

What Villagers
in the South East
Say...



WHAT REFUGEES SAY...

**COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES OF
TEMPORARY RETURNEES
ON THEMES RAISED IN
“WHAT VILLAGERS SAY...”**

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“The findings and subsequent analysis in this report are based on a limited number of interviews, and so may not be representative of the perspectives of the wider community or specific diverse sectors within them. As such, the reader is cautioned not to draw general conclusions from the report, but rather consider it as a snapshot of random perspectives intended to inform ongoing discussions on the evolving context and current obstacles to sustainable return. If you have other insights which you would like to share or recommendations to propose, please contact TBC field staff directly or through your camp leadership. Thank you.”

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Between March-April this year, focus group discussions were held with temporary returnees to SE Burma/ Myanmar from all 9 refugee camps along the Thailand-Burma/ Myanmar border. The aim was to gain a snapshot of individual perspectives and concerns on current conditions on the ground, rather than conducting a formal survey representational of the whole refugee caseload.

The consultations focussed on the conditions in the areas they returned to, the changes they and residents in those areas had detected since recent political and military shifts in the country, and their perceived current barriers to return.

The participants were identified by Section Leaders, with criteria that they must have returned to SE Burma/ Myanmar since the ceasefires were brokered, be adults, and that there should be some gender equity amongst them. In total, 85 temporary returnees participated in the consultations, with 35% being female. Over 100 others, comprising senior community leaders and CBO staff were also engaged through the process, although the main findings in this report only reflect the perspectives of those who had recently returned to their country of origin.

Prior to the discussions, the participants were invited to self-profile themselves to contextualise their movements. This involved them voluntarily providing the date, length, destination and purpose of their last visit, as well as the route by which they returned.

The destinations of their returns were mainly to rural upland areas encompassing at least 18 townships in all States and Regions in SE Burma/ Myanmar (except Shan State) – the majority for family-related reasons, and lasting from 1 day to 9 months.

Based on their testimonies and reported perspectives, there are substantial barriers to sustainable return, especially in areas associated with high levels of continued militarisation, with the ability to enjoy basic rights and freedoms not yet guaranteed by any functioning rule of law.

Although the severe insecurity associated with continued militarisation is a universal and critical concern across all camps and in all areas visited, the nature and levels of other obstacles varied between camps and the areas temporary returned to. Barriers to livelihoods security and land tenure/ reclamation were the next issues of greatest concern (although less so in the 2 most southern camps), with landmine pollution and access to health and education services following (the former mainly in the northern camps and the latter in the southern).

The prevalence of narcotics as well as negative environmental impacts caused by large-scale industry were of least concern to the participants (with exceptions in UMP and MLO respectively). Based on trends in the region, concerns around associated impacts of these are only likely to increase, and thus may gain greater attention in the future.

In summary, opportunities for a sustainable organised return based on international standards continue to remain elusive.

INTRODUCTION

From March to April this year, TBC held Focus Group Discussions (FGD) in all camps with random refugees who had recently temporarily returned to Burma/ Myanmar. The purpose was to explore their perspectives on social, political and economic conditions on the ground in the areas they returned to, what changes there had been since the national political transition in early 2011 and the subsequent brokering of individual ceasefires, and existing obstacles to sustainable return.

The aim was not to conduct a formal survey representational of the whole refugee caseload, but rather to gain a snapshot of individual perspectives and concerns. The participants were identified by Section Leaders, typically one person from each section of each camp – the only criteria being that they must have returned to SE Burma/ Myanmar since the ceasefires were brokered, be adults, and that there should be some gender equity amongst them.

Prior to the discussions, the participants were invited to self-profile themselves to contextualise their movements. This involved them voluntarily providing the date, length, destination and purpose of their last visit, as well as the route by which they returned.

The vast majority of participants reported returning to rural areas and thus their perspectives may not reflect conditions in urban/ periurban settings where post-election/ -ceasefire conditions may well vary. Nevertheless, it should be noted that by far the majority of camp residents come from rural areas such as these, and therefore the findings detailed below reflect perspectives relevant to many residents' primary destination preferences upon any spontaneous or organised return.

The discussions focused on three main areas of enquiry, with associated sub-themes:

1. Protection and Security

- Ongoing presence of *Tatmadaw* and NSAs
- Certainty of ceasefires
- Landmine pollution
- Freedom of Movement
- Rule of Law
- Confidence-building

2. Social Welfare Services (health and education)

- Provision and access (GoRUM-, NSA- and community-run services)
- Employment opportunities

3. Livelihoods

- Access to fields/ plantations and markets
- Land tenure and reclamation
- Land acquisition by economic interests and impacts on environmental security
- Prevalence of narcotics (*identified through the process and not an initial sub-theme*)

Collated extracts of these perspectives, as well as those expressed by villagers in the areas the participants returned to, are presented thematically in the main body of the report. These are followed by their self-identified priorities of the main current obstacles to sustainable return, together with analysis of borderwide commonalities and camp-specific variations, as well as possible reasons for the latter.

Following the discussions, participants were then invited to watch screenings of the “What Villagers Say...” videos documenting perspectives of villagers living in the same areas of their return, and to reflect on similarities and disparities of the opinions expressed in the videos with their own.

