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Burmese Refugee Transnationalism: What Is the Effect?

Inge Brees

Abstract: Burmese refugees in Thailand maintain economic, social and political links with their country of origin, but these transnational activities are influenced by the politics and level of development of the country of origin and the host country. Through transnational activities, refugees can have a positive impact on the home country by contributing to peace-building and development or they can enhance conflict, as the discussion on community engagement and political transnationalism will illustrate. Clearly, the increased capacity and networks of the Burmese diaspora have bestowed it with a large (future) potential to influence peace-building, development and conflict. Therefore, it is argued here that the various civil, political and military groups in exile should be included in the peace-building process initiated by international actors, next to stakeholders inside the country.

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Keywords: Burma/ Myanmar, Burmese refugees, transnationalism, diaspora, conflict, development, peace-building

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1 Transnational Refugee Networks in the Thai-Burmese Border Region

Burmese people flee their country for a combination of political and economic reasons.[1] Throughout the country, people flee from human-rights abuses such as forced labour or political persecution and/or the total loss of livelihood options due to the economic mismanagement of the junta. In addition, there are forced relocations for reasons varying from urban development and poppy eradication to enforced assimilation, while in the border zones, forced relocations take place in order to reduce potential support for the insurgents (Grundy-Warr and Wong 2002: 100). However, as many of the ethnic minorities in these rural borderlands are very attached to their farmland, they often refuse to relocate and instead prefer to hide in the jungle whenever the army is nearby, effectively becoming IDPs. As this conflict situation endures, families may ultimately decide to flee or adopt risk-diversification strategies by sending some family members to a city or abroad to seek employment.

Thailand is often the preferred destination as there is a high demand for foreign labour there, the 1,800 km long border between the two countries is (and has always been) very porous and there is already a large Burmese community present (Brees 2008). Upon arrival in Thailand, it is possible to receive protection and assistance at one of the refugee camps, but most Burmese actually live outside the camps for various reasons (Brees 2009a). Anyone residing outside a camp is considered an "illegal migrant", though, subject to arrest and deportation. However, the push factors are far more important in this case than the pull factors, and the choice of settlement (i.e. inside or outside the camps) is often unrelated to the causes of the flight. For example, many of the political activists are self-settled, since much opposition work is impossible from inside the remote camps. All the Burmese in Thailand are therefore called "refugees" in this paper, regardless of their legal status or the place where they live.

The experience of fleeing and living in exile obviously has an impact on refugees. Refugees seek ways to adapt to life in the host country by negotiating about housing and wage employment, linking up to other previously unknown ethnic groups, creating community organisations and attracting donors, etc. This kind of agency contributes to social change for the individual refugees involved as well as for the greater refugee community (Dryden-Peterson 2006: 390). These coping and adapting strategies affect refugees in a way that cannot be "undone"; there is no return to the status quo. Many refugees have received relatively high standards of education and training compared to most people inside Burma. If they ever return to Burma, it is unlikely that all of them will become farmers (again). In Thailand, they have learnt various professions (e.g. new construction techniques, brick-making, solar-panel repair, etc.), and some have been employed by CBOs and/or international aid agencies. Certainly the potential of the latter for rebuilding the country is a large one as they have the capacity to write project proposals and attract donors, they know what confidentiality means, etc., at a level that hardly exists inside the country. But even before any return, refugees can affect their country of origin through transnational activities, which is the subject of this paper.

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[1] The term "Burmese" is used in this paper to describe any person from Burma, while the term "Burmans" is used for people from the main ethnic group.
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Given that this is a protracted refugee situation (since 1984), Burmese refugees in Thailand have, over time, been able to form networks within Thailand, across the border and on a global scale. This is not surprising, given that the conditions that produce transnationality, as noted by Lubkemann (2000), are all present:

- historical patterns of migration between the two countries,
- robust informal labour markets in peri-urban host settings,
- conditions of pervasive insecurity, which encourage the development of strategies of risk diversification,
- prolonged armed conflict,
- porous international borders.

While historical connections across the Thai-Burma border have always existed, the formation of large-scale networks with third countries has only been possible because of the greater access to technology in Thailand, greater economic resources and improved human capital acquired through training on Thai soil (Brees 2009b). Transnational activities are developed on an economic, social and political level through these networks. The ones developed in between Thailand and Burma will be discussed here. Burmese refugees in Thailand have established economic, social and political transnational activities to support their families and communities in their homeland.

Rather than going into a discussion of the initiation of these activities, the focus of this article is on the impact of the transnational processes. The junta's reaction to the transnational activities will be discussed as well as the current and potential impact on the stayees' households, communities and Burma in general, while recognising that additional fieldwork inside Burma would be beneficial to complement and refine insights gained on the Thai side of the border. It will become clear that the type of transnational activities, and thus their impact, is influenced by the politics and level of development in both Burma and Thailand. Moreover, in some contexts the transnational activities may enhance peace-building and development, while in others they may engender fierce debates, as the discussion on community engagement and political transnationalism will illustrate. In the conclusion, a more general reflection will be developed on the potential of the Burmese diaspora to influence peace-building and conflict in Burma.

