



# Myanmar

## Quick facts

Number of IDPs	At least 451,000
Percentage of total population	At least 0.9%
Start of current displacement situation	1960s
New displacement in 2008	At least 66,000
Returns in 2008	Undetermined
Causes of displacement	Internal armed conflict, human rights violations
Human development index	135

In October 2008, there were an estimated 451,000 people internally displaced by conflict in rural areas of eastern Myanmar. There were also unknown but significant numbers of IDPs in other parts of the country including in urban areas.

The displacement in eastern Myanmar has primarily been caused by government forces, and to a lesser extent by the insurgent ethnic armed groups fighting them. Since 1996, over 3,000 villages have been destroyed, forcibly relocated or otherwise emptied, leading to the forced migration of their occupants. However the displacement has been ongoing since the conflict began five decades ago, and became systematic from the mid-1960s with the introduction of the “Four Cuts” policy that targeted civilians and caused their displacement with the objective of separating ethnic armies from their civilian support bases. In areas where ceasefire agreements between ethnic leaders and the government have brought conflicts to an end, displacement has often continued due to human rights violations by government forces.

IDPs in eastern Myanmar were in 2008 either gathered in government-run relocation sites, dispersed in hiding areas in the jungle, or in ceasefire areas administered by groups that have agreements with the government. The IDPs in relocation sites may have been supporting themselves through daily labour, while a little aid from community-based groups and religious organisations may have reached them, but those in hiding were largely without formal support or livelihoods. In 2008 the estimated number of IDPs in ceasefire areas fell, but the number in hiding areas and relocation sites increased as over 140 villages were destroyed or relocated.

In comparison with Myanmar’s non-displaced population, IDPs especially in hiding and in relocation sites face greater physical insecurity due to their forcible displacement and relocation; less access to basic necessities; and a higher risk of exploitation. However, virtually all of the IDPs in eastern Myanmar are from ethnic minorities and so share certain risks with non-displaced members of minorities.

Government troops in many cases burn villages and farms of IDPs, so they have nothing to return to, and soldiers may also attack IDPs in hiding sites. The government prevents all humanitarian agencies from specifically targeting people displaced by conflict, and in the absence of formal aid programmes, some IDPs and particularly displaced women have had

to forage for food and water in areas with large numbers of government troops, putting them at risk of further violence. Displaced children have been at high risk of forced labour and recruitment.

IDPs in hiding in eastern Myanmar have experienced severe food shortages, as their farms and crops have been burned by the army. Some IDPs in relocation sites in Myanmar also face chronic malnutrition due to limited access to land; in cases where IDPs are able to grow crops, the army may be imposing taxes which leave many with no means of securing even their minimum subsistence needs. Water and sanitation facilities in relocation sites may be inadequate and residents are prone to a number of diseases. Mortality rates of displaced children in conflict areas are three times Myanmar’s average, at levels comparable to those among displaced children in Somalia.

IDP children in hiding areas have few learning resources, and open-air classes have often been disrupted by fighting. A large percentage of children in areas of conflict have to leave school after primary level, and in areas under government control they have been prevented from studying their own languages, having instead to study in Burmese.

The prospects are best for those IDPs in ceasefire areas (there were around 224,000 in 2008) where integration may be feasible to a certain extent. It is, however, unlikely that they will achieve equal enjoyment of their human rights. For the people in hiding in jungles, safe return will not be possible until the threat of army attacks and destruction of villages recedes. At some relocation sites, restrictions on IDPs may decrease and they may be then considered to have locally integrated to a certain extent.

For lasting change, the armed conflict and human rights violations would have to give way to genuine reconciliation between the majority and minority ethnic populations; the government would also have to recognise the existence of conflict-induced displacement in the country and give access to agencies seeking to assist IDPs.