Young Chin Refugees in Aizawl District Since 2021

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Abstract

This article investigates the multifaceted challenges young Chin refugees face in the refugee camps in Aizawl District, Mizoram State, India, after they arrived there following the 2021 military coup in Myanmar. These refugees struggle with their new foreign surroundings, language barriers, cramped living conditions, and shortages of essential provisions. Furthermore, they face impediments in accessing vital resources such as education. These adversities manifest in their hopelessness, depression, stress, and anxiety. This study aims to detail their unique circumstances, their resilience, and provides recommendations for a support system that should help them build a brighter future in their host country.

Introduction

Myanmar has land borders with Bangladesh, India, China, Laos, and Thailand, and has experienced significant upheaval since its independence, with millions of refugees fleeing to these neighboring countries due to ongoing conflict and persecution. After the most recent military coup on 1 February 2021, over 40,000 refugees from Myanmar have sought sanctuary in Mizoram State, India.[1] The majority of these refugees identify as ethnic Chin and fled from Chin State. This article explores the specific experiences and challenges of ethnic Chin refugees in Aizawl District, Mizoram State, acknowledging that their crisis is just one part of a much larger, broader humanitarian context.

The plight of Chin refugees in Aizawl District is a poignant reminder of the complex and multifaceted challenges faced by

[1] Singh, 2022.

those who seek safety outside their homeland of Myanmar. This group of refugees includes civilians who experienced the destruction of their homes, and the loss of their property, as well as Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) participants, including striking teachers, doctors, students, and even former police officers. Their journeys to secure a stable and secure life in a foreign land are marked by considerable uncertainty and hardship. They grapple to adjust to their new host society, facing education limitations, economic hardship, few job opportunities, and barriers to social integration. This article aims to detail the unique circumstances of several young Chin refugees in Aizawl, showcasing their resilience, and provides recommendations for a support system to be put in place to help them build a brighter future in their host country.

Literature Review and Methods

Myanmar has the world's longest-running civil war and many refugees have fled from its military dictators. The military has seized power three separate times: in 1962, 1988, and 2021. Since the latest coup, Myanmar has undergone one of the most turbulent times in its history. As of 2023, according to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) the number of people forcibly displaced has reached a new height of around 2.8 million.[2] Tens of thousands of people have fled from Chin State to neighboring states in India, such as Manipur and Mizoram. Most newly arrived refugees settle in Mizoram State.[3] Given continuing conflict in Chin State and neighboring Sagaing Region, more people are expected to flee to India. They face many hardships and challenges in their host country, such as a lack of legal status, basic amenities, health care, education and livelihood opportunities.[4]

These factors may adversely affect their mental health and wellbeing, their social integration, and their ability to adapt to a

[2] UNHCR, 2023.
[3] UNHCR, 2023.
[4] Zahan, 2022.

new and unfamiliar environment. According to the World Health Organization, refugees and migrants are at risk of poor mental health because of traumatic or stressful experiences, such as exposure to violence, loss of loved ones, separation from family and community, displacement, and uncertainty.[5] Refugees also often experience human rights violations such as torture, rape, and exposure to armed conflict.[6] They may experience anxiety, sadness, hopelessness, difficulty sleeping, fatigue, irritability, anger, or aches and pains. These factors may impair their cognitive, emotional and social development, as well as their academic performance and prospects. They often face risks and challenges during migration, such as physical injuries, malnutrition, separation from family members, exploitation by smugglers, and detention by authorities. This compounds the difficulties they face when trying to settle in a new host community.

This is the case for many of those displaced following the 2021 coup in Myanmar when the military targeted them for detention, torture, and even death. Civilians were forced from their homes and ran for safety due to the military's rampages and arson attacks. This happened nearly all over Myanmar, but Thantlang Township in Chin State was hit early. Residents had to flee at short notice and took risks crossing the border to India, including suffering physical threats and injuries, exploitation, hunger, exhaustion, and arrest. Once they arrived to a place of relative safety, many experienced poor living conditions, unemployment, education and language barriers, and uncertainty about the future. This increases the risk of developing mental health problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, and other mental illnesses.

Chin refugees who fled from Myanmar to Malaysia decades ago also faced many challenges and difficulties in their new country. They struggled with financial problems, language barriers, poor living conditions, a lack of access to medical support, and educational opportunities. They lived in fear of people wearing uniforms, such as the police and immigration officers,

[5] World Health Organization, 2022.
[6] World Health Organization, 2021.

because they had experienced detention, deportation, and harassment at home and on their journeys.[7]

Chin refugees who recently escaped to Mizoram State experience some of the same, but in general do not fear authorities in uniform to the same extent. While India is not a party to the United Nations 1951 Refugee Convention and does not grant legal status to refugees, the Mizoram State government accepts and supports Chin refugees, and has set up refugee camps.[8] This shows how situations for refugees vary depending on the location of the destination country and its policies. In Mizoram State, refugees in camps receive food and medical treatment from local people and organizations. They rarely fear people who wear uniforms and face little direct harassment by local authorities. This significantly helps their wellbeing and prospects, but their situation is certainly not perfect.