In some camps, Camp Committees and Community-Based Organisations were also invited to view the screenings, although the views of these audiences are not included in the key findings.

AUDIENCE DETAILS

Notes: * This section documents temporary returnees, as well as Camp Committee, CBO and Muslim audiences.

* The "temporary returnee participants were randomly selected by Section Leaders, typically one per section. The other groups self-selected their representatives.

Camp	Audience	Number of Participants	Female : Male Ratio (% Female)
Site 1 (S1)	Temporary returnees	2	1 : 1 (50%)
Site 2 (S2)	Temporary returnees	13	6 : 7 (46%)
	CC and CBOs	3	2 : 1 (67%)
Mae La Oon (MLO)	Temporary returnees	12	2 : 10 (17%)
	CC and CBOs	16	6 : 13 (56%)
Mae Ra Ma Luang (MRM)	Temporary returnees	9	2 : 7 (22%)
	CC and CBOs	19	9 : 7 (32%)
Mae La (MLA)	Temporary returnees	9	5 : 4 (56%)
	Muslim elders	20	6 : 14 (30%)
	Muslim Youth	13	0 : 13 (0%)
Umpiem Mai (UMP)	Temporary returnees	11	7 : 4 (64%)
	Muslim leaders	10	1 : 9 (10%)
Nu Po (NPO)	Temporary returnees	14	0 : 14 (0%)
Ban Don Yang (BDY)	Temporary returnees	7	2 : 5 (29%)
	CC and CBOs	12	5 : 7 (42%)
Tham Hin (THI)	Temporary returnees	8	5 : 3 (63%)
	CC and CBOs	11	6 : 5 (55%)
TOTALS		189	65 : 124 (34%)

Borderwide Summary of Participant Profiles:

Audience	Total	F : M Ratio
Temporary returnees	85	30 : 55 (35%)
CCs and CBOs	61	28 : 33 (46%)
Muslims	43	7 : 36 (16%)
TOTALS	189	65 : 124 (34%)

TRIP DETAILS

Notes: * This section only details movements by temporary returnees.

* There is no necessary correlation between the specific destinations and motivations, as laid out in the table.

* Inconsistencies between the total numbers of FGD participants listed above and the numbers of respondents here are due to non-respondents.

Camp	Latest Visit (least - most recent)	Length of Visit (shortest - longest)	Township Destination	Motivation for Return
S1	1304 - 1403	9 months	Bawlake x 2 Demawsoe x 2 Loikaw x 2 Mese x 2 Pasaung x 2 Pruso x 2 <i>(Note: the two visitors travelled through all townships of Karenni State to conduct extensive NGO work assignments)</i>	Work x 2
S2	2011 - 1403	3 days – 3 months	Demawsoe x 1 Pasaung x 3 Thandaung x 1	Family x 5
MLO	1203 - 1311	2 weeks - 7 months	Pasaung x 1 Kyaukkyi x 1 Papun x 9 Thandaung x 1	Family x 7
MRM	1303 - 1312	1 week – 9 months	Kyaukkyi x 3 Thandaung x 6	Family x 9
MLA	1401 - 1404	1 day – 3 weeks	Bilin x 1 Hlaingbwe x 2 Kya-in Seik-kyi x 1 Kyaukkyi x 1 Myawaddy x 1 Pa'an x 1 Thaton x 1 Thandaung x 1	"Go and See" visit x 1 Family x 4 Religion x 4
UMP	1304 - 1404	2 days – 4 months	Bathein x 1 Kawkareik x 3 Myawaddy x 4 Pa'an x 1 Thaton x 1	Family x 9 Work x 1
NPO	1304 - 1404	2 days – 2 months	Kawkareik x 3 Kya-in Seik-kyi x 8 Myawaddy x 2 Papun x 1	"Go and See" visit x 2 Land tenure x 1 Work x 4 Family x 7
BDY	1402 - 1404	2 days – 1 month	Dawei x 2 Kya-in Seik-kyi x 1 Mergui x 3 Myawaddy x 1	"Go and See" visit x 2 Land tenure x 1 Work x 1 Family x 3
THI	1311 - 1403	1 week – 4 months	Dawei x 6 Mergui x 2	"Go and See" visit x 1 Land tenure x 1 Work x 1 Family x 5

The vast majority of returnees from all camps returned via formal public transportation routes and services (under the control of various GoRUM and NSA units), indicating a substantial growth in confidence in the increased levels in freedoms of movement in these areas of SE Burma.