The data used for this paper is based on fieldwork carried out by the author as part of a research project on the livelihoods of Burmese refugees in Thailand. The research was conducted in Tak province, Thailand, between June 2006 and December 2007. Twenty different sites were purposefully selected to capture the wide diversity of livelihoods, after which a random sample of households was selected. Over 150 structured interviews with refugee households were conducted with the aid of carefully selected interpreters. Questions on financial and social remittances were incorporated into the livelihood interviews. Additionally, interviews were conducted with remittance carriers in Mae Sot. The information on other transnational activities is based on interviews with political activists in Mae Sot and Nu Poh camp, participatory observation and informal conversations during field research as well as on secondary data produced by diaspora groups. Due to the focus on Tak province, a lot of the transnational activities found, though not all of them, are between Karen people. As Hannerz (cited in Horst 2002: 2) notes, there is always a trade-off in transnational research between intensity and dispersion. Other research will need to verify whether the activities found are similar in other settings in Thailand and across the wider diaspora, but contacts with organisations working with ethnic Mon and Karenni refugees do suggest that similar networks and cross-border activities have been established in those areas.

Although this paper focuses on transnationalism, by no means do I wish to claim that all refugees are transnational. Whether and which kind of transnational activities exist depends on personal skills and preference as well as structural features. There are structural inequalities within refugee groups that influence whether someone will become transnational. All demographic variables (age, gender, religion, etc.) have an impact, but ethnicity is a particularly important factor in this case. Historically, the Karen have a much stronger cross-border network to fall back upon than Burmese people from other ethnic minorities (Lang 2002: 125-153; Grundy-Warr and Wong 2002). In this paper, the transnational engagement of Burmese refugees in general will be discussed, with ethnic distinctions only being made where necessary.

2 Transnational Activities by Burmese Refugees and Their (Potential) Impact

2.1 Financial Remittances and Their Multiple Effects

> Burma will also be hit by the global economic crisis, through its diaspora. Foreign labourers will be the first to be laid off, certainly in the export-orientated industries in Thailand. Huge problems are looming, as Burma cannot sustain the shock of losing all those remittances (Harn Yanghwe, Director of the Euro-Burma Office, Burma Conference, European Commission, Brussels, 31.10.2008).

Refugees can be transnational in many different ways. They are most frequently involved in economic transnationalism at a household level by sending *remittances* to the family members left behind in the country of origin. Even though Burmese refugees in Thailand are not allowed to work, the majority of them do. Once they have managed to establish relatively stable livelihoods, refugees tend to remit money, especially if they are self-settled or unmarried (Brees 2009b). Some respondents mentioned how they took the money with them when travelling home, but this is tricky due to numerous military checkpoints along the road. Official banking transactions between Thailand and Burma are not possible, however, and sanctions have impeded companies like Western Union from establishing a seat in the country. Most refugees therefore transfer their remittances through informal *hundi* systems with people who act as intermediaries and deliver the money to the recipient.

Although there has not been any research on remittances inside the country, based on a comparison with other conflict-affected countries, it can reasonably be assumed that these are a very important source of income for the people who receive the money. The remittances sent give the recipient family a greater level of power and choice (Horst 2008). They can simply use the money to survive in the economically marginal area or war zone – which would have been impossible otherwise – and spend it on consumption or invest it in businesses, or they can accumulate financial capital to migrate as well. Remittances thus play a very important role in poverty reduction. The remittance senders in my sample thought the money was used for consumption/ survival and household needs (as did senders in Turnell et al. 2008: 12).

Remittances are likely to have a positive effect on poverty reduction for the recipient family, but there is also some discussion amongst academics on the potential downsides of such cash transfers. It is said that constantly sending remittances may create dependency amongst the recipients (Horst 2002: 5), but the question is: which alternatives to remittances exist in this particular context other than migrating as well? In addition, remittances are "blamed" for satisfying individual needs and potentially raising inequality as a result, while not changing anything as regards structural problems in, for example, the education or health system (Levitt and Nyberg-Sørensen 2004: 7). Consequently, there has been quite some debate on how to "guide" remittances towards productive investments, to the detriment of the consumptive use of remittances (New Economics of Labour Migration, NELM). Pieke et al. challenge this discussion:

> Informal remittances bring desperately needed relief from acute or chronic disaster. Such remittances thus complement international relief aid, making a vital contribution to development that is prior to – and every bit as important as – more structural economic changes needed for sustained economic growth (Pieke et al. 2005: 10).

It is unrealistic to expect remittances to improve the disastrous macro-economic situation in Burma all by themselves. The burden of sending remittances is already a very big one for the senders. Turnell et al. (2008: 11) found that senders remit 38% of their annual disposable income on average, which is one of the highest levels found in studies worldwide. While this is obviously beneficial for the recipient in question, the financial transfers can thus be to the sender's detriment since they prevent the person from developing their abilities and hinder their integration in the host country. Transnational activities are therefore not necessarily beneficial for both sides of the link.

