



Humanitarian  
Aid Relief Trust

# **No Funding, No Food and No Safe Return**

**End of Funding Leaves Shan People Facing Starvation**

Burma Report

*January 2018*

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## List of Abbreviations

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IDP	Internally Displaced Person
HART	Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust
RCSS/SSA	Restoration Council of Shan State/Shan State Army
TBC	The Border Consortium
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
UWSA	United Wa State Army
SWAN	Shan Women's Action Network
SHRF	Shan Human Rights Foundation
SSRC	Shan State Refugee Committee

Please note that instead of Myanmar, HART uses the name Burma as this is strongly preferred by the local partners that HART works with in-country.

## Executive Summary

In October 2017, The Border Consortium (TBC) ceased food aid to 6,200 Shan Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and refugees living in six camps along the Burma-Thai border. After 15 years of assistance, TBC's funding has been suddenly withdrawn. This move is a result of the Burmese government's efforts to convince donors that the alleged peace process has made it safe for the Shan people to return home.

However, this is not the case, leaving the 6,200 IDPs living in the camps without vital support. With women and children making up 70% of the camp population, and the average cost of basic food rations reaching £100 per person per year, they will starve unless new funding is secured. £50,000 per month is needed to supply the six camps with rations of rice, salt, oil, soya bean and dried chilli.

Furthermore, many Shan are not able to return home because their land is occupied by the Burma Army or other ethnic groups, there is continued violence by the Burma Army in Shan State or in some cases, their villages simply do not exist anymore. These issues have not been recognised by TBC who have recently outlined a new strategy to help facilitate the return and reintegration of the displaced people to their homes, emphasising voluntary return to areas of temporary ceasefire.<sup>1</sup> This approach fails to address the evidence provided in this report which highlights that it is not safe for the Shan to return to their villages and instead need essential food aid to be resumed.

This report will outline the history of the displacement of the Shan people before explaining the current situation in the six IDP camps. It will then explain why the IDPs are not able to return to their villages and in doing so, explain why funding support is desperately needed for the six camps.



Map of six Shan IDP camps which face starvation as food aid has been cut

<sup>1</sup> The Border Consortium, 2017-2019 Strategy; <http://www.theborderconsortium.org/media/84542/Strategic-Plan-2017-2019-En.pdf>

## Recommendations

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### **To the International Community**

- ❖ Continue to support the IDP and refugee camps with food aid until the Shan are able to return safely to rebuild their villages and their lives
- ❖ Cease all investment in large-scale development projects until there is a federal political system and local perspectives are represented in decision-making
- ❖ Continue financial support of civil society organisations which play an essential role in supporting the ethnic national people who are not yet provided for by their own government
- ❖ Apply pressure for the amendment of the 2008 Constitution in order to bring the military under the control of the civilian-elected government
- ❖ Advocate for the restoration of farmland, removal of landmines, maintenance of no-fighting zones and resolution to villagers' security, human rights violations and threats
- ❖ Apply pressure to the relevant stakeholders to engage in a comprehensive and genuine peace process, rather than propagating an exclusionary process that is not moving towards a political solution to the conflict

### **To the Burma Government**

- ❖ End the impunity with which the Burma Army are able to commit human rights abuses against civilians; the Burma Army must end its offensives in ethnic areas and withdraw troops.
- ❖ Ensure that the peace process is amended to become inclusive of all ethnic armed groups and civil society organisations
- ❖ Immediately halt exploitative investment projects that have begun during a time of conflict and without effective consultation with local people

### **To the British Government**

- ❖ Give basic humanitarian aid to the 6,200 refugees and IDPs in six camps along the Shan-Thai border until it is safe for them to return home voluntarily and in safety and dignity.
- ❖ Provide this aid directly to the Shan State Refugee Committee (Thai border) who will ensure the aid reaches the intended beneficiaries.

## Displacement of the Shan

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Burma gained independence from Great Britain in 1948. The country is ethnically diverse, with minority groups comprising approximately one third of the population, with many having made attempts to achieve greater autonomy or complete independence from the central government. Shan State is the largest of the seven ethnic states in Burma, with a population of about eight million, half of which are ethnic Shan. The Shan people are ethnically related to the Thai, have a similar language, and live in southern China and northern Thailand as well as in Burma.