Borderwise Summary of Township Destinations:

State/ Region	Township	# of People	% of TOTAL
Shan State	---	0	0%
Karenni State	Bawlake	2	2%
	Demawsoe	3	3%
	Loikaw	2	2%
	Mese	2	2%
	Pasaung	6	6%
	Pruso	2	2%
	TOTAL	17	18%
Pegu Region	Kyaukkyi	5	5%
	TOTAL	5	5%
Karen State	Hlaingbwe	2	2%
	Kawkareik	6	6%
	Kyain Seikkyi	10	11%
	Myawaddy	8	8%
	Pa'an	2	2%
	Papun	10	11%
	Thandaung	9	9%
	TOTAL	47	49%
Mon State	Bilin	1	1%
	Thaton	2	2%
	TOTAL	3	3%
Tanintharyi Region	Dawei	8	8%
	Mergui	5	5%
	TOTAL	13	14%
Irrawaddy Region	Bathein	1	1%
	TOTAL	1	1%
<i>Non-respondents</i>		9	9%
TOTALS		95	100%

Borderwise Summary of Motivations for Return Trips:

Reason for Return	TOTAL	% of TOTAL
"Go and See" visit	6	7%
Land tenure	3	4%
Work	9	11%
Family	49	58%
Religion	4	5%
<i>Non-respondents</i>	14	16%
TOTALS	85	100%

* Note: The difference of 10 between the total numbers in the above charts is due to the 2 respondents in Site 1 both travelling to all 6 townships in Karenni State.

Half of the people consulted had temporarily returned to Karen State and almost 1/3 to Karenni State, with the majority motivation for return being family-related – particularly due to health issues. "Go and See" visitors comprised a small minority of returns, and only came from camps in Tak Province and those to the south.

ON THE GROUND REALITIES – COLLATED EXTRACTS OF LOCAL PERSPECTIVES

Note: * This section only details perspectives of temporary returnees.

* Common core themes arose across each of the discussions, and are summarised below.

Many of the issues are cross-cutting, especially those related to presence of Armed Groups, land issues and livelihoods.

* Sources of most perspectives are cited by camp. Ones not cited typically indicate consensus from all camps.

Presence of Armed Groups/ Ceasefire certainty:

Ongoing Security Concerns

- Burma Army units (*Tatmadaw*) and their proxies (BGFs in central Karen State and Mon State, and KnPLF and Red and White Stars in Karenni State) continue to be the universal security concern for rural villagers. Despite the ceasefire, they continue to patrol local vicinities in many areas, mainly to keep an eye on the situation and to counter the activities of locally-based NSAs, but nevertheless villagers are understandably very wary of their movements. In lowland parts of central Karen State however, they are typically confined to barracks (*MLA*).
- Universally, villagers state the *Tatmadaw* is exploiting the ceasefires to physically reinforce their outposts, bolster their numbers and resupply food and military supplies in their areas. In south Myawaddy township, Army officers are also relocating their immediate families to their areas of deployment. In addition, recently expanded road-building projects in many areas strengthen *Tatmadaw* reach to previously less-accessible areas. All these activities are interpreted as reflecting the permanence of the *Tatmadaw*'s deployment in their areas, and undermines confidence-building in ceasefire arrangements.
- Much greater confidence is placed in NSAs not aligned to the *Tatmadaw*, although the DKBA is still coercing labour in Myawaddy township (*UMP*).
- In central and southern Karen State (Kawkareik, Myawaddy and Kya-in Seik-kyi townships) and in Mon State, villagers simply cite the plethora of locally-based armed groups as a powder keg for a break-out, or sustained resumption, of hostilities (*UMP, NPO*).
- Ongoing offensives and firefights in Kachin and northern Shan State – as well as reports of sporadic clashes and incidents in northern Karen State – are commonly cited as examples of the *Tatmadaw*'s insincerity towards, and obstacles in confidence-building in preliminary ceasefires, let alone efforts in wider national political dialogue and eventual reconciliation.

"Before [the ceasefire], I couldn't count the number of checkpoints we'd be stopped at. Journeys would often take hours longer than they needed to. Now it's a lot easier, although we still have to pay pocket-money at the gates".

Female BDY returnee to Kya-in Seik-kyi

Improvements

- Severe violations of villagers by local *Tatmadaw* units are substantially reduced, although ongoing abuse of properties and regular collection of fees related to forced labour (Kawkareik and Kya-in Seik-kyi townships) continues to justify villagers' historic mistrust of the *Tatmadaw* and undermines confidence-building measures (*NPO, UMP, MLA*).

"[Since the ceasefire] the only difference in the situation is that we no longer hear gunfire. Apart from that, nothing has really changed".

Male MLO returnee to Papun

- Together with the cessation in fighting and reduction in abuse, reduced restriction in the freedom of movement is the main post-ceasefire-related security-related improvement. Nevertheless, villagers in Northern Karen State still very much fear the possible consequences of encountering *Tatmadaw* troops while travelling, yet this fear is much reduced in other areas of SE Burma (*MRM, MLO*).

Landmine pollution:

New Laying

- Generally, villagers are not aware of any new landmine planting. However, three returnees from MLO and two from BDY had heard of landmines being planted post-ceasefire and injuring villagers (the latter being related to a KNU-NMSP land dispute).

Clearance

- No reports of villagers being informed of any post-ceasefire clearance, although the DKBA in south Myawaddy township has recently been demarcating polluted areas with warning signs (*UMP*).

"There are still many areas we don't dare to travel through, but at least we know where some of them [polluted areas] are".

