

**C**

**oordination of  
humanitarian aid for  
Cambodian refugees in  
Thailand: reasons for  
ineffectiveness**

Nattinee Marakanond

99-2



Asia Pacific Press at the  
AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

<http://ncdsnet.anu.edu.au>

This work is copyright. Apart from those uses which may be permitted under the Copyright Act 1968 as amended, no part may be reproduced by any process without written permission from the publisher.

The contribution of the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) to this series is gratefully acknowledged. The opinions contained in the series are those of the authors, and not necessarily of the National Centre for Development Studies or of AusAID.

ISSN 1443-4717

ISBN 0 7315 3630 4

**Nattinee Marakanond** is a former student of the Graduate Studies in Development Administration program of the National Centre for Development Studies, The Australian National University. This paper was submitted at the close of the professional short course/ optional Masters Degree module, *Complex Emergencies: humanitarian aid evaluation*, which was held by the National Centre for Development Studies.

## Abbreviations

CCSPT	Committee for Coordination of Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand
COERR	Catholic Office for Emergency Relief of Refugees
CRS	Catholic Relief Service
ICM	Intergovernmental Committee for Migration
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
JVA	Joint Voluntary Agency
NGO	non-governmental organisation
TRC	Thai Red Cross
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WFP	World Food Programme

## Introduction

A large movement of Cambodian refugees began in 1979 after the Vietnam-supported Heng Samrin regime overthrew the Polpot Khmer Rouge regime (Pongsapitch and Chongwatana 1988:12). A great deal of refugees remain in Thailand and over 200,000 displaced persons are still based along the border between Thailand and Cambodia. Therefore, the Thai government, representing the first asylum of the refugees, is implementing operations to resolve the refugee situation according to humanitarian principles. However, these aid activities cannot achieve the purpose of humanitarian relief if priority is not given to coordination and simultaneous action among all the agencies concerned. There are, however, some obstacles to effective coordination in the case of relief operations dealing with the Cambodian refugee situation, including a lack of communication and sharing of information among relief agencies, their workers and other relevant groups.

## What is coordination?

Coordination is an agreement among parties in the administration of humanitarian aid. It is necessary in the emergency situation for the effective implementation of relief programs. Effective coordination requires the communication of information and skilful coordination of leadership groups. Coordination among the many actors involved in humanitarian aid programs provides many advantages. First, effective coordination can prevent each agency's functions overlapping. Coordination helps determine the goals, plans and operational methods of various organisations, and increases the sense of teamwork and common purpose amongst these organisations. It also enhances the chances of successful accomplishment of the mission (Walsh 1996:220).

The emergency situation requires not only the enforcement of peace, but also multi-functional operations involving both military and civilian groups. Therefore, coordination between military and civilian operations is necessary to produce dedicated contributions from these different groups. For example, humanitarian organisations can not unilaterally conduct operations in the field, because they face great risk whenever they provide food and medical treatment to combatants, even though their mission aims to be impartial and neutral. In addition, coordination allows humanitarian organisations fuller use of available resources. It helps utilise the capacity for regional action to solve problems at a more comprehensive level, ensuring greater potential for balanced and effective actions. Moreover, coordination with the press or the media can assist in attracting donors, thereby improving the relief program and reducing the costs of the operation to the government and the burden on the national budget. Finally, coordinated actions in a conflict situation can create space for negotiation which involves humanitarianism in political concerns (Van Brabant 1997:5).

On the other hand, coordination may also create new bureaucratic layers, leading to overbureaucratisation, thereby resulting in the excessive delays during times of emergency. The costs of this wasted time may be justified, however, by the fact that other waste might be avoided in the operation through maximum collaboration (Dedring 1996:41).

Coordination can be encouraged through regular meetings between inter-agency bodies in order to guarantee day to day consultation and interaction. Not only these meetings, but also the dissemination of information, through such things as dialogue, reports or newsletters, will develop and enhance the coordination of operations. Coordination occurs at many different levels—between governments, international agencies and voluntary agencies.

