

Urban refugees in Thailand

“The police have arrested me three times. Each time I show them my UN certificate [which states that I am a UNHCR-recognized refugee], but they don’t care. They tied my hands behind my back and took me to the police station, and then they took all my money.”

A refugee from Ivory Coast, AAT community education session



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Thailand is not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and has no domestic legislation governing refugees.¹

Most urban refugees arrive with a genuine passport and tourist visa, although some arrive on fake passports, with their passage secured by human smugglers. They have usually exhausted most of their savings to come to Thailand. Once their tourist visas expire, they are illegal immigrants under Thai law, and thus **at constant risk of arrest and detention**, regardless of their UNHCR certificates which indicate that they are recognized refugees. The police often harass and extort money from refugees before releasing them, but arrest can also result in indefinite detention.

Refugees have no right to work legally in Thailand, and it is difficult to find employment even in the informal sector. Humanitarian assistance for asylum seekers is provided in an organized way by only a couple of NGOs in Bangkok, but this is insufficient to cover even their basic needs. The

subsistence allowance provided to recognized refugees is insufficient to enable refugees to pay rent and put food on the table, let alone cover other expenditure.

Most urban refugees in Thailand have a precarious existence: unable to work, often unable to send their children to school, financially stressed, dependent on arbitrary handouts to survive, at risk of exploitation and constantly worried about being arrested and indefinitely detained. Many have physical and psychological health problems resulting from the trauma they experienced in their home countries, worsened by their difficult living conditions in Bangkok.

Refugees, particularly Africans, often face harassment and discrimination from the Thai community.² Many refugees were unaware how challenging conditions would be in Thailand before they came, often having been misled by human smugglers.

Even if refugees obtain refugee status, the chances of being resettled are slim, and **they face serious ongoing protection problems for as long as they remain in Thailand.**

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¹ Burmese refugees are dealt with under a separate executive order, permitting them to stay in Thailand if they are registered in one of various camps along the Thai/Burmese border.

² Documented by the UNHCR in *Analysis of Gaps in Refugee Protection Capacity Thailand*, November 2006 pp 5, 10, 11, 14, 18.