Household remittances can also have a positive cumulative impact on the homeland. Huguet and Punpuing (2005: 46) estimate that around 155.3 million USD is sent to Burma per year, while Turnell et al. (2008: 11) suggest that the real amount could actually be as high as 300 million USD annually. These estimates, which only account for the transfers from Thailand to Burma, exceed the total amount of ODA to Burma (144.7 million USD (UNDP 2008)) and demonstrate the importance of remittances for a country that suffers under economic mismanagement and conflict:

> The more refugees are produced, the smaller the inflows of aid and remittances but the higher the importance of these inflows, when considered relative to the size of the economies (Gammeltoft 2002: 8).

These remittance flows can lead to a rise in foreign exchange in the country and, as such, international financial institutions can come to see the country as creditworthy (Fagen and Bump 2006: 4). Moreover, remittances can help "banking the unbanked" as they enhance the chance the recipients have of getting loans and therefore generate a savings culture. In this case, however, financial institutions are very weak and unreliable, and sanctions do not allow international financial institutions to engage with Burma. Additionally, value transfer of remittances is often considered a safer option, and even if the money physically crosses the border, it tends to be changed into kyat first. After all, the junta does not allow the Burmese people to possess foreign currency. If this context were to change in the future, the impact of remittances on the overall economy could be enhanced substantially.

Nevertheless, even in the current context, the potential of transnational economic practices is being increasingly recognised by the Burmese junta (the State Peace and Development Council, SPDC). The SPDC has started to promote migration for work actively, mostly to Malaysia, Singapore and the United Arab Emirates at the moment (Aung Thet Wine 2008). It would like to extend this system to migration to Thailand as well, but several problems have hindered this in practice until now. However, at the beginning of 2009, the Royal Thai Government (RTG) announced that in February 2010 every migrant worker will need to go to the border to register legally with Burmese officials ("the national verification process") (Hseng 2009). This signals a complete change of the present system and it remains to be seen whether the employees concerned will cooperate with this new system, which could dramatically increase their insecurity and that of the families they will have left behind in addition to the tax burden they will have to shoulder due to the Burmese junta. Indeed, people who leave officially through employment agencies are required to pay a considerable proportion of their wages back to the state in the form of taxes (10%), which makes it an unattractive option. For the junta, these taxes on labour export are an attractive source of income ("remittance-capturing") as millions of Burmese people work abroad. At the same time, labour migration diminishes the potential of the social – if not political – demands building up within society (Lubeigt 2008: 181), which is why the junta is not necessarily against it as long as it can profit from it. As the largest part of the Treasury is currently used on defence in Burma, it is doubtful whether the remittance-capturing process will benefit the development of the country.

Another kind of transnational activity which can have an impact on conflict is the cross-border business conducted by entrepreneurs. I have not found any evidence of large-scale transnational businesses in the hands of refugees as their legal status in Thailand and the bad economic or war context in their areas of origin discourage investments. However, as in any conflict, there are entrepreneurs who will act as “peace spoilers” – actors who prefer conflict to peace if peace entails the loss of large-scale economic opportunities:

> During more than fifty years of (mostly) low-intensity armed conflict in Burma, insurgency has become a way of life for long-suffering villagers, for combatants on all sides and for the networks of traders, loggers, spies and aid workers that grew out of the war. Many of these groups have vested interests in maintaining conflict along the border (South 2006).

Certainly the enormous smuggling businesses in drugs, gems and timber are important in this regard. These transnational smuggling businesses operate through a myriad of actors such as local junta and rebel leaders, Thai or Burmese businessmen and police and immigration officers, with refugees sometimes performing high-risk, low-profit manual labour jobs for small operations (see e.g. Gallash 2001: 50).

Overall, it can be said that the household remittance system is the least controversial transnational practice as it does not challenge the security of either the country of origin or the host country. Transnational businesses are only combated if they are illegal, but are otherwise encouraged by both Burma and Thailand due to mutual benefits (see e.g. Lubeigt 2008: 165).

2.2 The Impact of Social Engagement

Case studies on relatively large groups of migrants often point out their home-country social engagement. Migrants can set up specific development projects in their home community or support local initiatives financially by sending collective remittances:

> This collective endeavour [...] is motivated not by personal familial obligations alone, but rather by a combination of sociocultural and political factors, including migrants’ identity and sense of solidarity with their place of origin (local nationalism or regionalism), reciprocity with the homeland, and often an eagerness to gain status and recognition in the place of origin (Guarnizo 2003: 677).

Burmese diaspora CBOs support IDPs through the provision of food aid, school materials, clothes and health care (Brees 2009b). In addition, training courses are organised for interested and connected individuals on both sides of the border in a wide range of subjects: teaching, journalism, photography, human rights, maternal health, hygiene, etc. Many of these activities only exist because diaspora CBOs managed to align with international NGOs and donors, making this community engagement a transnational matter in various ways.

