

PROLONGED SUFFERING, HOPES, AND UNCERTAINTIES: THE FATE OF KACHIN IDPs IN MYANMAR

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After ten years of long-suffering in IDP camps following the NLD-led government initiative with the collaboration of different civil society groups and international NGOs, the hope of IDPs in Kachin state to go back to their home has been revitalized. However, the hope was fragmented, and they came into uncertainty again to return to their homes following the recent military coup in Myanmar. A Myitkyina township based IDP, Seng Ing (not real name) who was originally from Waing Maw township expressed that “As my home compound is quite big so that I plan to make a vegetable farm, and in front of my house, I will open a small shop for my daily income, and my children can play freely again as we arrived in our home. But now everything about my dream to go back home and the plan was destroyed because of the military coup since February”².

Amid ongoing political turmoil in the country following the oppression and brutalities by the military after the coup, the last 9 June 2021 was marked as the 10th Anniversary of the war in Kachin state. Many IDPs and rights groups expressed their concerns for the resettlement and return of IDPs because of the prolonged suffering of IDPs in squalid camps with limited access to basic services and daily needs. A young man from Je Yang IDP camp expressed his desire to go back home on the day of the anniversary. “It’s already been 10 years and now it

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² Interviewed by Kachin Women’s Association of Thailand (KWAT) on 22 June 2021.

turned to 11 years that I have been living in IDP camp. But I am not happy here anymore. I always want to go back to my home. As I am a youth, my No.1 priority is to go back home, and I always imagine that my home will be existed the same like before” (Documentary Video, 2021).

The renewing of the conflict between the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and the Burma military force in 2011 has resulted in 104,000 IDPs sheltering in 168 camps in Kachin state and the border of Shan-Kachin state as of 27 January 2021 (UNOCHA, 2021). Some IDP camps are located in government-controlled areas and some are KIA-controlled areas. Because of prolonged stay in the camps in dire conditions, the lives of IDPs have been in abnormal conditions in the camps. Being IDPs negatively affects all sides of their lives more or less. The access to health services is limited as they cannot go outside of the camp for further services except NGOs and CSO/CBO’s services. The IDPs have no livelihood opportunities for income generations that help them to fulfil their basic needs. The children of IDPs have no access to education because there are no regular schools nearby the camps or language barrier difficulties in the government schools. Moreover, sexual violence against women in the camps is very common. By reason of hardship in the camps, youths and women are frequently trafficked to China in the false hope of providing jobs which ultimately results in forced labor or forced marriage in China. Moreover, all the IDPs are solely dependent on the services providing by NGOs and CSOs/CBOs. Because of the emergence of new conflicts in other parts of the country such as Rakhine, Shan, and Kayin, the number of new IDPs has increased. The need for humanitarian assistance for new IDPs has affected the humanitarian supports of IDPs in Kachin State at some level and the funding has been reduced as well. The government not only failed to fully support the IDPs but also to protect their properties and ancestral lands left behind after they fled from war.

Due to the urgency of resolving the IDPs crisis, the NLD-led government under its IDP camp closure strategy have attempted to relocate IDPs and dozens of coordination meeting among UNs, INGOs and local CSOs have been conducted since 2018. However, the efforts on IDPs relocation or resettlement were not successful as the government could not make a ceasefire agreement deal with KIA and build capacities for IDPs resettlement in destination places. Even for some IDPs who have been registered to go back home like Seng Ing’s family, the government could not provide enough facilities for the returnees. “In the camps, we mainly rely

on aids and the children have no future, so we are yearning to go home”, said Khon Ra, a widow, and mother of four children. She applied to the government to go back to her village under a government resettlement scheme with a hope to start a new life after having lived in the camp for nine years (Zaw, 2021). This is the time that the hope of IDPs to go back home was at a high level.

After the COVID 19 pandemic, the general population of Myanmar has been affected negatively but the lives of vulnerable people like IDPs have been badly affected as they are living in overcrowded places with poor access to all services including hygiene, water sanitation, and other COVID 19 related services. Moreover, the humanitarian services provided for IDPs have become limited or reduced due to COVID 19 related movement of restrictions of all people including service providers’ staff. Neither NGO service providers could come regularly as they used to provide regular services nor IDPs could go outside to work who used to work before outside of the camps. Therefore, IDPs have suffered double during the sudden rise of COVID 19 cases in the country. According to a local news outlet of Kachin State, N’lam Kying, who is in charge of the Trinity IDP camp in Myitkyina regarding IDP’s difficulties during the pandemic said “We don’t have enough water to wash our hands in our IDP camp. We are struggling for enough drinking water. We only have one well in the camp, which has more than 100 families, if we pump water from the well for two hours, it is gone. We tried to build another well, but we were unable to finish it” (Kachin News Group, 2020). Amid the hardship during lockdown due to COVID 19, the IDPs were hopeful to go back home.

Following the 1 February military coup, the IDPs not only lost their hope but also got more hardship in the camps. The humanitarian assistance for both existing IDPs and new IDPs has been blocked since the coup, while around 187,400 new IDPs (UNHCR, 2021) have emerged across the country as the result of fresh armed conflicts after the coup. Moreover, only in Kachin state, as of 31 May, over 6,000 villagers had been displaced from 16 villages in Momauk Township after clashes between KIA and Burma military brought shells into their villages by Burma army. Consequently, many residents in the area were seriously injured including a 14-year-old-boy who was injured in the head while was feeding chickens and some other villagers including monks who were killed. Public properties were also destroyed by the Burma Army troops (KWAT, 2021).

The IDPs who depend on WFP monthly cash assistance (stipend) have been facing serious problem to survive as the banking system in the country has been halted with internet restrictions and closure of all banks following the coup and WFP have faced difficulties to transfer the cash to IDPs. Moreover, most of the NGOs' work to provide humanitarian assistance in the country has been halted or slowed due to political turmoil and security concerns. A woman who lives in the KBC IDP camp in Momauk township, said, “We are struggling for food, WFP only provides 11,000 kyats (7 dollars) per person every month, when the money doesn't arrive, they go hungry” (BNI, 2021). Another IDP woman from Waingmaw Township said, “The prices of vegetables have gone up. The cost of everything has increased. We aren't allowed to take daily employment so it is very tough” (BNI, 2021).

After years of long-suffering with abnormal life in the camps, the hope that the IDPs have expected to go back home to have a normal life has become blurred while facing additional challenges in their existing hardships followed by the consequences of political turmoil in the country after the coup. The dream of IDPs for returning home has become beyond the possibility in the near future. Therefore, the international NGOs and local CSOs/CBOs must prioritize the provision of humanitarian supports for IDPs continuously and must provide cross-border aid to local CSOs/CBOs for direct and effective ways to reach the vulnerable groups in need of emergency humanitarian assistance.

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