

# Chronic Refugee Populations and UNHCR's Funding Model: A Source of Insecurity

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Approximately two thirds of the world's refugees live in protracted situations, or long-lasting and extended periods of exile.<sup>[1]</sup> Within these situations, a large majority are in developing or unstable states, where host governments cannot adequately provide for their own citizens – never mind those from other countries. In spite of the large and growing number of states with long-standing refugee populations, this issue has received little attention from the international community. A quick survey of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees website only highlights immediate refugee concerns; it does not focus on long-standing exiled populations.

In a largely donor-funded model, which focuses on fundraising for urgent protection, the lack of attention given to protracted situations is cause for concern. A marked decrease in funding for refugee programs – when attention is shifted elsewhere, or there are early signs of peace in a country of origin – has significant security implications. Reduced funds force refugees to compete with local populations for scarce resources and have the potential to exacerbate tensions with host governments.<sup>[2]</sup> A longer term decrease in funding may effectively push refugees back to their country of origin before the conditions for return have been met, or seriously diminish bilateral relations.

In this context, the following essay argues that steady and reliable funding for protracted refugee situations is essential to both human and state security. This paper will first explore the nature of the international refugee regime, including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) mandate and funding model. I will then focus on the impact of reduced budgets in long-standing refugee situations, with Tanzania as a case study. Analysis will then turn to the refugee population from Myanmar living in Thailand, where news of democratic reforms in Myanmar has led to a substantial decrease in funding for essential services in camps. Finally, this paper will conclude with potential policy alternatives for more sustainable funding models.

### Background Information: The International Refugee Regime and (In)Security

Founded in 1950, UNHCR was charged by the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees with the protection of their interests. This mandate includes the dual responsibilities of providing immediate relief and ensuring that the conditions are met for either return to the country of origin, or relocation and development programs.<sup>[3]</sup> Within this role, UNHCR often works in partnership with other organizations, such as the World Food Programme or local non-profit charities. Since its founding, UNHCR's relationship with host governments and responsibilities have changed substantially. While originally charged primarily with emergency relief operations, UNHCR and its humanitarian partners' responsibilities have evolved to include a larger variety of long-term refugee care programs – even in signatory states to the 1951 convention.<sup>[4]</sup> These responsibilities include the ensuring that refugees have access to food, shelter, water and healthcare, access to education, social services for women and career resources.<sup>[5]</sup>

UNHCR's changing mandate to include long-term refugee care reflects the growing existence of protracted refugee situations. These populations are defined by UNHCR as refugee populations of at least 25,000 who have lived in exile for at least five years in developing countries.<sup>[6]</sup> More broadly, protracted refugee situations have been defined as those in which "refugees find themselves themselves in a long-lasting and intractable state of limbo. Their lives may not be at risk, but their basic rights and essential economic, social and psychological needs remain unfulfilled

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after years in exile.”<sup>[7]</sup> While UNHCR has increasingly recognized the difficulties of and potential solutions to these situations, less attention has been paid to the relationship between donor funding and protracted populations.

UNHCR's reliance on donors for programming support has consistently placed the organization in a precarious position. The agency has repeatedly voiced concerns about the impact of funding insecurity; however, most of these calls for assistance have focused on the repercussions of reduced resources for immediate crises, not chronic situations. While protracted refugees situations may seem relatively stable, reductions in funding for these populations poses a significant threat to both human and state security. When programming is reduced, chronic refugee groups are typically forced to compete with local populations for scarce resources; this effectively reinforces perceptions that refugees are a burden on host states.<sup>[8]</sup> While changed perceptions may not sound particularly damaging, they have the potential to contribute to conflict between host and refugee populations. Further, when hosting states believe that the international community has withdrawn support, they are less likely to engage in local solutions to support refugee populations and may actually implement policies that push refugees back to their host country; examples of these include imposing severe restrictions on the movement of humanitarian workers, refugees and aid. In countries of origin where ceasefire agreements – or an uneasy peace – have been achieved, the early repatriation of refugees has the potential to reignite civil conflict.

