camps.

Ms Vivian Tan, spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Bangkok, told The Myanmar Times by email that the time for voluntary return to Myanmar was not ripe, as the ceasefires had not yet been translated into peace agreements.

She said there were still many challenges in southeastern Myanmar that had to be addressed before refugee returns from the nine border camps could take place in a safe and sustainable way.

"UNHCR does not have a timeframe to start organising returns, but we do need to work with the refugees, [community-based organisations] and NGOs now to make sure that when the time eventually comes, we will all be ready and not be scrambling to cope with the demand for repatriation assistance," Ms Tan said.

In February, an exile group called Burma Partnership released a documentary, 'Nothing About Us Without Us: Refugee's Voices About Their Return To Burma', in which refugees expressed their concerns about the timing and circumstances of possible repatriation, including where they would live after their return.

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UNHCR says it has sought to address the concerns raised in the documentary.

Ms Vicky Tennant, Head of Field Office, South-East, UNHCR Myanmar told The Myanmar Times that the refugees must be in a position to decide for themselves when conditions are right for them to go home.

"If and when they decide to do so, and provided they are able to do so voluntarily, safely, and in dignity, then UNHCR will work with the two governments concerned to ensure that they are able to do so in a way which makes sure that their rights are protected," she said.

"For now, however, we do not think that the conditions are in place yet. For example, landmine clearance has not yet started, and real progress in the peace process will be needed in order to build the confidence of refugees and give them the long-term security they need in order to return home permanently."

Ms Tennant said recent developments in Myanmar, particularly the ceasefire agreements and peace talks, had given rise to hopes that if progress continued many refugees would eventually be able to return home and re-establish their lives back in Myanmar.

She said the Burma Partnership video was "not as balanced as it could have been. It made some unfair allegations against UNHCR and did not fully reflect our responses to those allegations. As a result, the film may have contributed further to the refugees' anxiety about repatriation," she said.

"The film also suggested that UNHCR is involved in 'relocation sites' in southeastern Myanmar for returning refugees to settle in. This is incorrect," she said.

"We do think, however, that it is important for planning to take place in Myanmar to absorb refugees who will eventually return home. The Myanmar authorities have said that returnees will be able to choose where to return to within the country."

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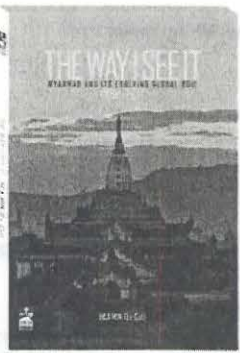
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