The Karenni are another ethnic group from Myanmar who often flee Myanmar due to political and military oppression, usually to Thailand, which borders Kayah (Karenni) State. Many Karenni have lived on-and-off in camps along the Thailand-Burma border for decades, facing various challenges and uncertainties about their security and future, many suffering with depression, anxiety, and PTSD. They have limited access to education, employment, and secure legal status in Thailand, which affects their social functioning and integration into mainstream society. These factors contribute to their mental distress and vulnerability, which require culturally appropriate and community-based interventions.[9]

The Chin refugees from Myanmar who crossed the border to India since February 2021 experienced similar trauma and violence, such as losing their homes, being separated from their families, being threatened, and even detained. In Mizoram State,

[7] Kaur et al., 2002.

[8] Refugees in India often struggle to access the full extent of support available from UNHCR. While there is an official UNHCR office in New Delhi, reaching it is often difficult, and the resources available there may not be sufficient to meet financial and security needs.

[9] Cardozo et al., 2004.

they face precarious living conditions in makeshift camps or host family homes, where they often lack adequate food, water, sanitation, health care, and education. They also live in uncertainty and anxiety about their legal status, protection, and prospects of return or resettlement.

These factors may increase their mental health problems, such as stress, anxiety, and major depressive disorder. However, there is no study on the mental health situations of the refugees in Mizoram State. Unlike the Karenni refugees in Thailand, who fear being forced to return to Myanmar without adequate protection and safety guarantees, the Chin refugees in Mizoram receive solidarity and hospitality from the Mizo people, who share cultural and linguistic ties with them.[10] However, this may also create social pressure and expectations from their relatives and friends in Mizoram.

Some studies deal with Myanmar refugees in New Delhi, but few with those in Mizoram State. Most focus on social coping strategies, life experiences, risk contexts, and border issues.[11] There is a lack of systematic data and research on the mental health status and needs of Chin refugees in Mizoram State, especially young refugees. We need more comprehensive and culturally sensitive assessments of the mental health of Chin refugees in Mizoram State, leading to effective intervention programs.

This article attempts to address this by exploring the problems faced by young Chin refugees in Aizawl District. I use qualitative methods to understand the factors contributing to these problems and to evaluate possible interventions. I delve into young Chin refugee experiences, emotions, mental health, and wellbeing perceptions. I focus on the diverse perspectives of young Chin refugees aged between 17 and 30.

I generated my data through semi-structured interviews with eight participants in four refugee camps using an interview guide developed from my research objectives. These interviews provided a rich understanding of participants' mental health

[10] Zahan, 2022.

[11] For example: Jops et al., 2016; Jops et al., 2019; Mallick, 2014; McConnachie, 2018.

challenges, factors influencing these challenges, and their perceptions of interventions. For added contextual insight, I observed some of my research participants' daily lives, interactions, and living conditions, to complement the interviews. These observations were documented through file notes. Data was analyzed to identify patterns and themes related to mental health challenges, contributing factors, coping mechanisms, and interventions. Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, procedures, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw, and I employed pseudonyms for their names for security reasons. All collected data has been anonymized and stored securely to protect participants' privacy and confidentiality. Written informed consent was obtained before data collection. Given my research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges experienced by young Chin refugees in Aizawl District specifically, including to inform culturally appropriate interventions to address their particular mental health concerns, facilitate their integration, and enhance their overall wellbeing, its findings may not be fully generalizable to other contexts.

Results

There are many diverse perspectives and stories in the data I generated from my interviews and observations, but some continuity and shared themes are apparent. The importance of family and friends was a common thread weaving through my eight research participants' narratives. The impact of their current circumstances on their emotional and mental health was also highlighted. In this section, I will focus on three major themes in the data: emotional wellbeing, a sense of safety, and trauma experience.

Emotional Wellbeing

The participants' differing emotional wellbeing reflected their unique sets of circumstances. One participant, Thang Te, said, "A

solemn man with a distant gaze finds joy elusive." Yet, whenever he mentioned God, he clearly embodied more happiness than his usual stoic demeanor. Another, Sang Sang, a motherly figure among my interviewees, expressed that her happiness blossomed when strangers visited, offering strength and prayers to the community. Ti Ti, a young girl with an enthusiasm for learning, is happiest at school, immersed in her studies. Thang Thang, a lively boy, shared that playing with friends provided him with a brief respite from his other worries. Van Van, a focused young man, revealed that he could only experience joy during group study sessions with his friend; otherwise, happiness eluded him. Dim Dim, a social butterfly, lights up when she is with her friends, her haven of joy. Nu Dawt finds solace and joy tending to plants around her home and managing her household. In stark contrast, A Thang struggled to identify activities that brought him happiness, candidly admitting that he did not know what activities made him happy and that he did not feel inclined to seek enjoyment.