## Case Study: Tanzania

An examination of Tanzanian refugee operations and government policies illustrates the threat that changes in funding patterns pose to security. As a relatively stable country in a volatile region, Tanzania has a long history of hosting refugees from adjacent states. In the 1960s, Tanzania received roughly 400,000 refugees from Rwanda, Burundi, Mozambique, South Africa, Somalia and Kenya. During this time, the government did not restrict the flow of refugees and was internationally recognized for its hospitality.<sup>[9]</sup> In 1993, however, refugee flows reached unprecedented levels; in just one year over 1.3 million refugees from Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda entered the country.

In the period following this influx, international funding did not match refugees' needs, placing a significant burden on the Tanzanian government. More specifically, after 1996 UNHCR experienced increased difficulties raising funding for its programmes in central Africa. Attention on the humanitarian emergencies in countries including Bosnia – and later Iraq – shifted attention and funding away from needs in Tanzania. This problem was acknowledged in a 2003 joint press release from UNHCR and the World Food Programme (WFP), which provided food rations to the camps in Tanzania. According to the then Deputy Executive Director of the WFP, Jean-Jacques Graise, “as new emergencies arise, the interest in these long-standing cases tends to fade, leaving refugees on the brink of hunger.”<sup>[10]</sup>

By 2003, however, the programs in Tanzania had already been forced to make substantial cuts. According a 2000 UNHCR report, their operations were “adversely affected by the unpredictability of funding and budget cuts.”<sup>[11]</sup> The impact of these cuts was palpable: UNHCR was forced to stop distributing soap, sanitary items and domestic supplies.<sup>[12]</sup> Similarly, the World Food Programme, which provided food rations to camps in Tanzania had to make significant reductions to provisions.<sup>[13]</sup>

The impact of funding deficiencies, however, extended beyond the direct provision of aid to refugees. Following the mass influx of refugees in 1993, humanitarian organizations had initiated a range of projects in host communities to compensate Tanzanians for accommodating refugees. These programs were organized under the Special Programme for Refugee-Affected Areas (SPRAA) and administered by government authorities and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The result of these efforts was substantial: fifty primary schools and twenty dispensaries were rehabilitated,<sup>[14]</sup> four hospitals were expanded, 120 water systems were improved and a community centre was constructed.<sup>[15]</sup> However, with funding fluctuations, organizations were forced to halt programming planned for refugee-affected areas, including “road repairs, school renovations and the overhaul of water systems.”<sup>[15]</sup>

During this time, funding decreases effectively increased both human and state insecurity. These shortages were

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exacerbated by Tanzanian government policies which prohibited Tanzanians from hiring refugee labourers and trading at camp markets.<sup>[16]</sup> Also, as organizations were forced to cut food rations, refugees increasingly resorted to stealing crops and goods from the homes of farmers.<sup>[17]</sup> Stealing problems were exacerbated by cuts to educational and vocational programs – which left a large youth population nothing to do. These aggravated locals until tensions culminated in the 2005 murder of a refugee caught stealing beans in Ngara.<sup>[18]</sup> Overall, funding cuts clearly contributed to insecurity by forcing refugees to look elsewhere for their basic needs.

Faced with dwindling resources and rising insecurity, as well as feelings of abandonment by the international community, the Tanzanian government implemented increasingly restrictive politics and protection standards declined. Both UNHCR and the WFP had publicly warned the international community that this would happen; however, their warnings had not managed to increase funds.<sup>[19]</sup> In 2001, President Benjamin Mkapa told a meeting of diplomats that “the international community had reduced its support considerably, leading to the reduction of essential services to refugees.”<sup>[20]</sup> Further, “the inadequacy of refugee services had resulted in some of them engaging in unlawful acts which discouraged the Tanzanian government from continuing to accommodate and support them.”<sup>[21]</sup>

