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Participatory research report on transnational
repression against Myanmar diaspora
In Mae Sot, Thailand

DON'T

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SAFE



We Don't Feel SAFE

Participatory research on transnational repression against Myanmar diaspora in Mae Sot, Thailand

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Published by Friends Without Borders Foundation
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www.friends-without-borders.org

Front cover drawing by Juntima Tabmongkol (Finalist, 2021 youth painting competition, Friends Without Borders)
Front cover photo by Supamok Silarak
Designed by Ma Yim Studio

The report was originally written in English and translated into Burmese. The briefer versions are available in Burmese and Thai.

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Acknowledgement and Dedications

We would like to thank all the research participants who have agreed to share their valuable, and at times, painful experiences. Their trust in the Border Voices team is invaluable in helping people understand the lives of Myanmar diaspora, refugees and dissidents in Mae Sot, especially those who have arrived after the 2021 military coup.

The team also would like to thank Friends Without Borders administrative team, donors and countless friends and families who have been very supportive to us. Without this support, it would not have been possible to shed light on the hidden transnational repression and human rights violations against the Mae Sot Myanmar diaspora.

This research report is dedicated to the brave Myanmar refugees and dissidents both inside Myanmar and in exile everywhere in the world.

Border Voices Team

2023 Border Voices Team members

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Transnational repression (TNR) in this report refers to attempts by governments to reach across borders to silence dissent among diasporas and exiles through assassination, illegal deportation, abductions, digital threats, interpol abuse and family intimidation.

The Border Voice research team was formed by a Myanmar migrant, political refugees and Thai citizens. This participatory research, which was conducted during July-December 2023 in Mae Sot town on the Thai-Myanmar border, aims to present TNR-related incident patterns and impacts on the Myanmar diaspora community in Mae Sot, the people's response strategies and their voices in relation to what can be done to address the threat. As a participatory research, the 'researched' of this project were treated as participants whose knowledge and capabilities were respected and valued. This report is the result of the team's synthesis and analysis of the voices of 42 Myanmar diaspora participants and eight stakeholders who include members of NGOs, CSOs, an international organization and Thai authorities.

Although TNR is a new term for all research participants, when being explained the literal meaning of the term in local languages, all could easily relate to the threat. Most could either give examples and/or reflect their thoughts of how the Myanmar military regime may have reached across the border to the targets. Moreover, all participants confirmed that they did not feel safe in Thailand.

The key factors of the people's vulnerabilities to TNR include the absence of legal status and the lack of awareness and knowledge of TNR and necessary issues. Thailand's denial of the existence of Myanmar political refugees leaves people with no legal protection from being sent back to persecution in their home country. Misunderstanding and the lack of awareness of TNR can contribute to ignorance and unnecessary risks. The lack of digital security knowledge can lead people to leave clear digital footprints to be tracked and fall victims of fake accounts, fake news, phishing and other scams. Moreover, living in another country without sufficient understanding of its laws, regulations, culture, social relations and political context contributes largely to the refugees and dissidents' vulnerabilities.

In Mae Sot, reported TNR actors include both Myanmar and Thai citizens. The latter are authorities of security units that include police, immigration police, village security units and soldiers. The former includes intelligence personnels who are living among migrant and exile communities. TNR operations reported were not only directly aimed to harm or get rid of those perceived by Myanmar government as enemies, but to be a form of psychological warfare that could silence the opposition and their activism or

compel the target to return as they are the living proof of the atrocities in Myanmar.

Almost all research participants confirmed that until recently, they have not faced nor heard of a direct physical operation such as attacks, kidnappings and assassinations perpetrated by SAC agents on Thai soil. A case of disappearance was reported but unfortunately close relatives of the person could not be reached for further details. In the participant's opinions, it is easier for the junta to act against Myanmar refugees and dissidents in cyber space and within its jurisdiction, while in Thailand any action will not be possible without cooperation of Thai authorities.

The most common form of TNR experienced by Myanmar diaspora in Mae Sot is cyber repression, which both stands on its own purpose of psychological threats and as part of other tactics, which include coercion by proxy, (attempted) attacks and cooperation with Thai authorities in surveillance, arrest, detention and unlawful deportation. Coercion by proxy is employed to pressure, manipulate, intimidate or threaten exile dissidents in order to warn the targets that their fates are still under the regime's control, and that their activism could lead to further harms against those still inside. Surveillance and (attempted) attacks can be a psychological threat that leads to physical surveillance, which aims for further harm. All participants who shared the attempted attack experiences were former high-ranking military personnel, former high-level civil servant and former PDF soldiers.

Cross-border cooperation for TNR was explained as a cooperation of either one or many units of security agencies on the Thai side and one or more power groups on the Myanmar side. The case of three PDF members who were handed to the Border Guard Force (BGF) by Mae Sot immigration police in April 2023, and another similar case of two injured PDF members who were taken from a hospital by a group of Thai officials and placed in Mae Sot immigration detention were suspected to be a cooperation between SAC and/or BGF and some Thai officials in (an) individual (s) level in exchange of personal benefits. While there is no recent proven evidence of the two governments' cooperation directly for the purpose of TNR, observers agree that Myanmar refugees and dissidents are forced to sacrifice for the 'good relations' and 'peace and stability in border areas'. In addition, there has not yet been any confirmed evidence of local cooperation with a policy purpose to commit TNR against political refugees and dissidents in Mae Sot, yet there were known incidents that demonstrated the insensitivity of the local authorities' treatment of war refugees that almost facilitated a TNR-related incident.

The participants also had concerns on indirectly-related incidents, which were those that claimed to be or become TNR, despite the fact that the real

purpose is not. These include the way corrupt Thai officials arrest undocumented Myanmar refugees and dissidents with an aim only to extort money, and not to prosecute or deport, and a crime that the perpetrator is, or claims to be, a member of an authority from Myanmar.

At the community level, the Myanmar diaspora has developed social support and safety network, which has slowly grown during the past three years. The people's strategy to protect themselves from TNR mainly focuses on self-restriction and resilience allowing themselves to be exploited by the corrupt system and abused by those involved, due the the fact that almost all do not hold valid immigration documents while there has been no legal recognition of their right to seek asylum.

According to the participants, the most severe consequence of TNR is their deteriorating mental health and psychological well-being caused by the fear of TNR itself and their strategies to prevent themselves from falling victims of TNR. In addition, such strategies contribute to their poor access to economic, health and education opportunities and restrict their political rights.

The research recommendations to prevent TNR and to protect Myanmar diaspora in Thailand from falling victim of TNR were gathered individually and from brainstorming sessions of the research participants and the Border Voices Team. Recommendations for Myanmar diaspora in Mae Sot include not only security measures, but also advices for how to live physically and mentally safe in Thailand while carrying on hopes. Recommendations for CBOs, CSOs, local and international NGOs and international organizations are related to security measures, relevant services and the need to spend more efforts on refugee's rights advocacy. Recommendations for the National Unity Government of Myanmar (NUG), the Thai government and international communities focus on the recognition of the rights refugees and the support for efforts for democracy in Myanmar. As one of the participant reflected, no government should have the right to act beyond its territory, and TNR by SAC is possible because Thailand has no clear policy regarding the protection of refugees.

Prologue

At 10.15 PM on the night of the 28th of January 1997, over a hundred armed men dressed in black or camouflage uniforms crossed the border from Burma/Myanmar to Mae Sot district in Thailand. Their destination was Huay Kalok refugee camp, about three kilometers from the borderline. The troops, which refugees believed to be a combined force of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) and Myanmar military government, the then State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), fired their weapons, shouted to threaten people to return to Myanmar, looted houses and robbed those running in fear. The whole camp was burned to ashes.

The refugees reported that there was no action from the Thai security unit that withdrew well before from the area: at least nine hours earlier. Over 6,500 refugees were left homeless, one killed and a number of injuries were documented¹

The incident was one of the four attacks that occurred in the same month of the same year to four refugee camps on the Thai-Myanmar border. There were many more attacks during 1995-1998.² The aims of these attacks were clearly to terrorize refugees into returning to Myanmar to form a civilian support base for the DKBA instead of being crowded in Thailand as living evidence of atrocities in Myanmar.

These attempts by Myanmar's military government to reach across the border using its DKBA proxies were designed to silence and eradicate the border based exile community, were a clear violation of Thailand's territorial sovereignty. Thailand's response that was known to the public was the relocation of refugees to new camps further from the border, although the biggest refugee camp that was also attacked has remained in the same location until present.

One of the possible objectives of the attacks was clearly achieved. Since then, refugees on the border have come to the light and been portrayed as a threat to national security for at least a couple of decades after.

1. See Karen Human Rights Group, Attacks on Karen Refugee Camps, 18/03/97 [<https://bit.ly/3VmoNS9>]
2. *ibid.*



Picture by Thanatchaya Wongwas (Long list, 2021 youth painting competition, Friends Without Borders)



Introduction

Twenty-five years after these cross border attacks, although there is no such obvious and large Myanmar military operation to be seen, there are new forms of cross border aggressive interdiction and harassment of people fleeing military rule: transnational repression.

Transnational repression (TNR) in this report refers to attempts by governments to reach across borders to silence dissent among diasporas and exiles through assassination, illegal deportation, abductions, digital threats, interpol abuse and family intimidation.³ According to Freedom House's documentation during 2014 to 2022, 38 origin states were found using physical TNR in 91 host countries. The number did not include indirect tactics such as the use of spyware, surveillance, threats sent over social media or phone, or threats against family members back home.⁴

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe considers TNR a global phenomenon that 'not only violate numerous non-derogable and fundamental human rights of the individuals targeted but are also a threat to the rule of law, democracy and national security of the states where those individuals live and have found refuge'.⁵ The Office of Foreign Missions under the United States Department of State also calls the attention of all foreign missions to 'its heightened concern and condemnation of transnational repression activities occurring in the United States and elsewhere'.⁶

3. There has not yet been an international legal definition of 'transnational repression'. This report uses Freedom House's description of the term as in <https://freedomhouse.org/report/transnational-repression>

4. According to Freedom House's President Michael J. Abramowitz in late 2023. See Michael J. Abramowitz, "Transnational Repression: A Global Threat to Rights and Security", Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing, Transnational Repression: Authoritarians Targeting Dissenters Abroad, 7 December 2023 [<https://bit.ly/49V7aNU>]

5. Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights, Council of Europe. (2023). Transnational Repression as a growing threat to the rule of law and human rights. [<https://bit.ly/3VkuZoU>]

6. U.S. Department of State. (2022). "Notice: Counter-Transnational Repression" 07/08/22. [<https://bit.ly/3TCpdTk>]

Thailand and Transnational Repression

Although the term is new and has not yet been recognized widely, TNR incidents are in fact not new to Thailand. The cross-border attacks to refugee communities over two decades ago as mentioned earlier were one of the experiences that fits the definition of transnational repression.

Recently, during 2014-2022, over 150 individuals have been documented by Freedom House as victims of TNR in Thailand. These, amongst others, include 109 Uyghur refugees who were deported to China in 2015, four Cambodian registered persons of concern of UNHCR who were deported to Cambodia in 2021⁷ and an exiled Lao political activist who was assassinated in Thailand in 2023.⁸

In addition, as an origin country, several cases were also documented by human rights organizations. They include the extradition of an anti-monarchy campaigner by Malaysian authorities at the request of Thai authorities in 2019 just days after three other activists went missing in exile⁹ as well as the disappearances of the three Thai dissidents who were last seen in Laos¹⁰ amongst others.

By early 2024, there has not yet been a common term of ‘transnational repression’ in Thai language. No systematic documentation in relations to TNR and Thailand as both host and origin country has been produced. The majority of affected communities, Thai authorities and Thai civil society are not yet been familiar with the term: it has not yet entered the popular vernacular of activists and refugee protection practitioners. Despite this, the April 2023 incident of Thai authorities handing three Myanmar dissidents to the junta-aligned authorities received much public attention.¹¹

In addition, as the same as most countries in the world, there have been, no specific law, policy and attempt to address the crime, which the masterminds, who often cooperate with their counterparts in Thailand, are in another country.

7 Freedom House, Transnational Repression Report 2022, Case Study Thailand.

[<https://freedomhouse.org/report/transnational-repression/Thailand>]

8 Human Rights Watch, “Thailand: Lao Refugee Gunned Down-Urgently Investigate Killing of Bounsuan Kitiyano” 24/05/23

[<https://bit.ly/3TDJNmb>]

9 Rojanaphruk, P. (16/05/19).

Malaysia Extradites Thai Republican as Crackdown Intensifies. Khaosod English. [<https://bit.ly/48XXgtp>]

10 Human Rights Watch. (2019). Laos: Investigate Disappearance of 3 Thai Dissidents-Battered Corpses in Mekong River Identified as Missing Activities. [<https://bit.ly/3Po1JyG>]

11 Human Rights Watch. (2023). Thailand: Myanmar Activists Forcible Returned-Thai Government Aids Junta's Persecution of Opposition. [<https://bit.ly/3PmEL4s>]

Myanmar Diaspora in Thailand: post-coup dilemmas

A diaspora in this report refers to an expatriate community with a history of dispersal (usually forced) that maintains a memory and various myths about a specific “homeland” and constructs a collective identity related to this homeland. It remains committed to the welfare of this homeland, to which it may return one day.¹² This definition, which was proposed by political scientist William Safran includes war refugees, and those covered under the 1951 Convention refugees, asylum seekers, exiled dissidents and other migrants from Myanmar in Thailand.