The refugee issue is an international emergency situation which requires the participation of many different agencies in order to protect and alleviate the suffering of the refugees and displaced persons. As Ramsbotham (1996:122) has noted, inter-operability is the key to successful coordination. Thus, the mission should include military force to provide stability and security. Political initiatives such as a ceasefire or national and local reconciliation should be undertaken by the UN. Other UN agencies should be responsible for human rights issues, food or health assistance, and other international organisations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) should assist in humanitarian activities (Walsh, 1996:219). Furthermore, the collaboration of voluntary agencies provides refugees and displaced persons with a feeling of personal assurance, allowing them to adjust more readily to their new homes than they would under purely public guardianship. There should be a lead agency acting as a coordinating body among those agencies involved in humanitarian programs to ensure that the decision making or planning process is properly coordinated.

## **Mechanisms for coordination in the case of Cambodian refugees in Thailand**

The Thai government invited the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to participate in finding solutions to the refugee situation in Thailand after Thailand imposed a 'voluntary repatriation' policy on the Khmer refugees. The system of humanitarian administration has evolved, giving different roles to the UNHCR, other national and international agencies, and voluntary organisations, involved in refugee relief efforts, together with the host government.

### **Government coordination**

In the Royal Thai Government, the National Security Council, headed by the Prime Minister, is the highest decision-making body concerned with refugee policy. The Council includes the heads of the major ministries and high-ranking military officers. Two bodies are responsible for interpreting and implementing policy—The Ministry of the Interior and the Supreme Command of the Royal Thai Armed Forces. The Ministry of the Interior handles the administration all camps, as well as providing essential and other services by

channeling funds from the UNHCR to voluntary organisations. On the other hand, the Supreme Command of the Royal Thai Armed Forces is responsible for planning and management of matters relating to Cambodian refugees in Thailand and along the border between Thailand and Cambodia. In all the camps, the civilian administrators are subject to military authority and the military has ultimate control and power over the people within the camps (CCSDPT 1984:21).

The Royal Armed Forces also provide supervision in the holding centre for affected Thai villagers and cooperate closely with concerned agencies in the Thai Affected Villagers Programme (Institute of Asian Studies, 1988:11). Furthermore, the Ministry of Public Health is responsible for defining medical policies, and acts in liaison with medical services, providing water, sanitation and public health programs. The Ministry of Education is involved in providing the camp education program and plays an operational role in employing local Thai teachers (CCSDPT 1984:21). However, when problems occur, policies always adopt a top-down approach and, due to the rigid bureaucracy, the funding process can be very slow.

### **International coordination**

The Thai government can not bear the entire burden of the refugees alone, so they are compelled to coordinate with international organisations. First, the United Nations, through the UNHCR, plays a major role by providing assistance at refugee camps inside Thailand (but not those on the Thai-Cambodia border). Moreover, the UNHCR is not only involved in refugee services, but also provides assistance through maintaining relationships between the host government, international organisations and voluntary agencies. Since the UNHCR, like the Thai government, regards the policy of voluntary repatriation as the best solution based on the principles of human rights, it is involved in monitoring the screening process which assesses eligibility of refugees (Hitchcox 1990:118).

However, UNBRO took over the role of UNICEF and acted as the leading agency coordinating other relief operations such as the ICRC and the voluntary agencies. UNBRO works in close consultation with the military wing of the Thai government. Their initial attempts have also aimed to support Khmer cultural institutions in the delivery of aid, for example, by coordinating clinical medicine with the traditional healers (Reynell 1989:62).

Second, the World Food Program is another international organisation that provides cooperation in humanitarian relief. The organisation is responsible for the encampments along the border and the affected Thai villagers. It also operates with the Joint Operation Centre Supreme Command for security management. Coordination among the WFP, the UN, UN agencies and other voluntary agencies is consistent maintained through the radio communication system.

Third, the ICRC coordinates with UNICEF as a Joint Mission, especially in the seed rice distribution programs, by cooperating with other voluntary organisations. It also works alongside UNBRO, but is not subject to its control. The ICRC is also responsible for the process of evacuation of civilians along the border. Fourth, the role of the Intergovernmental Committee for Migration (ICM) is to facilitate refugee resettlement programs by coordinating with donor embassies in arranging transportation facilities. Lastly, the role of the Joint Voluntary Agency (JVA) is apparent in terms of coordinating with the US embassy for the resettlement program (Hitchcox 1990).