At independence, Shan leaders agreed to join the Union of Burma in return for constitutional guarantees which included the right to secession after ten years. The compromise was far from harmonious and following disputes over the handling of Shan affairs between Shan politicians and the Burmese government, the first Shan armed opposition group was organized in 1958. Furthermore, the right to secession was cast aside after General Ne Win's coup d'état in 1962 which fuelled Shan resistance to the increasing efforts of state authorities to centralise power. However, it was not until the late 1990s when two events occurred that led to widespread displacement of the Shan.

### **Scorched Earth Campaign 1996-98**

Several armed groups subsequently formed in order to resist the Burmese government's control over Shan State. One of the largest was Mong Tai Army which at its peak commanded 20,000 soldiers. When the Mong Tai Army broke up in 1995, Lt. Gen Yawd Serk, formed a new Shan resistance group, the Shan State Army – South, from the remnants (later called the Restoration Council of Shan State/Shan State Army – RCSS/SSA). In an attempt to cut off support for this new group, the Burma Army began a massive Scorched Earth Campaign in central Shan State in March 1996, driving the rural population at gunpoint off their lands into guarded resettlement camps near towns and main roads.

In the subsequent two years, the Burmese army forcibly relocated over 300,000 people in 1400 villages. The villagers were forbidden from returning to their homes and farms to work in their fields and collect belongings, and those who disobeyed were frequently shot on sight by Burmese troops. In addition, relocated Shan civilians were used as unpaid labourers to do work against their will.

The Shan Human Rights Foundation found evidence for human rights violations committed by the Burmese army during their operation<sup>2</sup>. This included the killing of over 600 civilians, with the worst being a massacre of 56 villagers, including women, in Kunhing, on June 16, 1997. These villagers had been given permission to travel by ox-cart to collect rice from their old villages, but were arrested and shot dead by military troops on the way. Furthermore, Amnesty International interviewed Shan who had been relocated<sup>3</sup>. They reported that a 27-year-old farmer from Laikha township was forcibly relocated twice:

*"We were given a two day deadline to move from Tard Mork to Laikha...after three days they burned down Wan Heng, 200 houses, one section of Tard Mork. I saw the smoke when I was sneaking back. Some people were burned in the houses - I think about four or five people. Two women and three men."*

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<sup>2</sup> A report on the conditions of internally displaced persons in Shan State of Burma, Shan Human Rights Foundation, March 1999

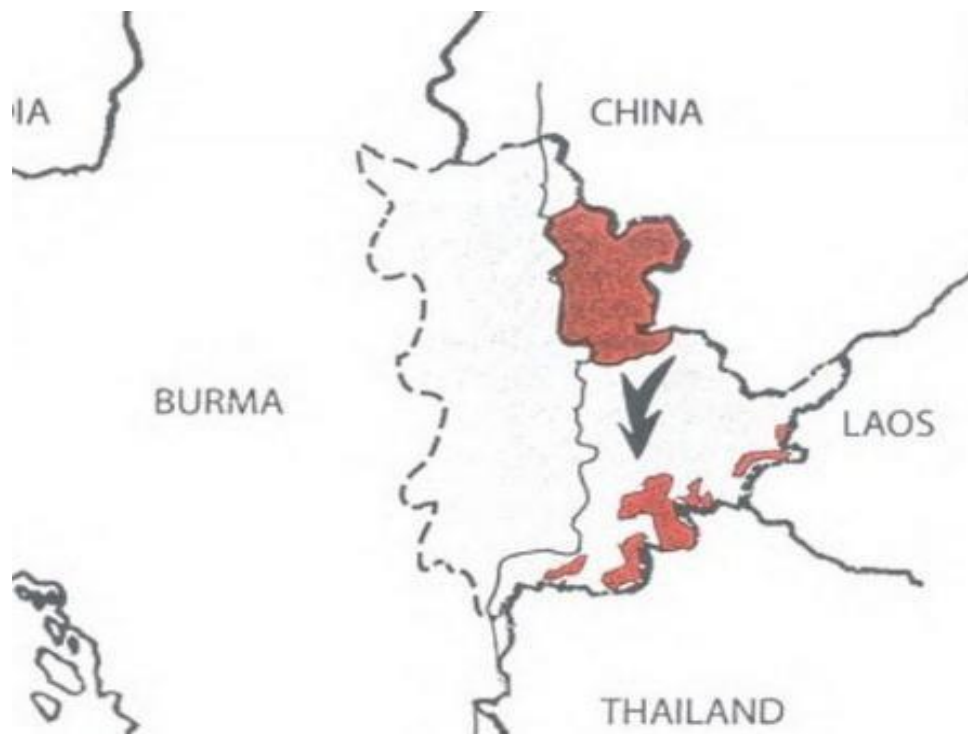
<sup>3</sup> Report Atrocities in Shan State, Amnesty International, June 1998

