



RESISTANCE AND THE COST OF THE COUP IN CHIN STATE, MYANMAR

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The Asia Foundation

Lead researcher: June Nilian Sang

Contributors:

Victor Biak Lian
Dan Seng Lawn
Adam Burke
Tabea Campbell Pauli
Nathan Shea
Rebecca Crisp

Design: Deddeaw Laosinchai

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List of Acronyms

AA	Arakan Army
CDF	Chinland Defense Force
CJDC	Chinland Joint Defense Committee
CNF/A	Chin National Front/Army
CSO	Civil society organisation
ICNCC	Interim Chin National Consultative Council
IDP	Internally displaced person
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
SAC	State Administration Council
ZRO/A	Zomi Re-unification Organization/Zomi Revolutionary Army

Executive Summary

The violent crackdowns that followed the Myanmar military's coup d'état in February 2021 led many civilians in Chin State, a region in the west of the country which borders India and Bangladesh, to take up weapons and defend themselves. Suffering high numbers of arbitrary attacks on civilians, Chin State has seen hundreds of deaths and tens of thousands of individuals displaced in the past two years. Conflict continues as local groups resist the Myanmar military in the absence of any political solution or decisive military victory. Airstrikes and arson attacks by Myanmar forces have led to the destruction of thousands of civilian homes, religious and community buildings, and crops and livestock. The United Nations estimates that up to 54,000 people have been displaced within Chin State since 1 February 2021, and over 50,000 people have fled across the Indian border.¹

Civilians in Chin State, both in military-controlled areas and territory 'liberated' by ethnic armed or resistance groups, lack proper access to food, education, health, and livelihoods services, further increasing the number of fatalities.² Women, children, elderly people, and people with disabilities are particularly vulnerable. Political and geographic challenges have stymied a coordinated humanitarian response. Displacement of civilians is likely to continue in the medium term, including across the Indian border into Mizoram and Manipur. Direct access for international humanitarian actors has been severely limited. Local authorities and communities on the Indian side of the border, which share historical and kinship ties with Chin people, have played a significant role in providing support on the ground. Nevertheless, long-term solutions for aid, livelihoods, and future security of Chin populations are absent, leaving many uncertain around their strategies for survival.

This report provides an update on the situation facing many communities along the Myanmar/India border. The data and insights, collected in December 2022, reveal the evolving landscape of armed and political actors and the shifting balance of power within Chin State. It also spotlights the situation faced by thousands of Chin civilians displaced by violence, seeking refuge along the India-Myanmar border. Its key findings, underpinned by detailed contextual analysis, provide evidence for humanitarians and development policymakers seeking to improve support to conflict-affected populations.



Image 1: A crossing point on the Tio river at Camp Victoria. Photo credit: JNS.

Key Findings

Resistance has been particularly strong in Chin State as armed and political actors have rejected the coup.

- Violent crackdowns, airstrikes and arson attacks against civilians and residential buildings sparked a significant resistance movement involving thousands of people from across various tribal groups, with support from the extensive Chin international diaspora.³
- New resistance groups emerged, some joining established alliances with the region's largest ethnic armed organisation, the Chin National Front/Army. Along with its network of allied local resistance groups, it claims control over 80 percent of the state's territory.
- The Arakan Army has sustained its presence in the south, concentrating in at least five military posts in that part of Chin State. It is also reportedly aiding activity of various township-level Chin/Chinland Defense Forces through training and provision of arms.⁴
- The Myanmar military continues to reinforce troops in its remaining posts in Chin State.⁵ It is reported to be cooperating with the Zomi Re-unification Organisation, a northern-based Chin armed group.

Chin political stakeholders have not reached a common position on issues of public administration and future governance arrangements.

- Two different coordinating bodies, the Interim Chin National Consultative Council and the Chinland Joint Defense Committee are pursuing plans for future governance arrangements in Chin State. Diverging views on political and military priorities have created internal instability and stymied progress toward a state-wide governance system in opposition to the military's administration.
- The Chinland Joint Defense Committee's primary mandate remains military cooperation while its political endeavours have seen little progress. The Chin National Front unilaterally moved to form an interim administration for Chin State with negotiations ongoing between state-level and township-based resistance groups and other political stakeholders.
- Political power struggles have not impacted activity on the ground as public administration in non-military controlled territory continues to be run locally. Any successful attempt at a future state-wide administration will need to generate sufficient common ground among local bodies.

Conflict has led to widespread destruction and displacement in Chin State. The main aid response has come from the Chin diaspora.

- Internally displaced people have relocated to makeshift camps or resettled in other villages or urban areas. Those displaced in the south have tended to remain in Chin State whereas those further north, where transport infrastructure is more developed, are crossing into India.
- Chin diaspora fundraising efforts are estimated to account for up to 90 percent of funds received by local humanitarian and resistance groups, though support is often based on tribal or sub-ethnic links and is highly unequal across different groups.
- Some international organisations are able to provide relief on the ground though access on the Myanmar side faces extreme logistical challenges.

The long-term wellbeing of Chin people displaced along the Indian border depends on livelihoods opportunities and access to education or other skills development, as well as continued local support.

- During the initial refugee influx, the government of India's Mizoram State financed the majority of refugee camp construction, with further support coming from local authorities, religious and community organisations, and volunteers.
- Coordination of refugee support occurs at district and village level and has included issuance of temporary registration cards and admission of refugee children into public schools. Aid for refugee camps is coordinated by local authorities, civil society organisations and local refugee committees.
- Financial insecurity and access to health and education services are key areas of concern for refugees, with many relying on remittances from abroad, or casual employment. Humanitarian conditions have for the most part been stable, but Chin refugees' long-term prospects in India remain unclear.

Introduction

Often seen in the past as a marginal and impoverished area, Chin State has become a key site of resistance against Myanmar's military. This report examines current conflict dynamics and key actors in the region, highlighting changes in the political landscape since the military coup. The research seeks to understand and explain the complex political economy which has emerged between actors in Chin State, as multiple groups vie for popular support, territorial control, and military superiority. It maps key stakeholders within the conflict context of the border region, outlining the flows of people and goods across the border, and impacts of the policy environment on Chin communities.

Chin State is situated in Myanmar's north-west, next to Sagaing and Magwe regions and Rakhine State. It shares a 510 km border with India's north-eastern states of Mizoram and Manipur, as well as a narrow stretch of border with Chittagong, Bangladesh, in the southwest. In 2014, a census recorded a population of 478,801 people over 36,072 square km, though the figure had likely risen up to 530,000 by 2021.⁶ There remains a strong tribal diversity within Chin State, with the total number of tribes estimated between 36 and 53.⁷ With more than two thirds of the ethnic Chin population living outside of Chin State, the area is among the country's least populous. It has also been politically and economically isolated through successive military regimes and centralised civilian governments, due to its mountainous terrain. In comparison with resource-rich Kachin State in the northeast of Myanmar, Chin State's perceived lack of natural wealth led to low levels of development and limited investment in physical infrastructure. In 2014, it was recorded that around 79% of the state's population lives in rural areas.⁸

The first section of this report gives an overview of the main political and military actors operating in Chin State at the time of research. It provides an updated picture of the complex political economy within and between non-state armed groups, revealing the challenges they face in remaining united due to internal differences on priorities and strategy. The second section outlines the situation facing displaced people and refugee communities, the operational context of international responses, and how local and diaspora networks are working to address gaps in support on the ground. The final section focuses on inter-communal dynamics between Chin refugees and local populations in Mizoram and the broader social and political context on the Indian side of the border.