After the 2021 coup in Myanmar, widespread non-violent demonstrations were violently dispersed by the State Administration Council (SAC)’s indiscriminate use of violence. An expanded armed revolutionary followed, with thousands of people from the cities fleeing to border areas where ethnic revolutionary organizations (EROs) operate. Large numbers of Myanmar citizens have crossed into Thailand, joining the already over four million migrant workers, and some 90,000 refugees in nine border camps.¹³

Myanmar’s alarming decline in political freedoms has forced thousands of dissidents and their families to ethnic border areas. Myanmar military counterinsurgency strategies have long targeted civilians who are considered to be supporters of the resistance forces. These villagers are either forcibly displaced or compelled to seek sanctuary in neighboring countries, especially Thailand.

From Friends Without Borders’ observation, the post-coup new arrivals in Thailand include several broad classifications of people as follow:

- 1) The 1951 Convention refugees and asylum seekers, whom in this report are referred to as ‘political refugees’ and their families, in border towns and suburbs and in certain inner cities such as Chiang Mai and Bangkok. Based on interviews with a local Thai government officer and members of refugee civic groups, it was estimated in November 2023 that around 50,000 political refugees, dissidents and their families were scattering in the greater Mae Sot area and along the border in Tak Province.
- 2) War refugees from border communities who fled indiscriminate airstrikes, artillery shelling and ground fighting between groups towards Thailand. These families were normally pressured to return

12 Safran, W. (1991), *Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return*, in: *Diasporas*, 1, 1, 83–99, cited in Egretreau, Renaud (2012), *Burma in Diaspora: A Preliminary Research Note on the Politics of Burmese Diasporic Communities in Asia*, in: *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 31, 2, 115–147.

13 The figures for the refugee population comes from the Thai Ministry of Interior and the UNHCR’s verification exercise of refugees in the nine camps from January to April 2015 and was last updated in the end December 2022 [<https://bit.ly/3TjDEu0>].

to Myanmar to be internally displaced persons (IDPs) before forcibly crossing back to Thailand again whenever the attacks resumed. Based on interviews with community-based organizations (CBOs) and FWB's records, it was estimated that there have been at least 50,000 refugees/IDPs right on both side of the border from Mae Hong Son to Tak provinces since after the coup.

3) Refugees of generalized violence, massive violation of human rights¹⁴ and events seriously disturbing public order in part of the country¹⁵ from inner areas of Myanmar NOT bordering Thailand, and from the part of the border area that is INDIRECTLY affected. Due to the distance between their communities and the border, the people do not usually arrive in Thailand in big groups but rather scatter in smaller groups; some travel with the help of smugglers. Thus they are regarded by most as 'migrant workers' rather than refugees despite the fact that they cannot return home safely.

4) Dissidents who do not aim to seek asylum but rather have temporarily crossed the border to Thailand for certain reasons, i.e., for medical attention and visit families, or to live and work in Thailand.

5) Migrant students and workers who seek political freedoms, better public services and a better future, and/or who have fled economic violence that has been caused by political violence. The group finds it is hard to sustainably survive in Myanmar but they still have homes to return to and may not be in imminent danger upon returning.

Thailand's policy and legal framework in protecting Myanmar refugees

During decades of Myanmar political crisis, Thailand's responses to various forms of forced migration from Myanmar have been based not only on the country's foreign affairs policy but also national security notions.

National security has been used as an excuse for Thai governments to cooperate with other foreign governments in relations to deportations of political dissidents. According to Freedom House's transnational repression report, a major risk factor for TNR is Thailand's formal and informal cooperation with other countries, as the country foreign policy specifically emphasizes the goal of fostering balanced and positive bilateral and multilateral relationships to ensure regional stability.¹⁶

14 The terms are line with the refugee definition of the 1984 Cartagena Declaration, a regional complement of the 1951 Refugee Convention

15 The term is in line with the refugee definition of the 1969 Organization of African Unity Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, a regional complement of the 1951 Refugee Convention

16 Office of the National Security Council, Office of the Prime Minister, "The National Security Policy and Plan (2019-2022)", [<https://bit.ly/49WSnIH>] Cited in Transnational Repression 2022 : Case Study Thailand.

17 According to UNHCR: "It prohibits States from transferring or removing individuals from their jurisdiction or effective control when there are substantial grounds for believing that the person would be at risk of irreparable harm upon return, including persecution, torture, ill-treatment or other serious human rights violations."

Without a clear policy, measure and standard of procedures, inconsistent decisions are made locally in relation to refugee responses. For an influx of war refugees, a local military unit, which is under a different line of command in different area, have the authority to decide who can enter, receive aid and leave. For political refugees who are living among migrant worker communities, while there are several governmental agencies and local units that are tasked with national security, each of them may come up with different and, at times, conflicting approaches.

Thailand is not a party to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 protocol. The term 'refugee' has usually been denied or avoided by the Thai security agencies until recently. In official documents, refugees were referred as 'displaced people fleeing fighting' or 'people fleeing public disturbance'. The political refugees during the 1980's-1990's were even called 'Burmese students' as many of them were university and highschool students. It was only until recently that the term 'refugees' were used publicly in the current elected parliament.

With an over 2,100-kilometer border with Myanmar, Thai governments try to keep the issues of Myanmar refugees and dissidents low key in order to avoid a conflict between the two countries. Such policy at times undermine the state's international obligation to protect those fleeing persecution, and sometimes even lead to a violation of the principle of 'non-refoulement': the international customary law that forbids sending refugees back to danger.¹⁷

While refugees in the nine border camps established for almost 40 years are still considered illegal immigrants who are permitted to stay temporarily in designated sites, the new arrivals are less welcomed. Since the last camp population verification in 2015, Thailand has adopted a plan that there must be no new arrivals, and all camps, which were called 'temporary shelters' must be closed down as soon as possible. All rounds of the new influx after the coup were arranged in a more temporary manner. The refugees were to stay in 'temporary safe areas (TSA)' with limited access to aid and were pressured to cross the border back as soon as the Thai authorities assumed the particular attacks had (temporarily) ceased in that area. This meant the political refugees, who had resided in border villages on the Myanmar side and therefore fled airstrikes together with ethnic villagers, had to pay their way out of the TSAs and scattered in the local areas for fear that they could be specifically targeted by authorities waiting on the other side of the border.

Unlike the treatment of Myanmar political refugees during the late 1980's to early 2000's and the current political refugees from other countries, most of Myanmar new arrivals after the 2021 coup, if not the very important persons (VIPs), were treated by the Thai government as the same as other irregular migrants. The Thai governments so far have not issued any official measure how to deal with the situation. Despite the fact that the people were advised by local groups to report themselves to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office and apply for protection, there was no screening and registration processes and no identity documents issued by the UNHCR for the purpose of protection of the people while living in Thailand.

The available procedures are only to screen those with genuine 'needs' to resettle in a third country.¹⁸ Thus, the political refugees who did not enter the country via legal channel are left struggling on their own with difficult access to aid. Most are known to 'pay' for different types of protection, none of which are official and legal.

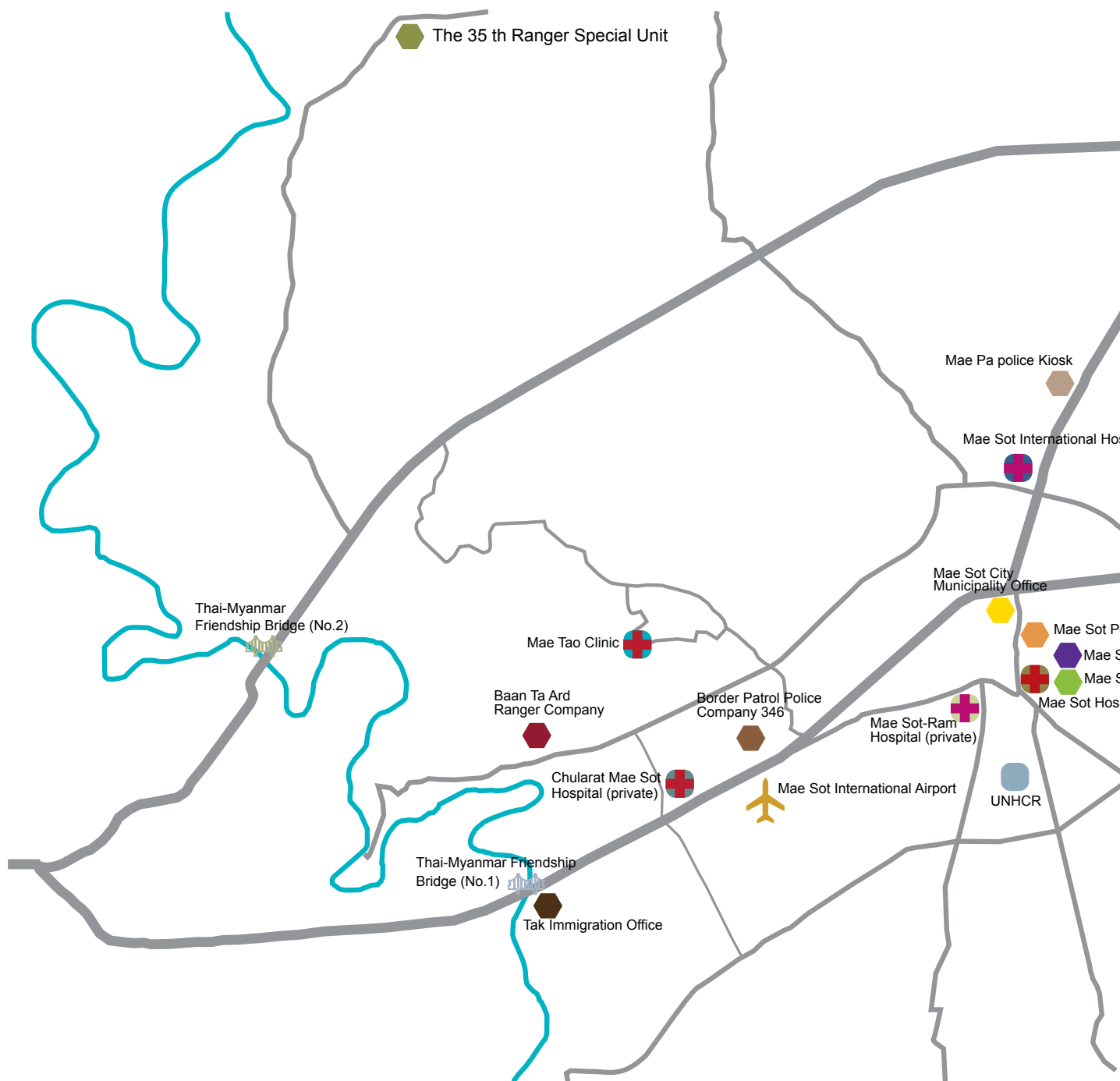
The lack of a mechanism to distinguish those who are in need of protection against refoulement has been a persistent challenge. New tools for refugee protection have emerged in recent years. These include the National Screening Mechanism (NSM) under the Office of Prime Minister's Regulation on the Screening of Aliens who Enter the Kingdom and are Unable to Return to the Country of Origin B.E 2562 (2019) and the Prevention and Suppression of Torture and Enforced Disappearance Act, which declares the deportation of an individual to a country where there is a substantial risk of forced disappearance or torture illegal. However, the details of the first and enforcement of the latter are still critical.¹⁹

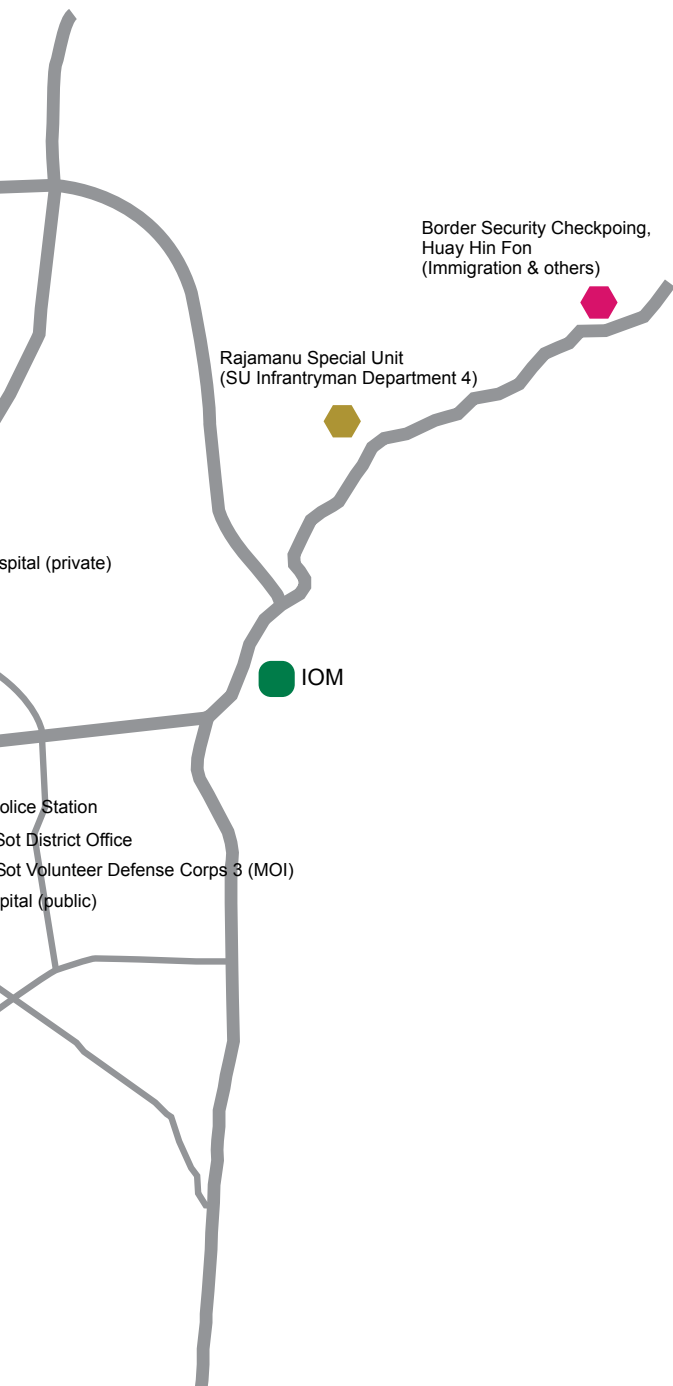
According to the Amendment of 2018 to the Royal Ordinance Concerning Management and Employment of Migrant Worker B.E. 2560 (2017), there are currently three types of documented migrant workers from neighboring countries in Thailand: those who are permitted to stay and work according to the cabinet resolutions in 2022 and 2023; those who are employed under the Thai-Myanmar governments' MoU; and those who are employed specially in border areas according to a particular article of the Royal Ordinance. After the coup, the Thai government opened a channel for unregistered migrants to join the system twice, according to the Cabinet Resolutions dated 5 July, 2022 and 5 July, 2023. During 2022-2023, most refugees and dissidents were reluctant to apply to be legalized as a migrant worker due to the belief that they would be able to resettle abroad or return soon, while the expenses, especially via brokers in Thailand, were too high.






