While issues with refugees were separate from Tanzania's other security concerns, as the situation deteriorated it became increasingly difficult for authorities to regulate the movement of people, weapons and goods across borders.<sup>[22]</sup> In 2001, after nearly a year of reduced rations, 3,000 Congolese refugees left their camp and headed towards the town of Kigoma before being stopped by Tanzanian authorities. Similarly, in 2003, faced with increasing government restrictions and cuts to rations, refugees in Kobondo left their camps and headed towards the border. This pattern continued; by the end of 2003, 33,000 refugees had spontaneously repatriated to Burundi.<sup>[23]</sup>

The impact of decreased international assistance during this period was not limited to refugees in Tanzania. The budget crises that UNHCR faced during this time were substantial: for example, from 1997 to 1998, donors provided \$320 million for the UNHCR's general programme budget – a decline of \$31 million from 1996.<sup>[24]</sup> The World Food Program was also forced to reduce its food rations for the two million refugees living in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea.<sup>[25]</sup> The impact of these reductions resembled that of refugees in Tanzania: as food rations decreased, refugees increasingly ventured into dangerous areas outside of camps in search of food. In Guinea, for example, refugees in camps close to the border crossed into Sierra Leone to search for food. At the time, refugees reported stories of adolescents who had been abducted by RUF rebels while searching for food in Sierra Leone.<sup>[26]</sup>

One of the reasons for the decrease in funding in Africa was the emerging crisis in Kosovo. While the need for assistance in Kosovo was undeniably urgent, critics later alleged that aid was concentrated on the situation – at the expense of others – because it was strategically located and widely televised.<sup>[27]</sup> Using immediate refugee crises as a rallying call for donations was a strategy deliberately developed by the UNHCR under the leadership of then-High Commissioner Sadako Ogata. According to Gil Loescher in his analysis of UNHCR's evolution under different commissioners, Ogata

“realized the significance of the impact of media coverage on public opinion and the impact, in turn, of public opinion on political processes and leaders [...] without a high profile, it would be difficult to raise money for bigger operations.”<sup>[28]</sup>

The example of Tanzania illustrates the repercussions of both a funding model that relies on publicity for immediate humanitarian crises and the withdrawal of donations for chronic refugee situations. Tanzania's changing position – from a country willing that accepted a significant number of refugees, to one imposing increased restrictions – illustrate the power that local development projects can have on a state's willingness to host exiled populations.

## An Emerging Security Threat? Karen Refugees in Thailand

UNHCR has repeatedly tried to resolve the problem of sudden drops in funding for protracted refugee situations; however, problems in this area still remain. The current situation of Karen refugees from Myanmar in Thailand provides an example of these issues.

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Decades of civil conflict in Myanmar have displaced hundreds of thousands of refugees. In Thailand alone, there are approximately 120,000 refugees living in the nine border camps established in 1984.<sup>[29]</sup> Funding for these camps has historically been provided by a number of international and local organizations; these include UNHCR and the Thai-Burma Consortium (TBC). The TBC is a group of ten different non-governmental organizations from eight countries that are collectively the largest source of care for refugees.<sup>[30]</sup> All of these organizations rely on voluntary donations for their programming. Since early signs of democratic reform – including the 2010 transition to a nominally civilian government – first emerged in Myanmar, donations to these organizations have decreased substantially. As reforms progressed and countries lifted their sanctions, international donors increasingly switched donations from organizations assisting refugees in Thailand to those operating inside Myanmar.<sup>[31]</sup>

Drops in funding to the TBC, for example, recently led to two consecutive years of ration cuts.<sup>[32]</sup> In 2011, due to a combination of funding shortages and rising costs the TBC reduced food rations to an average of 1,930 calories per day; in 2012, rations were reduced again to 1,640 calories per day.<sup>[33]</sup> These amounts did not meet suggested requirements, which according to the TBBC 2012 report, are “2100 cal/person/ day for populations in emergencies who depend solely on external aid.”<sup>[34]</sup> In 2013, rations were also reduced until they were at 1381 calories per person, per day.<sup>[35]</sup>