The report concludes with a set of key implications relevant to local and international policymakers seeking to operate more effectively in this complex and dynamic environment.



Figure 1: Townships and border areas of Chin State
Source: Google Map, Myanmar Township Boundaries MIMU v9.3
— MIMU Geonode (themimu.info)

This report is based on information obtained from fieldwork, remote data collection, and secondary sources. Between December 2022 and February 2023, the researcher conducted 45 key informant interviews, life history interviews, informal discussions, and remote interviews, as well as engaging in non-participant and participant observation. Key informants, of which 40 percent were women, included leadership of new and existing armed resistance groups, civil society organisations (CSOs), humanitarian responders in refugee and displaced person camps, members of Chin international diaspora networks, and people in Chin State and in Mizoram who had been affected by conflict since the coup. Fieldwork took place in territory jointly controlled by Chin ethnic armed and resistance groups, and along the Chin State-Mizoram border. Due to the ongoing conflicts in many of these areas, the researcher applied remote data collection methods where field visits were not possible. In this region of high intra-communal diversity, the research set out to capture

insights and experiences from several different communities of refugees and groups of displaced people, and from different armed and political resistance movements. The researcher was able to interact with respondents in Lai and Laizo dialects, as well as Mizo and Burmese, enabling them to connect with a wide range of stakeholders from both sides of the Myanmar/India border. Reflecting the researcher's own networks and access points, many of the Chin armed resistance group members interviewed for this research belong to the CNF/A alliance, while recognising that those groups alone do not reflect the broad spectrum of diversity of experiences and perspectives of anti-coup resistance in Chin State. The researcher also engaged with members of armed groups not belonging to the CNF/A alliance. This research adopts a trauma-centred approach to data collection which prioritised voluntary, safe, and dignified participation in research. All interviews are based on prior informed consent.



Image 2: Gate at Rihkhawdar-Zowkhathar border crossing. Photo credit: JNS.

Conflict Dynamics Since the 2021 Military Coup

A week after Myanmar's military staged a coup on 1 February 2021, protests emerged across Chin State led by students and youth groups. The anti-coup movement began as a local initiative, with strike committees forming in each township. Existing youth and student networks coordinated between different townships, and later began to form organised armed resistance groups. Crackdowns on peaceful protesters and raids by the military and police began in mid-March 2021, forcing many protest leaders to seek safety at the border.⁹

By early April many leaders of township-based resistance groups relocated to Camp Victoria, the Chin National Front/Army (CNF/A) headquarters, to coordinate activities within an alliance network.¹⁰ Having signed 2015's Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement, the CNF/A did not engage in direct confrontation with Myanmar's military. Instead, new township-based and tribally affiliated fighting forces emerged across Chin State, collectively called the Chinland Defense Force (CDF).¹¹ Initially, many new local armed resistance units adopted the CDF label with their respective township names as a suffix (i.e. CDF-Hakha, CDF-Thantlang, CDF-Matupi etc). Over time, more groups emerged based on local and tribal affiliation, adopting names like Chin National Defense Force and Maraland Defense Forces. This report uses 'CDF' to refer to the new resistance groups formed after the coup, though there are groups who do not use the same uniform name, including the Chin National Organization/Chin National Defense Force, and the Zomi Federal Union/People Defense Force-Zoland. Many of these new resistance groups coordinate closely with the CNF/A, though others remain outside of this alliance network and operate locally based on tribal affiliations.¹² Open conflict began in Chin State as CDFs retaliated against military violence by attacking convoys, causing casualties on both sides.¹³ The local acts of resistance, documented on social media, drew praise from wider sections of Myanmar's population.

Key actors

At the time of the coup, there were three active non-state armed groups in the region: the CNF/A, Zomi Re-unification Organization/Zomi Revolutionary Army (ZRO/A) and the Arakan Army (AA). The National League for Democracy dominated the state's political landscape, winning a majority of national and subnational parliamentary seats in both the 2015 and 2020 general elections, ahead

of ethnic Chin parties and the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party. Following the coup, dozens of new armed groups emerged in Chin State. Many formed in cooperation with the CNF/A during the April 2021 talks at its headquarters in Camp Victoria.¹⁴ Numerous local political party leaders went into exile. Other than the Union Solidarity and Development Party, no other political parties are operationally active in Chin State at present.

The CNF/A was founded following anti-military protest movements in 1988 with the goal of 'securing the self-determination of the Chin people and to establish a federal system in the Union of Burma based on ethnic equality and democracy'.¹⁵ After signing first a bilateral ceasefire and then the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in 2015, the CNF/A took part in formal peace talks, playing a lead role in political negotiations among ethnic armed organisations (EAOs). During the mid-2010s peace talks, CNF/A leaders disagreed on whether to prioritise political negotiations or maintain/expand military capacity, sowing disunity in the organisation and leading to some loss of public support.¹⁶ By early 2021, the CNF/A had roughly 250 active soldiers, and had not engaged in any military hostilities since the early 2000s.¹⁷ The military coup enabled the CNF/A to re-establish its leadership role with the emergence of the newly-founded CDFs and high numbers of new combatants seeking to join the armed resistance. Public support for the CNF/A has surged, as have financial contributions from international diaspora communities. In 2021 it formally signed a bilateral agreement with the National Unity Government which further consolidated the organisation's political position within Myanmar's broad resistance movement.

The Interim Chin National Consultative Council (ICNCC) was initially founded in April 2021 by the CNF/A, parliamentarians elected by Chin constituencies in 2020, political parties active in Chin State before the coup, and civil society, including civil disobedience groups, strike committee leadership, and rights-focused organisations.¹⁸ Its two objectives were to form an interim Chin State governance structure based on an agreed charter, and to represent Chin State within national-level democratic resistance forums, such as the National Unity Consultative Council and the National Unity Government.¹⁹ The ICNCC had considerable potential to play a political coordination role among Chin stakeholders but it soon struggled with internal divisions. Whilst it was able to send delegates to the national level forums, efforts at achieving consensus around future

state-level governance arrangements have stalled.²⁰ In early 2023, the CNF/A withdrew from the ICNCC, pursuing a unilateral approach to an interim Chin State government through a different coordination body, though it maintains a cooperative relationship with the ICNCC.²¹

This alternative coordination body is **the Chinland Joint Defense Committee** (CJDC). During the formation of the CDFs, a Joint Military Committee was established by the township-based strike committees together with the CNF/A, which eventually morphed into the CJDC in September 2021.²² The bloc comprises two representatives from each of the 17 CDFs and the CNF/A and is currently chaired by its General Secretary. Overseen by a Leading Committee, the CJDC covers four areas of coordination; military affairs (led by the CNF/A Chief of Staff), campaigns, supply, and information. It has a Special Forces group which carries out joint military operations.²³

