

# **Interfaces and the politics of humanitarianism: Kachin internal displacement at the China-Myanmar border**

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**Abstract:** Studying interfaces directs attention to the processes through which an array of social actors and regimes come into a constellation of relations and create webs of connection that impact humanitarian intervention and the lives of displaced people. This paper illuminates the politics of humanitarianism evinced during Kachin internal displacement at the China-Myanmar border. Since 2011 conflict between the Myanmar (Burma) military and Kachin separatists has precipitated internal displacement in northern Myanmar. Apart from the Kachin struggle for autonomy, a resource war is also fuelling the conflict. Many IDPs flock to the China-Myanmar border for safety but those that try to cross the border into China are barred by the Chinese police. The interfaces examined here reveal the constraints posed during the delivery of humanitarian aid, but also signal the connections that bring displaced populations and an array of social groups together, while keeping in view the global power geometries through which such connections are forged.

## **Introduction**

As a large bowl of steaming white rice was served for dinner, the conversation between my dining companions switched spontaneously from English to the Jingphaw language. Curious, I enquired about the topic of their conversation. They explained, ‘we are discussing the quality of the rice at this restaurant’. The two Kachin men stood up and went to the kitchen doorway where unopened gunny sacks of rice laid. They carefully studied the labels on the gunny sacks and asked the kitchen assistant how much the rice costs. The kitchen assistant referred them to the restaurant owner, one of the many Yunnanese-Chinese inhabitants who live alongside the Kachin people in border towns like the one we were visiting.

The Chinese owner conversed further in the Jingphaw (known as Jingpo in Chinese) language with my companions, following which we returned to the dining table to resume our dinner. They told me the owner said a sack of rice weighing 25 kg costs 110 yuan (US\$16.50). As one of my dining companions consumed a mouthful of rice he added:

We asked how much the rice costs here to compare it with the price that the rice supplier in China charges our organisation for the rice we deliver to the IDP camps in Myanmar. If the rice is too hard or not sticky, the IDPs find it different from what they are used to... Since rice is their main food and they can’t afford much else so at least the NGOs should give them the best quality possible. But this [good quality] rice is not affordable for us’.

Seemingly banal discussions about a basic commodity like rice in fact signals the interface of humanitarian concerns that exist at the China-Myanmar border. The anecdote above highlights considerations over the quality, suitability and affordability of food procured for

internally displaced persons (IDPs). It further draws attention to the logistical complexities of procuring and delivering food from the China side of the border to IDP camps located on the Myanmar side. In so doing, the anecdote illuminates the multiple regimes implicated in humanitarianism, which humanitarian workers (and the organisations they represent) have to negotiate as they carry out their work.

While much international attention has been given to ethnic politics in Myanmar, the vantage point of such discussions is usually from the centre of power rather than at the peripheries. Academic analyses are also dominated by political scientists or international relations scholars who focus on macro structures of power (e.g. government and military or ethnic militias), rather than the complex everyday negotiations of the communities whose lives are impacted by decisions taken by those in power. This paper seeks to address both gaps by analysing processes of interfacing that draw multiple social actors and regimes into a constellation of relations that impact humanitarian intervention and the lives of displaced people.

In this paper, an interface refers to the physical or metaphorical surface regarded as the common boundary shared by social actors and institutional structures. Studying the webs of connection that exist at interfaces illuminates the events, processes and decisions that converge to constitute the power geometries in which humanitarian action take place. Crucially, the paper's focus on interface is not merely another iteration of familiar macro/micro or structure/agency debates. Rather, my conceptualisation of interfaces is attentive to topological manifestations of power (Allen, 2011) wherein the interactions between social actors and institutional regimes may at times resemble a hierarchical social order (e.g. international, national and local), but are just as likely to traverse such hierarchies which are premised on socially constructed imaginaries of national sovereign power, and by extension, discrete local or international scales of decision-making.

This paper's discussion of Kachin internal displacement achieves two purposes: first, it signals the limits of international law and the politics of humanitarianism that accentuate the vulnerability of internally displaced persons who are not adequately protected under an interstate system that revolves around the parameters of state sovereignty. Second, it brings into view a constellation of entangled social relations that exist at the interfaces in which humanitarian action takes place, drawing in heterogeneous social actors and institutional regimes. In the case of Kachin internal displacement, the social actors and institutional regimes include faith-based and secular organisations in Kachin state and elsewhere in Myanmar; co-ethnics and other Chinese intermediaries living on the Chinese side of the border; the governments of Myanmar, China and the separatist Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) along with their respective military or police forces; and the international refugee regime (IRR).