Male UMP returnee to Myawaddy

Land tenure/ reclamation:

General

- Due to ongoing scepticism in current ceasefire arrangements, many people would want to return to the borderlands upon any organised return. However, all borderlands between Mae Tha Waw and Three Pagodas Pass are already secured by various contesting armed groups, with little or no land left to reconstitute independent livelihoods and thus this politicises potential return scenarios for many camp residents (*NPO, UMP, MLA*).
 - Many IDP communities in northern Karen State have already dispersed in pursuit of more sustainable solutions (including migrating to urban areas, settling in stable villages, and "secretly" returning to their previous areas of displacement). Others that remain are under the protection of NSAs and so any organised post-ceasefire resettlement of IDPs will likely require negotiated arrangements by NSAs (*MLO*).

"Return for most displaced people will be a matter of deciding which flag you choose to stand under".

Male MLA returnee to Myawaddy

Land Tenure

- Families in UMP and NPO feel caught between returning prematurely before their security is assured in order to secure what remaining land may exist or waiting until sustainable conditions exist but thereby "missing the boat". This anxiety is exacerbated by periodic encouragement by local *Tatmadaw* units, certain KNU individuals, as well as, more recently, the Mae Fa Luang Foundation (*UMP*).
- Since the ceasefire, issuing of land tenure documents by the KNU and local government authorities have increased in Dawei township, however claimants still have to produce their ID cards (*BDY*).
- In Kya-in Seik-kyi township, land owners have to pay annual renewal fees for their land registration to each local armed group at 1,000 Kyat per *rai* (1,600 m²). Non-payment results in their land being considered open for confiscation (*UMP*).
- Confiscation of land by companies with local *Tatmadaw* backing is increasing in Dawei township, although compensation is often paid (yet using coercion when meeting resistance). KNU is now controlling company encroachment in its areas of influence in Dawei township (*THI, BDY*).
- Land confiscation of recently expanded road-building projects is increasingly undermining local land tenure.

"I am just waiting and hoping that our Mother Organisation [the KNU] will arrange [land rights] as necessary for us".

Female THI returnee to Dawei

Land Reclamation

- Members of 5% of h/hs in THI are estimated to be returning to reclaim their original lands.
- Reclamation of previously owned land is mainly only possible in urban and periurban areas (although typically requires re-purchasing). Formal reclamation of land in rural border areas is more difficult, as it's all claimed by contesting armed groups (*UMP, MLA*).

Livelihoods security:

Demands

- Despite relaxations in restrictions on movement, regular taxation of economic activities (even simply villagers taking home-grown produce to market) at military checkpoints continues unabated in all areas.

"If there's real peace, of course we will return... it's just that there's no land left to pursue our livelihoods. NGOs talk a lot about self-reliance, but many of us will likely just end up being farm-hands... in Burma or Thailand, I don't know".

Male UMP returnee to Kawkaeik

- Demands for material support by all armed groups, including food, conscription of vehicles and forced labour/ related remuneration, continues to undermine livelihoods security, although their frequency and levels have reduced (substantially in some areas). Methods employed by *Tatmadaw* units to acquire these continue to be based on coercion (e.g. school repairs in Kawkaeik – *MLA*), while NSAs still typically request voluntary contributions based on ethnic patriotism (e.g. the Peace Council road-building project in Hto Kho Koh – *UMP*).

- The DKBA in Myawaddy township taxes all vehicles – 500-600 Baht annually for an "iron buffalo" or motorcycle, and 4,000 Baht for a car (*UMP*).
- Land confiscation of recently expanded road-building projects undermines local livelihoods, although will likely provide better access to markets.

Employment Opportunities

- Few job opportunities are created from the influx of extractive or cash-crop industries into local areas, although daily labour needed to perform basic manual tasks is sometimes hired locally. In addition, no local benefit is gained from the extraction of villagers' resources, as they are typically exported in raw form to urban areas.
- There is substantial concern that qualifications attained during displacement in refugee camps will not be recognised by local or national authorities upon return.

"Returning to work for a company on land that used to be my own is a demeaning prospect".

Male NPO returnee to Kawkaeik

Access

- Much greater access to fields, plantations and markets, although existing concerns in locations close to *Tatmadaw* outposts, especially in north-eastern Karen and Karenni States (*MRM, MLO, S1*).

Environmental degradation due to large-scale extractive and cash-crop industries:

- Most areas are experiencing some encroachment of large-scale economic activities, while some are witnessing substantial intrusion (MLO, S2). The main types of industries reported include:
 - Cash-cropping (sweetcorn, peanuts, rubber, palm oil) – mainly in southern and eastern Karen State, Mon State and Tanintharyi Region (although sweetcorn and peanut cropping in border areas of south Myawaddy township are villager initiatives with Thai companies being the primary buyers and providing agri-business based technical support – UMP).
 - Mining (various metals) – mainly in southern and northern Karen State, Pegu Region, and Karenni State.
 - Logging – mainly in northern Karen State (*"there's no trees left worth cutting in central and eastern Karen State!"* – UMP).
 - Hydro dams – mainly in northern Karen State, Karenni State and Pegu Region.
- As a result, villagers are facing several subsequent environmental abuses including:
 - Contamination of local water sources (free-flowing and captured), impacting supplies for households as well as animal husbandry and agricultural activities.
 - Erosion of farmlands.
 - Land confiscation with no or inadequate compensation.