A further set of **actors in southern Chin State** operates in Matupi, Mindat, Kanpetlet and Paletwa townships. Geographical factors have separated this region from the rest of the state, engendering a certain political isolation. CDFs of Mindat, Kanpetlet and Matupi are closely allied, and have political ties with the Maraland Defense Force. The AA's activities in southern Chin State triggered concerns as far back as the 2010s, and as of early 2023, it was reported to control at least five military posts in the state.²⁴ There are also reports of direct links between

the AA and the southern CDFs, including the provision of weapons and establishment of posts in Mindat township.²⁵ The Maraland Defense Force has confirmed that it receives combat training and weapons directly from the AA.²⁶

Divisions within the Chin political landscape

Sources revealed that the ideological differences which resulted in the CNF/A's departure from the ICNCC were centred on tensions between the unionist National League for Democracy members and others who prioritised a stronger ethnic Chin agenda. With the lack of progress in the ICNCC, and with strong backing by the CNF/A and its allies, the CJDC has ramped up political activities alongside its original role of military coordination though it has encountered challenges rooted in ideological differences between Chin stakeholders.²⁷ Elected lawmakers attach their decision-making legitimacy to the 2020 election result (*de jure* authority), whereas ethnic armed actors point to their higher levels of public support and stronger connection to local grassroots movements (*de facto* authority). Despite these challenges, the major political stakeholders, the CNF/A, the ICNCC and the CJDC, consult each other to align their messages and work toward a future single governance system in Chin State.



Image 3: Rikhawdar-Zokhawthar with refugee shelters in the foreground. Photo credit: JNS.

The ZRO/A-Eastern Command, a recent Myanmar offshoot of the Manipur-based ZRO/A-Western Command, targets the political unification of Zomi ethnic groups in the Myanmar-India-Bangladesh tri-border region into an autonomous territory.²⁸ Since its establishment in 1993, the Indian branch of the organisation engaged in direct conflict with the Indian government, culminating in a bilateral ceasefire agreement in 2005. The Myanmar branch is not known to engage the Myanmar military nor other EAOs directly, though they are closely linked to the People's Liberation Army, an Indian insurgent group active in Tonzang township, Chin State, as well as in parts of Sagaing. Following the coup, there are reports of the Myanmar branch of the ZRO/A cooperating with Myanmar military forces against Chin resistance groups, resulting in clashes with the CNF/A in January 2022 and a 'terrorist' designation by the CJDC.²⁹

The Myanmar military's presence in Chin State shifted significantly following the coup and the ensuing escalation in conflict, growing from 14 battalions and 56 camps to up to 18 battalions and divisions (though several camps have been lost in battles with Chin armed groups). Mass reinforcements, including convoys of up to 70 trucks, were sent into Chin State in 2021 following violence in Mindat, and with the launch of Operation Anawratha which targeted resistance in Chin State, Sagaing and Magwe.³⁰ A military command centre has also been set

up in Paletwa.³¹ Mobile operations are conducted in Chin State by troops based in neighbouring Rakhine, Magwe and Sagaing, a tactic that had been employed by the Myanmar military in the past.³² Respondents to this research describe a decrease in the Myanmar military's presence following the 2022 rainy season, when the CNF/A and CDFs expanded their authority over a large portion of the state.³³

The Chin diaspora, which has historically played an important role in the state's political and economic landscape, is central to post-coup dynamics. Many Chin people have family members living in countries where Chin refugees were resettled following widespread violence by the Myanmar military in the 1990s. These include countries in Asia (in 2010 Chin civil society estimated around 60,000 Chin refugees living in India, and 20,000 in Malaysia) as well as USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and some European countries.³⁴ Following the coup and ensuing violence, the international diaspora responded with significant moral and financial support. New and existing community-based and religious fundraising groups or organisations contribute the majority of funds received by resistance groups and local humanitarian providers—three separate respondents to this research put that figure at 90 percent.³⁵ The impact of these networks, which is explored in more detail below, cannot be overlooked as Chin resistance is unlikely to have grown to its current size and strength without them.

