



# Human trafficking and ethnic minority problems in Myanmar

Policy  
recommendations  
for Myanmar and  
neighboring states

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## **ABSTRACT**

Myanmar has gained a notorious reputation as a source and transit country for human trafficking within the Southeast Asian region. Human trafficking is not only prevalent internally, but trafficking across borders is sizeable as well. Ethnic minorities are particularly vulnerable to trafficking due to their conflict with the Burmese military government and the lack of minority rights within Myanmar. To analyse the connection between the human trafficking situation and minority conflicts in Myanmar, I will first examine the history of conflict between minority groups and the Myanmar government, the extent of human trafficking in Myanmar, and how human trafficking contributed to the militarisation of certain minority groups. This paper will then introduce key issues with the Myanmar government's current policies, specifically those under the new National League of Democracy (NLD) administration, led by Aung San Suu Kyi. Finally, this paper makes the following policy recommendations: (i) develop effective measures to address the core grievances of ethnic minorities' problems, (ii) proactively develop policies for both sex and labour trafficking offences, especially for minority populations, (iii) develop joint efforts with Myanmar's neighbouring countries to monitor cross-border human trafficking within the region, (iv) engage in dialogue with its neighbouring countries regarding existing undocumented immigrants from Myanmar to its neighbouring states.

## **INTRODUCTION**

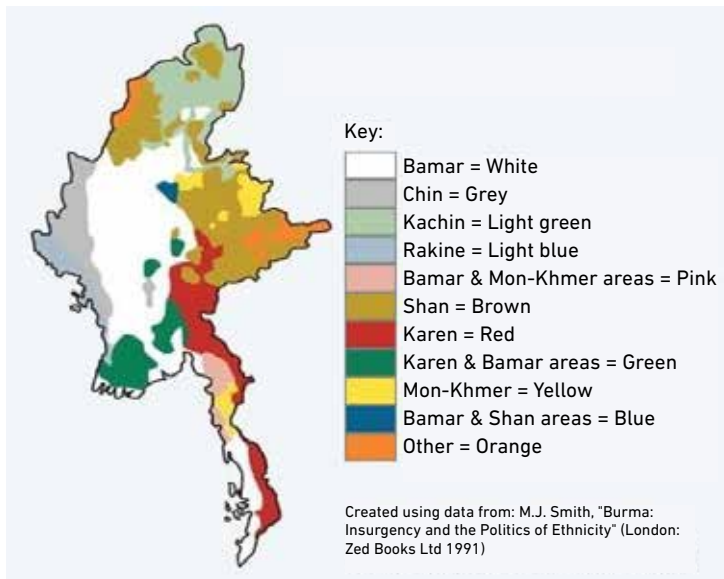
Myanmar has been criticised as one of the worst offenders for human trafficking in the world as a source and transit country. Human trafficking – forced labour and prostitution of men, women, and children – is prevalent within the country and across borders. Ethnic minorities are the most vulnerable to trafficking due to heightened conflict with the Burmese military government, as well as the marginalisation of their rights within Myanmar. Considering that ethnic minority groups account for approximately one-third of Myanmar's population, the number of victims of human trafficking belonging to minority groups should be of great concern. Therefore, it is important to examine the relationship between a rise in human trafficking and increased minority insurgency in Myanmar. To answer this question, this paper will first examine the historical background of conflict between minority groups and the Myanmar government, the extent of human trafficking in Myanmar, and how human trafficking contributed to the militarisation of certain minority groups. Then, I will identify issues with the Myanmar government's current policies, specifically those of Aung San Suu Kyi. Finally, I will recommend policies for Myanmar to address ethnic minority issues and to approach human trafficking problems in Myanmar more effectively.