### **Voluntary organisation coordination**

There are 41 voluntary organisations involved in Cambodian refugee relief services in Thailand. These groups are not restricted by a formal mandate from the Thai government, so they can respond quickly to new needs concerning such things as nutrition, water and sanitation problems. Some of these organisations are religious, and others are non-sectarian. Some are funded by religious groups, others by womens groups, some by private agencies, others, such as the Thai Red Cross (TRC), which provides aid assistance in the Ministry of Interior camps and along Thai–Cambodia border, are funded by the government. The operational costs of most voluntary agencies, however, are funded by the UNHCR and WFP–UNBRO (CCSDPT 1984). By way of example, the Catholic Office for Emergency Relief of Refugees (COERR) is an indigenous body which has acquired a certain degree of autonomy. The use of this agency to support the secondary education program, even though it was not officially allowed in the camps, illustrates the flexibility of the policy (Reynell 1989:64).

The Committee for Coordination of Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand (CCSDPT) is a body which includes 45 members from 15 voluntary agencies and is designed to create joint interest among members of offices of the Royal Thai government, international organisations, the UN, embassies of resettlement and donor countries. The Committee employs a small full-time secretariat whose function is to follow up particular issues and to handle day–to–day liaison with the the Royal Thai Government as well as other groups. The Committee secretariat manages a resource centre and publishes *Perspectives*, a monthly newsletter (CCSDPT 1984:26).

### **Effective coordination?**

According to Bennet (1996:143), the coordinating body should be the centre for information, persuading NGOs to assist them in different tasks, and ensuring NGOs present a collective voice in policy formulation. The CCSDPT is a coordinating body responsible for the Cambodian refugees in Thailand and seeks to ensure that the coordination and exchange of information among relevant NGOs takes place. In the case of the Cambodian refugees, UNBRO acts as a lead agency in the relief program and takes initiatives to gather NGOs in order to discuss the relevant issues and problems.

Coordination among agencies, whether between international organisations, NGOs, or the government, is present to some extent through meetings and dialogues. However, constraints and flaws of coordination and collaboration among agencies in the relief services have arisen in terms of communication of information between various different bodies.

According to Garvelink (1996:99), field operatives need some basic types of information to assess progress and knowledge of other organisations operating in their sector. For example, Walsh (1996:219) has noted that whenever a change of location is initiated by one organisation, this change must be anticipated and the information publicised in order to prevent upset amongst the other agencies and organisations. However, information clarifying the scope and location of operations, which should be available to facilitate the coordination process between international organisations and voluntary organisations in the same area, is absent. In the case of the seed rice distribution program, many activities carried out by voluntary organisations have been conducted without informing the Joint Mission (ICRC and UNICEF), which is responsible for funding and coordinating services activities between international organisations and NGOs. For example, the Christian Outreach (a voluntary agency) circumvented the Joint Mission when the delegate of the Christian Outreach obtained permission from the Thai military to distribute thousands of fishnets to the refugees without informing the Joint Mission (Mason and Brown 1983:107).

In the seed rice distribution program, communications and information dissemination between relief agencies and the Thai military was absent whenever there was a change of location for food delivery. The food delivery by the WFP for the Cambodian refugees was controlled by the Thai military, and whenever there was a new settlement of Khmers, the WFP would deliver the required food for the refugees to the Thai military warehouse, because the Thai military claimed that the delivery was risky and security could not be guaranteed. However, it is evident that, while there were 30,000 additional Khmer Rouge refugees, total rations were raised by 60,000. Relief organisations had no knowledge of the methods of distribution, nor even where the food was going (Mason and Brown 1983).