Since 2011 renewed fighting between the Myanmar (Burma) military and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) has precipitated the internal displacement of more than 100,000 villagers at Kachin state in northern Myanmar (RANIR, 2015). The internally displaced persons include Kachin, Shan people and other ethnic groups who live in Kachin state (henceforth Kachin IDPs). Situated at the intersection of China and India, Kachin state carries strategic geopolitical significance to the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (see Figure 1). Set against the backdrop of these developments lies Kachin nationalism that has been fuelled by deep-seated grievances towards decades of Burmese assimilation policies, military oppression

and economic deprivation despite the divestment of natural resources in Kachin state by the former military government. Following democratic elections in 2015, Myanmar has transitioned to a civilian government, but the military retains control over the key ministries to do with defence, border affairs and home affairs.

Kachin state is rich in natural resources such as jade, gold, rubies and other precious stones, which are commodities highly desired for export internationally, and to China in particular (Global Witness, 2015). Kachin state is also the site of controversial development projects such as Myitsone Dam, which is backed by Chinese companies and the governments of China and Myanmar. Article 37 of Myanmar's 2008 Constitution stipulates that the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, or the national sovereign state, is the ultimate owner of and has legal jurisdiction over all land and natural resources in Myanmar, a point contested by the Kachin people who want greater local control over land and natural resources. Struggles over resources can represent 'a variety of frontiers' (Peluso and Vandergeest 2011, 603), interfacing national state hegemony with anti-state political violence, and forcible spatial relocation of the populations implicated.

In view of its own geostrategic and geo-economic interests, China (both Beijing and the provincial government at Yunnan) has long closed an eye to the presence of the separatist Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) which established its own government at the border town of Laiza in 2005. The KIO and its military arm, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), control pockets of territory within Kachin state. Although IDP camps exist in Myanmar government-controlled areas, most of the villages affected by the fighting between the KIO and Myanmar military are located near the border area shared with China. As such, significant numbers of IDPs have fled to KIO-controlled areas at the China-Myanmar border. The geographical location of the IDP camps in contested territories impacts the extent and nature of humanitarian assistance they receive (Ho, 2017).

Research on forced migration in Myanmar has focused predominantly on the Thai-Myanmar border, which is more accessible to international researchers (e.g. McConnochie, 2014; Horstmann, 2015; also see Chang, this issue). More recently, an outflow of Rohingya refugees from Rakhine state has also attracted considerable international and academic attention. This paper considers the case of Kachin internal displacement which has received relatively limited attention on account of the marginal status of IDPs within the international refugee regime, and the competing geopolitical interests at the China-Myanmar border. Kachin internal displacement highlights the politics of humanitarianism, showing how the protector role of international humanitarian organisations is circumscribed by competing claims of sovereignty.

The following section reviews the literature on the different modes of power that impact humanitarianism. It argues that analyses which centre on sovereign state power occlude a wider array of actors who are active in humanitarianism and the webs of connection they forge to facilitate relief. The next two sections contextualise the historical and contemporary conditions leading to conflict-induced internal displacement in Kachin state, and discuss the way Kachin organisations circumvent the political and legal constraints of conducting humanitarian work in contested territories. The penultimate section examines how Kachin organisations negotiate and contest the demands placed on them by international humanitarian organisations and donors. The final section reiterates the key arguments of this paper, signalling the insights this

paper brings to ongoing peace negotiations in Myanmar as well as the conceptual contribution it makes to refugee scholarship.

### **Interfacing humanitarian interventions**

Refugees have a special status in international law as enshrined in the 1951 Refugee Convention which accords rights specific to this status as long as such displaced persons have undergone a formal process to determine their status as a refugee. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) is the global body tasked with coordinating the protection of refugees and humanitarian relief efforts. Although the UNHCR has expanded its range of operations and policy interests, the 1951 Refugee Convention does not apply to internally displaced people (IDP). Without crossing an international border into a foreign soil, IDPs are not recognised as ‘refugees’ and remain under the jurisdiction of the sovereign state in the country in which they experienced displacement (Cohen, 2006; Oosterom, 2016).

The UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement have existed since 1998, but the concept of state sovereignty remains the basis of the framework and implementation is challenging to enforce. The UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement is not a binding instrument. At stake in the tussle over the extension of humanitarian assistance weighed against state agendas is the human security of displaced persons. Some scholars opine that states should be responsible for human security while others contend that states can be perpetrators of injustice, thus compromising its ability to behave as a custodian (e.g. Weiss, 1999; Bellamy and McDonald 2002). In the latter view, international systems of governance are more suitable for protecting human security. However, the ability of the international refugee regime to extend protection can be circumscribed when states that perpetuate violence and trigger human displacement also function as gatekeepers that secure national borders (Wheeler, 2010).

The gatekeeping ability of states comes about by using classification systems that make legible or illegible persons who have been displaced; allowing or denying international humanitarian organisations access to sites where displaced persons have resettled temporarily; and according or withholding legal recognition to local organisations that assist displaced persons, thereby impacting the ability of those organisations to receive funding or deliver humanitarian aid lawfully (e.g. Weighhil, 1997; Collyer, 2010; Scheel and Ratfisch, 2014; Ho, 2017). As Brun (2001) argues, ‘internally displaced persons’ is not a neutral label applied by the humanitarian regime, but a social category which is deployed and transformed locally.

Also central to the unfolding of the Kachin IDP situation lies the security concerns of China, the neighbour on the eastern border of Kachin state. Although China has acceded to the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, it has not ratified the 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons or the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness (UNHCR, 2013). China also has a guarded relationship with international agencies such as the UNHCR, restricting its willingness to allow foreign humanitarian organisations to access the IDP camps at its borderland. Moreover, in countries of potential refuge, forced migration can become conflated with irregular migration and perceived as a threat to state security (Collyer, 2013). China seeks to deter asylum seekers and treats them as irregular migrants with economic motivations rather

than as persons in need of protection. Securing national borders out of national interests presents different priorities from those aimed at securing the protection of vulnerable persons.

Acts of aid, including humanitarian assistance, have also evolved through neoliberal reforms that have at times emphasised disbursing aid through the sovereign state, and at other times, expressing suspicion towards state agencies (Overton et al, 2013). In the Kachin case, competing sovereignty claims and stalled international humanitarian efforts direct attention away from the inter-state level towards another set of social actors who are active on the ground. The limited assistance provided by the international refugee regime and sovereign states accentuated the humanitarian role of Kachin community-based organisations (CBOs) and the separatist KIO government which enforces its own political and legal regime in the territories that come under its jurisdiction. The Kachin CBOs engage with multiple legal orders that shape the lives of displaced populations. Those multiple legal orders are enforced by the national and separatist governments, and international humanitarian organisations and donors. In different ways they all seek to exercise influence over the management of displaced populations through classification systems, and allocating or withholding recognition and humanitarian resources (also see Peterson, this issue; Raheja, this issue).

Critical perspectives on humanitarianism have argued that the international refugee regime articulates stratified modes of acceptability that determine the extent to which a person is considered deserving of protection, thus exhibiting deeply entrenched power relations. Barnett (2014), for example, critiques humanitarianism that is premised on the belief that such actions can be entirely neutral, impartial and independent of the parties involved in the conflict. He draws attention thus to the unequal power relations or ‘an unstable blend of compassion and domination’ that characterise the social relations of humanitarianism. In similar spirit, Tickin (2016) calls for new affective and political grammars as responses to human suffering and injustice. Kachin internal displacement draws attention to ‘affinity ties’ that motivate formal and informal forms of humanitarian action, both visible and less visible. Affinity ties emanate from webs of connection that can be conceptualised as ‘a dynamic constellation of cultural attributes to do with history, ethnicity, religion and place among other malleable identity constructs’ (Ho, 2017:85).

This paper considers the interfaces at which webs of connection converge and congeal into formal and informal humanitarian action. Studying interfaces necessitates situating those entangled relationships in the historical and cultural legacies that have constituted and are continuing to constitute the lives of displaced persons. Within Asian countries, pre-colonial and colonial pasts persist in the way modern nation-states and competing aspirant sovereign powers approach territory, sovereignty and governance. Zones of duplicitous sovereignty exist in contested territories where the national government’s de jure jurisdiction of that territory overlaps with forms of de facto control that is exercised by a competing power. Interfaces pave opportunity for studying inter-Asian connections that bring populations and social groups together, without losing sight of the power geometries and cultural specificities through which webs of connection are forged.