"[Since the company started mining in the area] the villagers are having to walk much further to collect water from clean sources".

Female MLO returnee to Kyaukkyi

"We haven't seen much impact from their [the company's] activities, but maybe that's because they've only just started in our area".

Male MRM returnee to Thandaung

- The Burmese government and the *Tatmadaw* are at the very least insensitive to – if not instrumental – in creating these impacts through the granting of concessions to these predatory companies without the involvement of the local community.

Health and education services:

General

- A few improvements in local government-run health and education services have been implemented in rural areas since the political transition in early 2013, such as:
 - Building of new schools and health centres.
 - Higher grades taught in government schools.
 - Health outreach activities, including inoculation programmes.

“It’s good that the local government is now sending [outreach] health workers to our village, although we find it difficult to communicate with them in their language”.

Female S2 returnee to Bawlake

These have mainly taken place in specific geographic areas:

- Pilot peace-building areas (e.g. new high school north of Kyaukkyi, government health visitor programme, and new primary education facilities/ upgrading of existing schools in Dawei township, and unspecified developments in northern Karenni State (MLA, BDY, S1).
 - Areas located close to other strategic urban settings (e.g. Pa’an town, Hto Kho Koh and Kyaindon – UMP, NPO).
 - The complete lack of developments in government-run services implemented in most areas close to the Thai border (e.g. between the border to Kyaindon – NPO) is why many people access health and education services in the camps.
- Improvements in freedoms of movement are allowing CBOs to ramp up their (unspecified) services in some areas, such as in northern Karen and Karenni States (MRM, S1).

Fees

- There has been no change in the substantial fees required to access government-run services – and the inaccessibility of services if unable to pay – since the political transition. Community-run services often require voluntary contributions from recipients to support teachers. Examples include:
 - Giving birth in government-run clinics in Kyaukkyi township costs 100,000 Kyat (about US\$1,200). Calling a Traditional Birth Attendant to a birth at home costs

“If you want to give birth in a government-run clinic, you have to pay 100,000 Kyat. I’m not sure if they charge double for twins!”

Female MLA returnee to Kyaukkyi

“People in my village send their kids to study in MLA because there are no schools above primary level in the area. Mae La is famous in Karen State!”

Female MLA returnee to Kya-in Seik-kyi

50,000 Kyat (MLA).

- “Successfully” completing high school – whether passing the exams or not – requires substantial payment in government-run schools (1,700,000 Kyat in Kya-in Seik-kyi/ 1,300,000 Kyat in Thandaung to board with teacher and get uniforms, extra tuition, etc).
 - A contribution of 6 tins (96 kgs) of rice per student per year in Hto Kho Koh (MLA).
- As the attainment of education is highly prized, the comparative low-cost access to and quality of education opportunities in the refugee camps is a highly-sought alternative to the expensive and low quality opportunities in rural areas of SE Burma (MLA).

Language

- Local Government in Kya-in Seik-kyi and Dawei townships are now allowing the teaching of the Karen language in the syllabus (BDY, MLA).
- Staff deployed from outside the [Dawei] area cannot typically speak our language, and this undermines the quality of service provision and the pursuit of our rights (THI).

Career Opportunities

- Burmans are still given preferential treatment for career and employment opportunities in local government-run services, although not perceived as so in Dawei township.
- Very concerned that qualifications attained by refugee staff during displacement will not be recognised by local or national authorities upon any return.

Prevalence of narcotics:

- Due to the relaxation in restrictions on movement, there has been a dramatic increase in the influx of narcotics (especially *Yaba*) into central and southern Karen State (Myawaddy, Kya-in Seik-Kyi, and Kawkareik townships – specifically including Hto Kho Koh, the headquarters of the breakaway KNU/KNLA Peace Council) and Karenni State, and, in some cases into camps (*NPO, UMP, MLA, MLO, S1*). As much as 30% of young people are regularly using it in Kya-in Seik-Kyi township – *NPO*). However, there are mixed reports of levels in *Yaba* consumption in Dawei township (*THI no, BDY yes*).
- There is a noticeable increase in substance abuse (Diazepam) in the Delta (Bathein township) including among high school students (*UMP*).

"In the Karenni hills, you can now get whatever [narcotic] you want".

Male S1 returnee to Karenni State

"If return really happens, I'm very worried for the youth... so many of them [in the Hto Kho Ko area] are now destroying themselves [by taking Yaba]".

Male UMP returnee to Kawkariek

- This increase is driven by economic activities of individuals rather than through arrangements or policies of the *Tatmadaw* or NSAs (although there is some suspicion that these groups may be facilitating the influxes – intentionally or inadvertently – especially in southern and central Karen and Karenni States – *NPO, UMP, MLA, S2*).

Other:

- The reduced restrictions in freedoms of movement, association and speech following the political transition in 2011 have not been enshrined in law, and so current improvements are very fragile and completely reversible.
- Issuing of citizenship papers (Citizen Scrutiny Cards) have increased, although Muslims are not having their religion recorded (*UMP*).

