

# Defining 'forced migration' in Burma

Most Burmese people fleeing their homes do so for a combination of reasons. The root causes for leaving, however, determine which 'category' they belong to: 'internally displaced persons' (IDPs) or 'economic migrants'. There is some discussion as to whether people leaving their homes due to exhaustion of livelihoods options are IDPs according to the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement<sup>1</sup> – or not. Ashley South and Andrew Bosson present their views below.

By analogy, this debate can be extended to Burmese people in exile. Are Burmese people outside refugee camps 'economic migrants' or 'self-settled refugees'? The article 'Invisible in Thailand' (pp31-33) sheds more light on this.

## Towards a typology of forced migration in Burma

Ashley South

One can broadly define three types of forced migration in Burma, according to the causes of population movement:

Type 1: Armed conflict-induced displacement: this is either as a direct consequence of fighting and counter-insurgency operations, or because armed conflict has directly undermined human and food security, and is linked to severe human rights abuses. This type can be found across Karen State, in eastern Tenasserim Division, southern Mon State, southern and eastern Karenni State, southern Shan State, and parts of Chin State and Sagaing Division.

Type 2: Military occupation- and development-induced displacement: this is generally caused by a) confiscation of land – following armed conflict – by the Burma army or other armed groups, including for natural resource extraction and infrastructure construction, and b) predatory taxation, forced labour and other abuses. All the border states and divisions are affected by militarisation and/or 'development'-induced displacement, as are a number of urban areas (including in the context of developing tourism and 'urban renewal').

Both of the above two types of displacement are products of conflict. Type 1 is directly caused by armed conflict; type 2 is caused by latent conflict or by the threat of use of force. As such, they constitute forced migration, and cause internal displacement (as defined in the Guiding Principles).

Type 3: Livelihoods vulnerability-induced displacement: this is the primary form of internal and external migration within and out of Burma. The main causes are inappropriate government policies and practices, limited availability of productive land and poor access to markets – all leading to food insecurity and lack of education and health services. Such people make up a particularly vulnerable set of economic migrants.

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## The role of coercive measures in internal displacement in Burma

Andrew Bosson

Forced migration in Burma may be caused by a single event such as a natural disaster, a military attack or a relocation/eviction order from the military or civil authorities for military, infrastructure or commercial purposes. Typically, these events affect whole villages or communities or sections of towns, and are relatively sudden.

More commonly, however, displacement is caused by a series of events, including coercive measures imposed by the authorities such as forced labour, land confiscation, extortion and forced agricultural practices. These measures, which constitute serious violations of human rights, typically act cumulatively over time, reducing the family's resource base, and thus its income, until the household economy collapses and leaving home becomes the best or only option. This process first affects the poorer families, though the whole community may gradually migrate over a period of years. This pattern of 'gradual displacement', in which people tend to leave as individuals or as family groups, may be recognised in regions of current conflict and in the cease-fire areas as well in as the rest of Burma. The coercive measures operate in, are affected by and exacerbate a situation of widespread poverty, rising inflation and declining real incomes.

In other words, people leave home due to a combination of interconnecting coercive and economic factors. One has to consider the whole process leading to displacement rather than a single, immediate cause. Where coercive measures are involved, which is generally the case in Burma/Myanmar, the resulting population movement falls squarely within the scope of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, even if the situation that actually triggers movement – frequently food insecurity – may also be described in economic terms.

*Andrew Bosson is an independent researcher. He is the author of 'Forced Migration/Internal Displacement in Burma with an Emphasis on Government-Controlled Areas', a report written in May 2007 for the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. Online at [www.iberlio.org/obl/docs4/IDMC-Burma\\_report\\_mai07.pdf](http://www.iberlio.org/obl/docs4/IDMC-Burma_report_mai07.pdf) Andrew Bosson's analysis is developed further at [www.iberlio.org/obl/docs4/IDPs-Coercive-measures2008-03-17.pdf](http://www.iberlio.org/obl/docs4/IDPs-Coercive-measures2008-03-17.pdf) as well as in the IDMC report referred to above.*

1. [www.brookings.edu/projects/idp/gp\\_page.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/projects/idp/gp_page.aspx)