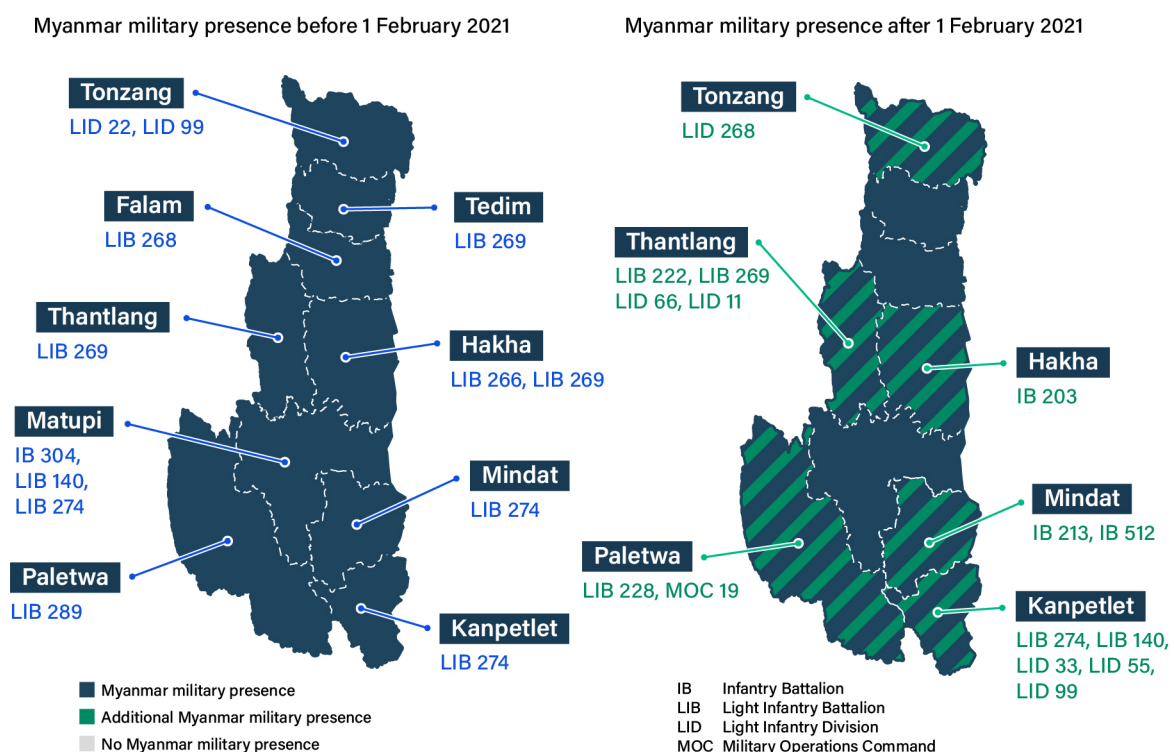


Figure 2: Presence of Myanmar military troops in Chin State

Governance and administration in non-military controlled areas

This research revealed a complex patchwork of different levels of control and authority claimed by an array of armed groups in the region. Claims of territorial control are difficult to verify and may be disputed between actors. The CJDC claims a presence of its member forces across 80 percent of Chin State territory, mostly in rural areas.³⁶ Several actors may contest control over road transport linkages between Chin State, Sagaing and Magwe. For example, on the Gangaw-Hakha highway the military's Light Infantry Brigade 266 runs a checkpoint at Caw Buk, while the CNF/A and CDF-Hakha claim authority over the route from Caw Buk to Sagaing region. Similarly, there is a military-run checkpoint at the entrance to Kanpetlet town though the local CDF has a strong presence along the rest of that road leading into Magwe region (in January 2023 that CDF announced a ban on all travel along the road citing security concerns).³⁷ People and goods moving across the state can be subject to checks from several different groups.³⁸ Many rural areas are not under firm control of either Chin resistance groups or military forces, in particular those in the far north and far south. Large parts of Paletwa township and the territory between the town and the Rakhine State border are under the AA's authority. The ZRO/A is active in some parts of Tedim and Tongzang in the north. Access to the Indian border is regulated by the CNF/A and CDFs through at least ten crossing points. Chin State's sole official border gate at Rikhawdar-Zokawthar was abandoned by the Myanmar military in late 2021 as conflict escalated with the Chin National Organization/Chin National Defense Force, a group with close links to the CDF network.³⁹ In February 2023 the military's governing body, the State Administration Council (SAC) extended martial law to a total of eight townships in Chin State—all except Paletwa. The move was interpreted by policy analysts and the public as a sign that resistance groups operating in those areas had been defeated.⁴⁰

In regions where the Myanmar military has retreated, the remaining political vacuum has been filled by CDFs or other local armed resistance group which have assumed responsibility for public administration. Many new resistance groups also run administrative activities at village, circle and council levels, including education, health and security functions.⁴¹ Some reportedly conduct judiciary and anti-narcotics activities.⁴² When territorial disputes arise between resistance groups, as occurred recently in Falam, these are generally negotiated locally, without involvement from the SAC or CJDC.⁴³ The CNF/A mediated the resolution of a territorial conflict in Ngaphaipi village between CDF-Mara and the Maraland Defense Forces in late 2022.⁴⁴ Though the CNF/A is present across many townships, it is not involved in local administration issues, focusing instead on state-level governance.⁴⁵

In urban areas, most of which are under martial law since February 2023, public administration is overseen by the SAC-appointed Chief Minister, Dr. Vum Suan Thang.⁴⁶ The SAC's ability to run public services has been disrupted by widespread civil disobedience activity—local media reported after the coup that more than 72 percent of Chin State's public servants had left their posts.⁴⁷ The military regime has brought in recruits from Sagaing and Magwe to fill these positions, however most public administration offices in Chin State remain closed.⁴⁸ Any successful attempt at a future state-wide system will need to generate sufficient common ground among local bodies, a significant challenge in a shifting political environment.⁴⁹

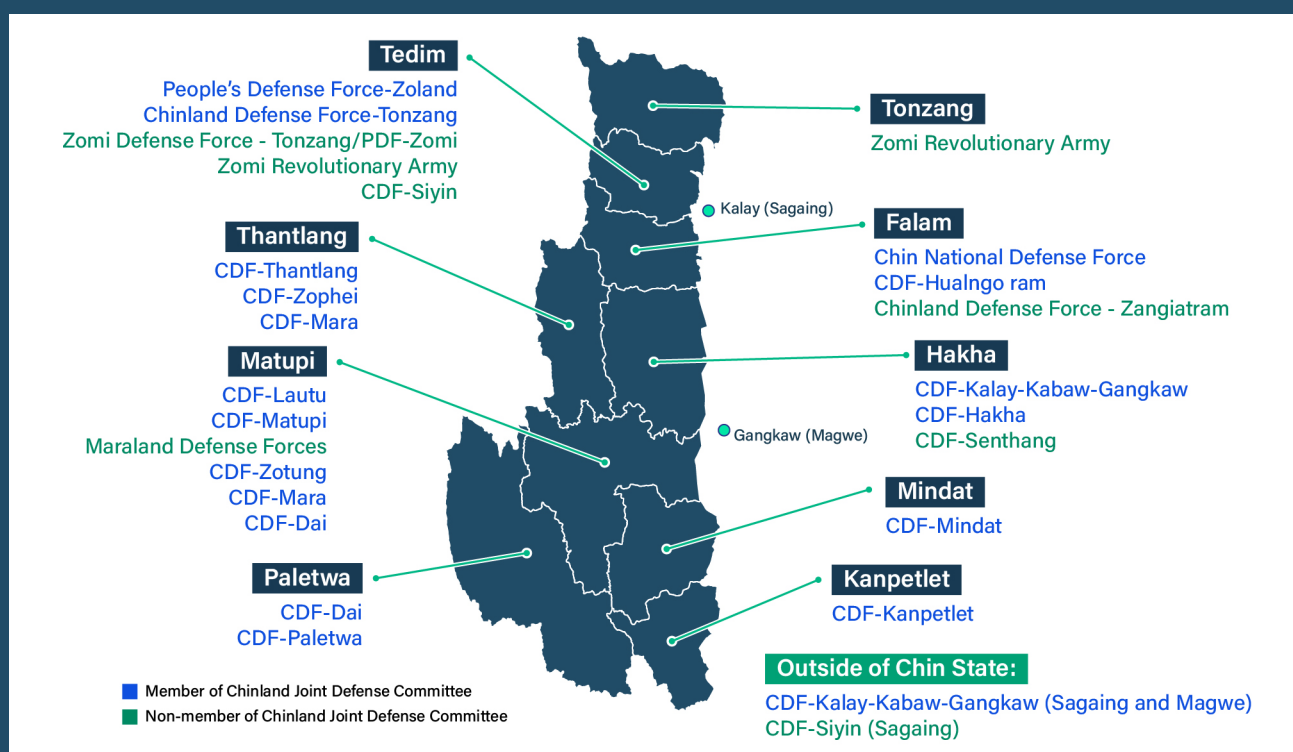


Figure 3: A patchwork of authority in post-coup Chin State

Displacement and Refugee Flows

Displacement has been a common feature of Chin State's history, largely due to religious and ethnic-based persecution by successive military regimes. A significant wave of displacements occurred in the 1990s due to conflict between the CNF/A and the Myanmar military, including an historic joint operation between the Myanmar and Indian militaries named Operation Golden Bird.⁵⁰ Between 2010-2020, AA activity in southern Chin and Rakhine States displaced thousands more.⁵¹ Since the coup, displacement has once again surged across the

state. The Chin Human Rights Organisation estimates that 120,000 people have been forced to leave their homes, a figure which was roughly triangulated by this researcher through interviews with five relief providers in IDP camps across the state (see Figure 4).⁵² The United Nations (UN) estimates that over 50,000 people have fled from Myanmar to India since the coup, of which almost 40,000 have stayed in Mizoram, while 54,000 displaced people remain in Chin State.⁵³