When these restrictions were first put in place, the TBC hoped that reductions in food rations could be offset by work that refugees performed outside of camps. At that point the Royal Thai Government had had rules in place for years severely restricting refugee movements; however, these were not often enforced. Refugees frequently worked outside the camps on farms or local factories. In July 2014, however, the Thai authorities began restricting the movements of the refugees, prohibiting them from leaving camps without official permission.<sup>[36]</sup>

On a related note, food rations in camps were not the only service that prematurely dried up following signs of reform and reconciliation. According to Karen News, the Mae Tao Clinic on the Thai-Burma border experienced a considerable drop in donations; this has been caused by international NGOs, which have moved funds from refugee care in Thailand into Myanmar.<sup>[37]</sup> Similarly, the withdraw of international donors from schools for undocumented migrants on the border has forced administrators to close 10 of the 75 schools; representatives have indicated that far more will have to close in the near future.<sup>[38]</sup>

At the same time, the Thai government – which has expressed repeated objections to the presence of a large Karen refugee population – has reignited conversations concerning closing the camps. One provincial governor has already proposed a programme that would see refugees return.<sup>[39]</sup> This governor, and many other Thai authorities, have repeatedly expressed objections to the Karen refugees; now that signs of reconciliation have emerged in Myanmar, these will hold increased weight with the international community.<sup>[40]</sup>

Analysts and International Organizations agree that repatriation in Myanmar will be a difficult process, and that the political and physical requirements are not yet in place. For example, Brad Adams, the Asia director at Human Rights Watch described Burma's human rights situation in 2014 as a “car crash.”<sup>[41]</sup> Similarly, Vivian Tan, a UNHCR representative advised that “a number of conditions in southeastern Myanmar [...] are not yet fully conducive to organized returns.”<sup>[42]</sup> Though the government is negotiating ceasefires with ethnic groups, including the Karen National Union, significant challenges remain: ethnic-minority areas are still militarized. Further, during the height of war in Myanmar, over 3,700 villages were razed or abandoned; authorities have not yet rebuilt critical infrastructure enough to allow peaceful repatriation.<sup>[43]</sup>

According to UNHCR's guidelines, the principle of voluntary repatriation should prevent refugees from being forced to return to their country of origin. In practise, however, many of those living in Thai camps feel that they are being pushed back to Myanmar. According to Naw K'nyaw Paw, the secretary of the Karen Women's Organization, recent restrictions that make life in camps unsustainable are the reason that many refugees have already returned to Myanmar; in an interview with *Foreign Policy*, she said that they

“see all of these things together as a way of forcing people to return home [...] If you don't have enough food, cannot get treated when you are sick, and children cannot go to school, you will have to leave the camp and try to survive.”<sup>[44]</sup>

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Unfortunately, despite repeated warnings, the restrictions in these refugee camps have not improved; as recently as January, 2015 a *Karen News* article claimed that refugees were seeing

“a stricter reinforcement of policies by Thai authorities, restriction of movement and a declining humanitarian assistance to refugees in many sectors, including food, healthcare, education and other services.”<sup>[45]</sup>

Failures to address repeated warnings about conditions in the camps suggests that they will not likely improve in the near term.

## Policy Space: UNHCR Attempts to Reduce Reliance on Donors

In Thailand, a multitude of humanitarian actors, not just the UNHCR, provide for Karen refugees; however, the fact that they suffer from the same funding challenges – specifically, a reliance on foreign donors – suggests potential UNHCR policy changes will have applications for these organizations. More broadly, the case studies of Tanzania and Thailand illustrate that funding gaps seriously impede the ability of UNHCR, and its partner organizations, to provide assistance for refugee populations. These gaps have significant security implications, as refugees with unmet needs may be pushed out of their host country before the conditions for repatriation have been met.

UNHCR has undertaken several strategies to attempt to reduce reliance on donor funding and refugee security. These strategies include advocating for more funding or budget restructuring and promoting refugee self-reliance, or development, initiatives.