### **Forced Wa resettlement to southern Shan State in (1999-2001)**

The Wa are thought to be the original inhabitants of parts of the Shan State and northern Thailand. They are largely situated in North-East Shan State and had a population of around 500,000 in 1994. In late 1999, the Burmese military authorized the United Wa State Army (UWSA), who had signed a ceasefire agreement in 1989, to begin mass forced resettlement of Wa villagers from the Chinese border down to southern Shan State. This was to be the second event that would lead to widespread displacement of the Shan.

The pretext for the resettlement was drug eradication: to move Wa villagers from the mountainous poppy-growing regions in the north down to more fertile farmlands along the Thai border, where they could grow alternative crops. The real reason was political: using ongoing divide and rule tactics, the regime wanted to pit the UWSA against the RCSS/SSA, weakening resistance in southern Shan State. In addition, the UWSA gained territory and economic advantages from border trade into Thailand and Laos as a result of the relocation.

Between 1999 and 2001, over 126,000 villagers – about a quarter of the total Wa population in Burma — were forcibly relocated from the six northern Wa townships down to the southern townships of Tachileik, Mong Hsat and Mong Ton. The move inflicted huge suffering on the Wa villagers, who were forced to abandon their homes and possessions in the North. Diseases were rife in the resettlement sites and over 4,000 people died in 2000.



*Map of resettlement of Wa people to Shan State*

The large influx of new settlers also caused severe disruption for existing southern Shan State villages – mainly Shan, Lahu and Akha. Houses, land, crops and livestock were seized without compensation, and in some areas UWSA started taxing and conscripting local villagers. Thousands of local villagers could not bear this oppression and fled to other areas of Shan State or to Thailand.

The Mong Karn area is an example of the divide and rule tactics. Over 16,000 Wa were resettled in the Mong Karn area along the Nam Sai river in eastern Mong Hsat, where there were originally six villages, with about 1,200 inhabitants, who were mostly Shan. When heavy fighting broke out between the RCSS/SSA and Burma Army near this area in early 2001, the Burma Army and UWSA began persecuting villagers suspected of supporting the Shan troops. Hundreds of Shan villagers from Mong Karn fled to the Thai border, where they set up the Loi Kaw Wan IDP camp. The original homes and lands of the Mong Karn inhabitants have now all been seized by the UWSA.



## Current Situation

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Many of the Shan people who escaped the violence fled to Thailand where they remain in limbo having not been recognised as refugees by the UNHCR. Others decided to stay in Shan State and set up camps along the Thai-Shan border where they remain at risk, stranded between the Thai border, Burmese Army and Wa Army territory. The six existing camps are positioned on remote strips of mountainous land, where water is scarce and the land is unsuitable for productive farming. These conditions have made it difficult for the residents to grow enough food for survival. Consequently, the camps have become reliant on international donations of food aid, which was abruptly stopped in October 2017. Donors have been convinced that it is safe for people to return to their ancestral lands because the supposed peace process has been effective. Indeed, TBC, which provided much of the food aid to the camps, have instead adopted a new strategy focusing on “supporting the voluntary return, resettlement and reintegration of displaced communities...between 2017 and 2019”.

HART visited Loi Tai Leng IDP camp in November 2017. It is evident that the living conditions are desperate and the cessation of food aid compounds an already dire situation.