18 Interview with a staff member of a foreign embassy staff and UNHCR field office.

19 International Commission of Jurists, "Thailand: Law to Address Torture and Enforced Disappearance is an Important Step Toward Justice, but Its Full Enforcement is Critical, 2023. [<https://bit.ly/4cbmiYS>].

In conclusion, most Myanmar refugees and dissidents who have arrived in Thailand after the coup are living as undocumented migrants. The absence of legal status is the main cause of the people's vulnerability to all kinds of abuses, discriminations and repression, including transnational repression.





-  https://maps.app.goo.gl/RVBZwvxkb5NiFsHT6?g_st=ic
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-  <https://maps.app.goo.gl/9WU4TTpUrE9dtMzg8>

Mae Sot : power dynamics and diaspora

Mae Sot is a border town situated on the Thai-Myanmar border. Based on local accounts, seventy years ago it was originally an ethnic Karen town with a small number of Thai and Muslim traders. In 2000, the first refugee camp that was established in its suburb was relocated to a neighboring district down south. Currently there are refugee camps in both southern and northern districts while the town itself has developed from a border trade center to be a bigger economic zone with a large number of migrant workers from Myanmar in industrial, agricultural and service businesses. In terms of population, Mae Sot is much bigger than the provincial capital city of Tak.

The town and suburbs do not only have numbers of factories and trade piers on the Moei river which marks an international border, but numbers of offices of non-governmental organizations (NGO), international organizations, civil society organizations (CSOs) and CBOs that work with refugees, migrant workers and ethnic communities in the border area. With its national security significance, located in town are also several governmental security unit offices including the Volunteer Defense Corps (Or Sor), an Infantry Regiment Task Force (Chor Kor), a paramilitary Ranger Special Unit (Tahaan Praan) company, Mae Sot Police Station, Immigration Police and a Border Patrol Police company.

Having been a center of trade and activism for decades, Mae Sot now is not only inhabited by Thai trader descendants and local ethnic people who are Thai citizens, but also the second and third generation of ethnic and Muslim immigrants from Myanmar (Burma) who have now obtained forms of legal statuses in Thailand, Myanmar dissidents, refugees and migrant workers, Thai and foreign NGOs and international organization's workers and foreign investors, especially the Chinese. There are nearly 50 migrant learning centers and one migrant health center²⁰ (clinic); all are initiated by member of diaspora community. Several clinics and hospitals are also found to accommodate Myanmar clients with signboards and posters in Burmese language. International education programs and a private hospital with Chinese and English interpreters are also available for residents of other nationals.

On Myanmar side, Myawaddy, which is a twin border town has also developed in its own way. The township is connected with Kawkaik and Hpa-an districts in Karen State where there are several armed groups operating. These include SAC military itself and different

20. Mae Tao clinic, founded and run by Dr. Cynthia Maung, an ethnic Karen medical doctor who has received several international awards for her humanitarian work.

21. In March 2024, BGF leaders confirmed the group's separation from SAC and a decision to convert all BGF militia in Karen State into Karen Nation Army (KNA). This report uses the name 'BGF' as it was written in early January 2024 from the information gathered during 2023

units of Border Guard Force (BGF)²¹, Democratic Buddhist Karen Army (DKBA), KNU/KNLA-Peace Council (KNU/KNLA-PC), Karen National Liberation Army (KNU-KNLA), Karen National Defence Organization (KNU-KNDO). Adding after the coup are also the Kawthoolei Army (KTLA) and multiple People's Defense Forces (PDFs) group, which are people's army, many aligned with ethnic resistances and some are funded and controlled by the Ministry of Defence, National Unity Government (NUG).

It should be noted that although BGF, DKBA and KNU/KNLA-PC are known to be allies of the Myanmar army, and while KNLA and KNDO are under the Karen National Union (KNU) which several of its brigades are resisting SAC fiercely, each of the units of the same army may act on its own policy, be competitors to one another and do not necessarily support each other.

With a long history of migration, and political, economic, social and cultural relations between people, even before the coup, it is not beyond expectation that the members and families of both dissidents and SAC-allied actors are regularly appearing in and/or having homes in Mae Sot, and that the town has once-again become a home of activism against military dictatorship. As a result, inevitably, intelligence operations of all sides and economic cooperation among armed groups, Thai and foreign stakeholders have expanded.



Picture by Butri Srisutta (Long list, 2021 youth painting competition, Friends Without Borders)



About the Research

The Border Voice research project does not aim to document TNR cases in a quantitative manner. This preliminary report is designed to present TNR-related incident patterns and impacts on the Myanmar diaspora community Mae Sot, the diaspora's vulnerabilities to and awareness of TNR, their prevention and response strategies, and their voices in relation to what can be done to address the threat. Throughout the process, the nature of 'participatory research' is expected to contribute to the empowerment of all participants who are Myanmar refugees and dissidents.

Participatory research

The principles of participatory research are that the subjects of the research are involved as partners in the process and that their knowledge and capabilities are respected and valued. In other words, the 'researchers' are facilitators and the 'researched' are treated as not only subjects, informants or interviewees, but as participants. The process is designed to transform the local-expert power relations to support community members to 'articulate their views and express their knowledge through describing and analyzing their own situation and problems.'²² A participatory research team comprises of those who are not necessarily academically trained in research but 'belong to or represent the interests of the people who are the focus of the research.'²³

The Border Voice research team was formed in June 2023 by three Thai citizens, one Myanmar migrant and five Myanmar political refugees with diverse backgrounds, ages, and genders. Each Myanmar member has passed a background verification to ensure the security of the other members and the research participants.

The team has developed a shared understanding of the term 'transnational repression' and brainstormed how to define TNR in their respective languages: Burmese, Karen and Thai. Digital security training was organized for the team and guidelines were set. All participated in designing topics for meeting with participants, sets of guideline questions, how

22 Participation Research Cluster, Institute of Development Studies. Research and Analysis, [<https://bit.ly/3IDXY4o>]

23 Vaughn, L.M. And Jacquez, F. (2020) Participatory Research Methods – Choice Points in the Research Process. The Journal of Participatory Research Method. Vol.1, Issue 1, 2020. [<https://bit.ly/3PoVGd6>]

to ensure diverse research participants and obtain their consent and security protocols. It was agreed among the team that there was a need to understand the participant's context and listen to what the people want to tell rather than focusing on TNR issues alone. The working languages are Myanmar, English and Thai. Therefore, conversation and written guidelines were translated back and forth to ensure mutual understanding.

The tools were tested internally among the Border Voices members before being finalized. In-depth conversation sessions were conducted with 27 participants by the five Myanmar team members in Mae Sot. For security reasons, the choice was to conduct private meetings with individuals rather than group meetings or focus groups. The research team's network was leveraged and snowball sampling was utilized. The selection was based on background and gender diversity and potential risk of human rights violations and TNR. All of the participants met at least two-four times to ensure trust and complete information.

As the tool was a rough guideline, each Myanmar research team member had freedom to adjust it to the individual participant, who also had latitude and agency to share what she or he would like and exchange thoughts. Each of the five Myanmar team member also write their own stories according to the guidelines. Adding to the activity was the project director's onsite and online meeting sessions with four more dissidents in Mae Sot and five dissidents who had moved from Mae Sot to other cities. In total, there were 42 Myanmar diaspora participants in this small participatory research project.

The project coordinator roles were to oversee the work with the help of the research administrator, provide support and inputs to each of the Myanmar research team members, and conduct interviews with eight stakeholders who included members of three Myanmar CBOs/CSOs, three NGO workers, three Thai officials, and a former staff member of an international organization responsible for political refugees in Mae Sot.

Apart from the meetings, interviews and literature reviewing, the team including the field assistant explored public cases from online media outlets in Burmese, English and Thai language. Observations from the field of each of the team members and informal conversation with stakeholders, refugees and dissidents were shared among the group and documented.

The project information was stored in an encrypted drive with restricted access. This report is the result of the team's synthesis and analysis of the information and their ideas in relations to recommendations for future advocacy, actions and strategies. The draft report by the project coordinator was reviewed among the whole team, before being finalized by the project director.

Research limitations

The project has limitations due to three main reasons: the security concerns for all exile participants, the limited time given, and the nature of participatory research itself.

Considering all participant's security as the top priority consequently restricts opportunities for a more participatory activity such as group gathering and more meetings. The sensitivity of the issues also posed a challenge in handling information. To address these challenges, the team were trained in digital security management and a social safety net system and guidelines was initiated. The team members also had a mutual understanding of the need for anonymity, data anonymization, and both analog and digital secured methods of information storage. All team members agree to use pseudonyms for the research credits.

The pilot project had only a few-months field study period, while such sensitive issues would ideally need more time for trust building. In addition, given that the experiences in relation to TNR and human rights violations often touched upon mental health issues and trauma of oneself and the person's close ones, individuals were initially hesitant to disclose details and needed longer sensitization time. The team therefore limited their activities mostly to the people in their network circles, as those others would have needed longer time to confide thoughts and stories. This reality also reminded the team of the need for their counselling skills to be strengthened, and for an expanded mental healthcare service for affected diaspora members.

Participatory research is a method that recognizes that research is a part of everyone's life and challenges the belief that research should be conducted only by specialists. The Myanmar research team members are community members who do not necessarily have academic research and human rights documentation experiences. The result therefore should not be expected as a traditional academic report, but rather should be viewed as a community voices piece for communication.

Participants

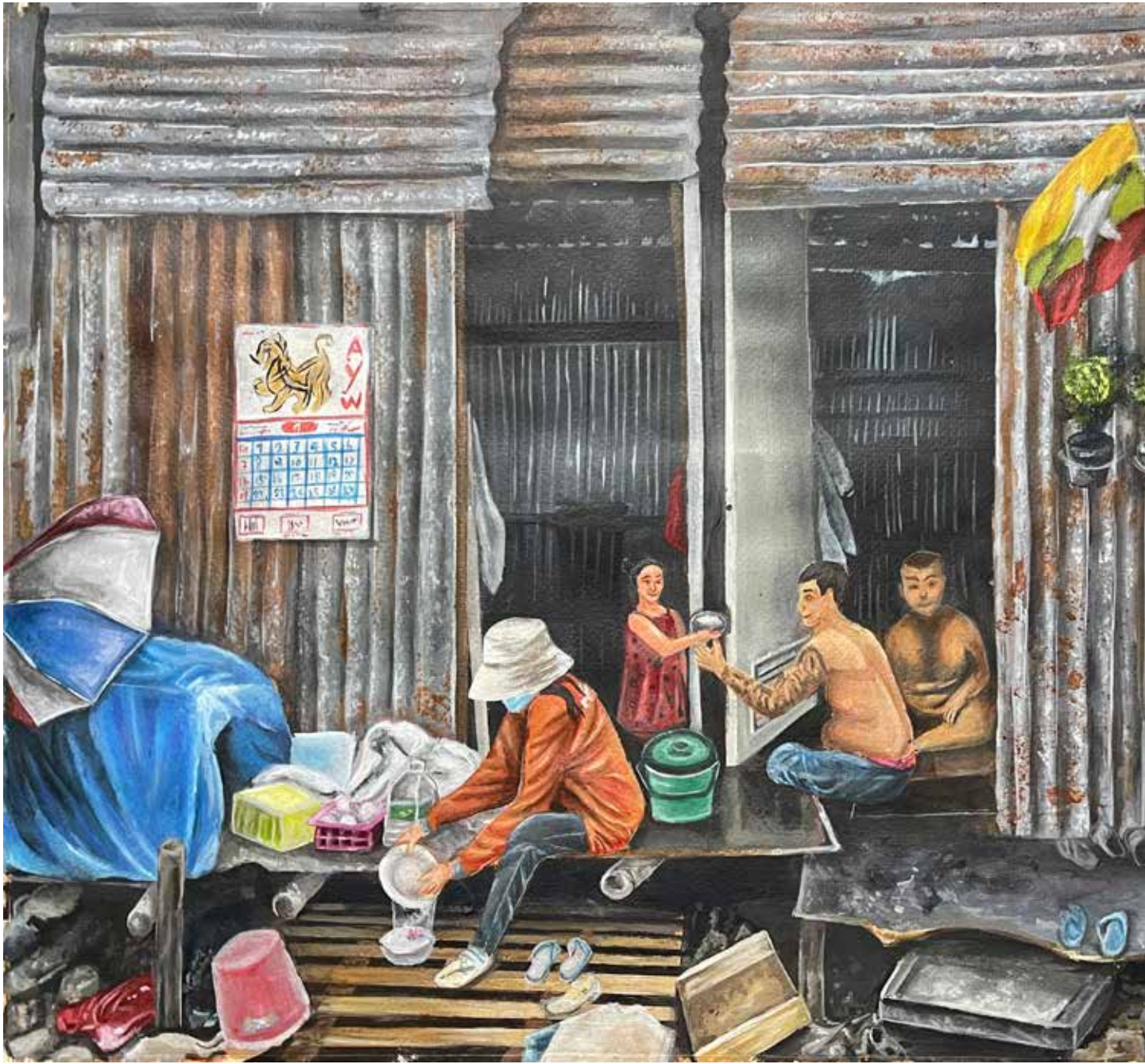
There were 42 research participants: 22 males, 19 females and one member of LGBTQ+, from the Myanmar diaspora community in Mae Sot. Among these, six have already moved out from Mae Sot due to security reasons. Among the six, two have entered Thailand legally with passports and visas. All except these two entered the country via irregular channels and have no legal immigration documentation. They reported to have paid monthly protection fees to different agents who claimed to work on behalf of Thai

authorities.

