

WFP's review of TBBC's food aid to the Burma refugees at the Thailand-Burma Border

October 2006

I. Executive summary

The operations of Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) are not only well documented but also well managed by skilled and dedicated staff that put the needs of the refugees at the centre of everything they do.

For about two decades now, TBBC's programmes have been implemented through partnerships with refugee committees, community-based organizations and local groups. This long standing relationship has culminated into an 'institutionalized' trust which very much define the mode of TBBC's operations within the Thailand Burma border, and which in many ways provides a competitive edge to TBBC's operations.

Owing to a broad based donor support to TBBC, there is no anticipation of food pipeline breaks until the end of 2007. The only threat to food pipeline in the camps would be a result of inaccessibility of some camps during the rainy season or unforeseen under performance of some suppliers. This threat is however minimal.

TBBC is presently confronted with the crucial task of ensuring that all deserving refugees are included in the feeding list. This will involve high level open talks with the Government of Thailand to review its current restriction of registration of new arrivals by the Ministry of Interior. As a member of the Committee for Coordination of Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand, TBBC is very capable of resolving this impasse given also its long standing good relationship with the Thai authorities. A quick resolution to this would be a relief to the affected thousands of unregistered new arrivals with no means of livelihood other than kinship support, begging and reliance on scarce odd job opportunities. It should be noted with concern that the majority of people visiting nutrition centers are the unregistered refugees, which underscores their unmet food needs.

The future prospects for refugee resettlement in third countries remain uncertain at the moment or within the coming year or so. It is therefore highly appreciable that TBBC has initiated a food security component within its programmes to help alleviate poverty and encourage dignified survival of the refugees as well as the surrounding host population. In this regard, the Community Agricultural and Nutrition (CAN) Programme of TBBC needs to be expanded and supported by various donors.

Even though the food needs for the registered refugees are fully met by the current TBBC programmes at the border, there are some aspects of the operation as discussed later in this report that could improve the effectiveness of TBBC's operations.

II. Objectives and methodology of the WFP's review mission.

Objective

The primary objective of the WFP's review mission was to assess whether the provision of food to 150,000 refugees in 9 camps on the Thailand Burma border is adequately covered by TBBC.

Methodology

The review mission looked into the relevance of the current TBBC Programme activities with regards to the food needs of the refugees; the food supply chain; warehouse management; process of food distributions and monitoring.

The review process began in early October through desk review of reports and documents followed by visit to TBBC's offices in Bangkok; three days field visit to Mae Sot Field office during which Umpiem Mai and Maela refugee camps were visited; discussions with camp committees; visit to godowns; interviews with new arrivals; and visit to a distribution site.

III. Main findings and recommendations

1. Registration

Some refugees reported to have lived in the camps for as long as 2 years without being included in the feeding lists. For reasons that did not come out clearly during the review mission, the Thai Ministry of Interior has imposed restrictions on registration of any more new arrivals into the camps. It was not easy to determine the exact number of the refugees excluded from the feeding lists though the camp committees estimated that there were between 5,000-6,000 in the two camps visited (Umpiem Mae and Maela) alone. This presents a serious exclusion error that needs to be addressed with the Ministry of Interior as most of the unregistered refugees were found to be leading undignified life in the camps characterized by begging, over reliance on kinship support as well as performance of elusive odd jobs that reward less than 50 baht (about US\$1.35) a day. TBBC occasionally provided some of the unregistered refugees with some little food from its contingency stocks in the godowns but this was noted to be irregular. It is no wonder then that the bulk of people admitted at the nutritional feeding centers are the unregistered new arrivals.

Recommendation:

- TBBC and UNHCR to **urgently** pursue the matter of registration of new arrivals with the relevant Thai Authorities with the aim of lifting the current Ministry of Interior (MOI) restriction on registration of new arrivals.

2. Food basket

The current food items in the food basket provide a total calorific contribution of 2,230 Kcal and are well accepted by the refugees. The needs of the special groups like malnourished children, pregnant and nursing mothers, the aged, etc are met by the nutritional feeding programmes run by health agencies eg Aide Medicale Internationale (AMI). TBBC has included in its general food basket the *AsiaMix* (fortified blended flour) that is additionally beneficial to the vulnerable groups. There is also nursery school feeding and regular monitoring of the nutritional status of the refugees in general.

Recommendation:

- TBBC to continue to monitor closely the admission rate into the supplementary feeding Programme as well as therapeutic feeding programmes. The monitoring is recommended to consider the seasonality of high admission rates to enable TBBC continue with timely distribution plans and make available contingency stocks.

3. Food pipeline

About 20 governments/donors currently support the TBBC activities. The result of the donor support to the refugee needs is a healthy food pipeline for the remaining months of 2006 as well as the entire 2007. There are only minimal risks of pipeline breaks due to unforeseen poor performance of the suppliers or inaccessibility of some camps as a result of poor road condition.