These kinds of social engagement can have an impact on both development and conflict. The relief aid has an obvious positive impact on IDPs as it ensures their survival. However, it is dangerous for the care providers involved as the junta regards their presence as illegal and too closely aligned with the Karen National Union (KNU) insurgents (who are necessarily there to provide security for the aid workers, thus this is a self-fulfilling prophecy). In terms of assistance to development, there is some diaspora support for infrastructure, but large-scale development projects set up with diaspora funds and know-how are not possible in the current context of distrust and war. Still, development can also occur in a less visible, slower way. For example, the training courses bring about development on different levels; they not only increase the human capital of the persons concerned, but some of them also have a direct impact on the community. In concrete terms, the health care-related training courses have significantly increased the capacity of the local health workers to improve the hygiene and medical conditions of their community in the absence of state-provided health care. Other training courses, on the other hand, such as those on journalism and photography, have a large indirect impact on the SPDC as the exposure of human-rights abuses and troop movements has multiplied along with these courses. If ideas about human rights, democracy and gender equality are gradually internalised on individual and group levels, both in the country and in the diaspora, they can contribute positively towards peace-building:

> […] when the transnational dimension proofs [sic!] to be vital to the advancement of a discourse on human rights and a critical debate on violence and repression, this can only be seen as a healthy development (Horst 2007: 8).

The fact that these diaspora groups manage to organise themselves at such a sophisticated level, offering services to both people in exile and at home, communicating globally and receiving international funding, leads to an increase in their authority and legitimacy compared to ethnic and junta leaders inside Burma. Social transnational activities can thus lead to a shift in power relations and, as such, have political consequences. For example, the funding and distribution of aid by Karen CBOs called KORD, CIDKP and KRC, who are all closely related to the KNU, has political consequences:

> The aid coming in from the NGOs helps to establish the refugee camps as power domains of the KNU. The distribution of aid via the arm of the KRC serves to perpetuate the idea among the Karen refugees that the KNU still cares for its people. In doing so, it produces

> and also reproduces the allegiance of the camp's inhabitants (Sang Kook 2001: 80).

The same applies to aid to IDPs. As ethnic leaders inside Burma lack both the international networks and the capacity that Thai-based organisations have, they are less present on the international scene, which means less funding for relief and development projects and, as such, less recognition by their population.

Apart from the political influence, cross-border aid can entail negative results for non-political stakeholders. For example, after Cyclone Nargis hit Burma in May 2008, all kinds of diaspora organisations tried to help the victims, including the ones usually working in Karen State (such as the Free Burma Rangers). However, as these are closely associated with the KNU but were now working far outside their usual territory with donor money that was not intended for cyclone victims, they jeopardised the humanitarian space of other aid workers in the affected delta zone. The close relationship between these transnational aid workers and rebels can thus be problematic in another context where it is possible for aid organisations to work legally, and have a negative impact in that particular situation despite good intentions. The impact of community engagement thus very much depends on the local context in the country of origin.

2.3 Does Directly or Indirectly Challenging the Junta Have Any Effect?

As there is no freedom of speech or political organisation inside Burma, the safest way to reveal the human rights violations inside the country and engage in some kind of opposition is to flee the country:

> Political diaspora movements are a repositioning of the politics of the homeland to the territories of host countries where more political space exists for oppositional politics in the hope of opening up or even transforming homeland political systems (Michael Peter Smith in: Al-Ali and Koser 2002: xiv).

In general, it can be said that the (future) potential of the political diaspora in contributing to both peace-building and conflict is particularly large in this case study. The reason for this is the small margin for political contestation that activists inside the country have enjoyed for several decades, which has severely limited the capacity of these organisations to become performing political opposition parties that can challenge the junta. This does not imply that the diaspora organisations have achieved much more tangible results, but they do have a larger network, more capacity and more freedom to speak out, which ensures they have more "voice" than the opposition inside the country does (with the exception of Aung San Suu Kyi):

> The 'long-distance nationalist' in exile from Burma has both little impact on what happens inside the nation and little price to pay for the possible effects of his or her actions. Nonetheless, making this point does not necessarily conflict with seeing the outside as an important part of the struggle too, or perhaps more accurately, occasionally a separate struggle (Dudley 2003: 22).

While there are dialogues and fierce debates in international panel sessions and over the Internet, these usually occur in between elite members in exile. The "inside" hardly participates in this kind of debate, since the large majority of the people concerned have no access to the necessary technology and specialised education, knowledge of English or the liberty to speak one's mind safely. In a sense, there are, indeed, separate struggles going on. The impact of the political diaspora's struggle will be highlighted here.

Despite being an external factor, the transnational dialogues have managed to create a vibrant international lobbying community, which

> changed or strengthened opinion in some Western governments and boardrooms and, to an extent, it has created its own reality. […] It has also encouraged the further development of language, technological and political skills amongst Burmese exiles (Dudley 2003: 29).

After all, the more the Internet became widely used by the Burmese community in the West, the more the diaspora in Thailand felt encouraged to improve its own IT skills, leading to a steep increase in news coverage by the various ethnic minorities. It is hoped that these Internet conversations and information-sharing opportunities will create better intergroup understanding, but this does not seem to be the case for the Burmese diaspora yet, since only a small elite can afford to use the Internet for leisure purposes. Still, in view of the large-scale resettlement programmes that are going on from the refugee camps to the West, this might change quickly.