It should be emphasized that the this research is not a quantitative study. Therefore, the segregated numbers explained here do not reflect statistical percentage but a demonstration of various backgrounds of participants who were considered vulnerable to TNR. Among the 42 participants, there were 10 former civil servants, three security force personnel, five current and former journalists, one member of an ethnic armed force, five members of political parties and the rest were activists from CBOs NGOs, CSOs and other Myanmar citizens who have taken part in the Myanmar Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). Eight of these reported to have joined an armed struggle against SAC for a period of time. In Thailand, most of these participants either continue to be active citizens or are participating in political, human rights and humanitarian activism while trying to make ends meet from daily wages, petty trading and financial support from friends and relatives.

Participants from other stakeholders include three NGO workers, three members of local CBOs/CSOs, one former staff of an international organization and three Thai local officials. Among the 10, there are three females and seven males.

Due to the sensitivity of the issues, all participants are willing to share their stories, thoughts and opinions anonymously. Although the 42 research participants from various backgrounds cannot represent the estimated over 50,000 political refugees, dissidents and their families in Mae Sot, their perceptions towards and experiences of TNR well reflects those of their smaller circles of colleagues, friends and neighbors in Mae Sot diaspora community.



Picture by Thanachoot Nunthasate (Long list, 2021 youth painting competition, Friends Without Borders)



Findings

1. Mae Sot Myanmar Diaspora : Perceptions towards TNR and their vulnerabilities

One of the high-profile cases of an assassination attempt in relation to Myanmar nationals was the plot to attack and potentially kill the Myanmar ambassador to the United Nations (UN), U Kyaw Moe Tun, in New York in August 2021.²⁴ The incident involved the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), which arrested two Myanmar citizens (who were charged and subsequently convicted), underscores the alarming reach of TNR, where operatives are deployed beyond national borders to threaten or eliminate an opposition figure. The case is known among the research participants for this report. It is another example that confirms to them how the Myanmar military regime can reach across the border.

Yet the incident that drew the Myanmar diaspora community's intense attentions to TNR was the forcibly return of the three PDF members to the hands of BGF, that at the time technically worked under the Myanmar military since 2009.²⁵ The three were shot while escaping. One death was reported while the fate of the others who were handed from BGF to SAC authorities remained unconfirmed.²⁶ Common perceptions in Mae Sot were that the deportation was a deliberate cooperation between Thai and BGF authorities, although it remained unclear whether it was a beneficial exchange at a personal level, a local level or higher authorities were involved. This alleged collaboration has instilled significant fear among Myanmar exiles and a reminder of their unsafe situation along the borderlands.

24. Closson, T. (28/08/2021). Myanmar Ambassador, Who Opposed Coup, Is Target of Assassination Plot. The New York Times. [<https://nyti.ms/3VlWt2l>]

25. Human Rights Watch. (2023). Thailand: Myanmar Activists Forcible Returned-Thai Government Aids Junta's Persecution of Opposition. [<https://bit.ly/3x4WTQs>]

26. See "Anti-junta fighter killed during deportation from Thailand to Myanmar", Radio Free Asia, 10/04/23 [<https://bit.ly/3THQZhm>]. The Irrawaddy, 30/08/22 [<https://bit.ly/3Vf9pXQ>].

Perceptions

Although TNR is a new term for all participants, when being explained the literal meaning of the term in local languages, all could easily relate to the threat. Most could either give examples and/or reflect their thoughts of how the Myanmar military regime may have reached across the border to the targets. For a political refugee who had experiences fleeing to Thailand during the 1990s and again in 2021, TNR has been an experience that the then and now exile community have been prepared to face. As one participant observed:

Living in Thailand, we always had to be alert; then or now – it is the same. I remember 20 years ago when a few of our (student) organization's members were caught as SPDC spies. One confessed that he did it because he had no choice; his mother was in their hands. With such experiences, I can expect that SAC will not leave us in peace so easily. People who have fled here have to be well aware of the fact. This is not unexpected. They (Myanmar military) see us as their enemies and they will find a way to get rid of, or silence, their enemies.

TP-02Pp Member of a political organization, male

When reflecting how they understood TNR, most of the participants identified a few similar tactics that they have heard of, or see possible in the area as examples. One of the most common concerns was an intelligence operation that included 'informers' (in Myanmar language, called *dalan*) who could be undercover among refugee community and migrants. The participants believed that these informers' tasks were to report movements and locations of the potential target to SAC or Thai authorities, and such information may lead to further digital threats, arrests and deportation to forced disappearance and assassination.

The military TNR tactics, as far as I understand, include them sending intelligence personnel with migrant passports and visas to live among exile communities as food riders, drivers, sellers, teashop workers and owners, etc. These people send information to Thai police so that they arrest the targets, extort them or send them back. I don't feel safe in Mae Sot because I think Myanmar authorities can ask Thai authorities to arrest the person they want at any time.

TRS-01Ca, Former civil servant, female

The incident that supported the participants' concern regarding SAC intelligence operation was the arrest of alleged Myanmar spies among 38

27. See “Junta Spies Posing as Monks, Nuns Among Myanmar detainees in Thailand”, *The Irrawaddy*, 30/08/22 [<https://bit.ly/3Vf9pXQ>].

fake monks and nuns in a Buddhist monastery in Mae Sot in August 2022.²⁷ Others common acknowledged tactics were digital threats, fake news and online communication that aimed to quieten activism or lure former insiders back to the country, and ‘coercion by proxy’ or threats to family members in Myanmar as a way to control or threaten the target in Thailand.

Although most of the participants had initially said that they had no experience about TNR, it was found that many among them later shared TNR-related stories in the conversation. Moreover, all participants confirmed that they did not feel safe in Thailand. Although it is considered ‘safer’ after having crossed the international border, they are still living in fear of being arrested and deported to the hands of BGF and/or SAC, especially if the Thai authorities knew that they were political refugees.

Vulnerabilities

Apart from the geographical factor that contributes to the risk of the Myanmar diaspora in Mae Sot as mentioned earlier, the key factors of the people’s vulnerabilities to TNR include their lack of legal status and the lack of awareness and knowledge of TNR and necessary issues.

Thailand’s denial of the existence of Myanmar political refugees leaves tens of thousands of people in an illegal immigrant status with no legal protection from being sent back to persecution in their home country. When any of their rights is violated, the ‘(il)legal’ status also deters them from accessing justice and almost any legal remedy. Living in constant fear of being arrested and deported also results in isolation and the lack of a social safety net.

Misunderstanding and the lack of awareness of TNR can contribute to ignorance and unnecessary risks. Many understood that TNR operations only targeted PDF members and high profile cases and therefore do not consider themselves vulnerable, although experiences from other countries show how those others, especially ones that live in a close circle of high profile people can also be targeted. This is why some dissidents see TNR as a ‘normal’ practice that any government in the world may do. The sense legitimizes the crime and results into victim-blaming. TNR victims are often partially held responsible for the harm they experiences.

The lack of digital security knowledge can lead people to leave clear digital footprints to be tracked and fall victims of fake accounts, fake news, phishing and other scams. While most refugees and dissidents have learnt that Signal is a secure communication application, most were not aware that using public WiFi was also a risk.

Living in another country without sufficient understanding of its laws, regulations, culture, social relations and political context contributes largely to the refugees and dissidents' vulnerabilities. For instance, people were often threatened with harsh prison sentences despite the actual relevant law; some of their actions unintentionally drew attention and troubles, and they do not know who and where to ask for help, or who can be trusted. The lack of understanding of the Thai society also means the lack of opportunities for good relations with Thai people, who perhaps can be the best placed to protect them.

2. Patterns of transnational repression against Myanmar Diaspora in Mae Sot

Perpetrators and targets

In Mae Sot, reported TNR actors include both Myanmar and Thai citizens. The latter are authorities of security units that include police, immigration police, village security units and soldiers. The former includes intelligence personnels who are living among migrant and exile communities. These people could be of Myanmar army itself, or of other armed groups such as BGF that controls the wide part of Myawaddy border opposite Mae Sot. The BGF personnel, from the participants' experiences, may act for BGF's own interest or for SAC. All participants believed that authorities, armed men and intelligence operation from Myanmar could do nothing in Thailand if the Thai government and local Thai authorities did not allow them to.

Reported targets are mostly former insiders and political activists, especially those who used to be involved in both armed and non-violent struggles inside Myanmar for a while. It should be noted that the reason that one had not yet faced the threat may not reflect the fact that there was no attempt but may be due to the person's prevention strategy that sacrificed so much freedom. All journalists and high profile participants were cautious of their movements. Many dissidents learnt to censor their activities and live a very restricted lifestyle.

Purposes

From all information received, the Border Voices Team concluded that TNR operations found in Mae Sot were not only directly aimed to harm or get rid of those perceived by Myanmar government as enemies, but to be a form of psychological warfare that could silence the opposition and their activism. The objectives of reported TNR were summarized as follows:

1. To get rid of, or silence those who oppose the military regime;
2. To create fear that could undermine activism against the regime;
3. To persuade, or compel or force the target to return as they are the living proof of the atrocities in Myanmar. The targets may also be wanted for extracting information about armed resistances or a higher target, or for punishments and infliction of fear among other dissidents;
4. To collect information for intelligence purposes, which could be used for the above three objectives when receiving orders.

Tactics

Almost all research participants confirmed that until recently, they have not faced nor heard of a direct physical operation such as attacks, kidnappings and assassinations perpetrated by SAC agents on Thai soil.

In their opinions, it is easier for the junta to act against Myanmar refugees and dissidents in cyber space and within its jurisdiction, while in Thailand any action will not be possible without cooperation of Thai authorities.

I think SAC agents cannot come and arrest us or do any harm to us here themselves. But I am sure that there have been a kind of situation when it gives information of the people it wants to Thai authorities to act. I saw how Thai officials knew the exact location when they went to arrest people. They even had photos to check the names and faces.

ST-04Pp, member of a political party, male

As mentioned earlier, there were many contributing factors to the low number of TNR incidents that led to physical assault, abduction, disappearance and death. These include not only the unknown level of efforts the regime spent for such a crime, but also intervention efforts of CBOs, CSOs, NGOs and international organizations and the diaspora's self-protection and response strategies.

a) Cyber repression

Cyber information operation both stands on its own purpose of psychological threats and as part of other tactics, which include coercion by proxy, (attempted) attacks and cooperation with Thai authorities in surveillance, arrest, detention and unlawful deportation.

Cyber information operation, which transcends national boundaries, needs little financial and human investment. It is therefore widely employed by the military in Myanmar, Thailand and many other countries around the

world. Digital space has become a battleground for intimidation, threatening, exposing, attacking and trapping individuals, even when they are outside of the home country.

Besides trying to reach us physically, there is an online threat. The military has a way to stalk refugees and dissidents in Mae Sot online. They get information about the people's daily routine and lifestyle by following their online movement, and then use the information for the propaganda and threatening on their platforms such as online TV, telegram channels, etc.

MYH-01Aa, university student, female

Facebook and the messaging application 'Telegram' are popular social media platforms among Myanmar citizens. The latter was believed to be secured but in fact its weak policies allowed government's information operations to dox people and incite violence. There are many Telegram groups or channels that expose people's personal information, political activity and location so that they will be arrested. The most infamous one is the pro-military channel Han Nyein Oo, which is known to publicize dissidents' names, family members, photos, addresses in Myanmar and Thailand, and even fabricated nude pictures of women activists.²⁸

Online intimidation and threatening

The psychological threat makes one understand that it will lead to further physical harm. Online intimidation and threatening replaces the traditional physical stalking and on-site intimidation as it is much easier and cheaper to operate. It involves showing the targets how they have been stalked, either physically or digitally, by disclosing their and/or their loved ones' present addresses. At times, especially in the posts in Han Nyein Oo channel, there was a call for attacks against the targets at the exact location.