Second, the participation of voluntary agencies in resource allocation in the rice distribution program is lacking, not due to the unwillingness of those agencies to coordinate their activities, but due to the lack of information provided to these agencies. The ICRC is more concerned about the security of their own organisation, than about the pool of skillful resources needed to make the Cambodian refugee relief program successful. In the rice distribution programs, the ICRC tried to exclude the participation of voluntary organisations in the border operation, because the ICRC was also supporting Cambodian refugees inside Cambodia—which was under the control of the Heng Samrin government—and was afraid that their operation in Cambodia would be jeopardised by the involvement of voluntary agencies believed to be supported by the US (Mason and Brown

1983:108). In this regard, the ICRC overlooked the fact that voluntary agencies are full of skills and experienced staff, which could potentially be of great assistance to their operations.

In some situations, inadequacies in material and services assistance in some areas can not be blamed on agencies, but on the policies of the Thai government, which restricts the access of voluntary agencies. International and voluntary organisations are not permitted to access to some camps, in particular, the camps administered by the Ministry of the Interior. Moreover, in some sensitive areas very close to Thai–Cambodia border, international organisations have been unable to provide food and materials directly to the refugees, but instead have been forced provide these to the Thai military for further distribution (Institute of Asian Studies, 1988:10), because those areas are sensitive to national security and are ultimately controlled by the military. As a result, only 5,000 to 6,000 of a total 17,000 refugees are accessible to international aid agencies. Moreover, the lack of access for international organisations provides few safeguards against abuses by camp authorities. Many international relief and humanitarian relief agencies can access only four Khmer camps—Site 8, Ta Luan, O’Trao and Bora’—where violence and intimidation of camp authorities are nonetheless still apparent (The Asia Watch Committee 1989:9). This lack of multi-operation in some areas consequently impedes the delivery of humanitarian aid.

Third, the meeting concerning the policy of relief distribution was held at the central level and involved UNICEF, the ICRC, the WFP and the UNHCR. It later granted funds to the Catholic Relief Service (CRS) and various other voluntary organisations for actual operations. However, the lack of adequate information dissemination to these voluntary organisations meant that these functions of these organisations often overlapped. For example, in Phanat Nikhom, there are four agencies responsible for medical and health services, and the medical process has to go through all four services, all of which had essentially the same functions (Hitchcox 1990:123).

Fourth, there is no coordination of humanitarian diplomacy. Even though there is a coordinating center (CCSDPT) to integrate the joint interests of NGOs with those of the international organisations and other donors, and the government, there has rarely been any negotiation for humanitarian space. The voice of the NGOs cannot be heard in the policy approach and their basic principle, humanitarianism, is always overridden by security issues. The operations of these NGOs and voluntary agencies are still limited by the restrictions of the host government, which is more concerned with national security than humanitarian issues. To provide relief supplies, both delivery NGOs and advocacy NGOs have to bid with the UNHCR for a contract with the government. These organisations do not actively coordinate to negotiate for humanitarian space in the political arena, because this could place their contract at risk.

According to Gordenker(1987:103), the existence of a coordinating body or coordinating meeting means nothing unless diplomatic initiatives are adopted to persuade government not only to help relief efforts, but also to halt the actions which cause



refugees. In the Cambodian refugee situation, even though NGOs sometimes feel confused and frustrated about their attempts to create and maintain physical and mental health in an environment where the host government places more value on national security than humanitarianism (Hitchcox, 1990:121), they do not collectively and actively argue for humanitarian principles. They remain entangled in government policy and the military threat. On one occasion, in 1986, a number of agencies came together and publicised their joint concern about abuses of human rights in the border camps, but this kind of coordinated activity has rarely happened since then (Hitchcox 1990:122).

Fifth, according to Van Brabant (1997:23), government authority, particularly that of the military, is a major impediment to coordination of humanitarian activities. The Thai military is one of the major bodies responsible for implementing aid policies formulated by the Thai government and is deeply concerned with national security. Moreover, in the field of humanitarian aid, the intimidation of ordinary people and administration leaders by lower-ranking military officials, demanding extra items for their families—as well as the case in Ban Sangae, where a pregnant woman stepped on a mine planted by soldiers in the police volleyball area (Reynell 1989:67), and the case of the armed drunken guard who raped 45 Khmer widow refugees (Institute of Asian Studies 1988:20)—indicates that the abuse of military authority is still prevalent in the aid distribution process and has never been challenged by any diplomatic coordination.