A distinction can be made between direct and indirect political diaspora activities: the former directly target the home country, while the second category is directed towards political institutions in host countries and (super-)regional bodies ("indirect" targeting of the home country through other actors) (Østergaard-Nielsen 2002; Adamson 2002). The Burmese diaspora is very active in each of these domains and their activities do not go unnoticed.

2.3.1 The Impact of Direct Political Transnationalism

The junta reacts very harshly to contentious politics within Burma. Peaceful demonstrators or opposition members are frequently arrested, and the SPDC does not hesitate to use massive force to quell demonstrations, as was last seen in September 2007. Similarly, the rebel armies in the border areas are combated forcefully with the "four-cuts strategy". These counter-insurgency tactics disproportionately affect the civilian population, however. Hence, the Burmese are very much divided on which option is preferable: "fighting for the cause" or "ceasefire for peace":

> Critics accused the hard-liners in Mae Sot of sacrificing the interests of Karen communities in the conflict zones for the sake of an increasingly elusive breakthrough at the national political level (South 2008: 59).

There is an intense debate on whether or not a ceasefire and subsequent return of the refugees would be better for the ethnic minorities than the decades of conflict they have had to endure up until now:

> We just want peace so we can go back! This is not our country. If there really is peace and monitoring of that peace by the international community, then we would go back! (emotional remark by a participant in a focus group discussion, Mae La camp, 21.12.2006).

> The Karen people in Myanmar have become very weary and fed up with the prolonged civil war and its consequences. [...] The Karen leaders in Myanmar have projected the idea of transferring 'the armed struggle in the field' to the 'political struggle around the table (Karen civil-society leader from Rangoon, quoted in South 2008: 65).

Inside Burma, there are other Karen organisations than the KNU that have chosen to "return to the legal fold" and engage with the junta to pursue greater economic and cultural autonomy (South 2007: 65). Because the KNU is based in Thailand and has far greater access to international resources, though, they managed to gain recognition as the representatives of the estimated seven million Karen. In practice, however, many Karen live inside the country, close to the border or in Rangoon and the delta zone, and do not necessarily recognise the leadership of the KNU (Thawnghmung 2008). Regardless of whether they support the KNU's military approach or not, the people in Karen State are strongly affected by the war situation, which is likely to endure as exiled hardliners were elected as the KNU leadership in 2008.[2] On the other hand, as long as the war continues, the KNU provides vital protection by establishing early-warning systems for villages, notifying them in case tatmadaw attacks are imminent, and provides safe passage through the mine-infested borderland area for IDPs and people wishing to seek refuge in Thailand. Even the impact picture of direct political transnationalism is thus grey, rather than black or white.

2.3.2 The Impact of Indirect Political Transnationalism

Diaspora organisations provide information on the situation inside the country and lobby to effect a strong response by the international community. Through their work, they can focus attention on issues that are being neglected. For example, intensive information campaigns on a rat infestation in Chin State and the subsequent famine there helped the UN to respond quickly to this particular situation:

> We are very happy with the reports on the famine in Chin State from several of the organisations present here. Now the profile is raised and it is easier to get donor support. That will help us to get a better view on the situation and mobilise more resources (Chris Kaye, WFP representative, Burma Conference, European Commission, Brussels, 29.10.2008).

Another possible positive effect was revealed through the work of the KHRG: local military leaders may be responsive to a threat to reveal the abuses to exiled media:

> They (the villagers) had to carry things for the SPDC and had to cut bamboo poles for them. [...] I warned them (the SPDC authorities) that 'if you continue to order the villagers to do these things, the news (of forced labour demands) will spread out from (the) BBC and VOA'. After that they reduced the forced labour (villager in Papun district, cited in Hull 2008: 11).

While this finding cannot be generalised, it does illustrate a possible effect of exiled media coverage.

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[2] The KNU does want a ceasefire, but peace on its own terms, which include a political settlement for all the ethnic minority groups in the country and, as such, a discussion on political devolution and federalism. This stance has impeded a ceasefire since the 1990s (Thawnghmung 2008). In contrast, Karen leaders with a "Union Karen perspective" "do not see a fundamental contradiction between citizenship of a centrally governed state and the pursuit of greater economic, social, cultural and linguistic autonomy" (South 2008: 65).

The main goal of these transnational groups is, of course, to effect national political change through international pressure. In spite of the intensive lobby work, the international community has not reacted strongly with regard to the political situation in the country. Year after year, the Burmese junta is condemned in high-level international meetings and sanctions have been proclaimed, but these actions have not been able to achieve any goal in the field apart from challenging the legitimacy of the junta. The fact that Burma is not strategically and economically important enough for the West to severely pressurise the junta or its allies is certainly an important factor, but the main reason for the inefficiency is the discord between the West and the East over the tactics used to influence the Burmese generals, i.e. sanctions versus constructive engagement (Brees 2007). As the rule of the Burmese junta is accepted in the region, it is rather easy for them to ignore calls for change from the diaspora and the Western nations.