Instead of coming face-to-face, they sent threatening messages online. I had experienced being threatened via Messenger on two occasions. The message was from an unknown account. The sender said he knew my address in Mae Sot and that he has already had a plan for me once I returned to Myanmar. He said the Thai police could arrest and send me back there anytime. The person also said that he was not far from me. The other one was more a kind of life-threatening text. It said that I could be 'disappeared' anytime.

MYH-04Maa, former member of armed resistance group, male

28. See Engage Media, In Myanmar, Telegram is used as a weapon to destroy lives, 2023. [<https://bit.ly/3wUp9oR>]

Exposing private information online

Telegram channels such as Han Nyien Oo and many others and FB groups are platforms where personal information, photos, phone numbers and present location or address of the targets are circulated. Only to have such private information published, one is forced to live in fear. Although no one can totally confirm the linkage between a telegram post and its consequences in terms of capturing, kidnapping, physical assaults, arrests, etc., the tactic inflicts serious psychological consequences. Moreover, suspicious incidents that the cyber threat could lead to physical attacks were shared by the participants as below :

After arriving in Mae Sot for a month, I shockingly found that Han Nyein Oo, an alleged military informant, posted my personal information, photos and home in Myanmar in the Telegram channel. A few days later (I was) informed that Myanmar police and soldiers came in 10 vehicles to my house in Myanmar. The incident left me with the feeling of vulnerability. Although I am in Mae Sot, I've been living in fear. I've tried to stay as quietly as possible.

TRS-01Cp, former civil servant, female

On June the 14th, 2023 Han Nyein Oo Telegram channel posted about our activity in Myanmar with our photos. I was scared because Han Nyein Oo is related to underground terrorist groups that kidnap, torture and murder those against the regime. Two weeks later, an unknown account with Myanmar registered number sent two photos of ours with our present location, our residence address, my husband's phone number and his father's nickname known only among his political party. My husband informed UNHCR about the threats but nothing happened and the threats continued for a month. Then one afternoon, a month and a half after the first Telegram post, my husband was arrested by Thai police just very close to our residence, which was the location shown in the channel, and I was told he would be deported 10 days after the court ruled. It is possible that someone informed the Thai police to arrest him.

TP-08Mj, wife of a detained former military personnel

Online deception and trapping

Individuals were reported to be trapped by fake news in social media, following by online communication and calls that urged them to return to the country. The targets were mostly former insiders such as army personnel

and middle to high rank civil servants. Similar to the attack incident against Karen refugees back in 1997 told in the Introduction section, research participants explained that the military regime put efforts in calling people to return home, for fear that they could show ugly evidence (of crimes) or simply be the ‘living proof’ of the atrocities caused by the regime.

SAC tried to call people back. When they have escaped to other countries, they can show the world how cruel the military is. My colleague kept contacting me. Each time he asked where I was and whether I would go back to work. He said if I went back, the 505(a) (charge under the Penal Code) would be revoked. He kept sending messages and called me online, pressuring me to go back by giving various reasons. So I cut off contact with him and with all friends who are still inside Myanmar.

RS-01Cj, former civil servant, female

The main tactic is to lure people to go back. SAC try to call back those in the army who joined CDM by releasing fake news that all the charges against us will be lift and all will be able to return to their family peacefully. Then they have someone contact individuals via Messenger or Telegram. Some refugees believed them because the news had already spread in social media before about how people had gone back and stayed happily with their families. But the junta always lie. In fact, those returnees got a long-time prison sentence and even death penalty. One of the Major's I knew was told that his daughter was hospitalized and if he went back to her and his wife, he would get his job back and all the charges would be lifted. The Major went back and disappeared. Nobody knows whether he is in jail or killed. But I know the highest penalty for desertion is death.

MYH-02Mp, former military personnel, female

29 Ibid.

Online abuses

Although no research participants have been personally ‘attacked’ in cyber space, evidence reported by others show the possibilities. Engage Media’s report about Myanmar women activists fake pornographic photos and videos posted on Telegram channels, Tik Tok and Facebook accounts with the help of artificial intelligence (AI).²⁹ Although the interviewee in the EM report was still inside Myanmar during the time of the cyber-attack, it can be assumed that the no-boundary nature of the cyber-world targets all dissidents whether they are inside the country or living in exile.

Furthermore, a member of Border Voices team documented a case of a former Myanmar army personnel who had been kicked out of the new exile community he just settled in due to fake news released by an alleged information operation. In 2022, the news was originally posted by a Facebook account with less than a hundred friends that the person had already gone back to join SAC. His photos and the name of current area he was living in were also exposed. It was then shared by many other avatar accounts and reached some Burmese ‘influencer’ FB pages. The family had to move out from the then community for fear of those who found them as a threat or a traitor. A number of credible political refugees who knew the family well confirmed that the news was fake and the person was a genuine refugee.

b) Coercion by proxy

Although the majority of political refugees fled to Mae Sot with their immediate family, and some even came with extended family members, there are those who have arrived alone and most have left their parents and siblings who were not active in CDM behind.

SAC cannot reach my friends and my acquaintances in Mae Sot. But they can reach their homes and remaining family members in Myanmar. My friends’ homes (in Myanmar) are sealed off and the family members were arrested and interrogated. Some parents were even pressured to announce disinheritance of their children, and they had no other choice but agree just to keep both them and their children safe. This put a lot of pressure on the dissidents.

MYH-07Aa, university student, male

Coercion by proxy, one of the popular TNR tactic known among the research participants, is employed to pressure, manipulate, intimidate or threaten exile dissidents. In the case of the Myanmar diaspora in Mae Sot, messages are sent to the targets, either by direct contacts from family members or indirectly from community members, colleagues, friends, etc., that their family members were intimidated, threatened, interrogated regularly, arrested, detained, tortured and sentenced to jail.

The aims are to warn the targets that their fates are still under the regime’s control, and that their activism in participating in political-related activities and giving information to media could lead to further harms against those still inside.

My parents are over 90 years old so I couldn’t take them here with me. SAC searched their house five times and sometimes at nighttime. There were also people who were sent by SAC, I

believe, broke into our house after midnight and looked for me. We all faced this. My colleague's family members were arrested, beaten and imprisoned although they knew nothing. When they can't arrest you, sometimes they arrest others in your house instead. Now questions are popping up in my head all the time: are they going to arrest my parents and when? What will they do to them? This seriously affects my mental health.

MYH-03Pp, member of a political organization, male

The army issued a deserter warrant for me but nothing bad happened until I gave a live interview broadcasting on Facebook. As soon as the interview went live in the evening, people from the navy entered my father's house, and continued with my sister's and my mothers who lived separately. They were all interrogated. At the time both my parents had not yet published their disinheritance of me in the newspaper. I was very scared and did not dare to appear publicly any longer. When the media asked more interviews, I declined. I've got a message in my old Facebook account telling me that my mother would be detained in a prison in Mandalay. I deleted my FB account. My sister later told me that our mother was detained for 40 days.

MYH-02Mp, former military personnel, female

Six months after I arrived here, my father was arrested. He is 80 years old. Actually my parents and sister had lived quietly far from me. Unfortunately, there was a murder case in the village and the police came to question people and found out that my parents had a son who was charged under Section 505 (a) and was then participating in the resistance. My father was taken to the police station and kept there for two days. They questioned him about my whereabouts. He was beaten because he did not know much about me. Then they allowed him to meet my mother and sister, whom were told that if my father agreed to call the son to come back, he would be released. My father didn't call me so now he has been held in prison for six months already. I felt so painful. I wanted to go back there and get arrested instead, but my mother, sister and my wife said that would not help anything.

TRS-02Co, former civil servant, male

c) Surveillance and (attempted) attacks

Stalking someone is a violation of the right to privacy. Yet, according to Thailand, it is not a crime as long as it does not lead to criminal actions such as physical assaults, sexual harassment or murder.

For the Myanmar diaspora in Mae Sot, cyber surveillance can be a psychological threat that leads to physical surveillance, which aims for further harm. The research participants who have survived to tell the stories believed that the purpose of stalking of Myanmar dissidents and refugees is to prepare an attack, which could be kidnapping, assault, murder, or arrest by Thai authorities who will send the target back to the hands of the military authorities in Myanmar.

One day I received an online call from a friend, saying, 'hey guys!', where are you?' I felt something was wrong. We have never used the word 'hey, guys!' in the group but aliases known in the group as pass codes. I realized and hung up the phone. We then investigated the matter and found out that the member had been detained by SAC in Myanmar. I am very grateful to him how he managed to tell me the word that let me know he was under their force. Nobody know what would happen if I told him where I was.

ST-04Pp, member of a political party, male

Although those who shared their experiences escaping the surveillance had no way to confirm what would happen if they could not manage to flee from the scene, most believed that the harm they might have faced was serious and not worth taking a risk. All participants who shared such experiences were former high-ranking military personnel, either of SAC or its armed allies, former high-level civil servant and former PDF soldiers.

In the first and second cases below, the target dissidents who were a young male student (RS-05Aro) and a single woman (RS-04Ca) believed that the aim was to kidnap them to extort information, and for punishment. The third person (RS-02Arp) understood that he was wanted for the same reasons but the perpetrator used the hands of Thai police to arrest and deport him to the area under the perpetrator's control.

One day I got contacted by a friend who used to join (a) PDF with me. A while ago my friend was arrested by SAC while I escaped and finally arrived in Mae Sot. He told me via an online call that he was released and could not risk going back to PDF. He wanted to come to Mae Sot. I was glad that he was finally freed. I told him he could stay with us and he could get odd jobs like I did. I gave him my phone number and address and told my roommate about this.

But just in the following morning, while my roommate and I were at work, the friend called and said that he had arrived in

front of our house. I told him to wait there because we had to finish our job. Then my roommate started to feel suspicious of his very fast arrival and suggested that we should wait and see from a far distance to make sure. So we did, and there I saw no friend of mine but a few strangers staying not far from my house.

I rang my neighbor and asked if there was anyone came looking for me, how the person looked like and whether he was still there. He confirmed my suspicion and said that those guys were still around. So I knew I had to run. That night my roommate and I stayed with a friend from the workplace. The next day I found out from the neighbor that those guys came again, so we stayed away for almost a month. I think they were trying to capture us for some reasons, and they used my friend as bait to get my exact location. It's hard to tell who these people are because I've got a bounty on my head. It was announced with my photo in Myawady (a Myanmar military daily newspaper).

RS-05Aro, former student and member armed resistance group, male

It hadn't been a month yet since I escaped from Nay Pyi Daw to here that my neighbor told me about the two strangers who came looking for me. They asked a Burmese noodle stand about me, but at the time she didn't know me. Later on I've got a problem with the noodle stand's daughter who was my neighbor; it was about noises and garbage. I talked to her and her mother, for fear that the loud noise could draw Thai police attention and dirtiness could get me kicked out, but nothing changed. So I explained to the landlord and he talked with both of them, angrily. A few days later, the two strangers came banging on my door and shouted in Burmese. I rang my neighbor and asked for help but she's too afraid to call the landlord. But because of the noise, a Thai citizen in a house not far from us came out to look and screamed and yelled at them that she would call police, so they left. After that I moved out on that day.

RS-04Ca, former civil servant, female

My friend is a BGF defector, a bit high-ranking one I can say. He has fled to Mae Sot because his family got threatened. They rented a house close to me. After six months, a stranger came to call him at the gate, saying he was a neighbor and would like to share Thingyan (festival) snack. The guy was curious and asked many questions that made the family feel uncomfortable.

30 See “Thai-Myanmar border bridge reopens after three-year closure”, Myanmar now, 13/01/23 [https://bit.ly/49SORZF]

Two days after that, Thai police came, saying that there was a complaint about loud noise. Luckily he wasn't there. The police asked his wife how many people were living there and she said now there were only two and it was not possible that they would make loud noise. She gave them money and after they left, she contacted her husband. The whole family moved out later in that same day. They had to move several times until their savings almost ran out. Now they are not in Mae Sot any longer and I haven't heard from them since.

RS-02Arp, former armed group's personnel, male (told by a friend)

Although most participants believe that SAC and its allies have increased informers in Mae Sot in migrant communities right after the coup and that these people could travel to Mae Sot by various ways as the same as the refugees did, the reopening of the Thai-Myanmar Friendship Bridge No. 1 in 2023 is significant.³⁰ Due to COVID-19 restrictions and fighting that broke out near the Mae Sot-Myawaddy border since late 2021, the bridge which served as the only official formal cross-border channel had been closed for three years. The reopening of such an official travel channel, according to the participant's opinions, could facilitate more opportunities for different level of SAC officials to access to Myanmar diaspora community in persons.

As soon as the bridge reopened, they came in two cars and drove around our safehouse. So we had to move to somewhere else.

NGY-02Pp, member of political organization, male

Disappearances

There is no experience regarding assassination and physical assault cases of TNR. Among the research participants. Rather, a disappearance case was reported. Unfortunately, the Border Voices Team was not able to reach close relatives of the persons in the testimonies. There is no information whether there had been warning signs such as cyber threats and physical surveillance before it occurred.