Recommendation:

- TBBC to continue with its current strategic resource mobilization efforts to ensure no funding constraints are encountered in its food aid activities even beyond 2007.
- To ensure uninterrupted supplies from the suppliers, TBBC should continue to monitor closely and have regular meetings with suppliers to mitigate any possible breaks as a result of non performance.

4. Procurement system

Though this was not looked at in details, the downstream supply chain professes a very transparent and traceable tendering system which presents low risk of abuse and ensures high quality commodity to the refugees. The professional inspections provide additional safety net for ensuring good quality supplies, right weight and packaging.

Recommendation: This transparent system to continue!

5. Warehousing

Efforts have been made in the past for godowns to meet some minimal WFP warehousing standards as per WFP's warehouse management handbook. This was evident from past trainings provided on godown management. But all the godowns visited were, unfortunately, far from reaching WFP standards.

Recommendation:

-TBBC to provide some more training on godown management and ensure implementation of the skills learnt.

6. Ration books:

The ration books follow very much the principles of WFP's ration cards, but were noticed to be kept by some of the section heads during and after distributions and the refugees seemed to have no idea what was written in the ration books. While this has rightly not been an issue for TBBC which relies heavily on the trust between itself and the section heads to provide the right quantity of food to the households, there remains high risk of food misappropriation if not closely monitored. There is also no proper audit trail of the food supply chain since the ration books (or prepared master lists) are not signed (or thumb printed) by the beneficiaries to acknowledge quantity of food received.

Recommendation:

- The quantity of food received should be acknowledged by the representative of the refugee household receiving the food in form of a signature or thumb prints.
- The ration books should be retained by refugees themselves after food distributions.
- The present ration books should include a column for signature or thumb prints. This could also be done on master lists if it is not possible to add an additional column.

7. Godown and distribution losses

The TBBC's Supply and Distribution Reconciliation carried out monthly collate godown and distribution losses that result from food handling or spillages. Though not regular, losses upto 3% are investigated by TBBC and corrective measures undertaken in addition to providing comprehensive reports to the donors. This was noted to be one of the best practices of TBBC.

Recommendation:

- This is a transparent approach to commodity handling and should be documented by TBBC as one of its best practices.

8. Monitoring

A lot of efforts have been put on the monitoring of TBBC activities. Indeed there are available in-depth monitoring tools developed for this purpose. There is also good feedback of monitoring results to the camps which, as intended by TBBC, instills greater ownership of Programme monitoring among refugee partners in addition to strengthening the monitoring feedback loop. It was however noticed that the monitoring tools available focus more on food delivery process and the end use is done only once in a year by the annual nutrition surveys.

The Field Assistants also seemed overburdened by the overwhelming number of monitoring tools to be used on monthly basis.

Recommendation:

- A well structured monthly Post Distribution Monitoring is recommended to capture vital information like actual use of food (quantity traded, amount shared with relatives, quantity actually consumed at the household level etc).

-TBBC to review its staffing capacity for monitoring activities to avoid overloading the Field Assistants.

9. Income generating activities

The Community Agricultural and Nutrition (CAN) component of TBBC's activities at the border is commendable as it assists the refugees and the host population to achieve sustainable increases in food production using local resources and helps them to develop appropriate and essential skills needed to achieve future long term food security.

Recommendation:

- Expand the activities under CAN.

-Consider if Food for Work, Food for Training could help expand the CAN project.

10. HIV and Aids

TBBC is actively involved in advocacy for the refugees to be considered as migrant workers in Thailand, which would mean lots of movement between the camps and the urban settlements within Thailand. Even though the current HIV infection rates in the camps remain low, movement between the camps and other urban settlements within Thailand render the refugees vulnerable to HIV infection. It is therefore encouraging to note that TBBC conducted and HIV and Aids awareness training to its staff some two weeks ago. A lot more however needs to be done by TBBC in terms of more education and awareness in the camps. This could be done in collaboration with the health agencies and CBOs.

Recommendation:

- TBBC to work closely with CBOs and NGOs in the camps to directly address the issues of HIV and Aids, even if only in the form of education/awareness.

IV. Main conclusion

Except for the unregistered refugees which is beyond the TBBC's control, TBBC is effectively covering the needs of the 150,000 refugees at the Thailand Burma border. But there exist opportunities for cooperation between WFP and TBBC in terms of technical advice as may be needed from time to time.

V. Main recommendation:

TBBC to continue with its current successful strategic efforts of meeting the needs of the refugees and should consider sending some of its staff to WFP's operations to broaden their knowledge base on food aid operations. WFP's 'Food Assistance to Bhutanese Refugees' in Nepal would be very ideal for such an exchange visit.