

An Introduction to UNHCR's Return Assessment Project

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Background and Objective

UNHCR's Return Assessment project is designed to capture information on spontaneous return movements of internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugees in South-East Myanmar. The progress of the peace process in Myanmar, including ceasefire agreements between the government and the region's non-state armed actors, has led to cautious optimism that solutions, including the possibility of safe, dignified and voluntary return, may start to emerge for refugees and IDPs displaced by conflict in the South-East.

Whilst conditions are not yet conducive to the promotion of refugee returns through an organized voluntary repatriation, there is some evidence that small-scale spontaneous return movements, particularly by IDPs, may already be happening in some locations.

In this regard, the purpose of returnee monitoring is to understand the dynamics of these spontaneous return movements – who is returning, and to where – and to gather and share with partners information on the protection and assistance needs of returnees and the communities receiving them. With this information, UNHCR and partners will be able to more effectively plan and target support for

durable solutions in the South-East.

The project was initiated in Mon State, Kayah State and Tanintharyi Region in June 2013, and Kayin State in November 2013, and entails UNHCR conducting field visits to villages identified as potential return areas.

In carrying out an assessment, UNHCR field teams undertake community-level discussions to confirm whether there are any refugee or IDP returnees in the village, capture their displacement profile, and broadly map out the needs and vulnerabilities of the community as a whole.

Methodology and Approach

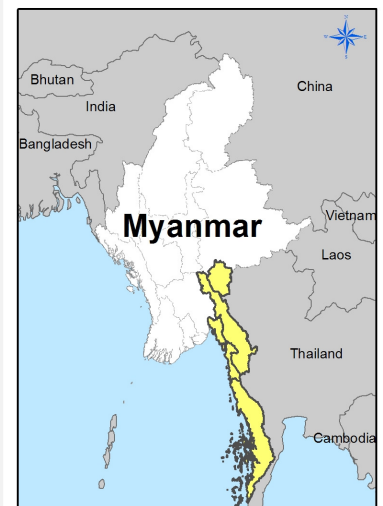
UNHCR utilizes field monitoring information, village of origin data, and feedback from partners, in order to identify possible return villages. For example, a staff member or a partner who receives information about possible returnees in the course of their regular field work, is asked to submit a short return report which feeds into UNHCR's return log, which allows UNHCR to assemble a summary of potential locations.

Once potential return locations are flagged for UNHCR, a field team follows up to complete a return assessment, using a standardized methodology. In order to focus

on return movements relevant to recent developments and to identify those who may be in need of reintegration support, the return assessment focuses only on refugees and IDPs who returned since January 2012 with the intention of remaining permanently in Myanmar.

The return assessment tool deliberately employs a community-level approach by identifying a key informant, typically a village administrator, and asking questions about the community as a whole. Field teams do not attempt to identify or approach individual returnees, who may prefer to keep a low profile for the time being. UNHCR employs a "Do No Harm" approach in order to adapt to the protection risks and other sensitivities that may be encountered in the field.

*Return
Assessments
attempt to
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spontaneous
returns*



Outcomes and Outputs

As the purpose of the return assessment project is to monitor broad trends and patterns related to return movements, and to collect community-level data rather than individual information, the outputs are limited by that scope. The project does not, for example, attempt to represent the total number of refugee or IDP returnees in the South-East.

Instead, UNHCR's infographics, such as the return assessment dashboard shown to the right, focus on the number of verified return villages and villages of origin. A verified return village is one where UNHCR field staff have confirmed there are IDP or refugee returnees, who have returned since January 2012, with the hope/intention of remaining permanently. A village of origin is one in which UNHCR has confirmed is home to

refugees residing in Thailand. Finally, the analysis of the vulnerability and needs data collected through the return assessments is used to inform the strategic planning of UNHCR and its partners.

Challenges and Constraints

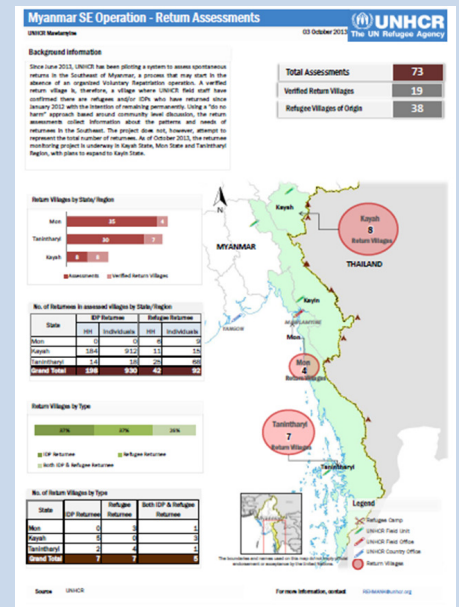
Despite a gradual opening up of humanitarian space in the South-East, UNHCR does not yet have unimpeded access to all areas where refugee and IDP returns may be anticipated. Advance authorization is still required for field visits, and is usually granted for specific purposes only.

Staff are generally accompanied by government officials, and for international staff, armed escorts are still required in certain locations.

Some potential return areas are still not accessible to international humanitarian agencies (particularly in Kayah State), and undue pressure for access at a sensitive time in the peace process may not be in the interests of local communities.

Enhanced UNHCR access to potential return areas will nonetheless be an important indicator in determine if/when conditions become conducive to the promotion of voluntary repatriation by UNHCR. Monitoring the conditions under which voluntary repatriation takes place, and ensuring that these are in line with key standards related to safe, dignified and voluntary return, is a key component of UNHCR's mandate for durable solutions, and a fundamental part of an organised return operation.

Return Assessments involve community-level discussions, and employ a protection-sensitive, "Do No Harm" approach



For return assessment outputs, please see the UNHCR Myanmar-Thailand Web portal:

Commonservice.info

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