PRIORITISED OBSTACLES TO SUSTAINABLE RETURN

Notes: * This section only details perspectives expressed by temporary returnees.

* Participants were asked to prioritise 2-4 of their most significant thematic obstacles to return. The number was based on the total number of core issues raised in the discussions – ranging from 5 -7 and summarised below. 1 mark was given to each of their priorities.

Borderwide Summary of Prioritised Obstacles to Sustainable Return

Self-Identified Obstacle to Sustainable Return	Camp	Count	% of OVERALL TOTAL	PRIORITY
Presence of Armed Groups/ Ceasefire certainty <i>* In THI, this obstacle was identified as two separate elements, hence the doubling of the score.</i>	S1	2 / 2	36%	1
	S2	13 / 13		
	MLO	12 / 12		
	MRM	7 / 9		
	MLA	9 / 9		
	UMP	7 / 11		
	NPO	13 / 14		
	BDY	7 / 7		
	THI	* 16 / 8		
	TOTAL	86 / 85		
Land tenure/ reclamation <i>* In MRM, participants identified land tenure and livelihoods insecurity as a single inter-related obstacle, and so the score has been divided equally between these three obstacles.</i>	S1	1 / 2	15%	2
	S2	5 / 13		
	MLO	4 / 12		
	MRM	* 5 / 9		
	MLA	3 / 9		
	UMP	7 / 11		
	NPO	10 / 14		
	BDY	2 / 7		
	THI	0 / 8		
	TOTAL	37 / 85		
Health and education services	S1	0 / 2	15%	3
	S2	2 / 13		
	MLO	2 / 12		
	MRM	4 / 9		
	MLA	0 / 9		
	UMP	6 / 11		
	NPO	12 / 14		
	BDY	3 / 7		
	THI	7 / 8		
	TOTAL	36 / 85		
Livelihoods security <i>(this includes ongoing taxation and forced labour – UMP)</i> <i>* In MRM, participants identified land tenure and livelihoods insecurity as a single inter-related obstacle, and so the score has been divided equally between these two obstacles.</i>	S1	2 / 2	15%	4
	S2	7 / 13		
	MLO	6 / 12		
	MRM	* 5 / 9		
	MLA	6 / 9		
	UMP	7 / 11		
	NPO	2 / 14		
	BDY	0 / 7		
	THI	0 / 8		
	TOTAL	35 / 85		
Landmine pollution	S1	1 / 2	13%	5
	S2	9 / 13		
	MLO	8 / 12		
	MRM	6 / 9		
	MLA	0 / 9		
	UMP	1 / 11		
	NPO	3 / 14		
	BDY	2 / 7		
	THI	1 / 8		
	TOTAL	31 / 85		

Prevalence of narcotics	S1	0 / 2	4%	6
	S2	2 / 13		
	MLO	0 / 12		
	MRM	0 / 9		
	MLA	0 / 9		
	UMP	5 / 11		
	NPO	2 / 14		
	BDY	0 / 7		
	THI	0 / 8		
	TOTAL	9 / 85		
Environmental degradation due to large-scale extractive and cash-crop industries	S1	0 / 2	2%	7
	S2	1 / 13		
	MLO	4 / 12		
	MRM	0 / 9		
	MLA	0 / 9		
	UMP	0 / 11		
	NPO	0 / 14		
	BDY	0 / 7		
	THI	0 / 8		
	TOTAL	5 / 85		
TOTAL		239 / 85	100%	100%

Legend:

	Severe perceived obstacle to return (prioritised by 50-100% of participants)
	Significant perceived obstacle to return (25-49% of participants)
	Mild perceived obstacle to return (1-24% of participants)

Camp-specific Prioritised Obstacles to Sustainable Return

Note: * The prioritised obstacles are ordered left-to-right by the overall borderwide severity.

Self-Identified Obstacle	Presence of Armed Groups/ Ceasefire certainty	Livelihoods security	Land tenure/ reclamation	Landmine pollution	Health and education services	Prevalence of narcotics	Environmental degradation
Camp							
S1	100%	100%	50%	50%	0%	0%	0%
S2	100%	54%	38%	69%	15%	15%	8%
MLO	100%	50%	33%	67%	17%	0%	33%
MRM	78%	56%	56%	67%	44%	0%	0%
MLA	100%	67%	33%	0%	0%	0%	0%
UMP	64%	64%	64%	9%	55%	45%	0%
NPO	93%	14%	71%	21%	86%	14%	0%
BDY	100%	0%	29%	29%	43%	0%	0%
THI	200%	0%	0%	13%	88%	0%	0%

Legend:

	Severe perceived obstacle to return (prioritised by 50-100% of participants)
	Significant perceived obstacle to return (25-49% of participants)
	Mild perceived obstacle to return (1-24% of participants)
	Non-prioritised perceived obstacle to return (0% of participants)

Note: Most participants felt that all the summarised issues (and a plethora of others not fully discussed) were substantial impediments to sustainable return. As such, "mild" and "non-prioritised" obstacles listed above should not be considered as unimportant. These results simply reflect a prioritisation exercise of barriers each of which was already identified as a core obstacle to return.