## **BACKGROUND ON THE CONFLICTS BETWEEN ETHNIC MINORITIES AND THE MYANMAR GOVERNMENT**

Ethnic minority groups were officially brought into Burma, Myanmar's former official name until 1989, during British colonisation from 1824 to 1948 when Britain annexed different ethnic areas within the region into one British Burma. Before

the British annexation, these ethnic minorities had separate and diverse histories and origins. For instance, the *Kachin*, *Wa* and *Shan* are also found in China; the *Karen*, *Mon* and a part of *Shan* come from Thailand border; the *Chin* and *Naga* from India and the *Rakhine* and *Rohingya* Muslims from Bangladesh (Smith, 1994, p.17). Each ethnic group has its own language, culture and national identity. Since British colonisation these ethnic groups have established their own minority political parties, further developing a strong sense of identity that is distinct from mainstream Burmese society, each ethnic group has already been departing away from the Burmese society. Accordingly, these minority groups have developed a strong sense of self-identity over time.

**FIGURE 1 ETHNOLINGUISTIC MAP OF MYANMAR**



Source: Dahgaypaw Myra, "Myanmar Population count comes with controversy," Al-Jazeera, March 2014.

As one can see from the map on the previous page, Myanmar is composed of various ethnic groups that coexist throughout the country. Despite such existence of minority populations, the military government and the *Tatmadaw* (Burmese armed forces) have historically been dominated by the majority Burmese or Bamar tribe. The Bamar tribe also regarded other ethnic groups to be “uncivilised” (Smith, 1994, p.20). Therefore, policies that favoured the Burmese majority language and culture clashed with the strong presence of diverse ethnic groups, inevitably leading to internal conflict. In 1989, the country was renamed to Myanmar because the military government wanted to be more inclusive of ethnic groups beyond the Burmese majority. However, the name change also aroused many controversies within and outside of the country, especially since the Burmese people felt they did not have proper input into the change (Schiavenza, 2014). Ethnic minorities also felt that the new name, Myanmar, was chosen without considering any of the country’s linguistic differences. Internationally, many human rights organisations and the United States, saw the name change as a concession to the military government since the name was adopted by the repressive government. Likewise, there are many factors in Myanmar that caused internal conflict between the minority population and the Myanmar government.

## **GRAVITY OF CROSS BORDER HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN MYANMAR**

Human trafficking has become a major human rights issue in Myanmar. Not only does human trafficking within Myanmar raise a big concern, but cross border trafficking is also a critical problem. Most victims are from minority states such as *Kachine* and *Rakhine*, places that tend to suffer from political instability, growing insecurity and lack of recognition from the Myanmar



Figure 2 clearly identifies human trafficking routes from Myanmar to its neighbouring states. For instance, the Dry Zone of Myanmar, which refers to the central regions of Magway, Mandalay and southern Sagiang and is home to approximately one fourth of the total population of Myanmar, is a major trafficking transit area that connects cross border trafficking routes to minority states in Myanmar. There are also many routes that traffic minority victims to Laos (UNIAP, 2015). These routes demonstrate how human trafficking in Myanmar has escalated into a regional underground operation. According to the United Nations, minority groups are trafficked to China, Malaysia and Thailand mostly for labour exploitation. For female victims, they are often subject to sexual exploitation and domestic work. Children are forced to either work as beggars or petty thieves in streets (UNIAP, 2015). In the case of human trafficking to China, victims tend to be from *Kachin* and Northern *Shan* States. Most of the victims are women, who are usually trafficked to the *Yunnan* Province in China as prostitutes or as “brides for sale”. These “brides” are sold to unmarried men in Chinese rural areas and are often forcibly married and subjected to domestic violence and exploitation (Blanchard, 2007).

Thailand is also a major market that has high demand for trafficked labour. The main exploitative sites are in Bangkok, Samut, Mae Sai, and Mae Sot. Human traffickers supply Thailand with “slave labourers” mostly for its agricultural and fishing industries. For instance, Thai fishing industries are notorious for exploiting persecuted ethnic minorities from Myanmar. A *Guardian* news report estimated that at least 12,000 *Rohingya* migrants, an ethnic minority from the *Rakhine* state in Myanmar, were sold to fishing industries each month as of 2014 and were exploited as slave labourers and sex slaves (Stoakes *et al.*, 2015). In addition, upon the agreement of the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) between Myanmar and Thailand in 2008, Thailand’s agricultural businesses were granted the rights to engage in sizeable agricul-