Finally, the lack of joint planning with refugee initiatives in some aid programs is clear, especially in educational and health programs. As a result, relief programs are not oriented to the supposed beneficiaries—the Khmer refugees. The first indicator is the fact no refugee or displaced person participated in the drafting of the guidelines for education in refugee camps, which was the projects of the CCSDPT.

Similarly, the Conference on Humanitarian Assistance on the Thai–Cambodia border, which was concerned with the eventual repatriation of the Khmers was conducted in Aranyaprathet, a town about 80 kilometers from Site Two camp. The conference involved high ranking civilians, military members of the Thai government, international agency directors and personnel, as well as voluntary agency directors and field workers (Hasson 1989:119). Although it was suggested that refugees should be allowed to attend, most Thai authorities responded that this would not benefit the Khmers, because they did not believe that the Khmers would have anything to add to the meeting (Hasson 1989:119). The location of the conference and the attitude of the Thai authorities impeded the coordination of the beneficiaries' initiatives.

In the meetings of the Health Education Committee to coordinate the various aspects of health education in the camps, the voluntary agencies frequently forgot to bring the Khmer project supervisor with them (Hasson 1989:120). Judging by these examples, there seems to be little attempt to incorporate the Khmers—the supposed beneficiaries of the projects—into the meetings on a partnership basis.

## Conclusion

Coordination in the Cambodian refugee situation can not be considered effective, because the operation, which is headed by the Thai government, is neither accountable nor transparent. Relief agencies do not know how much of their goods and other materials are actually delivered to the hands of refugees, if any at all. The ICRC is never informed by the government of their plans to shift refugees. For example, the ICRC was not informed by the Thai military when the military borrowed a truck from the WFP and moved 1,600 Khmer refugees from Khao I Dang holding centre to Ban Sangae in order to strengthen Khmer resistance (Mason and Brown 1983:147). Such communication difficulties tend to lead to all other voluntary agencies working in that area becoming upset.

Concerning intersectoral coordination at the government level, the Ministry of the Interior is the leading body, which effectively cooperates with the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education in the humanitarian aid programs for refugees. The Thai military, however, is embedded in the government administration and exerts a major influence on relief policy. This is the principle cause of the difficulties experienced by other voluntary agencies in competing for humanitarian space.

## Recommendations

The success of refugee relief services depends on the degree to which international organisations, voluntary organisations, private agencies, the government and beneficiaries are coordinated. In the case of the Cambodian refugees in Thailand, coordination among the many groups involved in aid services, apart from purely governmental coordination, needs to be improved.

First, according to Bennet (1996:137), transferring decision making to the field and to the recipient needs the involvement of refugees. Gordenker (1987:124) also suggested that the involvement of refugee initiatives in the planning process should be encouraged, thereby allowing refugee groups to criticise unrealistic ideas and to complain if they feel the system is not right for them. Therefore, the reestablishment of the Coordinating Committee should involve not only government representatives, NGOs, the UN, and international organisations, but also representatives of the Khmer refugees. A regular newsletter should also be distributed among the committee.

Furthermore, the meetings of Committees for program planning should be held near the site of the camp in order to ensure the attendance of the refugees. The involvement of all actors in distribution planning would ensure that the many various interests could be expressed. Information about the programs could be distributed, fostering understanding, as well as helping the approach of each agency pursuing the same goal. Furthermore, cooperation between delivery NGOs and advocacy NGOs should be emphasised, in order to raise public awareness of abuses of power and to run productive campaigns, so that humanitarianism can have an influence on political concerns.

Second, the media should also be encouraged to participate in the meetings, so that they become better informed about the programs. Coordination with the media is very important, because news reports could attract funds from potential donors. At the moment, donor fatigue is impeding the resettlement program. There have been news reports on the Persian Gulf conflict, the genocide in Rwanda, and economic breakdown in some regions. Consequently, donors have recently tended to donate heavily to the Afghan repatriation, rather than to relief of the Southeast Asian crisis. In addition, the media should be allowed access to all camps, even those administered by the Ministry of the Interior, so that intimidation and abuse of authority, as well as the connections between the Thai authorities and drug interests or prostitutes within the camps, can be made public.

