Bringing hope to Myanmar migrants and refugees fleeing adversity

The border between Myanmar and Thailand is characterized by intricate mobility dynamics. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) is working to understand and address the complexities of this situation. From January to May 2023, the IOM data collection team conducted interviews with over 2,600 individuals from Myanmar as they entered Thailand. For this work, IOM has enlisted the support of seven UN Community Volunteers.

The migration corridor between Myanmar and Thailand is one of the top 20 in size globally and the largest in the Asia-Pacific region. An estimated 10,000 individuals enter Thailand monthly through just two of 10 observed border provinces. Of these, 15 per cent cite the quest for safety as a reason for leaving home.

Acknowledging the multifaceted nature of the crisis and the implications it has on cross-border movements, UN Community Volunteers with IOM are aiding data collection for the Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM).
The UN Community Volunteers have allowed IOM to reach out to Myanmar nationals, many of whom do not speak Thai or English. The familiarity of UN Volunteers with the community and the languages of the migrants is a key asset to facilitate IOM’s operations. They contribute to the UN’s overall mission to create an inclusive society that respects the rights of refugees and migrants and its goal of leaving no one behind. – Géraldine Ansart, IOM Chief of Mission, Thailand

Cherry* joined IOM as a UN Community Volunteer in August 2022, powered by her dedication to improving the conditions of migrants and refugees. Based in Ranong province, she interviews refugees, engages with village leaders and conducts surveys to gain insight into the prevalent conditions and needs. By actively tuning in to their stories, Cherry provides migrants and refugees with a platform to express their perspectives, share their experiences and communicate their unique circumstances and requirements.

Through my interactions with nationals of Myanmar, I understand the difficulties they encounter, such as economic hardships, social exclusion and limited access to basic services. As a migrant myself, I have a deep understanding of the challenges and struggles faced by this marginalized community. – Cherry, UN Community Volunteer and DTM enumerator with IOM, Thailand

Mali* is also a DTM enumerator with IOM. In her previous role, she used to serve as a Burmese interpreter for migrants seeking medical support in hospitals. By interviewing nationals of Myanmar and community leaders, she gained extensive insight into their daily lives and circumstances. Building on this experience, her assignment as a UN Community Volunteer uncovered her capacity to bring about change and betterment for this vulnerable group.

It is my aspiration that the data collected will be used to develop constructive policy recommendations, ultimately leading to improved lives
for migrants and refugees. I take great pride and happiness in contributing to enhancing their conditions. --Mali, UN Community Volunteer and DTM enumerator with IOM, Thailand

The UN Community Volunteers bring their experiences, personal and professional, to their current assignments. "Before joining IOM as a UN Volunteer, I worked with non-governmental organizations on various issues related to migrants and refugees," Phan* shares. "My role involved offering guidance and support to migrants, such as sharing information about documentation requirements, routes and other essential aspects."

The desire to help explore and address the difficulties of Myanmar nationals in Thailand spurred Ni Ni* and Kin Sa Na* to become UN Community Volunteers. They both provide migrants and refugees from Myanmar with crucial contact details for necessary support services, such as healthcare providers, legal aid organizations and community centres.

By conducting interviews and surveys, Ni Ni captures the voices, experiences and perspectives of migrants and refugees, shedding light on their daily struggles, hopes and aspirations. The resulting data is a powerful tool to advocate for evidence-based policies and programmes that address the specific needs of migrants and refugees, ultimately contributing to their overall well-being.

As a UN Volunteer, I am immersed in the daily lives of migrants and refugees. This hands-on approach provides me with invaluable opportunities to have meaningful conversations, exchange experiences and share knowledge with individuals who have embarked on challenging journeys in search of safety, stability and a better future. -- Ni Ni, UN Community Volunteer with IOM, Thailand

Kin Sa Na echoes this sentiment, saying, "I am glad that I am contributing to the migrant and refugee communities by exchanging with Myanmar nationals about my experiences and theirs."

*Last names have been withheld to protect the identities of the UN Community Volunteers.

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