Not only international politicians, but also the Burmese people tend to be divided over the sanctions strategy. Under pressure from opposition lobbies, the US and EU have imposed sanctions on Burma, leading to a massive loss of jobs in the garment sector in Burma, for example. Another important aspect of these sanctions is the denial of assistance to the country by international financial institutions, and some diaspora groups lobby strongly to keep it that way (e.g. Ethnic Community Development Forum 2008). In addition, advocacy organisations like the Free Burma Coalition have pressurised Western companies to leave the country, threatening them with consumer boycotts. They attracted a great deal of media attention and many companies did, indeed, withdraw from Burma, such as Pepsi and Texaco, again leading to job losses. Predictably, this leads to disputes as, once again, it is the people who stay behind who are the ones who suffer from the consequences of these decisions.

For its part, the junta has responded to the influence of the diaspora lobby and the resulting tensions with the West by hiring US-based consultancy firms to improve its image (Smith 1998). In addition, it tries to criminalise diaspora organisations and their counterparts. For example, it attempted to exclude the Free Trade Union of Burma from a meeting with the International Labour Organization by calling the former "terrorists":

> In the light of intensified cooperation between Myanmar and the ILO, as evidenced by the emergence of a redress mechanism for forced labour victims, to allow the participation of elements involved in terrorist acts at the special sitting on Myanmar will in no way contribute to our worthy efforts to eliminate the practice of forced labour (Statement by U Hla Myint (ILO 2007)).

However, the junta has little control over the extensive information flows from Burma-based informants to the diaspora or over criticism spread through Internet forums. In an attempt to get a better grip on these Web-based activities, the SPDC sent officials to India and China on training courses in the fight against cyber-criminality, where they learnt to intercept e-mails and detect their sources (*Irrawaddy* 2007). Multiple events in 2008 suggest that this strategy has worked. Several of the large diaspora websites (e.g. Mizzima and Democratic Voice of Burma) were hit and were down for days in July 2008 (*South East Asian Press Alliance* 2008), while the e-mail box of Dr. Turnell from Macquarie University was flooded with thousands of e-mails on one day, right before the 2008 Burma conference (personal conversation, Chicago, 2 October 2008). It is very likely that critics of the regime will increasingly have to endure this kind of harassment in the future.

In contrast to these activities, the influence of *indirect contentious politics* is first and foremost felt by Thailand, which is host to over two million Burmese refugees and the largest political opposition movements (Brees 2009b). In addition to peaceful contentious politics such as demonstrations, there have been violent actions on Thai soil by small groups called the Vigorous Burmese Student Warriors (VBSW) and God's Army. The VBSW held 89 people hostage in the Burmese Embassy in Bangkok in 1999, demanding the release of all political prisoners in Burma. The Thai government reacted calmly and provided them with a safe passage out of the country (BBC 1999). This safe exit severely angered the Burmese junta. It caused a major bilateral crisis and the border was closed for months. In contrast, when God's Army, an armed opposition splinter group, seized a Thai hospital in Ratchaburi in January 2000, Thailand responded with force by invading the hospital and killing all the gunmen (Brooten 2003: 317-322). That event raised Thai public and government concerns about homeland security threats posed by the Burmese activists and insurgents on Thai soil. Furthermore, with the coming into office of Prime Minister Shinawatra in 2001, Thai foreign policy became increasingly economy-orientated, and given the extensive natural resources of its neighbour, the Thai government wanted to revive its relations with Rangoon. Consequently, there was a crackdown on all Burmese activists in Thailand. All registered urban refugees, including many activists, were ordered to move to the refugee camps, ending all protection outside the camps. In addition, the offices of diaspora organisations working on democracy, human rights or advocacy were monitored and raided (HRW 2004: 31-32). This was very difficult to protest against due to the illegal status of many of these organisations and their members.

Nevertheless, the Thai government has a dubious role in the Burmese political environment. While it is in favour of good relations with the junta now, in the past it supported the Karen insurgency. Relations were still very close throughout the 1990s, and information on hostile troop activities was still shared between the Thai military and the KNU military. However, this situation suddenly changed in early 2009. As the KNU has consistently lost strength over the last decade due to internal splits and loss of territory, it has become less relevant to Thailand. Senior military leaders of the KNU were therefore pressurised to leave Thai territory by 25 February (*Irrawaddy* 2009). It remains to be seen what impact this will have on transnational activities and on the refugees in general.

3 Conclusion: The Influence of the Diaspora on Conflict, Peace-Building, and Development in Burma

Refugees are not a static population. They change due to life in exile and, in turn, affect their country of origin through transnational activities, thus their agency should not be underestimated. This paper clearly illustrates that refugees can engage in economic, social and political transnational activities, even in the absence of a secure legal status in the host country. However, the type of transnational activities, and therefore the impact, is influenced by the politics and level of development of both the country of origin and the host country (Brees 2009b). Formalised links that the diaspora has with the Burmese junta are neither possible nor desired, and professional economic activities are not widespread due to the disastrous economic and/or war situation in the home areas of the refugees as well as the lack of a legal status for the refugees. Contact and financial remittances are hampered by the lack of proper telecommunication and banking systems in the country of origin, while collective social remittances are clandestine since they are disapproved of by the junta. The host country, on the other hand, has proven quite influential for this form of political transnationalism due to its crackdown on activist urban refugees and diaspora organisations, and lately on rebel organisations, pushing them increasingly underground. Transnational activities are thus not untouched by nation-states.

