



Myanmar



Quick facts

Number of IDPs	At least 470,000
Percentage of total population	At least 0.9%
Start of current displacement situation	1960s
Peak number of IDPs (Year)	Undetermined
New displacement	75,000

At the end of 2009, there were an estimated 470,000 people internally displaced by armed 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.

Internal displacement in eastern Myanmar has primarily been caused by government forces, and to a lesser extent by the insurgent ethnic armed groups fighting them. From 1996 to 2009, over 3,500 villages and hiding sites were destroyed, forcibly relocated or otherwise emptied, leading to the forced displacement of their occupants. However, displacement has been ongoing since the conflict began five decades ago, and it became systematic from the mid-1960s with the introduction of the “four cuts” policy (seeking to cut off insurgents’ access to food, money, intelligence, and fighting personnel) that has targeted civilians and caused their displacement in order to separate ethnic armies from their civilian support bases. In areas where ceasefire agreements between armed opposition leaders and the government brought conflicts to an end, displacement has often continued due to human rights violations by government forces.

In 2009, the government demanded that all groups which had agreed ceasefires turn themselves into army-led Border Guard Forces. This led to new fighting in ceasefire areas, with some new displacement as a result. Government-led development projects also affected IDPs and led to further displacement.

IDPs in eastern Myanmar were in 2009 either gathered in government-run relocation sites (128,000), dispersed in hiding areas in the jungle (111,000), or in areas administered by ceasefire groups (231,000). During the year, the respective estimated numbers of IDPs in each of these situations increased. 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 comparison with Myanmar’s non-displaced population, IDPs – and particularly those in hiding or in relocation sites – face greater physical insecurity due to their forced displacement and relocation; they have less access to basic necessities, and they face a higher risk of exploitation. However, virtually all of the IDPs in eastern Myanmar are from ethnic minorities and so they share certain difficulties with non-displaced members of minorities.

Government troops have in many cases burned down villages and farms, so that IDPs have nothing to return to, and soldiers have also attacked 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 people without the means to secure even their minimum subsistence needs. Water and sanitation facilities in relocation sites may be inadequate and residents more susceptible to a number of diseases. Mortality rates of displaced children in conflict areas are three times Myanmar’s average. Internally displaced children in hiding areas have few learning resources, and open-air classes have often been disrupted by fighting. A large percentage of children in conflict areas have to leave school after primary level, and in areas under government control they have been prevented from studying in their own languages, having instead to study in Burmese.

The prospects are best for the 231,000 IDPs living in ceasefire areas, 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 the various minority ethnic populations; the government would also have to recognise that there are people who have been displaced by conflict in the country and give them access to assistance.