tural projects within Myanmar's border regions that are inhabited by ethnic minorities. During these projects, however, The New York Times (2015) reports show that Thai businesses largely have utilised trafficked labour, consisting of ethnic minority groups such as the *Karen*. The reports also suggested that traffickers may have colluded with Thai officials to smuggle ethnic minorities into Thailand. Notably, "unrecognised" ethnic groups such as the *Rohingya* are the main victims because they do not possess identification documentation from the Myanmar government. Most of the *Rohingya* victims were asylum seekers who were transiting through Thailand to reach Malaysia, but were instead sold into forced labour in Thailand (Buckley, Berry, 2015).

## **VULNERABILITY OF ETHNIC MINORITY GROUPS TO HUMAN TRAFFICKING**

Due to the lack of ethnic minority rights, the government's hostile policies towards minority populations, and widespread poverty, ethnic minority groups have become prime targets for human traffickers. In particular, ethnic minorities are large victims of cross border human trafficking. The United Nations Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking (UNIAP) reported that 73 per cent of human trafficking victims in Thailand and Malaysia are from the *Shan* states while 36 per cent of victims in China are from minority populations in central dry zone areas (UNIAP, 2015). Because most ethnic minorities reside in the areas bordering Thailand and China, they are frequent targets for human trafficking.

Not only does proximity to the market make ethnic minority groups ideal targets for human trafficking, but also their generally lower economic status. According to the U.S. Department of State, reports indicate that Malaysian government officials purposefully lured job-seeking ethnic minorities to the Malay-



sia-Thailand border in order to hand them to human traffickers once they are formally deported (Ngiam, 2012). There were also several cases where ethnic minority workers were hired in neighbouring countries but were abused as slave labourers by foreign employers. Economic hardship faced by ethnic minority groups is a significant vulnerability factor, as many ethnic minority workers seek to find jobs in bordering nations such as China and Thailand that offer higher wages. Human traffickers lure minority workers by falsifying themselves as brokers (UNIAP, 2015), and then selling their victims as forced labourers or sex slaves.

The Myanmar government's policies towards ethnic minorities, especially regarding the displacement of minority groups, have significantly increased the likelihood of human traffickers targeting minority populations. The Myanmar government forcibly relocated ethnic minority groups, most prominently done after 1988 staged coup by the military government. The government justified its actions by claiming that the forced relocation was one of its counter-insurgency policies. The loss of their lands meant that ethnic minority groups were unable to sustain their livelihoods through their primary economic activity, farming. As a result, these groups were more likely to become indebted, impoverished, or homeless and thus more susceptible to human trafficking (Smith, 1994, p.71). There is also evidence that government officials have engaged in human rights abuses during this dislocation process. The United States Department of State report (2013) suggested that military personnel within Myanmar were serious perpetrators of forced labourers and child soldiers, especially in ethnic minority areas. According to this report, since the dissolution of a ceasefire with the *Kachine* army, conflicts with minority populations have displaced approximately 75,000 *Kachine* and 115,000 *Rakhine* residents, which left these groups highly vulnerable to forced labour and sex trafficking (U.S. Department of State, 2015). Most importantly, the Myanmar government has refused to recognise some of these displaced ethnic

minority groups such as the *Rohingya*, and the government has been accused of deliberately ignoring human rights violations and economic despair in these regions. Essentially, inhumane treatment and policies by the central government have destroyed living circumstances for some ethnic minorities, thereby causing them to be more exposed to human trafficking.