This paper is based on multi-sited fieldwork that was conducted from 2012-2015 in Kachin state (Myanmar) and Yunnan province (China) in towns or villages along the China-Myanmar border. The research focused on the role of humanitarian organisations in displacement situations. The fieldwork encompassed in-depth interviews and ethnography at

four sites where the Kachin humanitarian workers carry out their work, including three IDP camps. Although access for this research started through contacts in a religious organisation, the Kachin humanitarian workers studied also came from secular community-based organisations and KIO government offices managing internally displaced populations. Thirty-nine people were interviewed for this study. The interviews were conducted in English or Mandarin by the author with a Kachin translator on standby. The majority of the interviews were not recorded either at the request of the respondents or so that respondents would speak more freely. In such cases, detailed fieldwork notes, including verbatim quotes were taken. Given the risky work undertaken by humanitarian workers in conflict zones, the affiliations of the respondents (except as 'faith-based' or 'secular' organisation) and the fieldwork sites will not be specified. A map has been provided to depict the location of IDP camps at the Sino-Myanmar border more generally (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Map of IDP camps in Kachin State and Northern Shan State

Source: Author's own (reproduced with permission from RANIR)

### **Competing sovereignties and internal displacement**

The Kachin ethnic category consists of the dominant Jingphaw and five non-Jingphaw groups, namely the Lisa, Lawngwaw, Lachik, Zaiwa and Rawang. British colonialism in Myanmar classified groups with similar languages under the same 'tribe' or 'race' during the 1911 and 1931 censuses (Scott, 2009). Racialisation operates through both formal and informal exclusion from citizenship and the social production of space (Vandergeest, 2003; Ho and Chua, 2016). Perceptions of being persistently excluded from equal treatment under the Republic of the Union of Myanmar has fuelled separatism amongst segments of the Kachin people. The label 'Kachin' has gradually shifted from a linguistic category to emerge as a politicised category and 'ethnographic fact' (Sadan, 2013:175).

In documenting the rise of ethno-nationalism amongst the Kachin people, historian Mandy Sadan (2013) underlines the circumstances unique to the eastern border that Kachin state shares with Yunnan province in China (compared to the western border it shares with India). Sadan signals that it was 'the designation of international borderlines in the east in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century [that] created a new kind of political imperative for multi-group incorporation' (Sadan, 2013:141). In the eastern border, local chieftains controlling passages to complex trade routes and politics had established boundaries to identify their respective chiefdoms. These boundaries received the tacit acknowledgement of the different parties involved, such as the Burmese king, British colonial administrators and Chinese officials. The fall of King Mindon's Konbaung Kingdom in Burma led to the delineation of border zones established by Britain and China (1886, 1893 The Durand Line and 1914 The McMohan Line). Parcels of land originally considered under Burma's jurisdiction were transferred to China. But the kinship system links the Kachin situated on the Burma side of the border to co-ethnics on the Chinese side of the border. The historical backdrop of how Kachin ethno-nationalism developed and the ties of the Jingphaw people in Myanmar to Jingpo co-ethnics in China is

crucial for comprehending the competing claims to sovereignty that linger till today, as well as the humanitarian relief efforts done in collaboration with cross-border co-ethnics in China.

In June 2011, the 17 years long ceasefire agreement between the Myanmar military (known as the Tatmadaw) and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) collapsed when fighting renewed, leading to the displacement of Kachin villagers from their homes and land. The ceasefire agreement had been tenuous and failed to translate into political settlements because of lingering resentment and suspicion on the part of both parties, fuelled by aspirations for Kachin self-determination. Writing during the ceasefire period, South (2007) posited that Myanmar government intended to neglect or actively obstruct development in Kachin state. The eventual demise of the ceasefire agreement was triggered in part by the outcome of the 2010 election in which seats in the newly created legislatures allocated to Kachin representation were disproportionately captured by politicians from the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), which is affiliated with the Myanmar military. Moreover, pressure placed on the Kachin ethnic armies to transform into Border Force Guards that would come under the command of the Myanmar military served as an additional tension point for the Kachin people (Farrelly, 2014). These events, augmented by memories of the unequal outcomes of the 1948 Panglong Agreement for ethnic minorities, reinforce a belief amongst Kachin leaders and people that self-determination would be better for their community.

