

PUBLIC INFORMATION SHEET: November 2017

Donors and diplomats joined TBC's board of directors, member organisations and senior staff between 13th and 16th November 2017 to reflect on contextual and programmatic trends during a series of meetings in Mae Sot and an exposure visit to Maela refugee camp. TBC was honoured to be joined by the Australian Ambassadors from both Thailand and Myanmar and more than 50 people participated in the discussions including representatives from the US, UK, Canadian and Australian governments as well as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from 8 countries.

In Maela Refugee Camp, representatives from women's organisations, youth groups, the Muslim community and other vulnerable groups expressed concerns about reductions in assistance and anxieties about the sustainability of return. Refugee leaders explained that they are trying to mitigate these fears through facilitating community-driven planning processes for group resettlement in areas administered by the Karen National Union (KNU).

During consultations with political parties, concerns were raised about stagnation in the peace process and specifically in regard to ceasefire monitoring, interim arrangements, political dialogue and security sector reform. It was noted that KNU recently expressed concern that the Tatmadaw's aggressive military operations in northern Rakhine State could derail the national reconciliation process.

Civil society organisations briefed participants about efforts to raise awareness about nutrition, improve water supply and sanitation infrastructure, strengthen customary land tenure and promote sustainable livelihoods in communities emerging from protracted conflict. Reflections were also shared on the cessation of food assistance to camps for internally displaced persons and the need to broaden options through which refugees can access support during return and reintegration.

TBC reported that acute malnutrition remains low amongst refugee children and that the prevalence of chronic malnutrition has reduced by 5% (to 30%), which indicates a significant downward trend. Refugee programme priorities for 2018 were presented and included rolling out of the food card system into all camps subject to approval from the Ministry of Interior.

In regards to funding for refugees along the Thailand border, it was reported that negotiations with the Government of Norway for a contribution in 2017 continue while the Government of Sweden's long term commitment will cease at the end of this year. TBC's initial budget projections for 2018 assume the refugee population will decrease by 8%, and that the remaining government donors will maintain support at the same levels. That would enable TBC to maintain food and charcoal rations at the same levels in 2018, but only by depleting general reserves.

TBC members reflected that to be a refugee along this border generally means to have escaped from conflict and abuse in order to be free from military control. In this context, the prospect of resettlement into government administered areas may not be the preferred choice. While protracted encampment is not a solution for refugees, the principles of voluntary return with dignity and safety cannot be understood in a cultural vacuum.

The agency of refugees and civil society will be instrumental in determining how lives and livelihoods can be re-established beyond the camps in the coming months and years. Flexibility from the donor community and understanding from national and sub-national authorities will also be key. TBC hopes this week's discussions have furthered understanding of the challenges ahead and contributed to finding solutions for refugees.