*The Loi Tai Leng IDP camp (above) is on the left-hand side of the road in Burma. Thai authorities forced the camp to move from the right-hand side which is in Thailand and do not allow IDPs to cultivate land on that side. In the other direction, the UWSA and Burma Army camps are clearly visible on the ridge of the distant mountain range.*



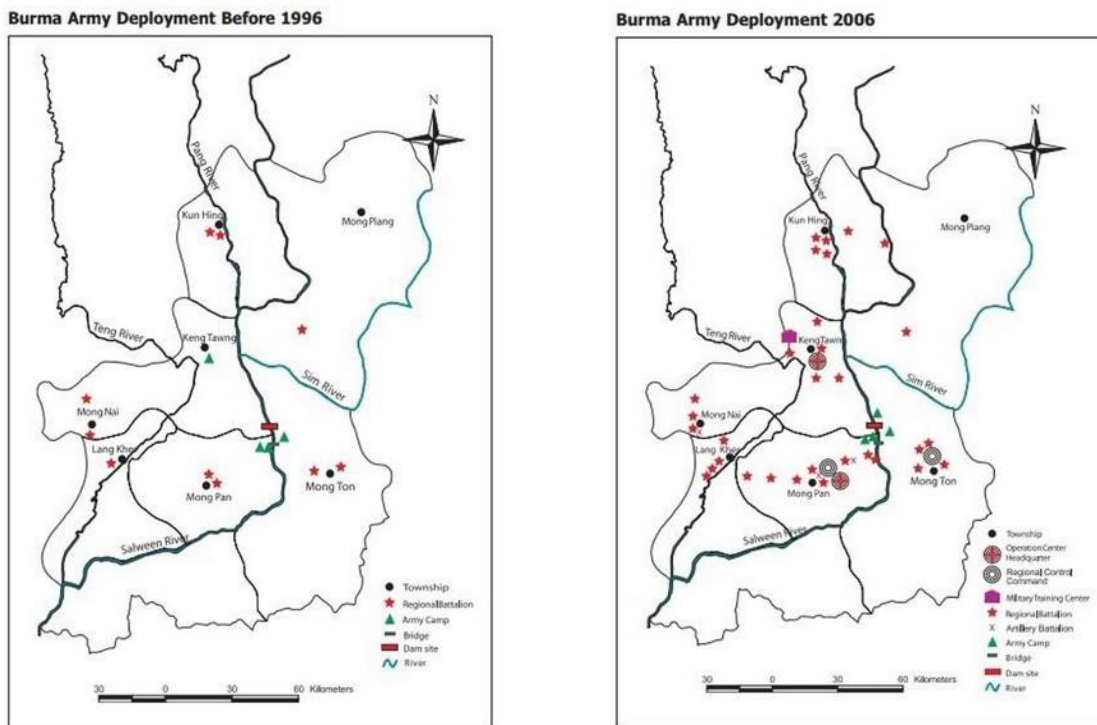
*350 children sleep at the school in the Loi Tai Leng IDP camp, many of whom are orphans or whose parents have abandoned them. They lack basic healthcare; one boy (above) had an infected eye as infections spread rapidly through the IDP camps.*

## Reasons why IDPs are unable to return to their villages

The RCSS/SSA signed a bilateral ceasefire with the Burmese Government in December 2011, followed by a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in October 2015. Nevertheless, Shan refugees and IDPs living in camps along the Thai-Burma border are unable to return home for four key reasons.

### 1. Ongoing Burma Army expansion in Shan State

Since the 1996-1998 forced relocation in central Shan State, the number of Burma Army troops has expanded hugely in the relocated areas. In 2011, the Burma Army set up its 14th Regional Command – the Central Eastern Command – in Kho Lam, Namzarng township, right in the centre of the 1996-1998 forced relocation area. Formerly a small village with one Burma Army battalion, Kho Lam has become a huge military installation with 27 battalions. Conversely, the RCSS/SSA has been limited in expanding its own forces. Even though in the RCSS/SSA's January 2012 union-level ceasefire agreement it was stated that the RCSS/SSA would be allowed to set up its headquarters in Ho Mong and Mong Hta sub-townships (in southern Langkho township), the Burma Army has not pulled back any troops from these areas. As a result, the RCSS/SSA has maintained its headquarters at Loi Tai Leng.



