



A Year On, Refugee Leadership Deserves Recognition and Investment: A joint statement

1 October 2026

On 1 October 2025, refugees living in the nine camps along the Thailand Myanmar border became able to leave camp to work legally. One year on, this remains a momentous step forward: more than 6,800 refugees have already left camp to work, and more are leaving to take up employment every day, sending money home and helping their families become self-reliant and able to meet their own needs. This transition is already underway and fully supported by refugee committees, who see it as the pathway to self-reliance for their communities.

No one understands the strengths and needs of refugees better than refugees themselves, and the past year has shown the scale of what refugee led governance can do. Committee members are visiting farms, companies and worksites to identify job opportunities and meet employers directly, coordinating with Thai authorities, village heads and employers to arrange safe travel and resolve disputes, and monitoring refugees who leave camps to work. Every camp now has a complaint and response mechanism, alongside training for departing workers that committees themselves recruit trainers for and organise. Committees are drafting contracts and rules to protect refugees working outside the camps, and actively promoting opportunities with employers, including for women.

This has happened against a backdrop of massive funding reductions. In the face of these reductions, refugee committees have stepped up, taking on a huge share of activities previously carried out on their behalf, from waste management to sanitation, to healthcare and more, all while continuing to look after their communities day to day. This sits alongside the community and protection work committees have long carried, from forums that share information on right to work developments, to awareness raising on gender-based violence, child safety and substance use, to youth and sports activities that keep communities strong. Refugee governance is a genuine asset to the wider community around the camps, as well as within them.

Barriers remain. Not all refugees are eligible for the right to work, and older refugees and refugees with disabilities have fewer opportunities open to them; refugee committees are working to expand access for everyone able and willing to work. Too many refugees are still seen mainly as a source of low-cost labour, when their skills span management, health, education and many other fields; realising the full extent of refugee skill remains a barrier in itself, one that employers and humanitarian actors all have a role in overcoming. We are working closely with the relevant departments of the Royal Thai Government to address these challenges, strengthen engagement, and ensure that refugee employment is safe, fair, and sustainable as part of the broader transition process. As humanitarian funding becomes more uncertain, work is becoming ever more essential to refugee independence, and the limited funding that remains must be coordinated closely with refugee committees so it is used efficiently and matched to refugees' skills and needs.

Camp Committees have shown they can absorb an expanding range of responsibilities and do so with skill, judgement and deep local knowledge. What would allow this capacity to grow, rather than strain, is investment that matches it, in particular stipends for camp management

staff that reflect the scale of responsibility they now carry, and funding for governance that runs across several years so committees can plan ahead with confidence.

The support refugees are seeking is help with the transition to self-reliance, rather than a return to food assistance. Refugees must be treated as genuine partners in shaping that transition: included early in decisions, consulted on how funding for the transition is planned and used, and recognised as the skilled, capable and political actors they already are. Humanitarian actors have an important role to play in this, by investing in refugee governance as core infrastructure for the transition, coordinating support so it reaches communities without duplication, and building partnerships that share information proactively and consistently. Nothing about refugees should happen without refugees.

The Border Consortium, Karen Refugee Committee & the Karenni Refugee Committee