Through these transnational processes, refugees can act as agents of change, but the case of Burmese refugees in Thailand provides mixed evidence in this regard. The transnational activities do have an effect on the "stayees", but the direction of the influence – positive or negative – is unclear, and it seems too early to be able to speak of real change yet. While the impact of financial remittances at the household level is positive in terms of poverty reduction, the significant out-migration is transforming the social fabric of households and communities “inside”.[3] Collective social remittances for their part can be directly and indirectly positive or have a negative impact, depending on the context. Also direct and indirect forms of political transnationalism engender strong debates between Burmese people in all the domains of the refugee diaspora. After all, the rebellion and the activities supported by hard-line activists in the diaspora have a negative contemporary impact on the stayees. Moreover, despite the lobbying achievements in terms of sanctions and Western company withdrawals, so far the political diaspora has not achieved any more tangible influence on the political situation in Burma than the “inside” opposition has. The junta’s grip on power has not weakened over the last decade. Currently, there is not much visible evidence of economic, social or political transformation due to refugees’ transnational activities. However, as the country of origin and the host country influence the transnational activities, the impact of transnationalism may change quickly once the technological, political and war context alters, e.g. in terms of the stayees’ participation in transnational dialogues, the impact of remittances on the overall economy, diaspora involvement in negotiations, etc. Furthermore, other transformations, such as knowledge of the human-rights discourse, may only change people’s hearts and minds slowly and in an immeasurable way.

A diaspora can also have a constructive effect on peace-building if it manages to reconcile and unite people while they are in exile. However, ethnic fault lines are still very much present in smaller Burmese refugee communities such as the one in Japan (Banki 2006) as well as larger refugee communities such as the one in Thailand (Fink 2003). Moreover, the news coverage and advocacy of the ethnic minorities and the Burmans is still substantially different; while the Karen and other ethnic minorities tend to concentrate on social, economic and cultural rights, the Burmans focus on civil and political rights, which Brooten (2003) sees as a negative perpetuation of differences and inequities between Burmans and non-Burmans:

> The consistent and repetitive nature of human rights abuse reporting has also worked to maintain stereotypes of non-Burmans as victims. In the public realm they remained invisible except as symbols of Burmese military oppression. While there were exceptions, the very fact that they were exceptional proves the rule – that the popular conception within the opposition was of the non-Burmans as lacking political skills (Brooten 2003: 202).

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[3] More research on this aspect will certainly be needed inside the country. Promisingly, research on the impact of emigration on Arakan State has recently started (by CNRS), which will hopefully be followed by similar research in other areas of Burma.

Despite ethnic and tactical differences and tensions, efforts have been made by the diaspora to improve cooperation and understanding. A promising umbrella project, uniting political, civil and military groups inside the country and on the Thai side of the border, was set up in 1999: the National Reconciliation Programme (NRP). It is very important to note that this initiative not only involves various armed factions, but also other groups that are affected by the SPDC's rule as this creates additional potential to develop a more sustainable peace (Collyer 2006: 99). The idea is to prepare the different groups to participate in the *Tripartite dialogue* between the SPDC, the NLD and the ethnic minorities by facilitating and funding the set-up of intergroup coordination mechanisms.[4] Since its inception, regular meetings have thus been held, both in Thailand and in Burma, in order to agree on common principles to govern Burma and to create the conditions necessary to safeguard them. In the third and last phase of the project (2008-2012), the NRP hopes to further deepen the political consensus, develop human resources and prepare people for democratic rule through reliable data-gathering, grass-roots empowerment, etc. A first symbol of the project's success was the establishment of the Ethnic Nationalities Council in 2004, which unites representatives of various political groups within the existing ethnic states. The organisation explicitly recognises the junta as a stakeholder, even agreeing on amnesty for past actions for anyone involved in peace talks, thus demonstrating a genuine interest in dialogue (ENC 2006).

These kinds of projects have a real potential to succeed as the Burmese social and cultural environment allow interaction across ethnic groups, which has largely spared Burma from communal violence, unlike similar situations in other countries (Thawnghmung 2008: 49). Living together has thus not become problematic and the solution is still seen as lying in the political arena. Therefore, if the NRP proves to be efficient enough to build up mutual trust and cooperation, which initial results indicate, this inclusive mechanism could substantially enhance the diaspora's contribution to peacebuilding. Since the NRP and other local initiatives lack the "voice" that international lobbies have, though, they tend to be ignored, not only by the Burmese junta, but also by important players such as the United Nations.

On the other hand, a diaspora can also prolong the conflict by supporting rebel armies or by holding on to strident, uncompromising rhetoric:

> Unfortunately for Burma [...] the voices of exiled elites have often drowned out better-informed, more nuanced and constructive views. In the zero-sum struggle for resources and perceived legitimacy, genu-

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[4] Interviews and e-mail conversations with Mael Raynaud, analyst for the Euro-Burma Office.