Maps showing an increase from 10 to 30 Burma Army battalions during 1996-2006 near the planned Mong Ton dam on the Salween river. Source: Shan Sapawa's 2006 report: "Warning Signs"

## 2. Ongoing attacks and human rights violations by the Burma Army

Despite the ceasefire agreements signed by the RCSS/SSA since 2011, the Burma Army has launched hundreds of attacks against these groups. Even after the RCSS/SSA signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in 2015, fighting with the Burma Army has continued, most recently in Ho Pong, Mong Paeng and Mong Kung townships.

The Burma Army has also continued to commit gross human rights violations against civilians in ceasefire areas, including extrajudicial killing, torture, and sexual violence. Since July 2017, there has been a large-scale military operation in Ho Pong, where troops from at least eight military battalions have tortured and arrested scores of villagers. These events are well documented on the Shan Human Rights Foundation web site <http://www.shanhumanrights.org>.

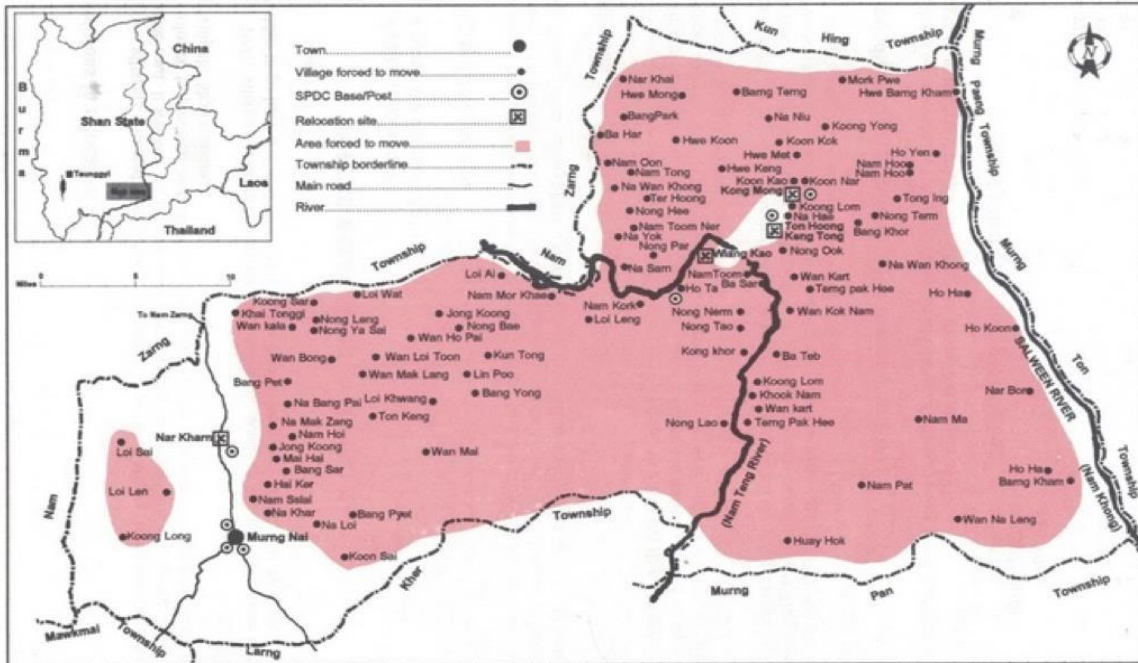
In an interview with HART, one of the leaders of the refugee camp (see right), spoke of his experience. His family home was burnt and they were forced to move out of the village at gunpoint in 1996. They lived in the jungle which was very dangerous as there was a shoot to kill army policy. They moved to another village but were attacked in 2000 and again their home was burnt and his brother in law was shot dead. They came to Loi Tai Leng because they thought they would be safer near to the SSA base. They cannot return home because there is still fighting in their township (Lone Nyar) in central Shan State.