Analysis of Prioritised Obstacles – by Theme

*Note: * Obstacles are listed in order of overall borderwide severity.*

Presence of Armed Groups/ Ceasefire certainty:

This is the single greatest perceived obstacle to sustainable return borderwide and from each camp. Some participants in NPO, MRM and UMP did not prioritise this as a barrier, maybe due to the prevalence of other more pressing issues, and/ or because these camps are located opposite areas in which Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs) are organising alternative return options to government-led initiatives and their local leaders are taking an uncompromising position towards overtures from the Burmese administration and *Tatmadaw* as part of the peace process. Nevertheless, this must be perceived as the most critical perceived impediment to sustainable return.

Land tenure/ reclamation:

Land tenure and reclamation issues were perceived as a significant or severe priority in all the camps except THI. The fact that the “Presence of Armed Groups/ Ceasefire not assured” obstacle was identified as two separate elements during the discussions in THI is likely a significant influential factor in this lack of prioritisation.

Health and education services:

In stark contrast to livelihoods security and landmine pollution, access to social welfare services was typically seen as a significant or severe priority to sustainable return in the southern camps. One exception to this was in MRM, where provision of social services has always been a priority of the community, from the time when it was based in and around Manerplaw (the centre of the military and political resistance prior to its displacement in the mid-1990s).

Livelihoods security:

There is a distinct pattern of variations in the prioritisation of this obstacle – generally intensifying the more northerly the camp location. Typically, the southern camps prioritise access to more basic rights (such as land tenure and health and education services) over livelihoods security. The interconnectedness of these different obstacles should be noted.

Landmine pollution:

At least 50% of participants in the 4 most northerly camps prioritised landmine contamination, while less than 30% of those in the southern 5 camps rated it as such, instead placing greater importance on access to more basic rights (such as land tenure and health and education services). This may reflect the more polarised military positions of the armed groups in these northern areas, as opposed to the spectrum of actors and their various activities typically present to the south.

Prevalence of narcotics:

This issue was only considered as a significant priority in UMP. This may well be related to the community’s geographical proximity to notorious drug production areas and trafficking routes.

Environmental degradation due to large-scale extractive and cash-crop industries:

Only participants in MLO rated this as a significant barrier to sustainable return. These participants were the only ones who returned to Papun township in substantial numbers, and so this priority concern may well reflect the concerns of villagers in this area, where resource extraction is often reported as undermining local land and environmental rights. As the expansion of extractive industry and agro-business into many rural upland areas of SE Burma/ Myanmar are still in their infancy, concerns around their impacts on sustainable return may well increase in the months and years to come.

Analysis of Prioritised Obstacles – by Camp

Tham Hin:

*Notes: * The “Presence of Armed Groups/ Ceasefire certainty” was identified as two separate barriers in this camp and, as deemed priority obstacles, limited the highlighting of others.
* ¾ of participants (6 persons) had returned to Dawei township, with the remaining returning to Mergui.*

Access to social welfare services was a clear secondary requirement to sustainable return, with some concern expressed around remaining landmine contamination. Although there is ongoing substantial industrial development in the region, no concerns were expressed around land tenure/ reclamation and environmental degradation, as the areas they returned to were more remote rural areas and, as such, were not perceived as being priority obstacles to sustainable return in those specific locations.

Ban Don Yang:

*Notes: * Over 40% of participants (3 persons) had returned to Mergui township, with nearly 30% returning to Dawei and 15% each to Kya-in Seik-kyi and Myawaddy townships.*

Besides the critical priority obstacle to return being the ongoing militarisation of the areas they returned to, access to social services and landmine pollution and land tenure issues were deemed significant obstacles to sustainable return. Despite many areas of return being similar to those in THI, the divergent prioritisation placed on land tenure and landmine issues as obstacles to return was mainly due to the 30% of participants who returned to Kya-in Seik-kyi and Myawaddy townships. As with Tham Hin, livelihoods security, the prevalence of narcotics and environmental degradation were not considered priorities by any of the participants.

Nu Po:

*Notes: * Nearly 60% of participants (8 persons) had returned to Kay-in Seik-kyi township, with over 20% returning to Kawkareik, almost 15% to Myawaddy, and 7% to Papun township.*

The ongoing militarised nature of the areas returned to, as well as concerns around access to local health and education services and land ownership were deemed as severe impediments to sustainable return. NPO was the only camp where participants considered livelihoods security in their areas of return as a “mild” obstacle (with all camps to the north considering this as a severe barrier, and the camps to the south not prioritising it at all). We also see the emergence of the prevalence of narcotics as a prioritised impediment.

Umpiem Mai:

*Notes: * 40% of participants (4 persons) had returned to Myawaddy township, 30% to Kawkareik, and 10% each to Pa’an and Thaton townships. 1 participant returned to Bathein township.*

Across all camps, participants in UMP least prioritised the presence of armed groups and uncertainty of ceasefires as a barrier to return – although still considered a severe obstacle – with concerns around livelihoods security and land tenure rated as equally important. Lack of access to social welfare services was also considered as a severe impediment. To the contrary, in UMP the prevalence of narcotics was rated as the highest barrier to return of any of the camps. Considering the levels of landmine pollution in the areas of return, the low priority placed on this as a barrier is somewhat surprising.