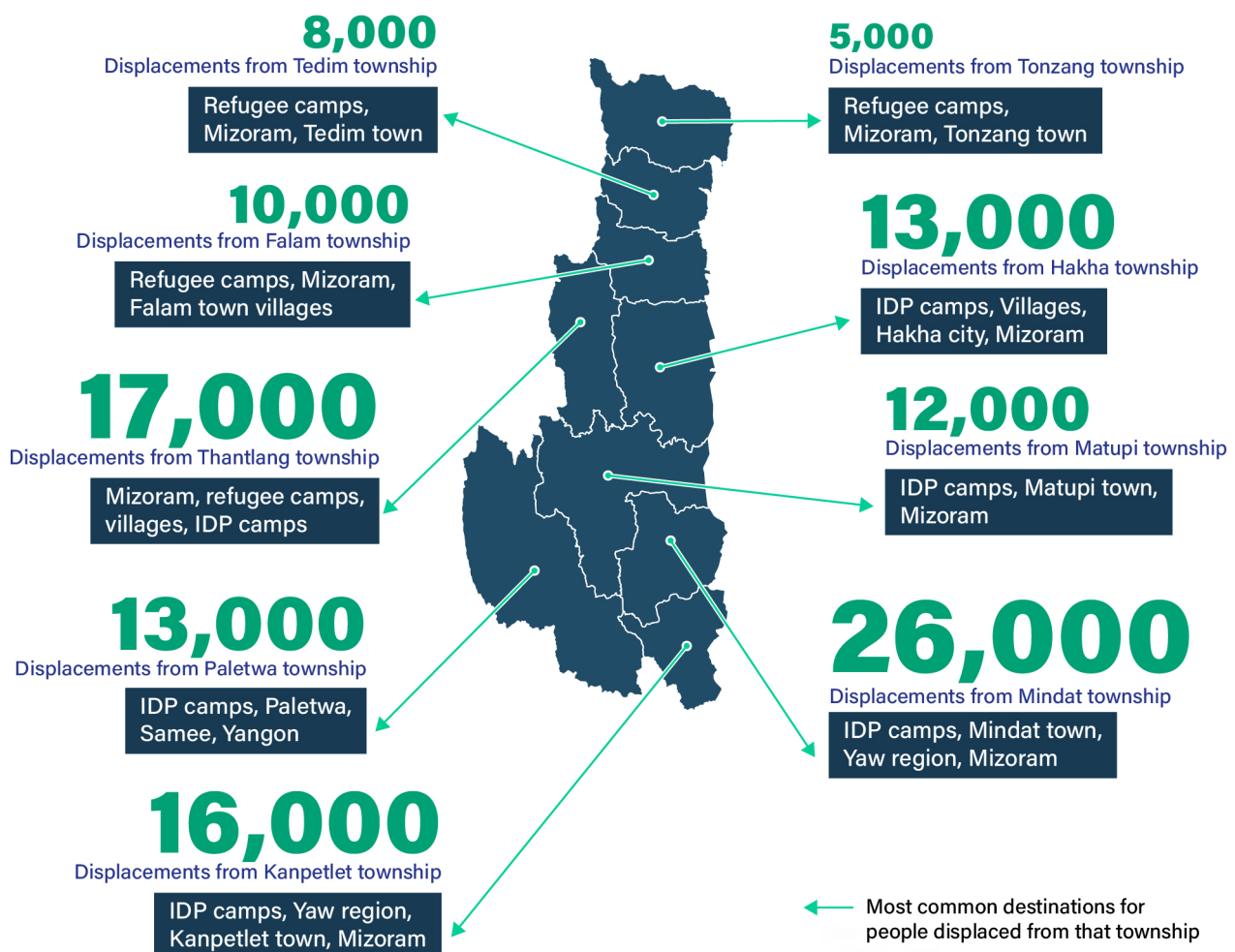


Figure 4: Estimated breakdown of IDPs and refugees by township



Image 4: An IDP camp in Paletwa town, Chin State. Photo credit: Chin Human Rights Organisation, December 2022.

Displacement has been state-wide, with those in the south often remaining in Chin state, while those in the north use better transportation links to access the border. The worst affected areas, such as Mindat and Thantlang, have faced largescale shelling and arson attacks from the Myanmar military.⁵⁴ UNICEF reports that around 6,000 IDPs are living in a single makeshift camp in Mindat town.⁵⁵ In Thantlang, on the state's western border, the military torched 1,277 houses, including 12 churches and religious buildings, causing the majority of the town's population to flee in October 2021.⁵⁶ This demonstrates the breadth and scale of population movements within and beyond Chin State since the coup. Interviews with IDPs showed a desire to return to their place of origin as soon as possible, though many have lost their homes due to the fighting. Some cases have been reported in which SAC authorities are forcing IDPs to return despite safety concerns and lack of proper infrastructure.

Forced IDP Returns in Paletwa

In October 2021, SAC administrators ordered 1,100 IDPs from nine villages residing in Paletwa town to return home on the basis of a ceasefire agreement between AA and the Myanmar military.⁵⁷ The SAC compensated those whose houses had been damaged (583,000 MMK per household, or around 270 USD) or destroyed (386,000 MMK per household, or around 180 USD), amounts which some villagers reported were insufficient to cover the cost of reconstruction.⁵⁸ Many returned to farming despite an ongoing risk of landmines. When conflict resumed in late 2022, they once again fled to Paletwa town.⁵⁹ In December 2022, the SAC again ordered IDPs to return home but offered no financial support. More than half had lost their homes, and many had also lost crops. This demonstrates the uncertainty IDPs face due to their reliance on administrative and political decisions over which they have no control. Faced with two challenging options, many displaced people remain in a painful limbo.

Key displacement dynamics

This research identified three types of displacement commonly found in Chin State.

IDPs who move to urban areas mostly come from remote villages or other towns which have been destroyed, and generally live in rented houses or with relatives. This group constitutes the smallest proportion of IDPs with the greatest access to livelihood security, health, and education.

IDPs who flee to nearby villages face significant socio-economic challenges, often relying on support from the Chin diaspora.⁶⁰ Some have been able to build their own houses or cultivate land, but not all village authorities grant permission to do so.⁶¹ While they often have access to shelter, their livelihood security remains under threat. Host villages face challenges associated with sudden population increases, such as water scarcity and supply chain disruption due to conflict.⁶²

IDPs in camps form the largest displaced community. There are currently reported to be around 40,000 people living in IDP camps across the state.⁶³ Aid workers approached for this research reported that around 80 percent of camps are located in Paletwa, Mindat, Kanpetlet and Matupi, with twelve smaller camps and a total population of around 5,000 IDPs in the north.⁶⁴ IDPs in camps have limited access to shelter, livelihoods, health, or education. Most shelters are made with bamboo and other makeshift materials, which provide little protection from monsoons or extreme cold.⁶⁵ In smaller camps in the north, families often have access to a single unit, whereas many of the larger camps in the south are made up of large halls housing thousands of people. In Paletwa town, five local camps house 7,000 people in total.⁶⁶ Residents in these camps rely entirely on outside assistance for food deliveries which are often delayed or insufficient.⁶⁷ An aid worker from Paletwa stated that the biggest challenges are finding food and clean water, with sourcing blankets and warm clothes also difficult in winter months.⁶⁸

Across each of these groups, women, children, the elderly, and people with disabilities face particular challenges. Many elderly people are suffering from conflict-related trauma caused by experiences of violence and loss of homes and loved ones. For pregnant women and young children, limited access to nutritious food can have long term implications for development.⁶⁹ Lack of access to transport or adequate healthcare makes these groups particularly vulnerable. Gender-based violence has also been a serious concern, with this researcher hearing of at least three cases reported in Chin State since the coup.