As previously discussed, UNHCR's funding model relies nearly entirely on bilateral donations and lacks a permanent source of money; these two factors make it incredibly vulnerable to changes in donor priorities.<sup>[46]</sup> This structure is mandated by the its 1950 statute which states that the United Nations will only bear UNHCR's administrative expenses.<sup>[47]</sup> Each year, UNHCR's annual budget is approved by the states that make up its Executive Committee. In order to raise the money for its budget, the agency conducts a Global Needs Assessment, then publishes its Global Appeal, following which donors commit to specific contributions.<sup>[48]</sup>

UNHCR's 2013 budget illustrates the extent to which it relies on a small number of bilateral donors. In 2013, only 3 percent of the agency's overall budget came from the UN general budget. Further, 86 per cent of donations came from country donors; donations from the United States – UNHCR's largest donor – made up 35 percent of its annual budget.<sup>[49]</sup> Within the donation pledge process, states may “earmark” funds – or commit them to specific situations. This practise remains fairly common: in 2009, approximately 57 percent of donations were “tightly earmarked” for specific programmes and 25 percent were “lightly earmarked” for regions only.<sup>[50]</sup> Earmarking donations has certain advantages: it encourages donors to contribute to the agency by allowing them to donate in areas of strategic interest; however, at the same time, this practise does not prioritize the most urgent of refugee needs, or allow for flexibility. Further, this practise does not encourage states to invest in protracted, or low-profile situations, as they are less likely to receive media recognition.

In order to reduce reliance on its main donors and increase its operating budget, UNHCR has tried to diversity its funding sources. This has included soliciting contributions from private organizations, as well as looking towards non-traditional donor states. Both of these tactics have contributed to budget increases: from 2007 to 2008 donations from the private sector increased by over ten million USD;<sup>[51]</sup> similarly, in 2009 non traditional donors – including Andorra, Oman, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Slovenia and the United Arab Emirates – each increased their contributions by at least 50 percent. However, these changes did not correct fundamental deficiencies with agency funding: in the same year, UNHCR still experienced a significant budget shortfall and the share of tightly earmarked funds actually increased.<sup>[52]</sup>

UNHCR has also sought to reduce the impact of budget shortfalls and increase the quality of human life for protracted refugee populations by incorporating self-reliance initiatives into its regular programming. For example, the 1984 International Conference on Assistance to Refugees sought to incorporate development principles into refugee assistance through a partnership with the United Nations Development Programme.<sup>[53]</sup> Unfortunately, early

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initiatives in this area achieved little success; host governments did not want to encourage refugee populations to permanently settle on their territories. Instead, they preferred to have exiled people in visible positions to retain aid from international organizations.

In spite of these challenges, UNHCR has made gains in the area of development assistance for protracted refugee situations. In 1999, the agency's Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit launched a "Protracted Refugee Situations Project," which sought to study the human impact of prolonged periods of exile. After 2000, under the leadership of a new High Commissioner, UNHCR began to take on a more assertive role in development initiatives, including the "Development Assistance to Refugees" and "Development through Local Integration" initiatives.<sup>[54]</sup> According to UNHCR's estimates, this project has reduced reliance on aid: as of 2003, over 47,000 refugees in settlements in northern Uganda no longer needed food rations.<sup>[55]</sup>

Critics of the SRS program in Uganda, however, have been vocal about its deficiencies; according to a report by the Refugee Law Project, initiative has actually increased human insecurity.<sup>[56]</sup> According to the report's authors, UNHCR undertook the SRS in order to mitigate the impact of dwindling resources and reduced education and community services. Many refugees do not receive external support from the SRS program and, as such, have no resources for self-reliance. Within this context, refugees pursued coping mechanisms such as early marriage to provide for themselves and families. These developments represent an "infringement on the rights of those involved that generally exacerbate existing physical, social and economic hardship."<sup>[57]</sup> The complications with the program in Uganda suggest that while self-reliance strategies may be beneficial in the long term, they cannot be combined with the immediate withdrawal of funds for regular programming. With this in mind, they do not significantly reduce reliance on donor funding.