## **ARMED CONFLICT BETWEEN MINORITY GROUPS AND THE MYANMAR GOVERNMENT**

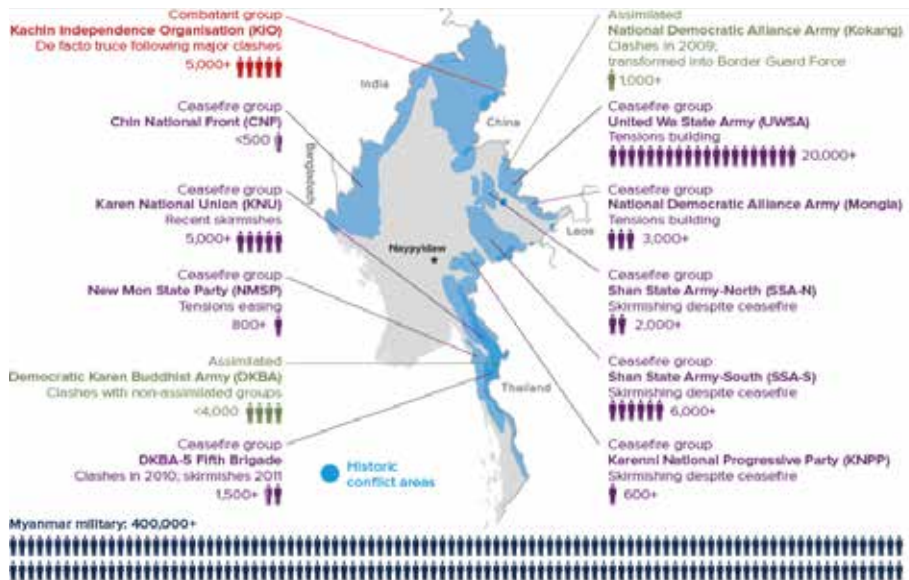
Lack of protection from the Myanmar government and the large presence of human trafficking in regions where ethnic minority groups reside has forced them to develop their own measures of protection, resulting in the formation of armed groups amongst ethnic groups in Myanmar.

Although some armies, such as the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), were formed at the end of British colonial era, many others such as the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) were established more recently, in order to rebel against the government. These insurgencies against the military government not only sought more autonomy within their regions, but they also felt that their basic ethnic minority rights listed in the *Panglong Agreement*, an agreement between the *Kachine* leaders and General Aung San in 1947 that guarantees autonomy and internal administration of ethnic areas, were being violated. In the case of the “Asian highway” project that the Myanmar government ambitiously designed, numerous reports indicate that forced labour was used in the construction. The project also resulted in the destruction of agricultural lands in Karen state and other areas (Raj, 2008). Most importantly, there were frequent allegations where government authorities and the military took advantage of these destroyed ethnic societies to promote their human trafficking. Such cases consequently aroused general distrust and opposition

to the Myanmar government. Therefore, the militarisation of ethnic minority groups was predominantly caused by their mistrust of the Myanmar government.

Despite such criticism, the Myanmar government has steadily made progress in stopping armed conflicts with minority armed groups. Figure 3 below shows how the Myanmar government agreed to a ceasefire with major armed groups as well as to assimilate some of these armed militias into the Myanmar's Border Guard Forces. Accordingly, it seemed that the Myanmar government's assimilation strategy was effective in ending long lasting armed conflicts with minority armed groups.

**FIGURE 3 THE NUMBER OF MINORITY COMBATANT GROUP THAT HAVE BEEN ABSORBED INTO THE BORDER GUARD FORCES**



Source: Myanmar Peace Monitor, Oxford Analytica.

However, the government's plan to assimilate armed opposition groups into *Tatmadaw*-commanded Border Guard Forces has intensified confrontations between the *Tatmadaw* and ethnic minority armed groups. Experts stress that ethnic minorities mistrust the Myanmar government and the army, arguing that there has been a "lack of genuine will by the Myanmar government to listen to the [ethnic minorities'] demands for ethnic rights and self-determination" (Sot, 2012). In parallel, as part of the "four cuts strategy" (an attempt to cut off food, funds, intelligence, and recruits to the insurgents), the *Tatmadaw* has perpetrated widespread violations of economic, social and cultural rights, including the deprivation of means of livelihood, excessive taxation and coercion. By these and other measures, ethnic minorities are discriminated against, or in extreme cases, not recognised as citizens of Burma (*Open Democracy*, 2016). These resettled ethnic minorities were "forced" to migrate to Thailand or China where they were then often used as forced labourers or, for women, used as sex slaves. Due to *Tatmadaw*'s disinterest in truly integrating opposition armed forces into the Burmese army, its strategies have backfired and increased resentment towards the *Tatmadaw*. Ethnic minorities frequently regard them as invaders and perpetrators (Smith, 1994, p.71-95). To some extent, ethnic populations began to blame the Myanmar government for economic despair and increased human trafficking in their regions, aggravating tensions between the Myanmar government and ethnic minorities.

