

# Without refuge: Chin refugees in India and Malaysia

Amy Alexander

**Most Chin refugees have never set foot in a refugee camp; they live as urban and undocumented refugees in India and Malaysia.**

Like many other ethnic nationalities in Burma, widespread human rights abuses have caused tens of thousands of Chin from Burma's western hills to flee Burma in search of survival elsewhere. While Thailand plays host to a majority of Burma's refugees, the Chin population in Thailand

Chin live along the Indo-Burma border. A smaller number journey onward to New Delhi, hoping to gain UNHCR protection. Both locations provide little protection for Chin refugees and daily existence is fraught with difficulties and hardships.

UNHCR and are awaiting refugee status determination. In mid 2006, UNHCR also began resettling the Chin to third countries.

Obtaining refugee status through UNHCR, however, has become increasingly difficult for the Chin community in India. Most Chin live in Mizoram, where UNHCR is not operational. As a result, Chin living in Mizoram seeking UNHCR recognition must make an arduous and expensive journey to Delhi.

Once registered, they are required to remain in Delhi, where it is difficult to make a living and assimilate culturally.

Further limiting the accessibility of refugee status for the Chin, UNHCR recently announced the closure of general registration in September 2007. Only 'priority' cases or those considered especially vulnerable, such as pregnant women, the elderly and the infirm, are now eligible for registration. 'Non-priority' cases will have to wait until the general registration

process re-opens, which is unlikely to happen soon.

Life for Chin refugees in Delhi is extremely difficult as they must compete for limited resources with the local poverty-stricken population who are struggling for their own survival. To address the growing needs of the refugee population, UNHCR, in coordination with implementing partners, had developed a network of social service programmes in financial support,

*Chin weavers in Mizoram, India, where they live and work.*



remains very small. Most Chin instead seek refuge in India and Malaysia. There they face challenges distinct from those faced by their compatriots living in Thailand.

## Chin refugees in India

A majority of Chin forced to flee Burma cross into neighbouring India and settle in the Mizoram hills, which are adjacent to the Chin Hills. Although it is impossible to accurately determine their true number, it is estimated that 60-80,000

Since India is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees or the 1967 Protocol, there is no procedural mechanism for providing official protection or benefits to refugees living in India. UNHCR, however, does have a presence in India and continues to register, recognise and resettle Chin refugees. Of the 1,800 Chin living in Delhi, 1,000 have been granted refugee status by UNHCR. Another 300 Chin cases have been registered by

education and health. This included, firstly, a short-term subsistence allowance for newly recognised refugees. In 2003, however, UNHCR began to phase out this allowance, cutting amounts by half after six months and eliminating it altogether after one year. This shift in policy fails to account for the realities of refugee life in Delhi, where self-reliance is not feasible for most of the refugee population.

Secondly, it includes a salary top-up scheme under which UNHCR agreed to supplement the salaries of refugee workers to bring them up to the official Delhi poverty line. However, since August 2007, no new applicants have been accepted into the programme. Meanwhile, the top-up scheme has in effect created a secondary labour market, where employers have grown accustomed to paying lower wages for refugee workers. Without continued supplementary payments by UNHCR, Chin labourers can expect to consistently earn less than the local population for the same work.

A third form of assistance is provided by the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) to cover the educational expenses of school-aged refugee children. But these subsidies are calculated based on the cost of attending government schools, where it is almost impossible for refugee children to meet the admissions criteria. Meanwhile, the subsidies are insufficient to cover the cost of private schools. As a result, many are left without an education.

The fourth programme seeks to address the health and medical problems suffered by refugees due to their poor living conditions in Delhi. Language barriers and intense discrimination inhibit Chin patients from receiving prompt or proper treatment in local hospitals. The Voluntary Health Association of Delhi (VHAD) had been responsible for providing basic health-care services to refugees in Delhi. However, in early 2007, VHAD closed its doors due to a lack of resources. Medical care is now prohibitively expensive for Chin refugees living in Delhi.

In addition, tension with the local population is an enormous obstacle to achieving self-reliance for the

Chin in Delhi and Mizoram. In Delhi, discord between the Chin and the local population is accentuated by the general lack of resources. As they compete with the locals for scarce commodities, the Chin live in constant fear of eviction, physical violence and other abuses. Most abuse is perpetrated with impunity, either because it is unreported or through a lack of law enforcement.

In Mizoram, despite Mizos and Chin sharing common ancestry, discrimination is pervasive. In the past, the Young Mizo Association (YMA), a non-political but extremely influential civil organization in Mizoram, targeted the Chin, leading to several crackdowns against them. The most serious incident occurred in 2003 when the YMA forced thousands of Chin back to Burma. Possibly indicating an easing of tension between the Mizo and Chin, in October 2007 the Mizo demonstrated alongside the Chin in their calls for change in Burma. Nevertheless the Chin continue to fear more evictions and forced deportations by the Mizo.

### Chin refugees in Malaysia

Due to substantial militarisation along the Indian border, many Chin fear the dangers associated with crossing into India. So, despite the distance, Malaysia has become a destination for the Chin and currently hosts some 23,000.

Like India, Malaysia is not a signatory to the Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol and since the beginning of 2006 the general registration process has been closed. As the exodus of Chin to Malaysia continues, more and more Chin find themselves waiting to be registered. Holding UNHCR documents at least provides hope of resettlement to a third country even if it provides no guarantee of protection or access to benefits in Malaysia.

The majority of Chin refugees live in devastating poverty in extremely cramped accommodation in the capital, Kuala Lumpur. Others live in makeshift camps outside the city or in the distant Cameron Highlands, where they work for low wages on farms, with unreliable water supplies and inadequate protective gear.

Harassment and abuse by the authorities is a daily reality for the

Chin in Malaysia. In addition to raids on neighbourhoods and workplaces, immigration officials approach and threaten individuals in public areas. Those unable or unwilling to pay bribes risk arrest, detention or deportation. Refugees who are detained in Malaysia are often kept in overcrowded, unhygienic cells. They are inadequately fed and given little access to basic amenities. Illness is common. Complaints of harassment and physical abuse by guards and officials are widespread.

Chin refugees are not allowed to work in Malaysia and are relegated to the informal work sector. Fewer than one third of the Chin community in Malaysia are employed while those who secure employment are often subject to exploitative employers and abusive working conditions.

Basic health services are provided through mobile clinics to both urban refugees and those living in the jungle camps. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) had been operating in Malaysia providing translators and reimbursements for hospital care until early last year when it withdrew its operations.

### Conclusion

Tens of thousands of Chin have fled torture, persecution and the threat of death in Burma. They take great risks, endure extreme hardships and confront dangerous challenges in the hope of finding refuge somewhere. What they find in India and Malaysia, however, is a lack of legal recognition, limited access to UNHCR protection, and difficulty in obtaining work, receiving an education and accessing health-care services and acceptable living accommodation. Like their brothers and sisters from Burma living in Thailand, the Chin in India and Malaysia are living without true refuge.

*Amy Alexander (amyalex\_thailand@yahoo.com) is the Advocacy and Campaigns Coordinator for the Chin Human Rights Organisation based in Chiang Mai, Thailand (www.chro.org).*

*CHRO is grateful to all those in the Chin communities who generously shared their time, stories and experiences which formed the basis for this article.*

Copyright of *Forced Migration Review* is the property of *Forced Migration Review* and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

Copyright of *Forced Migration Review* is the property of *Forced Migration Review* and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.