Only one woman was willing to talk about the ordeals she experienced (see above). She is originally from Mong Nai in Southern Shan State, but has been living in the camp for 15 years. She has suffered physical abuse at the hands of the Burma Army as well as being used as a porter. When the load was too heavy for her she was beaten and she still has damaged eyes from where she was attacked with a baton. She brought her two children to the IDP camp where they have gone to school. The school has been a huge benefit to her children because if they pass their exams they can continue their education in Thailand and then get legal work. She would like to go back to her village as the camp is short of food but there would be nowhere to stay and it is still too dangerous.

## 3. Original villages lie derelict or have been occupied

Over 1,400 villages were forcibly relocated by the Burma Army between 1996-1998 and hundreds now no longer exist as villagers have not dared return. Houses and temples have fallen derelict, and lands are either overgrown or have been taken over by the Burma Army and their allied militia. For instance, the township of Murng Nai – one of eleven townships where forced relocation took place – used to have a total of 224 villages before 1996. Today, according to official township immigration lists, only 83 villages remain (of which 27 are “new” villages), indicating that 168 villages have been completely erased.



*Villages forcibly relocated in Murg Nai Township (1996-1998)*

For IDPs who fled from areas of Wa resettlement in eastern Mong Hsat, their original homes are now occupied by Wa settlers. The former Shan villages in the Mong Karn valley have now all been completely taken over by the UWSA.

Several villagers have requested the authorities not to force them to return home as in some cases their houses have been burned down, livestock killed and they are at risk of detonating landmines or unexploded shells.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, some villagers who fled during the “Scorched Earth Campaign” had never applied for national identity cards, and those who did have citizenship identification say they were forced to abandon their possessions during military clearance operations in their villages.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/myanmar-shan-idps-need-resettling>

<sup>5</sup> <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/the-borderline-shan-anxious-and-facing-hunger>

In an interview with HART, one man told us of his experience living in the camps. A resident for 7 years, he was previously a rice farmer, but has been used as a porter by the Burmese Army on several occasions. When his land was taken away he came to the camp with his mother, who is now 80 years old, and his father, who died on the way from sickness. His son is working without papers in Thailand. He would like to go back to farm rice as it is very difficult to grow anything near the camp but he knows the risk of death is great with continued fighting in Mong Pan.



#### 4. Threat of permanent loss of lands from megaprojects

Refugees from areas where the Burmese government has planned large hydropower dams or mining projects will lose their homes if these projects go ahead.

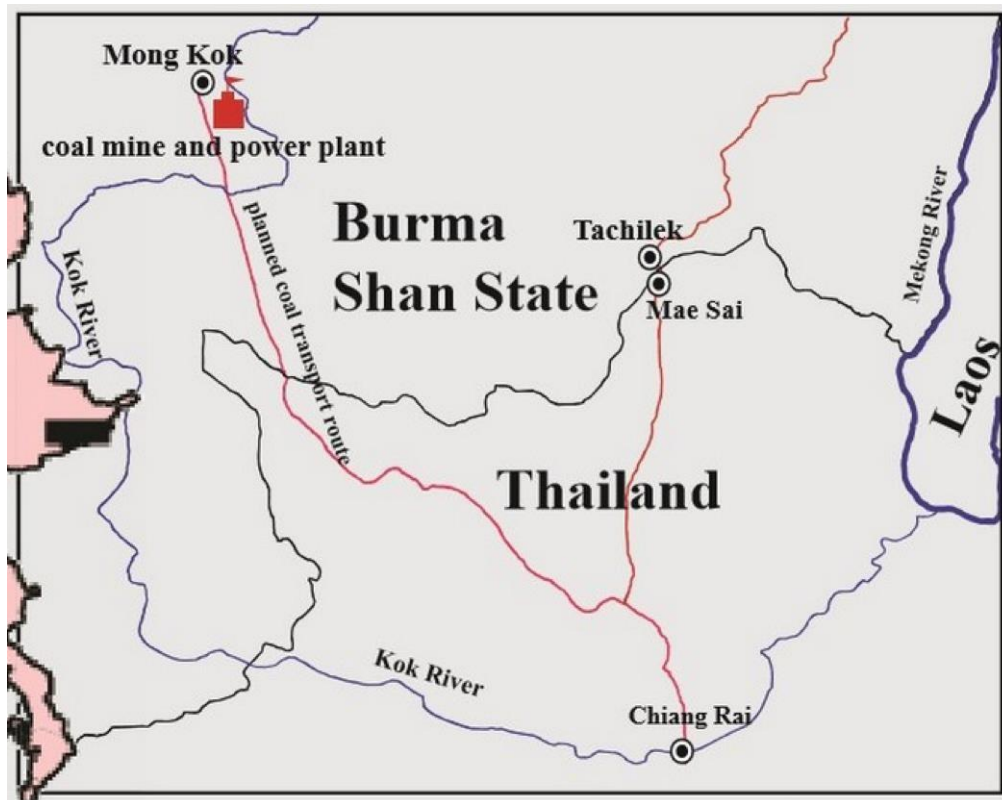
For example, the giant Tasang (now called Mong Ton dam) on the Salween River, a joint venture with Thai and Chinese companies for export of power to Thailand, will submerge vast tracts of land along the Pang tributary in Kunhing Township. Nearly 50,000 people were forcibly relocated from this area in 1996-1998. If the dam goes ahead, many will never be able to return home.