## ANALYSIS

It is important to discuss the interrelationship between the Myanmar government's policies towards minority populations and the rise of human trafficking of ethnic minorities. The most significant policy that has exacerbated the situation of human

trafficking has been the Burmese counter insurgency operations in ethnic minority regions. To begin with, the Myanmar government categorised various ethnic minority regions as war zones. It regarded all minority citizens as potential insurgents to justify various human rights abuses in ethnic minority regions. Government troops also forcibly seized properties, destroyed homes and killed villagers, thereby making it almost impossible for minority populations to reside in their traditional lands (Smith, 1994, p.73). The Myanmar government's displacement policies towards ethnic minorities notably increased the vulnerability of ethnic minorities to human trafficking. For instance, the government's displacement program forced almost 20 per cent of the *Karenni* and *Palsung* population to migrate to new lands (Smith, 1994, p.69). These minorities whose lands were seized without proper compensation from the government suffered severe economic hardship. Likewise, the Myanmar government was tolerant of their own officials committing human right abuses. As a result, human traffickers were able to take advantage of these displaced "refugees". In this sense, the Myanmar government's policies towards minority populations have aggravated the vulnerability of minority populations by promoting displacement and economic difficulties, in turn facilitating cross-border human trafficking.

The human trafficking problem in ethnic minorities and armed conflict in Myanmar are extraordinarily intertwined. According to Martin Smith (1994), ethnic minorities are more vulnerable to trafficking when they are going through conflicts, especially armed conflicts, with the Burmese army. Armed conflicts and *Tatmadaw's* policies towards ethnic minorities resulted in numerous displaced minority populations, who are inevitably targeted by human traffickers. On the other hand, the lack of systematic protection for ethnic minorities in Myanmar contributed to the formation of individual armies for ethnic minorities. After all, minorities have been looking for opportunities to gain more autonomy from the Myanmar government. The absence of ethnic

minority rights in Myanmar and the rising presence of human traffickers have given minority groups a plausible justification to arm themselves as a form of self-protection. The Myanmar government then categorised these minority groups with armed capabilities as insurgencies and implemented military campaigns to dismantle these potential threats. In the end, increased tensions caused more economic despair and displacement of minority groups, which further increased their vulnerability to human trafficking.

The interrelationship between human trafficking and armed conflict in Myanmar is an interesting case when compared to the traditional crime-conflict nexus literature. The crime-conflict nexus states that armed conflicts can create conditions for organised criminal activities. The report from the U.S. Department of State shows that human trafficking existed in Myanmar long before armed conflicts between Burmese army and minority insurgencies started. As conflict increased over time, the number of victims of human trafficking in minority regions has exponentially increased as well. For example, UNIAP reported that the number of human trafficking victims that have been rescued from the region increased from 540 in 2002 to 824 in 2005, a period during which the conflict heightened between the Myanmar government and ethnic minority groups (UNIAP, 2015). This trend could be explained by economic deterioration in ethnic minority regions due to armed conflict, which fostered cross-border trafficking to bordering nations. However, evidence has yet to show spill-over effects of human trafficking for minority insurgency groups. Some reports point out possible involvement of Myanmar and Thai officials in human trafficking, but there is no evidence that indicates a connection with minority insurgency groups. After all, human trafficking is a profitable business where there is enough demand in the market, both domestically and internationally. One possible explanation is that some of these insurgency groups were financed by other parties and financial

means; for instance, IHS Jane's Intelligence Review in December 2013 reported that China is discretely supporting the *Wa* group both financially and militarily (Schearf, 2013). Other insurgency groups such as the *Shan* already have their own criminal enterprises, such as opium trade, to generate revenue. In very rare cases like the *Karen*, they do not need criminal enterprises to fund their insurgencies because they already possess enriched mineral resources and hydroelectric powers. Regardless of each insurgency group's motives, there is no evidence that any are directly involved in the human trafficking business.