Among these eight participants, seven could identify activities that brought them happiness. Most residents found happiness in social interactions, whether with friends, family, or strangers who provided support and encouragement. However, a few confessed to an underlying sense of unhappiness that they could not easily shake off. This could be related to the difficulties in meeting basic needs such as food, water, shelter, and medical treatment. It is crucial to ensure that the basic needs of refugees are met. Compared to other refugee camps, like those in Malaysia and Thailand, some refugees struggle to access sufficient food in the official refugee camps in Aizawl District. Therefore, there is a pressing need to provide support and resources to help refugees cope with the mental health challenges associated with these difficulties and to improve their overall emotional wellbeing.

Sense of Safety

My respondents said they experience complicated emotions, with only brief moments of happiness, and prolonged periods of sorrow. Community support makes them feel safe, but language and cultural barriers keep some on edge. Out of the eight participants interviewed, seven expressed feeling safe in Aizawl District, where there is far less conflict than in Myanmar. The majority of these participants mentioned receiving support from local organizations and feeling accepted as refugees by the Mizoram State government. Additionally, they expressed that they felt there was a sense of shared culture between the Mizo and Chin ethnic groups.

Most of the refugees from Myanmar cited insecurity as a significant reason for their presence in Mizoram. India has not signed the United Nations 1951 Refugee Convention and the treatment of refugees differs considerably between locations in India. Those residing in the capital New Delhi for example often face more significant security challenges than those in Aizawl. But while the situation for the Chin may be better in Aizawl compared to other parts of India, one participant, Sang Sang, said she felt unsafe in Aizawl simply because it was not her home, she could not speak the local languages fluently, and she experienced discrimination. Consequently, she felt insecure.

Trauma Experience

Regarding trauma, participant Thang Te recalled distressing experiences including the detention and imprisonment of his friends, which affected his mental health. His duty as a police officer had put him under immense pressure, fueling his fears of the armed forces. Sang Sang revealed she had sleepless nights, disturbed by thoughts about her plight. Similarly, Van Van struggles to sleep at night whenever he thinks about his family's safety. A Thang has mysterious pain in his body and suffers from sleeplessness but does not know the exact cause. Ti Ti claimed not to have experienced trauma per se, but she relayed that she

does feel stressed about her exams and her family situation. Dim Dim disclosed she grappled with mental health problems tied to her family situation too. While not always classified as trauma, a huge mental toll influences my participants' daily lives, reflecting the impact of their unique circumstances.

Thang Te, a CDM police officer, found solace in religious musings. Although he saw little reason to be happy, the very mention of God elevated his spirits. Sang Sang took comfort in the strength and prayers of strangers. Then for Ti Ti, Thang Thang, and Van Van, happiness lies in the simple joys of attending school, playing, and studying with friends. Nu Dawt and A Thang were exceptions; the latter barely found reason to be happy, while Nu Dawt discovered her slice of happiness tending to the plants around her home.

However, there was a shared undercurrent of sadness beneath the surface-level contentment. Thang Te was worried for his ailing parents, as was Sang Sang, whose concern extended to her children and financial stability. Ti Ti, Van Van, and Thang Thang were bound by the heavy sadness of separation from their families and endless worries about their wellbeing. For Nu Dawt, loneliness was intensified by her inability to communicate in the local Mizo language, leaving her mainly confined to her home.

The refugee camps are melting pots of varying traumas and mental health concerns. Thang Te spoke of the horrors of being forced to arrest civilians as a police officer during the coup, the threat of detention, and the arrest of his friends by the Myanmar military. Van Van and Nu Dawt talked about sleepless nights, while others like Ti Ti and Thang Thang claimed to be relatively unscathed by trauma, albeit still stressed by family situations or exams. Friendships blossomed even in this difficult situation. Whether it was the joy of playing football for Thang Te and Van Van or simple companionship for Ti Ti and Thang Thang, friends provided an emotional cushion. Nu Dawt, however, is solitary and spends most of her time in the solitude of her home.

Many refugees have experienced traumatic events and health problems before, during, and after migration, including my respondents in Aizawl District, Mizoram State. Some also reported health issues related to their challenging circumstances.

To address the needs of this vulnerable population, a multifaceted approach involving the community and organizations is crucial.