My colleague told us he was coming to Mae Sot on his own. On the morning of 7 May 2022, he contacted us that he's already here in Mae Sot so we arranged the time, place and the date to pick him up. On the day we went according to the appointment, he didn't show up. We have been trying find out what happened since then until now but there's no clue. It's been over a year and we heard nothing from him. I had no idea he was arrested or killed and by whom.

MYH-04Ara, former member of armed resistance group, male

d) Cross-border cooperation between authorities

All research participants believe that there is cooperation between authorities of the two countries in surveillance, arrest, detention and unlawful deportation. This relies on the fact that all acknowledge close ties between the Thai and Myanmar governments and armies and suspicious experiences of the diaspora community.

We are in Thailand but we are not completely safe because Thai and Myanmar army are very close. Political activists can be traded off for political or economic reasons. SAC cannot come here and arrest us because this is Thailand, but they can work with the Thai authorities who have power here.

TRS-06Ca, former civil servant, female

Cross-border cooperation for TNR was explained as a cooperation of either one or many units of security agencies on the Thai side and one or more power groups on the Myanmar side. It should be noted that most Myanmar refugees and dissidents are not able to distinguish between personnel of different Thai security units such as police, immigration police, border police, infantry soldier, ranger, volunteer defense corps and village security unit from uniforms and arm patches. It is possible that a joint-operation was misunderstood to be a police search, and that personnel of one unit could be misunderstood as another. Therefore, the term 'authorities' and 'officials' are mostly used in this report instead of a specific unit's name.

In Mae Sot, the key actors on the Myanmar side are not only SAC as the ruling regime or the Myanmar military, but also BGF, which controls the border area in Myawaddy. The Myanmar army does not have border bases in Myawaddy and the vast area opposite Mae Sot is under the authority of BGF, following by DKBA and KNU. Thus, it is more likely that a direct physical action in Mae Sot could be of BGF personnel rather than the Myanmar army's. The complexity lies on the objectives of the action, whether it is a task on behalf of SAC, or for the benefit of SAC and BGF-SAC's relation, or purely to serve its own interests.

In Mae Sot we are afraid of BGF more than SAC. SAC has not much power in this border area. The DKBA tries to stay out of the conflict but just pay attention to its business. Sometimes BGF can be friends. For example, they helped a number of CDM'ers flee here, right? I know they got paid for this but my friends arrived here well and unharmed. However, we have to be afraid of them because they can do anything: capturing and torturing us to extort information and sending us to SAC. I think SAC can ask for

31. See “Thailand and Myanmar Traditional Rivals Now Brothers in Arms”, *The Straits Times*, 20/01/16 [<https://bit.ly/3Vlb66b>]
32. *Ibid.*, (22)

33. See “Thailand seeking to re-engage Myanmar junta with ASEAN Meeting”, *Reuters*, 17/06/23

[<https://reut.rs/43BUg5b>]

34. For instance : the meeting between the Thai Air Force Commander-in-chief with Min Aung Hlaing after the end of the 20th ASEAN Air Chiefs Conference chaired by the Myanmar military. See “Thai Air Force Chief meets Min Aung Hlaing following ASEAN Air Chiefs Conference”, *Prachatai*, 18/09/23 [<https://bit.ly/3IBXfRk>]

35. See “Thai military chief discusses cooperation with Myanmar’s Min Aung Hlaing”, *ThaiPBS World*, 14/01/24. [<https://bit.ly/3wUpilV>]

36. A letter from Brigadier General Khun Nay Tun Oo, Military, Naval and Air Attaché, Office of the Military, Naval and Air Attache, Embassy of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar No. 103 MA-22/G, dated 24 November 2022 to Colonel Khamthorn Kirthamai, Director of Foreign Liaison Division, Office of External Relations, Directorate of Intelligence, Royal Thai Army was circulated among Myanmar CSO and media. It was confirmed by local military unit that it was genuine.

37. According to the interviewee in “Sudden increase in arrests of undocumented Myanmar nationals in Mae Sot”, *BNI*, 22/06/23. [<https://bit.ly/3TDiulB>]

BGF cooperation, and sometimes BGF want to please SAC to support their relations. But sometimes it could be the matter of BGF itself for its own benefits.

TP-06Aa, activist, male

The three levels of TNR-related cooperation between Thai and Myanmar governments below are extracted from experiences and opinions of the participants, media reports and the Border Voices Team’s observations.

1) Government-to-government’s policy

Media reports over the years reflect how Thailand and Myanmar have had strong diplomatic and military ties.³¹ Right after the coup, the Thai Prime Minister and Defense Minister, who also came to power by a military coup, announced that he had received a letter from Myanmar’s junta leader, General Min Aung Hlaing, asking for help to support democracy, and even further gave a comment that ‘what is most important today is to maintain good relations.’³² The past government that ended in 2023 spent much effort to bring back Myanmar junta to ASEAN’s high-level meetings,³³ while the military leaders of the two countries frequently talked and/or met.⁴³ The new Thai cabinet that was sworn into office in August 2023 has not yet shown significant different approach so far. Recently in January 2024, Thailand’s supreme commander was reported to hold talks with Min Aung Hlaing about cooperation to crackdown illegal activities on the border, humanitarian aid, exchange of information and ‘efforts for ensuring peace and stability in border areas’.³⁵

Despite the close ties and Myanmar diaspora’s suspicions, there is no recent proven evidence of the two governments’ cooperation directly for the purpose of TNR.

The effort of Myanmar military attaché who requested the Thai army to ‘take necessary actions to effectively contain the activities’ of the 15 injured members of Karen National Defence Organization (KNDO) and PDF hospitalized in Tak province was not responded by either detention or extradition.³⁶ Frequently raids of undocumented migrants in Mae Sot and elsewhere in the middle of 2023 could either be the result of the Myanmar junta’s pressure or just normal raids that usually occurred right before and after a power shift.³⁷ There was no report of imprisonment and deportation of political refugees or dissidents as a result of these raids.

However, observers agree that it is clear that Myanmar refugees and dissidents are forced to sacrifice for the ‘good relations’ and ‘peace and stability in border areas’ that Thailand aims for.

SAC does not want us to be seen or heard in Thailand. So the Thai government treats us as illegal so that we cannot be seen and heard. This is up to the Thai government whether it will care about the relationship with junta or international reputation and righteousness.

TP-05Aa, activist, female

Keeping good relations with the military regime means one cannot keep good relations with its enemies openly. The policy stance has a direct impact on the Thai government’s policy on political refugees, and the denial of the existence, protection and rights of refugees is the key factor contributing to the people’s vulnerabilities to TNR. In addition, the Thai government downplays the significances of all Myanmar military incursions during the past few years is a factor contributing to TNR possibilities.³⁸

2) Cooperation with Thai local security unit

When I heard the news about the arrest of the high-profile people, I was afraid that it might be done in relation to SAC. Perhaps the police searches here many times were cooperation between Thai and Myanmar authorities. For instance, why that particular safehouse was frequently targeted? Was it an informer who wanted to stir a problem for us or a request of Myanmar military to the Thai?

TRS-05Ba, private business owner, female

The cooperation here refers to a local task under a high-level command or acknowledged by a high-level commander that is *claimed to be in the interests of Thailand*, and not for personal benefits. The Thai security units here include all military units under the Ministry of Defence and all police, including the immigration and border police under the Ministry of Interior.

The research participants are aware of the good relations between Thai and Myanmar at the local command level, owing to media reports of the Township Border Committee’s (TBCs) frequent meetings and other incident such as that of the mysterious 700 bags of rice on Salween river bank that the Thai army was accused to take part of the delivery to Myanmar army.³⁹ They also heard about a number of joint taskforce raids and police searches that specifically targeted certain individuals as the authorities came with a list of

38. For instance, the incursion of a Myanmar jet in July 2022 and 80-100 troops in September 2023. See “PM says incursion of Myanmar jet into Thai airspace not a big deal”, Thai PBS World, 1/07/22

[<https://bit.ly/3IM0Zzv>] and Aekarach Sattaburuth, “Border-hopping Myanmar troops cause alarm”, Bangkok Post, 12/09/23 [<https://bit.ly/3vgCM1k>]

39 The Thai army denied that it supplied rice to the Myanmar army. See Reuters, “Army denies supplying rice to Myanmar troops”, Bangkok Post, 20/03/21 [<https://bit.ly/3vetjHP>]

40. See “Thai police seeking anti-junta activists detain 108 Myanmar nationals in Mae Sot”, Radio Free Asia (Burmese Service), 23/03/23 [https://bit.ly/3Po2Dey]

names and/or photos,⁴⁰ of which no one has proof of the source.

It was more than once that Thai authorities raided buildings knowing who exactly was in there. In November and December 2022, the joint force rounded up places, checked people’s names and questioned everyone including children. They had the list of whom they wanted in their hands. Of course, everyone was let go unharmed, but that also was because many people intervened. How could they get the names if it wasn’t from the junta? So it is likely that they will share our information to the junta too.

TP-06Aa, activist, male

There has not yet been any confirmed evidence of local cooperation with a policy purpose to commit TNR against political refugees and dissidents in Mae Sot. This also is due to the fact that in one incident, there usually were many local and regional security units involved, and each unit may not have the same task and same policy. In addition, there usually were a number of CBOs, NGOs and international organizations that intervened to prevent refoulement. Therefore, nobody can confirm that the people were not sent back to the hands of SAC or BGF because there was no such intention in the first place, or because one powerful security unit could prevent it or because of the intervention of various groups and organizations. In addition, a legitimate ground was claimed for a few joint-force searches during mid-2023 as the targeted PDF members were found with weapons, and the arrested persons were not extradited at all.

According to a participant who has long had experiences on the border, Thailand would sacrifice too much if its local security units cooperate with Myanmar authorities in such crimes and it is more likely that some local officials act on their own for their personal benefits.

I know we are afraid of the ‘friendship’ between Myanmar and Thai army. But as far as I see, from the past until present, there are units or groups, or even individuals who might want to fully cooperate with Myanmar army, but there are also other units or groups or individuals who know that would sacrifice the country’s neutrality, so they try to prevent that. The balancing of these ideas allows us to be safe. It is not 100% safe, though, because I believe benefits have a stronger drive than ideology.

TP-02 Member of a political party, male

Nevertheless, the Border Voices Team observed that the insensitivity of the local authorities’ treatment of war refugees could facilitate a TNR-related

incident. According to a local media report, during January 2022, Thai officials told refugees in a Temporary Safe Area that there was a plan to repatriate a hundred people a day back to SAC's temporary camp, where all returnees' identities would be verified before having them sent back home.⁴¹ The cooperation between authorities of the two countries, with or without intention, poses grave risks for political refugees, and young villagers who could be targeted for interrogation.

Another incident told by a number of sources also showed that the cooperation between the Thai army and an ethnic armed group for the purpose of urging refugees to cross the border back almost crossed the line.

41. See "Burma Army Planning Large Scale Offensive Against Combined Karen Forces-Displaced People Fear Forced Return From Thailand", Karen News, 24 January, 2022 [<https://bit.ly/43pEUAn>]

It was during December 2021 to January 2022 that thousands of refugees fled were put in 'Temporary Safe Areas (TSA).' These refugees were villagers from border communities under either BGF, DKBA or KNU control and CDM'ers who had fled from town to the KNU area. In early January, while the attacks were still ongoing, Thai authorities kept asking refugees when they would return but the people thought it was still too dangerous. Then the Thai authorities brought a DKBA commander and his men to at least one of the TSAs I knew of. They told around 3000 refugees to go back because they could then guarantee safety. Over 400 felt they had no choice and returned. They might have lived with DKBA before but these armed men were not a play-friend but a powerful authority. The CDM'ers, some of whom came here by the help of DKBA, were afraid too. If DKBA can come to Thai side with Thai soldiers, then others can.

*Community volunteer, male
(Interview for documentation since January 2022)*

Authorities on both sides of the border do not want Myanmar refugees on Thai soil. DKBA and BGF want to have civilians' back-up in their territories while SAC does not want a living proof of Myanmar atrocities. Regardless of the Thai army's intentions, having an armed group leader speaking in an arranged safe area made refugees feel unsafe and directly supported SAC's desire to silence the people.

3) Individual(s) level for individual(s)' benefits.

Myanmar military or BGF cannot do anything on their own here. They have to get Thai police to arrest the targeted refugees and send them back. I think some Thai officials may do it for their own benefits. They could share information or send back people,

like the three PDF members, in exchange for rewards. Nobody has proof but I think it is likely.

TRS-06Ca, former civil servant, female

The case of three PDF members stimulated fear among the Myanmar diaspora in Mae Sot. According to news report, , on 1 April 2023, the men were arrested and handed to BGF by Mae Sot immigration police on April the fourth.⁴² During their attempted escape, one was reported killed. The other two injured men were sent to SAC prison. According to the Border Voices Teams local sources, there was an earlier ‘dialogue’ by another security unit to halt the deportation. Yet, it was done in a hurry on the very day of the appointment for visit and further discussion. This demonstrates that the incident was a not an accident but intentional.

According to observers, the reasons that the case was suspected to be an authorities cooperation for TNR were the fact that practically there were other ways that Thai authorities could have handled it. There was no need for the immigration police to deport the people that fast, and no need to hand them to BGF as there were many other channels of deportation. Moreover, another similar case was reported only a day later. Two PDF members who were sent to treat injuries in Mae Ramad hospital, 36 kilometers north of Mae Sot, were taken by a group of Thai officials and placed in Mae Sot immigration detention. Fortunately, due to the news of the first case, this case information spread quickly and interventions from various agencies were reported to be helpful.⁴³

According to the research participants and interviewed stakeholders, there was a suspicion that the two incidents could be a cooperation between SAC and/or BGF and some Thai officials in (an) individual(s) level in exchange of personal benefits.