> ine 'peace-making' efforts have been sacrificed for political expediency (South 2008: 110).

One example of the diaspora impeding peace-building is the planned ceasefire negotiations of the KNU with the junta in 1994. This move was actively discouraged by the government-in-exile because they saw it as undermining their own efforts to effect decisive international action against the Burmese generals. The KNU gave in to their wishes, to the detriment of the civilian population as well as themselves. Indeed, only a few months later, the KNU lost its Manerplaw headquarters and most of its remaining territory. Recently, there have been renewed attempts by the RTG to mediate between the KNU and the SPDC, which the KNU is willing to accept, but other exiles fear:

> Htay Aung, a Burmese researcher for the exile-based Network for Democracy and Development, said there would be a 'gap' between the KNU and Burmese opposition groups in exile if the KNU signed a ceasefire agreement with the Burmese government. The Thai authorities were also likely to increase pressure on Burmese opposition groups and the democracy movement would be weakened if the KNU reached a ceasefire agreement with the Burmese regime, Htay Aung said (Saw Yan Naing 2009).

Hence, history could repeat itself.

There is thus no guarantee that the diaspora will play a positive role. The picture is likely to remain mixed, as this case study demonstrates. What is clear is that it has a large potential to influence both peace-building and conflict in its country of origin due to its capacity and networks:

> The exiles on the outside could be said to be forming a new elite in comparison to those who remain inside, [...] characterised by greater levels of access to education and technology, greater opportunities and skills to manipulate language and technology and greater distance from the non-elite (Dudley 2003: 23).

However, at present, the role of refugees and diaspora organisations is not sufficiently taken into account by the international actors that are trying to influence the peace-building process in Burma. Ibrahim Gambari, the United Nations Special Envoy for Myanmar, visited the country six times in 2008, but so far his efforts have been fruitless (Aung Zaw 2008). Moreover, Gambari and the UN in general have focused solely on the conflict between the SPDC and the NLD, to the detriment of any engagement in peace-building in the long civil war:

> We are concerned that once again a United Nations envoy has visited Burma without also meeting with genuine representatives of Burma’s ethnic nationalities, such as the Karen National Union. [...] Ethnic people should not be sidelined in any future discussion on a national reconciliation process in Burma (statement by the KNU on 19.02.2009 after another of Gambari’s trips to Burma, quoted in Wai Moe 2009)

This is a void as the ethnic minority groups, their civil organisations and the rebel groups both inside the country and on the border are surely important stakeholders on the road to peace-building and the extensive negotiations this entails. While several of the political transnational activities discussed above (the rebellion, hostage-taking, pro-sanctions lobbying, etc.) are, indeed, geared towards confrontation and challenging the junta, most Burmese political parties (inside the country and in exile) actually prefer to compromise by acknowledging the junta as a partner for dialogue which will play an important role in the country’s future. Even the hard-line civil-society groups argue that the sanctions are merely a tool enabling them to start negotiations, rather than defeat the generals. The UN should thus include the political, civil and military diaspora leaders in the negotiations, regardless of whether the SPDC approves of this, next to stakeholders inside the country.

This overview demonstrates that refugees’ contributions to conflict, peace-building and development should not be underestimated as they are bound to play a large role. One of the reasons that the role refugees play in development and peace-building is given little attention (other than their potential as voters once they have returned) is the lack of research into refugee transnationalism. This case study has tried to demonstrate the various ways by which refugees can have an impact on their country of origin, but more research is needed, both in cases of conflict and post-conflict, in order to grasp refugees’ potential fully.

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Die Auswirkungen der transnationalen Verbindungen von birmanischen Flüchtlingen

Zusammenfassung: Birmanische Flüchtlinge in Thailand haben ökonomische, soziale und politische Verbindungen zu ihrem Herkunftsland. Diese transnationalen Aktivitäten sind von der Politik und Entwicklungsstufe ihres Ursprungs- und ihres Gastlandes abhängig. Mit Hilfe transnationaler Aktivitäten können Flüchtlinge eine positive Wirkung auf ihr Heimatland haben, indem sie zur Friedenserhaltung und Entwicklung beitragen. Sie können jedoch auch den Konflikt weiter verschärfen, wie die Diskussion über Gemeinschaftsengagement und politischen Transnationalismus zeigt. Die wachsenden Fähigkeiten und Netzwerke der burmesischen Diaspora haben sie mit einem großen zukünftigen Potenzial ausgestattet, Friedensinitiativen, Entwicklungen und Konflikte zu beeinflussen. Der Artikel behauptet deshalb, dass die unterschiedlichen zivilen, politischen und militärischen Gruppen im Exil in einen Friedensprozess eingeschlossen werden sollen, der von internationalen Akteuren und nationalen Stakeholders im Land angestoßen werden sollte.

Schlüsselwörter: Burma/ Myanmar, Flüchtlinge, Diaspora, transnationale Verbindungen, Konflikt, wirtschaftliche Entwicklung