## Recommendations

The challenges facing UNHCR with regard to protracted refugee situations and field operations present serious concerns about funding models. While the most obvious policy recommendation would be for UNHCR to appeal to donor states and the UN for an increased budget,<sup>[58]</sup> continued funding shortfalls suggest that this would not be feasible.

Instead, the UNHCR could focus on a series of incremental budget changes that would give it increased programming flexibility. For example, the agency could implement a policy where 10 percent of all "tightly earmarked" donations from states are put towards the organization's non-earmarked fund. This change would not prevent countries from donating to areas of strategic interest; further, the small percentage reallocated to the organization's general budget likely would not raise significant objections from donors. Further, UNHCR could try to switch from an annual to a multiyear funding model, which would provide more flexibility in program planning and allow the agency to identify funding shortfalls earlier.

Another option for UNHCR would be to appeal to the United Nations for increased contributions. As previously outlined, the UN only contributes a small fraction of the organization's overall budget and provides only for administrative costs. One option in this area could be to ask for a UN for a fund similar to that of the Central Emergency Revolving Fund (CERF) in the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA).<sup>[59]</sup> The CERF is a pool of non-dedicated funds with easy access that UN OCHA can use to address immediate concerns. Critically, UN OCHA may relegate these funds to other agencies in times of immediate need.<sup>[60]</sup> If established, this fund would assist with the issues outlined in Tanzania and Thailand, where organizations working alongside UNHCR – including the TBC and WFP – experienced budget shortfalls.

In addition, UNHCR has previously been able to solicit large-scale donations from private donors, including a 2.9 USD grant from the Ford Foundation.<sup>[61]</sup> By describing support for chronic refugee populations as necessary to regional security, UNHCR could solicit donations from private companies with operations in the area.

Finally, UNHCR may have to reorient its development and self-reliance programming. While these initiatives are undeniably critical for the quality of life that refugees experience in host countries, they should not detract from the

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organization's basic care programming. As illustrated in the example of Uganda, redirecting funds from basic needs funding towards self-reliance initiatives has the potential to actually undermine human security. UNHCR could shift sustainable development initiatives to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP); or, at the very least, the agency could appeal to UNDP for funds when undertaking self-reliance projects.

## Conclusion

Funding cuts to chronic refugee situations present a significant concern to both human and state security. As outlined in this paper, budget shortfalls have the potential to exacerbate conflict between refugee and local populations and push refugees back to their country of origin before the requirements for repatriation are in place. The Thailand and Tanzania case studies illustrate that UNHCR is not the only organization operating in this policy space – organizations such as the WFP and TBC also make essential contributions to refugee wellbeing; unfortunately, the length of this essay did not permit for a closer examination of the links between partner organizations and how they relate to funding issues. However, the funding difficulties experienced by UNHCR has applications for other organizations, as they all rely on voluntary donations and work in partnership.

Finally, the issues outlined in this essay illustrate the urgent need for increased funding for refugee camps in Thailand. If Karen refugees are pushed to return to Myanmar – as many already have – it has the potential to reignite civil conflict and undermine the ceasefire negotiation process.

## Endnotes

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<sup>[13]</sup> Whitaker, 248.

<sup>[14]</sup> Whitaker, 248-249.

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<sup>[22]</sup> Whitaker, 252.

<sup>[23]</sup> Whitaker, 248.

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<sup>[59]</sup> Jamal, 157

<sup>[60]</sup>

# Chronic Refugee Populations and UNHCR's Funding Model: A Source of Insecurity

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"How CERF Works," United Nations Central Emergency Response Fund, accessed April 1, 2015,  
<http://www.unocha.org/cerf/about-us/humanitarian-financing>

<sup>[61]</sup> Sarah Ellen Davies, *Legitimising Rejection: International Refugee Law in Southeast Asia* (New York: BRILL, 2008) 63.

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