It is more scary if the cooperation with SAC/BGF is based on personal benefits than on the country’s policy. We know that many Thai officials are corrupt, and they can do anything if they are paid well. Burmese people are their ATMs, that’s what people said. For national policy, at least I believe the Thai government does not want a bad reputation for violating international humanitarian and human rights law for very little benefit for the country. Individual abuse of power is more random and can happen to anyone at any time.

TP-07Ap, member of a political organization, male

42. See “Three PDF comrades who received medical treatment in Mae Sot were arrested by Thai immigration and brought back to the BGF and are being arrested by the SAC”, Myanmar Pressphoto Agency, 5 April, 2023 [<https://mpa-press.com/people-defence-force/19202/>]
43. Documented from a complaint of a CBO, which prefers to be anonymous, to Friends Without Borders on 6 April 2023.

Indirectly-related incidents

Among various forms of abuses against the Myanmar diaspora in Mae Sot, there are those that claimed to be or become TNR, despite the fact that the real purpose is not.

These include the way corrupt Thai officials arrest undocumented Myanmar refugees and dissidents with an aim only to extort money, and not to prosecute or deport. All participants shared the same stories, either from their very own experiences or those of their close friends and family members. The arrested person would be told through or by an interpreter that a certain amount ranging from a few thousand to tens of thousands must be paid, otherwise she or he would be handed directly to the Myanmar army, get tortured, imprisoned or killed.

None dared take the risk. Each was made to, at least partially, believe that the Thai officials in charge have been sending dissidents right to the hands of SAC or BGF for quite a while.

The interpreter said, “We would send you back to Myanmar. We know what you are and what kind of danger is waiting for you there. Then he said 20,000 baht could prevent this.

MYH-04Ara, activist, male

The Border Voices Team have decided to include no detailed quotes from the research participants in this regard, as it might expose the individuals and lead them to further harm as long as Thailand still has no legal protection for refugees.

Another form of abuse is a crime that the perpetrator is, or claims to be, a member of an authority from Myanmar. Similarly to the above, such crime has no purpose to silence or get rid of the dissidents. Yet, it is a crime in Thailand that is committed by those with authority in Myanmar, and that the perpetrator is usually unpunished not only because of the survivor’s legal vulnerability but the perpetrator’s influence in the border area.

After my uncle found out that I was raped by a neighbor who was a member of an armed group in Myawaddy, we moved out from that house. The man tried to contact me but I didn’t pick up so he called my uncle instead. He threatened that he would bring armed men to my uncle’s office and arrest him. My uncle asked what he wanted. The man said my uncle could pay me off. My uncle said he couldn’t and cut off the connection. After that, a member of that armed group really came to my uncle’s office with two policemen. They arrested my uncle for working ille-

gally and said he would be sent back to BGF. Luckily his colleague could get an international organization to intervene. Now I don't want to meet anyone. There are rumors about me. My uncle has no job because of me.

RS-03Aj, niece of an activist, female

3. People's prevention and response strategy

Due to the fact that almost all Myanmar refugees and dissidents in Mae Sot do not hold valid immigration documents while there has been no legal recognition of their right to seek asylum, their individual strategy to protect themselves from TNR focuses on self-restriction and resilience allowing themselves to be exploited by the corrupt system and abused by those involved. At the community level, the Myanmar diaspora has developed social support and safety network, which has slowly grown during the past three years.

Self-restriction

The limit of one's activities aim to hide oneself from all eyes. Myanmar political refugees and dissidents are advised by one another to make their old selves invisible in order to be safe from TNR. Almost all cut off contacts with families and friends inside Myanmar. Some have decided to change their identities: looks, names and even personal histories.

I've changed my hairstyle and dressing style. I don't talk with anyone about my past and present work. I don't apply for any assistance because I don't want to tell them who I am. I do not go out for shopping much and I mostly order things online. If I have to go out, I do not carry my computer around. My phone also has no old photos and information in it.

TRS-01Cp, former civil servant, female

Most research participants shared how they have deleted their old social media accounts, photos and videos; stop posting on Facebook that may show who and where they were, refrain from forming new friendship as no one can be trusted and avoid attending social, cultural and political activities especially ones that attracted a large crowd. A number keep moving houses every few months. The self-restriction for one's own safety is costly in terms of individual freedoms and psychological well-being.

So far I am safe, but that doesn't mean the situation is SAFE. I am safe because I don't show up at any public event, wedding and

funeral. I don't go eat outside and I don't use food delivery service either because having people come to my house is even worse than seeing me outside. I close all the curtains and don't see sunlight for days because I want nobody to peak in. I've moved out from Mae Sot though that's the place I could hear people speaking Burmese. There are lists of things each of us come up with to protect ourselves and nothing is fun. The Burmese restaurants and social gathering is enjoyable for many others but not for those who are at risk like us.

TPAp-07, member of a political organization, male

Allow oneself to be victim of corruption and abuses

As being advised by friends, CBOs, CSOs and NGOs, most participants have applied for international protection with UNHCR. In the first two years after the coup, word spread that if people registered themselves as migrant workers, they might not be able to get recognized as a refugee entitled to international protection. The experiences of Myanmar refugees in the 1990s confirmed the information. This meant that as long as Thailand did not recognize the right to seek and enjoy asylum, the only choice for new refugees and dissidents was to allow themselves to be exploited by Thai official's corrupted system.

All participants except three who held legal documents shared that they relied on a 'police ticket' system, which has already been reported publicly by several media agencies.⁴⁴ Those who paid the monthly fees know well that they were not completely safe from being arrested, but most had no other choice but accepting the unfair deal. If being arrested, money is also the only way to freedom. Claiming the right as a refugee and asking for help from NGOs and internal organizations meant at best they would be put in an immigration cell forever to avoid deportation.

44. "Myanmar migrants face being exploited under Thai deportation system", Benar News, 2 June, 2023 [https://bit.ly/3IDRHFI]

I have applied to UNHCR's protection but if something happens, a few hundred baht can better solve the issue. If you make a phone call to UNHCR, the price will increase and you'll get into more trouble.

NG-02Pp, member of a political organization, male.

Apart from the financial exploitation, the research participants also explained how they had tolerated abusive behavior from some officials and government employees, and in some cases of other Myanmar citizens who have been here before them, to avoid problems, which usually meant deportation to persecution in Myanmar.

Everyone who was arrested knew that the Burmese interpreter is the worst and most fearful. He yelled at people and acted like a Myanmar policeman. Some Burmese who've been here long and can speak Thai look down upon us and treat us like dirt, but we must stay calm. We must keep ourselves from having any problem with them. They have nothing to lose but we do.

NG-03Aro, former member of armed resistance group, male.

As time passes, refugees and dissidents in Mae Sot have learned that there is no chance to be legally recognized as a refugee and that international protection cannot fight the corrupt system. Recently, more people tried to get themselves into a migrant worker system, as in fact more than half of them are actually 'working' and are migrant workers anyway due to the lack of assistance.

Social support and safety network

At the community level, Myanmar refugees and dissidents rely on their own social support and safety networks for necessary information, emergency aid including financial loans and psychological support. There are CBOs Telegram channels that provides helpful information about health services and can sometimes support interpreters. There are refugee groups that create online platforms to send news about police checkpoints, and movements of Myanmar authorities that officially cross the border to Mae Sot. A number of participants shared that their neighbors helped look out for their safety and sent out warnings to others if there are strange cars approaching or Thai authorities operations.

I follow the news from several groups here. When I heard Myanmar military and police came to Mae Sot, I know I have to be more careful. This is very helpful. We need more efforts to support each other. We should try to do as much as we can for the public.

TRS-05Ba, business owner, female

In addition, more services by diaspora members for diaspora communities have emerged in the past three years. Apart from health and education services, there are online counseling sessions and on-site community support programs. Several types of efforts are spreading on a small scale as there are professional human resources among refugees and migrants. The people relied less on NGOs as time passed. They are fewer new arrivals that need emergency assistance, and Thai laws do not allow a refugee legal aid program to be effective.

We are really helpless if we get arrested so it is good to have such organizations to help. I am grateful that these groups are standing by our sides. But the fact is they cannot help much no matter how hard they have tried. How much they can help us depends on Thai laws. So the right question is how much protection can we get under the law of this country?

MYH-03Pp, member of a political organization, male

4. Consequences of TNR on Myanmar diaspora

According to the participants, while physical impacts which include death and disappearances were experienced, the most severe consequence is their deteriorating mental health and psychological well-being caused by the fear of TNR itself and their strategies to prevent themselves from falling victim of TNR. In addition, such strategies contribute to the people's poor access to economic, health and education opportunities and restrict their political rights.

Death and disappearances

This participatory research does not aim to collect data of TNR cases but perspectives and experiences of Mae Sot Myanmar diaspora communities in relation in TNR. Therefore, cases of disappearance and death as a result of TNR presented in this report should not be treated as quantitative data but qualitative information that explains the TNR pattern against Myanmar diaspora population in the area.

Experiences shared by the research participants include the disappearance of a member of a political party (MYH-04Ara) in 2022 and the death and suspected death of the three PDF members who were handed by Thai immigration police to BGF – SAC in April 2023. As mentioned previously, the low number of death and disappearances suspected to be a result of TNR does not necessarily reflect the low level of efforts as there are a number of contributing factors.

Mental health and psychological well-being

When I started to realize I wasn't safe here at all, I got depressed - so depressed that I felt it would be better to end this by going back to them, let them arrest me and put me in jail.

NG-05Aa, business employee, female

We live in full-time vigilance. Is there anyone coming? Who is the person walking in front of our house? At night time we have to look out for intruders and be afraid of an arson. To go outside, we have to be ready for any danger. My family and I used to live freely in Myanmar but now we have lost our freedoms.

MYH-03p, member of a political organization, male

TNR against Myanmar diaspora in Mae Sot works as a psychological warfare that forces people to live in constant fear and anxiety. Moreover, to protect themselves from potential TNR, a number of people put themselves into extreme isolation, both in the physical and virtual worlds, and fall into depression. Many are also in prolonged stress for being constantly humiliated. A female participant explained how she felt inferior living in an unwelcome place and all she tried to do was to avoid causing Thai people irritation. The participants who had paid for the police ticket system and/or ransom when being arrested reflected how they were depressed for allowing themselves to be insulted and taken advantage of.

My family just stay inside the house. It is like we're under house arrest. We don't even have a neighboring friend. We buy vegetables from only the nearest shop. We are so worry about getting arrested and sent back to the regime. My wife has been traumatized from the incident that I got arrested while working in the market. At the time we had to pay 30,000 baht. That is more than 10 times of a basic salary in Myanmar! Now I am the only one to go outside because I have to earn a living. I know the police ticket can guarantee only 50% security but there is nothing I can do. I try to calm my wife and my children down by telling them how we are safer here than our friends in Myanmar. At least if I get arrested again, there will be 'ways' to clear it. We are mentally insecure and this has been going on for over a year.

NG-04Mdo, former media personnel, male

Physical well-being and access to economic, social and cultural rights.

The research participants went further to explain how TNR has direct impacts on their economic, social and cultural life in Thailand. Living in isolation and fear restricts access to work, healthcare and education. Attending religious activities cannot even be done with peace of mind. There is a very thin line between the impact on psychological and physical well-being.

We try to protect ourselves but it affects our finances, health and my daughter's education. My mind is always upset. The law doesn't protect us from SAC. My husband was about to be sent back if a broker didn't intervene. He'd been in the immigration cell for five days not knowing when he would be sent to death. After that he lives in depression and couldn't earn a living much. Everyone in my family are having mental health issues, and we are living in poverty. We have no hope for the future. Half of the people know here are the same.

TRSCa-06, former civil servant, female

The struggle for democracy

The purpose of TNR is to weaken the Myanmar democracy movement and the anti-regime resistance. According to the research participants, during the past three years, TNR has directly and indirectly restricted political activities and slowed down the movement to some extent. There are a number of dissidents who initially did not plan to seek the third country asylum but later changed their minds due to the fear and difficulties in Mae Sot. People do not dare to express their political thoughts in social media and in public, thus reducing the opportunities for the campaign to grow.

I deleted my FB account and used another avatar one to read news only. I do not post anything on it at all. I stop giving media interview and stop being active in social life. In fact, I don't dare to do anything anymore for fear that the military will attack my family again.

MYH-02Ma, former military personnel, female

While some people do not want to give up their freedom of expression in Thailand, many others see a public event and social gathering a threat to the whole community.

I understand the local Thai authorities. If we organize a political campaign, they will get into trouble. SAC may yell at them 'how could you let this happen?', and then they had to do the searches or arrest someone and we are all in trouble. To live and work here, we need to compromise. For our political rights tomorrow, we have to sacrifice that of today.