Mae La:

*Notes: * The return destinations of the MLA participants were the most diverse of all the camps, and so drawing correlations of prioritised issues to particular locations is more vague.
* 22% of participants (2 persons) had returned to Hlaingbwe township, with 11% each to: Bilin, Kya-in Seik-kyi, Kyaukkyi, Myawaddy, Pa’an, Thaton and Thandaung townships.*

In addition to the ongoing militarisation of the areas returned to being the dominant priority obstacle, the lack of livelihoods security was also considered as a severe barrier. The only other identified priority impediment was around land tenure. Mirroring responses in UMP, the fact that

landmine pollution was not considered a priority is somewhat surprising, considering the levels of contamination in areas opposite the camp. This may be due to the fact that most participants returned to areas well inside SE Burma – as one participant commented, “landmines are mainly an issue for communities closer to the border”. Also unexpected was the lack of priority placed on the prevalence of narcotics, considering the pervasiveness of drugs in areas of SE Burma across from the camp.

Mae Ra Ma Luang:

*Notes: * 2/3 of participants (6 persons) had returned to Thandaung township, with the remaining returning to Kyaukkyi.*

Participants in MRM identified the severity of their obstacles to return mainly along basic human rights priorities, with militarisation, landmine pollution, and concerns surrounding land tenure and livelihoods security as the most severe. These were followed by the need for access to social services, with the prevalence of narcotics and environmental degradation not prioritised as barriers.

Mae La Oon:

*Notes: * 3/4 of participants (9 persons) had returned to Papun township, with 1 person each returning to Kyaukkyi, Pasaung and Thandaung.*

Similar to MRM, participants in MLO identified the severity of their obstacles to return mainly along basic human rights priorities, although land tenure issues were prioritised as significant rather than severe, in compensation to equally rating environmental degradation as such – the only camp on the border to do so (and with S2 the only other camp prioritising it at all – as a mild barrier), and the downgrading of access to basic social services to a mild impediment. Again, the prevalence of narcotics was not seen as a priority barrier to sustainable return.

Site 2:

*Notes: * Only 5 of the 13 participants provided details about their movements, mainly due to their late arrival to the FGD.*

**60% of participants (3 persons) had returned to Pasaung township, with 1 person each returning to Demawsoe and Thandaung.*

Similar to MLO (and MRM), participants in S2 also identified the severity of their obstacles to return mainly along basic human rights priorities, although environmental degradation was considered simply as a mild barrier in compensation for the equal prioritisation of the prevalence of narcotics.

Site 1:

*Notes: *Only 2 participants attended the FGD, with both of them travelling through all townships of Karenni State over a significant time period to conduct extensive work assignments.*

The two participants again perceived basic human right requirements as core to sustainable return, with militarisation and livelihoods insecurity as critical current obstacles to sustainable return, and ongoing land tenure and landmine pollution issues as secondary priorities. As such, the other barriers were not prioritised. As the nature of their work assignments took them to more populated locations, concerns around access to social welfare services, the prevalence of narcotics as well as environmental degradation in more isolated areas (as prioritised as “mild” by returnees from S2) may not have been recognised.

CONCLUSION

Between March-April this year, focus group discussions were held with 85 temporary returnees to Burma/ Myanmar (over a third being female) from all 9 refugee camps along the Thailand-Burma/ Myanmar border. They were consulted on the conditions in the areas they returned to and the changes they and residents in those areas had detected since recent political and military changes in the country. Over 100 others, comprising senior community leaders and CBO staff were also engaged through the process, although the main findings in this report only reflect the perspectives of those who had recently returned to their country of origin.

The destinations of their returns were mainly to rural upland areas encompassing at least 18 townships in all States and Regions in SE Burma/ Myanmar (except Shan State) – the majority for family-related reasons, and lasting from 1 day to 9 months.

Based on their testimonies and reported perspectives of residents in the areas of return, there is a high level of awareness of local realities on the ground, and substantial barriers to sustainable return clearly remain, especially in areas associated with high levels of continued militarisation, with the ability to enjoy basic rights and freedoms yet guaranteed by any functioning rule of law.

Although the severe insecurity associated with continued militarisation is a universal and critical concern in all areas visited, the nature and levels of other obstacles varies between camps and the areas to which the participants temporary returned. Barriers to livelihoods security and land tenure/ reclamation are the next issues of greatest concern (although less so in the 2 most southern camps), with landmine pollution and access to health and education services following (the former mainly in the northern camps and the latter in the southern).

The prevalence of narcotics as well as negative environmental impacts caused by large-scale industry were of least concern to the participants (with exceptions in UMP and MLO respectively). Based on trends in the region, concerns around associated impacts of these are only likely to increase, and thus may gain greater attention in the future. However, it is questionable whether they would eventually constitute a priority obstacle to sustainable return.

Opportunities for a sustainable organised return based on international standards continue to remain elusive and, as such, sustenance of adequate services to meet the basic needs of refugees is still very much a priority.