Two stories of gender-based violence

“

At 11:00pm on 11 November 2021, three SAC soldiers entered the house of an accused resistance collaborator in Aklui village, Tedim township. The Myanmar military soldiers tortured a father of three, later raping his wife in the presence of their three young children. Two of the perpetrators returned several hours later and again raped the woman. Their troop captain was aware the violence had occurred, reportedly apologising but taking no further action, with the troops quickly leaving the village.⁷⁰

“

In August 2022, Sung Sung (name changed) was living at Salen IDP camp within the CDF-Thantlang liberated area. She fled her hometown of Hakha with her family when conflict broke out between the local CDF and the Myanmar military in March 2021. Sung Sung, an unmarried woman with an intellectual disability, was allegedly raped by an unidentified man and became pregnant. She tried to conceal her pregnancy and, later, her labour. By the time her parents discovered she was in labour and found a rented car to drive her to hospital, she was unconscious. A doctor was able to deliver the baby but Sung Sung remained unconscious, and died during the 20-hour trip to Aizawl, where her parents had taken her for further treatment. The baby was four months old in December 2022 and living in Salen IDP camp. An interview with his grandmother, his primary caretaker, revealed he often gets sick from seasonal dengue and suffers from lack of nutrition.

“The United Nations estimates that over 50,000 people have fled to India from Myanmar since the coup, of which almost 40,000 have stayed in Mizoram. 54,000 displaced people remain in Chin State.”



Image 5: An IDP camp in Bungkhua village, Thantlang township, Chin State. Photo credit: Parku.

Humanitarian assistance to IDPs

Since mid-2021, humanitarian access across Chin State has been difficult due to continuous and intense fighting between the Myanmar military and CNF/A-CDFs, as well as government-imposed restrictions on the Indian side of the border. Though the CNF/A and Chin community groups have been advocating widely for increased humanitarian support, aid remains scarce, with one aid worker estimating that only 20 percent of needs are met.⁷¹ The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs received only 41 percent of the funding required for their Myanmar-wide Humanitarian Response plan in 2021–2022, affecting service provision across all conflict-affected areas, including Chin State.⁷² Ongoing military operations and hostilities, as well as issues securing travel authorisation approvals, are key challenges facing humanitarian responders.⁷³

UN agencies, including the World Food Programme and UNICEF, as well as the International Committee of the Red Cross, have access to Chin State from within Myanmar. The bulk of aid deliveries, including rice, nutrient packages, hygiene kits, water purification sachets, stationery, and basic cooking materials, have been distributed across the worst affected areas in the south of the state.⁷⁴

In other areas, CSOs and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) distribute resources through local networks. An IDP camp leader in Salen reported that the only NGOs providing the camp with assistance were Save the Children and the faith-based Myanmar group Karuna Mission for Social Solidarity.⁷⁵

While humanitarian assistance through official channels remains limited, the primary means of support for IDPs is through the Chin international diaspora. As well as direct financial support, diaspora networks have formed community-based fundraising groups which provide significant contributions to local NGOs and village administrations.⁷⁶ However, these groups are generally based on tribal or regional connections, providing support directly back to their own communities; areas with larger diaspora communities, such as Hakha and Thantlang, receive considerably more funding from overseas than rural areas. Transsecting these geographic divides are international church communities, such as the Global Chin Christian Fellowship, which has funded three large IDP camps in the state and provided a stipend of 30,000 MMK (14 USD) per resident.⁷⁷ The combined contributions of direct remittances and Chin community fundraising by overseas communities constitutes a significant proportion of overall aid.

The Conditions and Experiences of Chin Refugees in India

Chin migration to India in the early 1990s was a result of surges in conflict and a related political crisis across Myanmar. Following the 1988 students uprising, many people fled to Mizoram; some to raise arms and others to seek refuge in India. Thousands went to New Delhi in pursuit of protection from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and resettlement in third countries. In the 1990s, Mizoram gained statehood and economic opportunities in the region began to grow, spurring a migration of Chin people in search of jobs and business opportunities.⁷⁸ This trend decreased in the 2010s as Myanmar began to democratise. After the 2021 coup, migration across the border once again rapidly increased. As of December 2022, there are an estimated 50,000 Chin refugees from Myanmar in India, with the number increasing as airstrikes by the Myanmar military continue.⁷⁹

“Of course, we are very concerned about the Indian central government’s attitude on refugees. We expect more than this. They are the largest democracy country in the world, bordering with Myanmar. They can [be] a role model. But we are not in the position to criticise them because we are in their territory. In the meantime, we have people of Mizoram and their government with great support. We have to appreciate it.”

— A research respondent in Aizawl, December 2022

Refugee policies in border regions

The Indian federal government requested the Chief Ministers of the four north-eastern states bordering Myanmar (Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh) and the Assam Rifles, the paramilitary force responsible for border security, to identify and deport refugees coming from Myanmar, reminding the authorities

that “state governments have no power to grant refugee status to any foreigners.”⁸⁰ Chin refugees with resettlement rights in third countries were also formally prohibited from travelling through India.⁸¹ On the ground, however, local actors have demonstrated broad commitment to accepting Chin refugees.

- On 16 March 2021, a Mizo member of parliament requested that the Ministry of Home Affairs change its policy on refugees, stating that the people of Mizoram would not accept the deportation of refugees “until the restoration of peace and normalcy in Myanmar” reasoning that “they are our brothers,” and “sending them back would mean killing them.”⁸²
- On 18 March 2021, the Chief Minister of Mizoram wrote a letter to Prime Minister Modi and sent a group of delegates to New Delhi requesting support to assist refugees with food and shelter.⁸³
- Later that month, former Chief Minister of Mizoram and leader of the strongest local opposition party, Pu Lalthanhawla, similarly told Indian media that the federal government’s instruction to deport Chin refugees was unacceptable and asked the current Chief Minister to cooperate with responses by local NGOs.⁸⁴

By January 2023, no cases of deportation of refugees in Mizoram had been reported, or of refugees who had continued to New Delhi to seek protection from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Though the Assam Rifles continue to administer checkpoints along the border, research respondents indicated they do not intervene on issues of migration.

“Chin communities [...] are ethnically our Mizo brethren with whom we have been having close contacts throughout all these years even before India became Independent. Therefore, Mizoram cannot just remain indifferent to their sufferings today.”

— Letter from Mizoram’s Chief Minister addressed to Prime Minister Modi
Government letter; D.O.No.CMO.37/2021/24, 18 March 2021

