

Myanmar and Thailand: Life in a border region

Strangers at our door

Luigi Butori

In Southeast Asia, many people have a language, tradition and culture, yet lack a recognized and protected homeland. Thus, they are forced into constant movement, in search of a life worthy of the name and of a peaceful, serene existence. Italian Luigi Butori has lived in Thailand for 15 years. He and others help to offer assistance to the Karen people living on the border between Thailand and Myanmar.

Zigmunt Bauman entitled his 2016 book, *Strangers at our Door*. It was an important work, but one perhaps considered "crazy and visionary" at the time, like many of his other publications, including *Liquid Modernity*. His work seems almost a rallying cry launched in the crush of the masses of people numbed by pleasure and consumerism. It is a bit like what happens when you throw something onto a dance floor packed with people dancing wildly. No one pays much attention.

But now, almost ten years after its publication, the book is more relevant than ever. Europe, after the outbreak of the Ukraine war, is now experiencing what has been part of everyday life in other parts of the world for decades. Refugees continue arriving to escape wars in areas stricken by serious climatic, economic, and social problems. Never before has humanity experienced such a scale of global migration, as people arrive in search of better conditions or to save their lives.

Neighboring countries with very different responses to refugees

Thanks to a priest friend from the *Karen* ethnic group, I began learning about their suffering years ago. Myanmar recognizes 135 ethnic minorities in its controversial Constitution and my first trip there was in 1985. There, as never before, I saw poverty and sub-human conditions. I also came to know the value of diversity, acceptance, and benevolence that opens one up to those who have less. I encountered a reality vastly different from the far-away place where I was born and raised, in my native Italy.

In Myanmar, warfare between ethnic groups and with the Tatmadaw Army has been ongoing since the killing of General Aung San in 1947. Myanmar, or Burma as it was also called, has not known peace. After the August 8, 1988 revolution - dubbed the 8888 *Uprising* -- hundreds of thousands of refugees crossed the open border between Myanmar and Thailand to seek shelter, work and a new life in Thailand or neighboring Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

Thailand is the first stop, because Myanmar's border with India is practically closed, China is inaccessible, and the region bordering Bangladesh is also difficult. This leaves only Thailand, with its 2,416 kilometers of shared border and welcoming culture, to help the Burmese peoples. Official numbers speak of close to 2.5 million people from Myanmar in Thailand, although these numbers are likely an underestimate of the actual figures, with as many as 500,000 undocumented others in the country.

Tremendous added value

It is enough for one to go to working-class Bangkok restaurants in order to immediately notice that those serving are not Thai. In fact, a greeting offered in the Burmese language (such as "*mingalaba kammya*"), is enough to bring a big smile to the face of those serving your rice soup. Similarly, in other cities and regions throughout Thailand, 90 percent of heavy and sometimes dangerous work in factories, fields, mines, and machine shops, is done by the hands of Myanmar migrants. But this is also true of skilled labor as well, with there now being a veritable army of highly experienced, professional workers in the ranks of those bringing ahead the best of the Southeast Asian economy.

This situation is also being studied from a national security perspective: what would happen if all foreign workers from Myanmar suddenly refused to work beginning tomorrow morning? Construction, food service, transportation, and manufacturing in the country would come to a sudden halt, with irreparable damage. It is estimated that Thai industry would need close to ten years to replace workers from Myanmar. They are tremendously valuable for the whole Thai manufacturing and service sector, and Thailand could not provide current levels of service and hospitality (in 2024 some 41 million tourists visited Thailand), without this additional workforce.

Peace is a win for all

Perhaps the most immersive experience of my time in Asia was living with migrants on the Thai-Myanmar border. For more than a decade, we have been bringing and sending aid to these families, thanks to the support of colleagues and friends.

I always remain struck by the children's faces, by their dark eyes portraying a mix of sadness and fear, but also a glimmer of hope and a profound will to live. All that is needed at times is a doll, a ball, or a few sweets to awaken in them the desire to play. There is a school created by them and us, that is home to 100 students annually. No one knows for sure where these students come from, yet they are faithfully present each day, and are 100 mouths to feed.

It is enough to see their smiling faces when food is shared, or during lessons, or sewing classes, for one to become certain of war's absurdity. Refugees, those who come to our doors asking for help and in search of a new life, are also of undeniable economic value. And their integration into Thai society is an example for all of Southeast Asia and the world. Every refugee we welcome has also taught us something, helping us understand that to welcome is to love and to love is seek the other's human development, also in economic terms.

We need to convince ourselves, as Pope Francis taught us, that we all gain something when there is peace. And all is lost with war. It is a reality for which I, too, want to bear witness. I would like to testify to the world that these words are true and that they lead to happiness.