Discussion

Many refugees mentioned missing their families that remained in Myanmar. The inability to support their families financially and the challenges of communication due to poor network connectivity also caused emotional distress. Thang Te, Dim Dim, Van Van, and Ti Ti reported experiencing mental health challenges such as stress, anxiety, and depression, primarily due to traumatic events, family separation, and uncertainty about the future.

Language differences mean most participants have difficulty communicating with the local population in Mizoram State. This hinders their integration and limits their opportunities for employment and education. My respondents also encountered financial hardship as they were restricted from engaging in most forms of employment and economic activities. They relied on occasional daily wage labor and support from local organizations for their basic needs.

Thang Thang, Sang Sang, A Thang, and Van Van, who are all aged between 17 and 20, had their education disrupted by the 2021 coup and their migration. They wanted to continue their education, particularly by improving their English language skills. Sang Sang and Ti Ti said they were discriminated against daily. A Thang was contemplative of his interrupted education, while Dim Dim focused on the cramped living conditions. As mentioned, language barriers presented a unique challenge for Nu Dawt.

In summary, each research participant confronted and acknowledged their own unique set of challenges. Financial struggles loomed large in their responses, with Mizoram's comparatively high cost of living exacerbating their insecurity. Limited job opportunities for refugees further compounded financial woes.

Education opportunities remain elusive for those in refugee camps. Mizoram's education system allows refugees to attend public schools. However, most refugee camp residents choose to study the Myanmar curriculum online through the National Unity Government of Myanmar's (NUG's) Interim Education Program, which does not satisfy their educational needs for life in India. Financial constraints further impede their educational pursuits.

To better support these resilient individuals, it is imperative for both the Mizoram State government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to collaboratively address the multifaceted issues they face. This includes expanding access to education, improving employment prospects, and facilitating cultural integration, ultimately empowering refugees to rebuild their lives with dignity and opportunity.

Moreover, we should ask, what led these refugees to Mizoram State? Why did they leave Myanmar? The answers from my participants were unequivocal—safety concerns. Thang Te, the CDM police officer, would be arrested immediately if identified in Myanmar. The military's targeting of CDM members makes staying in Myanmar a dangerous gamble. Sang Sang's husband, too, is a CDM participant. Ti Ti and Thang Thang spoke of soldiers patrolling their neighborhoods. At the same time, Nu Dawt mentioned her inability to continue her work under the constant surveillance and threats posed by the military in Myanmar.

But in this patch of land in Mizoram, these individuals have found a place to pause and breathe. It is fraught with its own complications, and while the camp is not home, it is a refuge, a holding space for lost souls looking for safety, normalcy, and, most importantly, a future.

Recommendations

The following five recommendations are directed at NGOs in Mizoram State.

1. Increase funding for education and healthcare in refugee camps. This will help ensure that all young Chin refugees have access to the necessities they need to succeed.
2. Provide vocational training and job placement assistance to young Chin refugees. This will help them to find sustainable employment and become self-sufficient.
3. Raise awareness of the challenges faced by young Chin refugees and combat discrimination against them, through education campaigns, public awareness events, legal advocacy, and cultural exchange programs.
4. Support civil society organizations that are working to help young Chin refugees, through financial donations, volunteer work, and advocacy.
5. Given the prevalence of mental health issues among the refugees, provide mental health services, including counseling and support groups, to help them cope with trauma and stress.

In addition to these recommendations for organizations, the Mizoram State government should also ensure access to healthcare services, especially for those with physical health problems, and collaborate with healthcare organizations to provide necessary medical assistance. The UNHCR should advocate for refugee rights and legal protection, including their rights to work and access essential services. Legal support can help them navigate the immigration and asylum processes.

By taking these steps, we can help young Chin refugees in Mizoram State overcome their challenges and build a better future for themselves and their families. Tailored support programs can help these young Chin refugees rebuild their lives and look forward to a more secure and hopeful future.

Conclusion

The challenges young Chin refugees face in Mizoram State, India, are numerous and complex. They are forced to live in camps with limited access to education, healthcare, and employment

opportunities. They are also exposed to high levels of discrimination. As a result, many young Chin refugees experience feelings of hopelessness and despair.

Despite these challenges, there are also many stories of resilience and hope among young Chin refugees. Many young people are determined to overcome obstacles and build a better future for themselves and their families. They work hard to get an education, find jobs, and contribute to their communities.

Several things can be done to help young Chin refugees in Mizoram State. First, providing them with access to quality education and healthcare is essential. Second, creating opportunities for them to learn skills and find jobs is critical. Third, it is vital to combat discrimination and violence against young Chin refugees. The Indian government, international organizations, and civil society groups all have a role to play in helping young Chin refugees. We can create a more just and equitable society by working together. By taking these steps, we can help young Chin refugees in Mizoram State overcome their challenges and build a better future for themselves and their families.

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