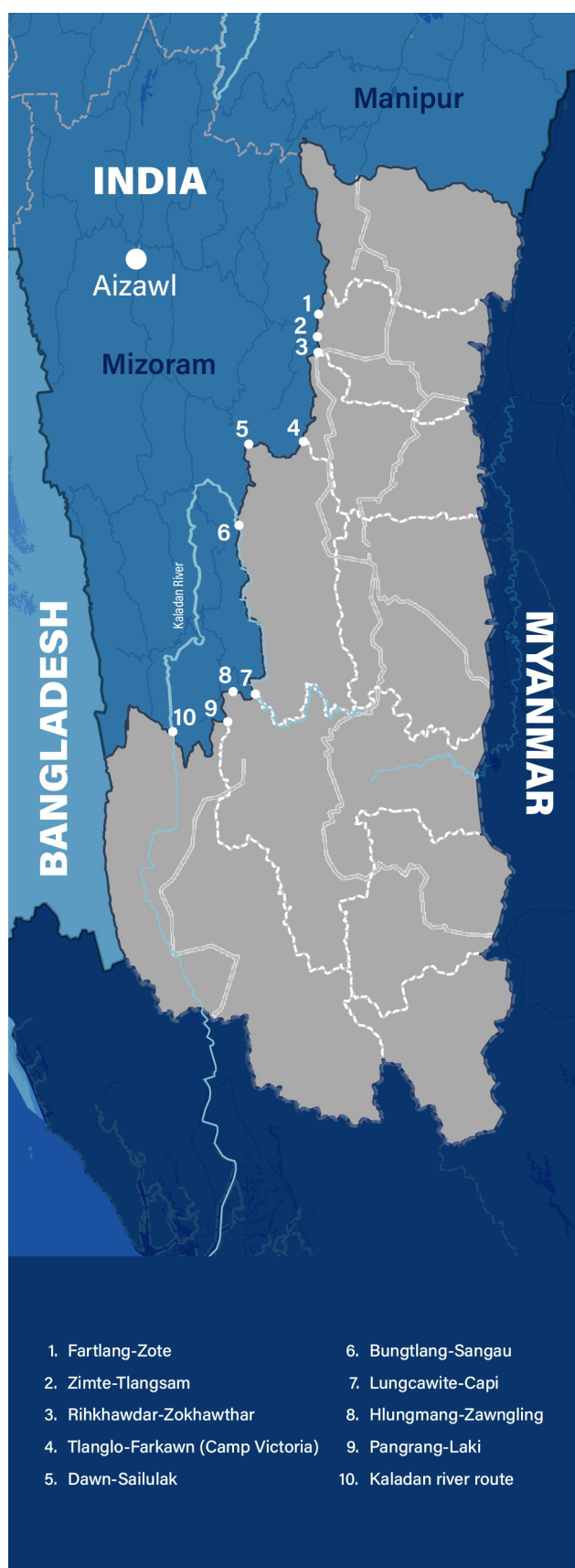


Figure 5: Border crossings between Chin State and Mizoram
Source: OpenStreetMap, Google Map

Mizoram's Refugee Population

Mizoram's governance structure is made up of districts, sub-divisions and regional division blocks, with strong delegation of authority to the district and village council level. According to a civil society leader in Aizawl, Chin refugees now reside in at least 45 different locations across Mizoram and around 50 percent of Mizoram's refugee population are estimated to be living in camps.⁸⁵ Many Chin immigrants who settled in Mizoram in the 1990s congregated in areas with others from the same tribe or location. This historical trend continues with the most recent wave of arrivals; though some select locations with geographical proximity and transport access from their place of origin, many choose their destination based on tribal bonds and cultural similarities. Lai people from Hakha and Thantlang mostly settled in the Lai Autonomous Districts Council area, a Lai speaking region. Today, most refugees from Thantlang are residing in Sangau and Lawngtlai, within the Council area, while refugees from Falam and Tedim townships reside in Champhai district. Many Mara people from Matupi township historically settled in Mara Autonomous District Council area, while the Matu people mostly resettled in Aizawl. In nearby Sihmul, the refugee camp is wholly inhabited by Matu people. The vast majority of the host village is also of Matu origin.

Challenges facing Chin refugees

Financial security depends on refugees' individual circumstances, and their ability to access remittances from overseas, income from work, government stipends and/or humanitarian aid. Most refugees living in rented houses in cities and towns receive remittances from relatives, whereas refugee camp dwellers tend to depend on humanitarian aid. Some refugees are trying to generate an income but face limited opportunities. Those employed by NGOs may be able to retain their existing income stream. A very small number of refugees work in construction and agriculture, receiving daily wages (between Rs. 550-1000 per day or 7-12 USD) depending on their skill level, experience, the availability of work and the season.⁸⁶ Opening retail shops and doing other business is prohibited for refugees in most parts of Mizoram.⁸⁷

“When we arrive here Aizawl district council gave us a lumpsum amount... But now we have to survive [on] our own. No one from my family members have jobs here. I don’t have a diaspora relative. The living cost in here is very expensive to cover our health, my children education, and daily needs. Not easy.”

— An exiled Chin political party member

Freedom of movement is largely dependent on temporary refugee registration cards, used for law enforcement purposes and to record the refugees’ residency in the area. This card, issued by some district and village councils, can be used to travel across most parts of Mizoram without restrictions. In some villages, refugees have to inform authorities prior to departure and immediately after return.⁸⁸ Respondents to this research reported that they are able to pass through local police checkpoints. A CDF member described occasional interaction with the Assam Rifles posted at the border, who are reportedly suspicious of resistance group members.⁸⁹ However, many resistance group leaders and members have been travelling around the border and, at the time of writing, no arrests have been reported. Refugees can generally use the vehicles they brought with them, though in some areas restrictions are applied. In Zokhawthar, Chinese-imported motorbikes available only in Myanmar are banned in the town and prohibited from resale, which is enforced through separate vehicle registration processes.⁹⁰ Similar restrictions have been imposed in Sihmul and Sangau, areas with high refugee populations.⁹¹

Access to health varies across different district and village councils. In Zokhawthar, at least until January 2023, pregnant refugee women were given special privileges for their medical needs at local clinics, while other refugees were required to pay for their medical costs. On 13 February 2023, Doctors Without Borders opened a new clinic especially for refugees in Zokhawthar village, providing them with access to the clinic and free medical services.⁹² A Medical Superintendent of Lairam Christian Medical Centre & Hospital in the Lai Autonomous Districts Council area announced that it will support medical care for refugees with limited financial resources.⁹³ On some occasions, local NGOs also provide certain medical assistance. In Sangau and other parts of the state, refugees can access any hospital for treatment, but must pay their own expenses.

Access to education in public schools is provided up to secondary school for refugee children, based on a notice by the Mizoram Board of School Education dated 28 October 2021.⁹⁴ A refugee registration card and proof of previous education is generally required for admission, though the notice suggests children should still be admitted if they are unable to provide this documentation. In some schools where many refugee children are admitted, the government has hired additional teachers. In Zokhawthar, two local teachers and two refugee teachers were hired at the beginning of the 2022-2023 academic year.⁹⁵

Support for refugees in Mizoram

A large portion of support for Chin refugees in Mizoram has come from community fundraisers, the Chin diaspora, and international aid. From early March 2021, civil society groups such as Mizo Zirlai Pawl, the People United in Music with a Purpose, the NGO United for Democratic Myanmar, Mizo Zaimi Inzawmkhawm, and Mizo Domain Mizoram conducted several charity concerts in support of Myanmar and Chin refugees.⁹⁶ During the initial refugee influx, the state government financially supported the construction of refugee camps and many local people contributed voluntary labour.⁹⁷ In Lawngtlai district, during the arrival of refugees in late 2021, local residents, church-based organizations and CSOs donated materials and helped to build makeshift tents for refugees. Members of the Legislative Assembly and ministers gave financial contributions. CSOs have raised funds from the community to support the refugee camps with resources.⁹⁸ During this period of research, international NGOs present in the area included Impulse NGO Network, Doctors Without Borders, and Action Aid. The government of Canada was said to be providing assistance, as were some local NGOs and the Chin diaspora community. The most common forms of assistance are cooking materials, dry rations, hygiene kits, groceries, blanket, water storage mechanisms and medical supplies.⁹⁹