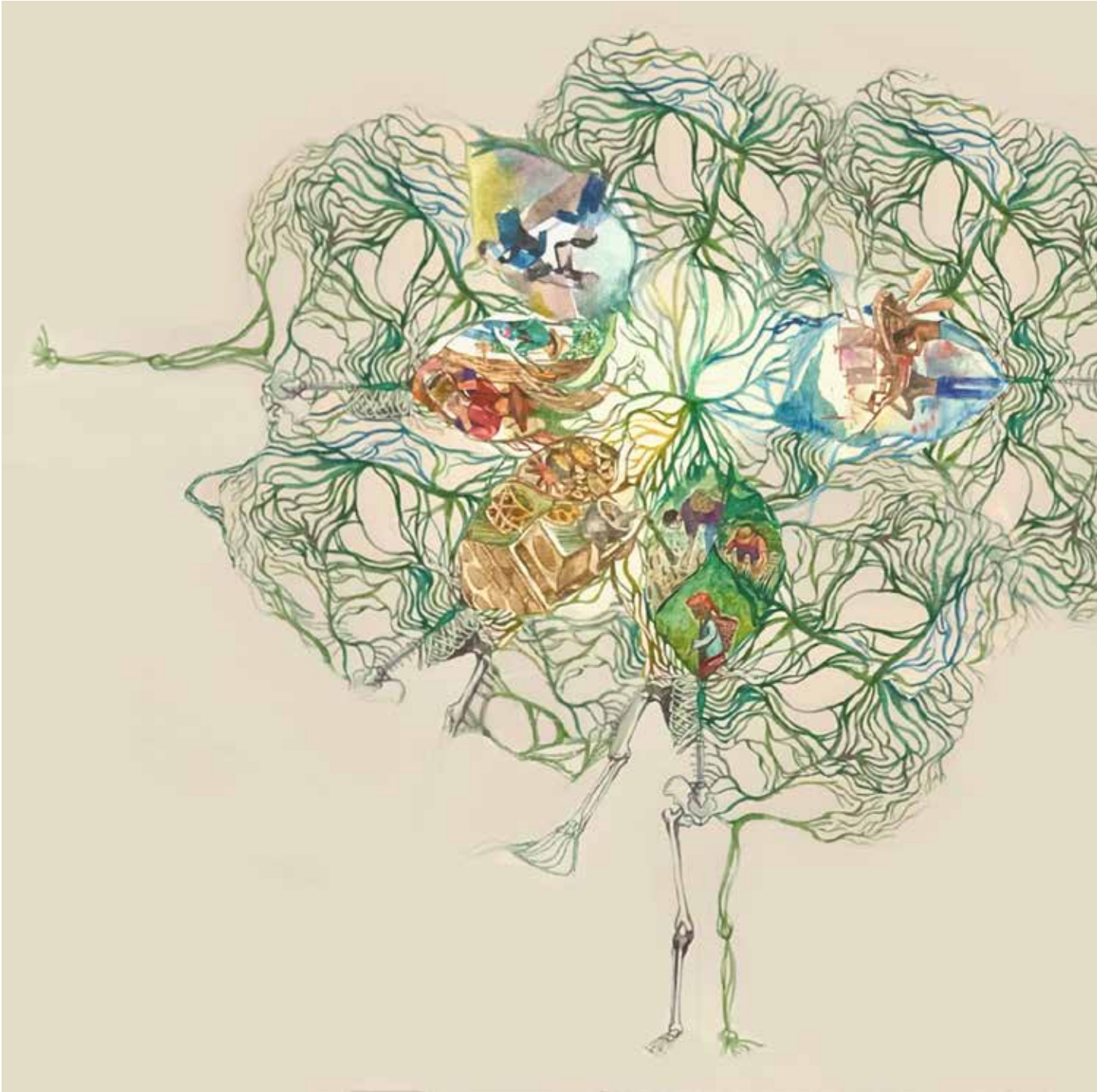
TP-02Pp, member of a political organization, male

However, another participant disagreed that one should sacrifice rights and freedom of today for the higher aim. As the key to achieving democracy is

the people's support and it is not possible to gain support when one cannot speak out.

I'm afraid that if we cannot speak on social media, cannot organize any public event, cannot even show up in other people's event, how can we fight for democracy? Not all of us can join armed resistance. Only armed resistance also never achieve our goal. We must not let a threat of TNR stop us from fighting our fight.

TP-04Aa, activist, female



Picture by Ansaya Kuntaya (Long list, 2021 painting competition, Friends Without Borders)



Recommendations

The recommendations to prevent TNR to occur in Thailand and to protect Myanmar diaspora from falling victim of TNR were gathered individually and from brainstorming session of the research participants and the Border Voices Team.

It must be noted that the recommendations below scope around TNR issues only. They do not aim to address all broader challenges facing by Myanmar refugees and dissidents in Mae Sot and in Thailand.

All contributors wish that their tips and suggestions for other Myanmar refugees and dissidents will reach the diaspora community, and that their recommendations for all others including Thai government and the National Unity Government of Myanmar will be valued.

A. Recommendations for Myanmar diaspora in Mae Sot

1. Security measures

- Apply for international protection through UNHCR. Although the organization cannot do much for us now, it is better than nothing and there is nothing to lose.
- Try to get a legal identity document whenever the Thai government opens a chance. If you are applying for one, it is best to check with trusted organizations whether the process is for real. There are several ID cards and work permit scammers now: be aware and do your background research.
- Understand there is always a risk to expose oneself, including political background, current activities, locations and lifestyle in both the digital, virtual and physical world. There is no privacy in an online world as well as in the physical world even among friends. Restrict unnecessary exposure and actions.
- Carrying information, photos and videos around in a personal device is not safe.

2. Living in Thailand 101

- Learn about Thailand in all aspects: political, economic, social, laws, culture including popular culture. This will help our lives here easier and more enjoyable. Instead of paying attention only on Myanmar news, follow news about Thailand too. We will be here for another while and we need to know the place that may become our

second home.

- Respect Thai national laws and community's rules. We unfortunately entered the country without legal permissions, but it is necessary that the immigration law will be the only law we break. Living with respect means, for example, we don't exploit the opportunity by using, or allowing our friends to use our safe-house for making bombs and keeping weapons. This is unacceptable in any country and will cause us all in trouble.
- Respect, try to understand and be sensitive to Thai culture and lifestyle. For example, understand that many Thais don't like when their neighbors drink and sing songs out loud. Understand that it is normal to feel threatened when a crowd of men coming in and out a place next door all day without even saying hello or smiling. Thai people do not hate people from Myanmar. If they do, we would not be able to live here like this. So don't do things to make them feel bad about us.
- Be friendly and befriend with the Thais as much as possible. Try to learn Thai language although we mostly stay among Burmese-speaking crowds and can speak English with some Thais. The language efficiency will open chances for friendship, jobs and safety.
- Be sensitive to migrant workers and working class Thais around us. Although we do not intend to cause them any trouble, it is true that our arrivals contribute to the increase of goods prices, rental and corruption.

3. Do not give up

- Mental and physical fitness should be one of our priorities. We have to make ourselves mentally and physically strong to survive this situation.
- Gather and share the list of contacts of CBOs, CSOs and NGOs with the kind of help each can provide. It is also good if the community gather and circulate the list of scam groups that one should avoid.
- Let's get together as self-help groups or small CBOs of political refugees, and connect with the existing Myanmar CBOs & CSOs and trusted Thai and international NGOs. With support from these organizations, our small and spreading groups can provide support to those with mental health problems, or become platforms for people in the neighborhood to share knowledge and experiences of TNR, intelligence movement, prevention strategies, etc.

- Initiate a good reporting and documentation system of TNR and other human rights violations in communities or each community. Keeping quiet of how we are badly treated will not make it go away. Information can be passed on to the network as mentioned above so that legal and humanitarian help will come fast and effectively. It can also be used for advocacy and proposals for NGO's relevant capacity building programs.

B. Recommendations for CBOs, CSOs, local and international NGOs and international organizations

1. Security measures

- Staff of all related organizations should be trained to understand the sensitivity of TNR and Myanmar politics so that they understand the diaspora's concerns.
- All organizations should intensively check political backgrounds of their staff members, especially those from Myanmar in order to ensure security of all clients. Those who have the potential to be involved with SAC or any group that refugees have run away from should not be in a position relating to refugees or working in organizations that obtain personal information from refugees and dissidents.
- There should be an agreed upon standard that personal information of refugees and dissidents obtained by the aid or case-work organizations shall not be shared with one another without consent of the person and must be kept in highly secured storage.
- Myanmar CBOs and CSOs should work with Thai and international NGOs and newly emerged Myanmar diaspora groups/CBOs to conduct a TNR risk assessment among Myanmar diaspora to see different levels of risk and strategies required so that they can prioritize groups and provide suitable assistance in a timely manner.

2. Services

- There is still a need for legal aid program to stop deportation for those who could not pay their ways out. The emergency number should work daily and until at least 8 PM.
- Mental healthcare and psycho-social counselling programs, including ones that address violence against women, are seriously needed. As it is difficult for refugees to access the service in person,

there should be more training for community volunteers and professionals for online counseling services.

- Helpful capacity building programs include Thai language class, 'Living in Thailand 101' classes and digital security. It is better to provide 'training for trainer' for the trained person to work in communities. In addition, there is a need for more community interpreters. Financial support for at least traveling costs for these volunteers are needed so that they can help the communities.
- International organizations that are involved in refugee protection and resettlement should work more quickly and effectively in the field.

3. Advocacy

- After three years, advocacy work should be the top priority. There is a need to advocate for the Thai government's recognition of Myanmar refugees the policy that is based on human rights and humanitarian principles (more details in D.) Organizations should also try to bring more attention to TNR and the plight of Myanmar refugees in Thailand.

C. Recommendation for the National Unity Government of Myanmar (NUG)

- Practically treat and pay attention without discrimination to all refugees: ethnic villagers fleeing war, former civil servants, former military personnel, politicians, media and ordinary citizens who are CDM'ers.
- Advocacy for Myanmar refugee's rights and recognition should be treated as one of the top priorities: no less than working for the change of Myanmar.
- Approach and engage with the Thai government and members of parliament both from governmental and opposition parties to advocate for the rights and recognition of Myanmar refugees: this is no less important than approaching and engaging with the U.S., EU and international community.
- Approach and establish good relations with Myanmar CBOs and CSOs, Thai NGOs, Thai employers and Thai communities from the position of a body that has the responsibility to look after Myanmar citizens is helpful and working in isolation.

D. Recommendations for the Government of Thailand

- Recognize the existence of Myanmar refugees and their right to seek asylum. A clear policy based on international human rights and humanitarian standards, that ensures safe asylum is the only way to end corruption, exploitation and abuses of power against the Myanmar diaspora and the threats of TNR.
- Design and implement screening mechanism with the participation of Thai civil society, and issue (a) types of temporary legal identity document that guarantees the right to stay and work, provide access to healthcare and education in Thailand. The process should be designed for a refugee to be able to apply without a third person, such as an employer, to guarantee as it opens for a broker who exploits the situation. Resettlement in the third country should be facilitated quickly for those who choose to go, so Thailand does not need to host too large a number of people already accepted for asylum.
- Enact and ensure the principle of non-refoulement. Ensure that any arrested individual have access to legal protection against refoulement under international law.
- All officials who work in relation to refugees and dissidents should be trained to respect international customary law, human rights and humanitarian principles and the Prevention and Suppression of Torture and Enforced Disappearance Act. It should be made clear that refugees are not criminals and thus shall not be subjected to extradition.
- Engage and support CBOs, CSOs and NGOs that provides services, assistance and legal aid to refugees. Work together with them and human rights organizations to combat TNR in Thailand.
- Support efforts for democracy in Myanmar and stop any direct and indirect support to the military regime to continue the use of violence against the people.

E. Recommendations for the International Community

- Expand efforts to in working with Thailand to recognize the existence and the rights of Myanmar refugees and develop policies that provides temporary legal status before the people can have access to other solutions, which includes voluntary resettlement and eventual return.

- Spend more effort to end violence caused by the Myanmar military regime and to support democracy and peace in Myanmar.
- Provide financial and technical support to local NGOs, CSOs and CBOs that work to protect Myanmar refugees in Thailand.

Epilogue

No government should have the right to act beyond its territory. Transnational repression by SAC is occurring in Thailand because the Thai government does not have a clear policy regarding the protection of refugees. We are refugees who were forced to flee political persecution. We are not criminals. We did not smuggle drugs and did not harm anyone. Cooperation between governments is legitimate for an extradition of a criminal who fled across the border because the person may continue to commit a crime in any country. But it should not be for those who fled oppression and injustice and only want to seek a temporary asylum.

MYH-07Aa, activist, male

From our conversations with Myanmar refugees and dissidents, I came to think more about the the significant role of the international community and the host country. Myanmar military regime leverages its diplomatic ties with Thailand to exert pressure on exiled dissents. Unfortunately, the lack of international protection and support for Myanmar refugees and dissidents has left them so vulnerable to the transnational repression.

Myanmar research team members, Border Voices Team

ACRONYMS

AI	Artificial intelligence
BGF	Border Guard Force
CBO	Community-based organization
CDM	Civil Society Disobedience
CSO	Civil Society organization
DKBA	Democractic Karen Buddhist Army
ERO	Ethnic Revolutionary Organization
KNDO	Karen National Defence Organization
KNLA	Karen National Liberation Army
KNU	Karen National Union
KTLA	Kawthoolei army
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and others
IDP	Internally displaced person
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NSM	National Screening Mechanism
NUG	National Unity Government
PC	Peace Council
PDF	People's Defense Force
SAC	State Administration Council
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
TBC	The Border Consortium
TNR	Transnational repression
TSA	Temporary Safe Area
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
VIP	Very Important Person