Third, direct coordination between local government authorities and some indigenous bodies should be encouraged. Bennet (1996:138) also suggests that the delivery of aid will be more effective if coordination is decentralised and local participation is encouraged through cooperation with indigenous NGOs empowered by collective representation and consensus. He elaborates that the process of channelling funds will be smaller, more flexible and cheaper. This will reduce the government's overt control of implementation. Moreover, the overwhelming presence of foreign NGOs in humanitarian aid causes confusion to the host government, because it is unwilling to be transparent. Therefore, it would be better if indigenous NGOs, like the autonomous COERR, could get access to all the camps along the border, so as to balance the power.

Finally, all refugee camps on Thai soil should be made fully accessible to international humanitarian aid agencies. Voluntary organisations should also not be excluded from the border region. This would enable the proper monitoring and management of deliveries of food and other materials by the military, prevent the abuse of camp authority, ensure transparency in service aid distribution, and reduce costs to the host government. Also, the presence of aid workers together with the military will help the refugees themselves understand the intentions of Thai government and will discourage the practice of forcing refugees to carry arms.

Coordination would enhance the effectiveness of humanitarian aid. Effective coordination depends not only on the motivation and skills of the relief agencies and their representatives, but also on a full understanding of the humanitarian actions necessary to achieve both remedial and preventive measures in providing humanitarian aid.

## References

- Asia Watch Committee, 1989. *Khmer Rouge Abuses Along the Thai–Cambodian Border*, the Asia Watch Committee, Washington DC.
- Bennet, J., 1996. 'Coordination, control and competition: NGOs on the front line', in J. Whitman and D. Pocock (eds), *After Rwanda: the coordination of United Nations humanitarian assistance*, Macmillan Press, London:136–46.
- Dedring, J., 1996. 'Humanitarian coordination', in J. Whitman and D. Pocock (eds), *After Rwanda: the coordination of United Nations humanitarian assistance*, Macmillan Press, London:35–50.
- Garvelink, W.J., 1996. 'Humanitarian assistance intervention in complex emergencies: information requirements in the 1990s', in J. Whitman and D. Pocock (eds), *After Rwanda: the coordination of United Nations humanitarian assistance*, Macmillan Press, London:98–105.
- Gordenker, L., 1987. *Refugees in International Politics*, Croom Helm., Sydney.
- Hasson, V.M., 1989. Organization of education programs for displaced Khmers on the Thai–Kampuchean border, PhD Thesis, Fordham University.
- Hitchcox, L., 1990. *Vietnamese Refugees in Southeast Asian Camps*, St. Martin's Press, New York.
- Institute of Asian Studies, 1988. *Thailand: a first asylum country for Indochinese refugees*, Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand.
- Mason, L., and Brown, R., 1983. *Rice, Rivalry and Politics: managing Cambodian relief*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame.
- Pongsapitch, A., and Chongwatana, N., 1988. 'The refugee situation in Thailand', in S. Chantavanich and E.B. Reynolds (eds), *Indochinese Refugees: asylum and resettlement*, Institute of Asian Studies, Thailand.
- Ramsbotham, D., 1996. 'Coordination is the key', in J. Whitman and D. Pocock (eds), *After Rwanda: the coordination of the United Nations humanitarian assistance*, Macmillan Press, London:118–27.
- Reynell, J., 1989. *Political Pawns*, OXFAM, Oxford.
- The Committee for Coordination of Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand (CCSDPT), 1984. *The CCSDPT Handbook: refugee services in Thailand*, du Maurier Associates, Bangkok.
- Van Brabant, K., 1997. *Relief and Rehabilitation Network Paper: the coordination of humanitarian action: the case of Sri Lanka*, Overseas Development Institute, London.
- Walsh, M., 1996. 'The Role of the humanitarian coordinator', in J. Whitman and D. Pocock (eds), *After Rwanda: the coordination of the United Nations humanitarian assistance*, Macmillan Press, London:219–25.