## **CONCLUSIONS FOR ETHNIC CONFLICTS IN MYANMAR**

For ethnic minority groups in Myanmar, human trafficking is a violation of their basic human rights. The Myanmar government's failure to protect minorities from these criminal activities has damaged minority groups' trusts in the government. Regardless of whether the *Tatmadaw* is to blame for this trafficking or not, the central government still has a duty to protect its people from such criminal activities. Perhaps minority groups have been hesitant to fully integrate into Burmese society because of this. At least minority groups who have their own military are comparatively less vulnerable to human traffickers than other minority groups without any form of armed protection.

However, the problem with having militarised minority groups is that the Myanmar government is not tolerant of such military capabilities. Thus, it is likely that the government would categorise these groups as insurgencies and target them with counter-insurgency strategies. Through past examples, the Myanmar government utilised "anti-insurgency" propaganda to abuse minority rights. The *Tatmadaw* has displaced various minority groups from their home lands, has used its population for

forced labour, and has committed various human right abuses in the name of patriotism. In the end, devastated minority populations, largely by such harsh measures by the government, became more vulnerable to human trafficking. In this sense, Myanmar has fallen into an inescapable cycle when it comes to dealing with minority conflicts. Without proper measures from the central government to protect its minority groups from human trafficking, minority populations militarise on their own for the sake of self-protection. Because the Myanmar government views minority military groups as a threat, it will inevitably lead to armed conflict between those two groups.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MYANMAR**

I will recommend possible policies the government of Myanmar can adopt to solve this seemingly inescapable cycle of ethnic minority problems. To do so, I will first identify problems and issues with Myanmar's current approaches towards minority rights. Lastly, I will present my recommendations for tackling human trafficking issues and ethnic minority problems.

### **Issues with Myanmar's current policies towards minority problems**

The first issue is that Aung San Suu Kyi's government is reluctant to prioritise ethnic minority issues in its agenda. When Aung San Suu Kyi successfully overtook the Myanmar governing body from the previous military regimes, many hoped that she would ameliorate the challenges facing minorities in Myanmar. Despite such hopeful expectations, Aung San Suu Kyi's government has announced it will prioritise a peaceful democratic transition and economic development over the minority conflicts. Although Aung San Suu Kyi did not comment directly on the Rohingya re-



gion, she has largely showed antipathy towards the Muslim population's concerns. U Win Htein, a spokesman and leading figure in Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), openly said that NLD will not prioritise *Rohingya* problem: "We have other priorities – peace, the peaceful transition of power, economic development and constitutional reform" (Rigby, 2015). In addition, an article in the *Independent* points out that "[Aung San Suu Kyi] has lamented the violence in Arakan State but has refused to endorse the positions of organisations such as Human Rights Watch, which have blamed Arakan's Buddhists for the persecution of the Muslims" (Popham, 2016). Thus, despite Aung San Suu Kyi's major push for liberalisation and democratisation, her agenda does not seem to include ethnic minorities in Myanmar.

Another issue is that Aung San Suu Kyi's government policies could potentially aggravate ethnic tensions in Myanmar. The Buddhist nationalists, many of whom are criticised for being extremely racist against Muslim minorities, are some of the biggest supporters of Aung San Suu Kyi. Additionally, Aung San Suu Kyi's government did not change the previous regime's policies towards the *Rohingya* population – the regime had previously officially stated that "*Rohingya* are interlopers and don't deserve citizenship rights." Furthermore, the Aung San Suu Kyi's government refused to recognise human right violations against the *Rohingya*, a continuation of the policy from the previous military government (Tharoor, 2015). The government urgently needs to address human rights violations against minorities in the *Rohingya* region. *The Telegraph* estimates that "around 140,000 have been forced to live in camps for internally displaced people since violence erupted in 2012, and the remainder – many of whom have lived in Burma for decades – face major restrictions on their freedom of movement" (Rigby, 2015). In addition, the *Rohingya* are the most targeted subjects for human traffickers in the region. The government's hesitation towards these issues has garnered strong criticism from the minority population. Conse-