An important challenge for local authorities has been aid distribution. District and village level authorities have asserted responsibility over coordinating and distributing aid.¹⁰⁰ In most of the villages and districts where refugees are residing, aid must go through the village council, a local CSO, or the locally formed refugees committee before being distributed.¹⁰¹ In Zokhawthar, the Myanmar Refugee Relief Committee was formed by the village council and Young Mizo Association to manage aid coming to refugee camps in their village. According to an anonymous interviewee, some NGOs are resistant to localised coordination due to trust issues and instead deliver their aid directly.¹⁰² Distribution of aid is unequal across different refugee communities. Most international NGO support focuses on refugee camps, meaning non-camp dwellers may be excluded. Research respondents state that the overall volume of aid is insufficient to meet all needs.¹⁰³

The future for refugees in Mizoram

Despite acceptance by the Mizoram community, refugees have serious concerns about their status and survival over the long term. In 2022, complaints from the host community were registered due to some refugees' involvement in illegal businesses, such as drugs and arms smuggling. While the latter appears to be largely accepted by Mizoram communities in support of the anti-coup movement in Myanmar, there is far less tolerance for cases of drug dealing and associated risks for the host community. In online forums, rights groups and local sympathisers have pointed out the involvement of local drug dealers in such cases, but concerns remain among the refugee community that if illegal business and criminal cases involving refugees increase, it could revive anti-refugee sentiment and cause widespread deportation.¹⁰⁴

One village council president reported that the Mizoram state government may consider gathering Myanmar refugees into a single camp on the outskirts of Zokhawthar to ensure a more efficient humanitarian response.¹⁰⁵ Refugees interviewed were unaware of this plan and it could not be separately verified from within the Mizoram government. One refugee camp leader argued that the proposal would be “practically impossible” because refugees from

other parts of the state would not be willing to move. However, this example demonstrates the fluidity of the political situation and refugees' dependence on ongoing support and goodwill from the Mizoram government and community. These issues may become more contentious in the lead up to the Mizoram elections, scheduled for November 2023. Though the refugee situation has not been politicised thus far, pressure through continued arrivals from Myanmar may be reflected in public debate. One CSO member interviewed raised concerns that “if the government or any of the political parties give voter ID cards to refugees in [a] certain constituency in order to maximise their votes, it might be beneficial to individuals who get the ID. However, it may cause conflicts among the political party and further result in communal conflicts at the community level.”¹⁰⁶

In 2023, conflict in Chin State is likely to continue increasing. The Myanmar military is pushing forward with a planned general election, which is widely opposed amongst Chin groups. Airstrikes by Myanmar military forces in resistance-controlled areas continue to push people across the border to join the growing refugee population. Without proper long-term planning, Myanmar refugees' future in Mizoram is uncertain.



Image 6: Sihmul refugee camp, Mizoram. Photo credit: JNS.

Implications for Policy and Practice

For the international community

- Work within existing systems of governance and public administration on the ground, while considering ongoing challenges facing local attempts at achieving common ground in a rapidly shifting political environment.
- Invest in future peace in Chin State by supporting ongoing governance discussions amongst different coalitions of local actors, identifying possible mechanisms to provide technical support to the emerging self-run administration systems in the liberated areas.
- Remain sensitive to inter-communal dynamics and the diversity of sub-ethnic and tribal actors when engaging with Chin political actors, including new divisions that have emerged since the coup, to mitigate potential risks of uneven representation and reach of different groups.
- Connect with existing networks and infrastructure of humanitarian response in the border region to enable greater reach and effectiveness of aid distribution.
- Recognise the Chin international diaspora as an important actor in the ongoing conflict, including through their humanitarian support, funding of armed groups, and role in political processes.
- Work with Chin civil society including diaspora institutions to ensure aid delivery is coordinated and distributed effectively, with a focus on reaching communities with limited international support, rural areas, and vulnerable groups including women and children.

For Mizoram authorities

- Continue to support refugees' access to education by ensuring public schools have sufficient resources to deliver education services to refugee children.
- Support refugee communities to establish sustainable livelihoods, for example by creating business operating permits for refugees, while also considering the concerns of host communities.
- Work with international donors to coordinate distribution of humanitarian assistance to refugees, ensuring robust accountability and oversight mechanisms.
- Recognise historical migration trends and tribal or cultural linkages which are key determining factors for refugees' choice of destination in Mizoram.

For Chin groups and civil society

- Create a mechanism through which Chin stakeholders can constructively engage with one another, and with external stakeholders in order to strengthen governance-building efforts.
- Seek to establish representative local and state governance mechanisms that equitably represent the diversity of Chin peoples and political aspirations.

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84. အိန္ဒိယဗဟိုအစိုးက မြန်မာစစ်ဘေးရှောင်များကို ပြန်ပို့ရန် ညွှန်ကြားမှု လုံးဝ လက်ခံနိုင်စရာ အကြောင်းမရှိဟု မီဇိုရမ်ပြည်နယ် ဝန်ကြီးချုပ်ဟောင်းပြော, [Former Chief Minister of Mizoram says there is absolutely no reason to accept instructions by the Indian central government to return Myanmar war refugees] Khonumthung Burmese, 27 March 2021.
85. An informal conversation with a Chin CSO leader, Aizawl, 11 December 2022.
86. Interview with a refugee living in Hnahthial, remote, 15 January 2022.
87. This is with the exception of Zokhawthar where refugees can do any kind of business without even obtaining permission from the Village Council. Interview with a refugee woman who own a small retail shop, 28 December 2022.
88. Interview with a refugee from anonymous location, January 2022.
89. Interview with CDF member, remote, 5 January 2023.
90. Many villages prefer the 125s over Indian-made motorcycles due to their bigger engine capacity.
91. Interview with a refugee from Thantlang, Sangau, 16 December 2022.
92. Update interview with refugee camp leader from Zokhawthar, remotely, 13 December 2023.
93. Ralzam siizung um kongkau, Office Order No 105/2022, Lairam Isua Khrista Baptist Kohran.
94. Notice, Mizoram Board of School Education, 28 October 2022.
95. Interview with Village Council president, Zokhawthar, 28 December 2022.
96. Myanmar unaute tanpuina, Mobile Charity concert, Mizo Zirlai Pawl, 22 March 2021.
97. Interview with with a local youth leader from Sangau, Remote, 11 December 2022.
98. Interview with YLA leader Sangau, remotely, 11 December 2021.
99. Interviews with refugees from Zokhawthar and Sangau, December 2022.
100. Interview with Village council president, Zokhawthar, 28 December 2022.
101. Interview with a refugee camp leader, Zokhawthar, 28 December 2022; Interview with a refugee camp leader, Sihmul, 12 December 2022; A remote interview with a local CSO leader from Sangau, 12 December 2022.
102. Interview with research respondent (identifiers withheld for security reasons).
103. Interview with camp leader-2, Zokhawthar, 28 December 2022.
104. Vanlalsailova, an influential artist in Mizoram speaks about the Chin refugees, video interview, October 2022; A remote interview with a local CSO leader from Sangau, 12 December 2022.
105. Interview with Zokhawthar village council president, 28 December 2022.
106. Informal conversation with a Chin CSO leader, Aizawl, 13 December 2022.