Proposed Dams in the Salween Basin

Similarly the large lignite mine and coal fired power plant project planned by the Burmese military-owned Myanmar Economic Corporation and Italian-Thai Power Company in Mong Kok, Mong Hsat Township, will make the entire tract, with over 1,000 Shan, Lahu and Akha residents, uninhabitable. IDPs in Loi Kaw Wan camp who fled military persecution in Mong Kok, will be unable to return home if this project goes ahead. The project has been stalled for almost six years as a result of protests from the Thai side of the border (due to potential pollution of the Kok River, one of northern Thailand's main waterways). However, since August 2017, the project has resumed, and villagers have been ordered out of the mining area.

*Location of Mong Kok Coal Project*



## The Border Consortium

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The Border Consortium, in providing humanitarian assistance, has been invaluable to the urgent needs of the displaced people of Shan, Kachin and Karenni states. Fleeing from the violence of the Burma Army, having had their homes burnt down, or forced to leave their villages because of megaprojects, the TBC has been able to provide the refugees and IDPs of Eastern Burma with shelter, food and most of all security since 1984.

However, with cutbacks in funding from the 10 international members (approximately \$1.7million in 2017), TBC has struggled to sustain its model of addressing the humanitarian needs of those affected by conflict. In 2017, this situation was made even more dire when it was announced that all funding (2016 figures report the total amount to be around \$17million) would be ceased from October. The new strategy had to incorporate this decision, and shifted towards facilitating the 'voluntary return' of camp residents to Burma and supporting the 'transitional recovery of host communities'.

As detailed previously, the security situation has not and will not improve while the Military are allowed to target marginalised ethnic groups with impunity. Therefore, the TBC strategy is flawed and cannot fulfil this new direction for the very reason that it is not safe to return, making the repatriation of the displaced in effect involuntary. This plan is also problematic as TBC intends to resettle camp residents to host communities, which will require significant effort, funding and time to successfully integrate the vulnerable groups.

This is why it is important that the work of the TBC is allowed to continue in the capacity of providing shelter and essential aid to the conflict affected communities that seek refuge in its camps. Without certain steps to ensure the safety of ethnic minorities in Burma, TBC cannot expect to safely return these displaced communities.

## Conclusion

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Despite the peace process, it remains dangerous for the displaced villagers in camps along the Thai-Shan border to return home. The Burma Army has not adhered to its ceasefire agreements with the RCSS/SSA, and has continued its military expansion and operations throughout southern Shan State. Civilians continue to face systematic abuse.

Hundreds of the original villages of the refugees have either now fallen derelict, or are occupied by the Burma Army, government militia, UWSA or mega-projects. Unless there is a genuine nationwide ceasefire, withdrawal of Burma Army troops, and a political settlement with the ethnic armed stakeholders, the displaced Shan cannot return home.

The issue has now become desperate as the international donors who funded TBC begin to redirect their aid away from the camps and towards the Burmese central government. Sadly, this has been neglected by the international community, forsaking the Shan to suffer without outside support.