quently, minorities are casting scepticism on Aung San Suu Kyi's government and openly denying their support towards Aung San Suu Kyi. For instance, Shwe Maung, one of three Rohingya Muslim Parliamentarian, claimed "he would not be given a vote in the election" (Baulk, 2015). Despite growing disapproval from the ethnic minority population, the Myanmar government is still hesitant to comply with the ethnic minorities' demands. The hesitation is in part because of the prevalence of Buddhism nationalism in current Myanmar politics and society. For instance, Buddhism played a significant role in rebelling against the military regime and they are the biggest supporters of Aung San Suu Kyi's political force (Mcgowan, 2012). Considering Burmese Buddhists' history of ethnocentrism and xenophobia of other cultures, supporting ethnic minorities groups like *Rohingya* could back-fire on Aung San Suu Kyi's government. For these reasons, Aung San Suu Kyi's government is wary of losing its main support, especially when the country is still in the middle of a political transition. However, that inaction from the Myanmar government has aggravated the tension between the Buddhist majority and other ethnic minorities. While ethnic minorities feel they are being politically marginalised, some of the Buddhist majority feel that Aung San Suu Kyi's government has not been punitive enough on uprisings from ethnic minorities. No matter which side Aung Sung Suu Kyi's government decides to support, it will likely to create more division in Myanmar society.

## Recommendations

In the following sections, I will suggest four recommendations for the Myanmar government and its neighbouring states to improve the cross border human trafficking situation for Myanmar's ethnic minority population.

1. Develop measures to address the core grievances of

ethnic minorities' problems. These measures should not be constrained by traditional Buddhist nationalism, thereby allowing the Myanmar government to adopt appropriate strategies to resolve ethnic minority problems.

Measures should include negotiating new treaty terms that guarantee minority groups' basic rights and citizenship. Most importantly, new measures should ensure that the Myanmar government will put an end to arbitrary land confiscation, forced relocations, and oppression of minorities from expressing their opinions and beliefs. Aung San Suu Kyi has liberated ethnic Burman from previous military regimes, but other ethnic minorities have been left out of this democratisation. Aung San Suu Kyi should adopt policies that resolve issues facing ethnic minorities, especially in Rakhine State where *Rohingya* Muslims are the target of severe human right abuses. The international community is increasingly criticising her government for neglecting minority right issues. Human rights advocacy groups have spoken out in protest. Nicolas Kristof, a columnist from the *New York Times* reports that Human Rights Watch, Fortify Rights and United to End Genocide have continuously reported brutality and un-humanitarian actions against the *Rohingya* (Kristof, 2016). The United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution in 2013 and other statements urging the Myanmar government to grant the *Rohingya* full citizenship rights. Since the majority of the population in Myanmar is Buddhist, Aung San Suu Kyi understandably does not want to adopt policies that will arouse Buddhist opposition. However, if Aung San Suu Kyi fails to address minority human rights issues, her government will also face the same domestic and international legitimacy issues that the previous military regime encountered. Therefore, Aung San Suu Kyi's government should address human rights abuses against ethnic minorities, despite their unpopularity with the Buddhist population for the purpose of long-term peace and legitimacy. Finally,

the Myanmar government should legally recognise the *Rohingya* as a minority group in Myanmar and allow government agencies and NGOs to gather and access relevant data and resources that specifically target the *Rohingya* population. Since the *Rohingya* people are the most susceptible to cross-border human trafficking, these statistics are crucial for developing policies to protect the *Rohingya*.

**2.** Develop proactive policies for both sex and labour trafficking offenders, especially against traffickers of minority populations.

Such policy options include increasing efforts to investigate and prosecute traffickers, implementing a clear victim identification process and protective measures, releasing data about human rights abuses against ethnic minorities in order to increase public awareness, allowing more authorities to participate in anti-trafficking task forces (ATTF), and granting the UN and other NGOs greater access to investigate trafficking issues. The administration can also improve coordination between the policymakers, prosecutors, and anti-trafficking task force (ATTF) to improve the system.

