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Canada Asked to Help Burmese Refugees

By **Cindy Chan**

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Refugees at the Mai Hla refugee camp, one of nine Burmese refugee camps along the Thailand-Burma border. The 142,000 refugees living in these camps are at risk of starvation unless Canada and other countries can provide emergency funding to alleviate the food crisis resulting from skyrocketing food prices. (Pornchai Kittiwongsakul/AFP/Getty Images)

Canadian Burmese activists are urging Canada to increase humanitarian aid to Thailand's refugee camps where Burmese refugees are at risk from rising food prices.

"The Thailand-Burma Border Consortium (TBBC), the main relief organization providing food for the refugees in the nine camps along the [Thailand-Burma] border, is under a very difficult financial crisis," said Tin Maung Htoo, executive director of the Canadian Friends of Burma (CFOB).

The TBBC provides food to 142,000 refugees in the camps. Over the last three months the price of rice has more than doubled and is expected to increase further, Maung Htoo said. The recent devaluation of the U.S. dollar has compounded the situation. The TBBC currently has an approximate budget shortfall of US \$9 million.

"This price crisis is very widespread in Asia currently, especially in those refugee camps because those organizations are running based on fixed income support from different countries," he said.

In early March Maung Htoo visited the region and saw the deteriorating conditions first-hand.

"When I was in Thailand I was very, very appalled to see the living conditions of the refugees in the camps and on the border," he said. "I visited the most crowded camp where more than 40,000 refugees are taking shelter and I noticed more than 4,000 are living without food rations."

He described the conditions at the Mei Tao medical clinic in the city of Mai Sot on the border, which serves hundreds of patients daily, including migrant workers and refugees, many of whom are Burmese.

"The facility is very, very much below the standard. Some patients lie on the ground, and some operations I feel are dangerous." These patients include severely injured victims of land mine explosions.

"The environment is not safe. There are no proper accommodations," said Maung Htoo.

The TBBC, which funds Mei Tao, recently notified the clinic that it is experiencing difficulty continuing to provide food for the clinic's staff and patients.

The majority of Mei Tao's budget comes from Canada, noted Maung Htoo, and "under this situation Canada's support is very, very important."

TBBC's executive director Jack Dunford recently travelled to several countries seeking emergency funding. So far, Spain, Ireland, and the Netherlands have announced additional funds.

Dunford was in Ottawa last week and met with senior Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) officials. However, he left empty handed without any promise from the Canadian government to provide tangible help, Maung Htoo said.

Canada is one of the smallest donors among 14 other countries providing aid to Burmese refugees in Thailand. It contributes only two to three percent of the costs of the refugee food program.

Maung Htoo pointed out that Canada gave up to \$20 million in aid each year to Burma before the democratic uprising in 1988, compared to today's \$2 million annually. In contrast, Canada has been providing much more substantial funding to other parts of the world such as Afghanistan and Haiti.

He urged the Canadian government to increase humanitarian aid to the Burmese refugees in Thailand. Canada is a key supporter of efforts working toward democracy and human rights in Burma, he said.

"At the same time we should not forget the situation inside [Burma] and on the border, and we should provide some concrete support." Otherwise these refugees could face starvation, said Maung Htoo.

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