All of the proactive policies above would help the government of Myanmar tackle the roots of the problem. There is already substantial domestic and international awareness of human trafficking in Myanmar, especially of minority groups. So far, Myanmar has developed anti-trafficking task forces, allowed NGOs limited access to investigate human trafficking issues, and attempted to develop identification measures. However, many experts such as Raj Anil, have expressed skepticism of the effectiveness of such measures (Raj, 2008). Both internal and cross-border human trafficking numbers have not decreased. The role of anti-trafficking task forces is fairly limited and NGOs are not allowed to participate in victim identification and data gathering. I recommend more proactive measures focusing on human trafficking issues

in order to truly address the problem. Documentation of human rights abuse cases is important because it helps policymakers to understand the magnitude of the problem as well as to adopt more effective policies for human trafficking issues. In addition, the government and NGOs should implement measures to identify vulnerable ethnic minority groups and to partner with international human rights organisations to develop more proactive protection measures. Since the government's reactive policies towards human trafficking of ethnic minorities have proven to be ineffective, it is necessary to adopt more proactive actions.

**3.** Develop joint efforts with Myanmar's neighbouring countries in order to mitigate cross-border human trafficking as well as protect trafficked Burmese in these nations, particularly Thailand.

There are a large number of documented cases of cross-border human trafficking by NGOs, the UN, and foreign media. Myanmar is ethnically diverse and consists of ethnic groups originating from many of its bordering nations such as India, Bangladesh, China, Tibet, Laos and Thailand. Thus, it is important for the Myanmar government to realise that solely adopting domestic measures to prevent cross-border human trafficking is not enough. Instead, the Burmese government should coordinate directly with its neighbouring nations, such as Thailand, to establish a joint anti-trafficking task force (ATTF) in order to pressure human traffickers from both sides of the border. Furthermore, Myanmar should work with its neighbouring nations to grant NGOs and other international organisations unrestricted access to cross-border trafficking routes, known black markets, exploited labour sites and places with the presence of human trafficking victims. International organisations can proactively gather data and provide up-to-date statistics for Myanmar and neighbouring

states to evaluate the magnitude of the issue and combat trafficking.

**4.** Engage in dialogue with neighbouring countries to resolve the status of refugees and trafficked people from Myanmar to its neighbouring states.

Myanmar also needs to address the undocumented immigrants that were already trafficked to its neighbouring states. *The Bangkok Post* argued that “the joint effort between [Burma and Thailand] to verify the nationality of the workers who have illegally entered Thailand failed because the Myanmar government does not care about the plight of its people” (*The Bangkok Post*, 2007). In fact, the Myanmar government has complicated the identification process by demanding these migrants to return to Myanmar for verification. The Myanmar government should first actively collaborate with its neighbouring nations on the migration issue. By doing so, Myanmar can be fully informed of the status and situations of migrants in its neighbouring states to develop relevant solutions to guarantee their safety and rights. Then, the government should engage in meaningful dialogue and diplomacy with its neighbouring states to protect and promote the rights of these migrant workers, the majority of whom are victims of human sex and labour trafficking.

## CONCLUSION

Myanmar is currently trapped in a vicious cycle, whereby ethnic minorities are marginalised, leading them to militarise, which in turn leads to government crackdown and further marginalisation. This cycle historically leaves minorities extremely vulnerable to trafficking both within Myanmar and across borders to neighbouring countries. In order to break this cycle, I recom-

mend that the Myanmar government should develop measures that address core grievances of ethnic minorities such as forced relocation issues and citizenship rights, develop proactive policies to stem both sex and labour trafficking offences, establish joint efforts with its neighbouring states to alleviate cross border human trafficking, and finally engage in dialogue with neighbouring states to recognise and protect existing undocumented immigrants in those states who are often victims of human trafficking. By taking these steps, the Myanmar government can start to truly establish democratic society its people have been hoping for, one that is inclusive of all ethnic groups, and sincerely combat its human trafficking problems.

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