Alongside the ongoing struggles over ethnic equality rights in Kachin state, also fuelling the present conflict between the Myanmar military and the KIA is a resource war over land in Kachin state which is rich in timber, jadeite and other precious minerals (Woods, 2016). A report by Global Witness (2015), a London-based NGO, indicates that the jade industry is valued at US\$31 billion in 2014, but the revenue benefits senior officers in Myanmar military and their political and commercial partners the most. Laoutides and Ware (2015) posit that conflict over the control of resources ‘appears to be a symptom rather than the cause of the conflict’. However, attempts to determine linear causal relations only serve to occlude the complex social relations and political considerations that exist at interfaces. For example, at the interface of the resource war between the Myanmar military and the KIA are contestations over the political economy of natural resource extraction. In zones of duplicitous sovereignty, companies can be taxed by both governments in exchange for the right to use the land for commercial agriculture or to extract natural resources. Chinese firms, several of which are backed by the Chinese government, are implicated in this ‘transnational political economy’ (Hyndman, 2002) that has emerged to meet demand in China for quality timber, jadeite and energy. The Myitstone Dam in Kachin state is but one example of a controversial development project undertaken by the Chinese to produce electricity in Myanmar, much of which is then directed to China to meet its domestic demand for energy.

According to the Kachin humanitarian workers, both the KIO and Myanmar governments’ tax companies but it is the KIO which has used the revenue to build good roads and schools in Kachin state. In so doing, the KIO earns the goodwill of the Kachin people while the limited benefits given by the incumbent Myanmar government reinforces distrust of the Kachin people towards the Burman-dominated elites (also see Martov, *The Irrawaddy*, 23 September 2015). Views on the complicity of the KIA in precipitating internal displacement are mixed. On the one hand, the Kachin humanitarian workers recognise that the KIO is culpable of causing internal displacement through conflict; on the other hand, it is fighting to

protect the Kachin population and extends humanitarian assistance to affected populations (fieldwork interviews, 2015). Studying the interface of entangled social relations reveal ‘new and emergent meanings of the political’ (Ticktin, 2014:283). In this case the abjection of the IDPs heightens the political subjectivity of the Kachin people and fuels their demands for separatism.

The Kachin villages affected by conflict are located in ‘hotspots’ close to the China-Myanmar border and the majority of the displaced persons flee to seek refuge in church compounds, Buddhist monasteries, or with family and friends in KIO-controlled territories (also known as non-government controlled territories). Others went to Myanmar government-controlled territories such as in Myitkyina. Pockets of displaced people attempted to reach what they consider safer grounds in China by crossing the border on foot; some succeeded as local Chinese authorities tacitly allowed them to remain with family and friends in China as long as they maintained a low profile. On other occasions, the visible crossings of larger numbers of IDPs were met with armed hostilities by the Chinese police at land and river crossings. Rather than recognising them as persons fleeing civil war and deserving of humanitarian protection, the Chinese government considers them irregular migrants who might become a liability and security risk in China. In China’s Yunnan region, the co-ethnic relations of various minority groups extend into other neighbouring countries, posing the possibility of ethnic nationalism fomenting which can threaten the territorial integrity of the Chinese nation-state (also see Han, 2016).

Refused entry into China, the Kachin villagers resettled in KIO-controlled areas as internally displaced people. Many stayed in churches or with family and friends temporarily. As their numbers increased several church compounds or municipal spaces were converted into IDP camps to consolidate the displaced populations for their safety and to facilitate provision of assistance. Some IDP camps are located in remote mountainous areas accessible only via China because of poor road conditions within Myanmar. The location of such camps in KIO-controlled areas impacts the nature and extent of humanitarian assistance extended to them because of international regulations governing the work of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs). The next section considers the politics of humanitarianism that are evinced at the interface in which Kachin secular and faith-based organisations interact with both INGOs and competing geopolitical actors at the China-Myanmar border.

### **Interfacing Kachin mobilisation**

Refugee classification determines who ‘qualifies for protection under international law, as well as the quality of the relief aid’ (Glasman, 2017:2). Fundamental to such assessments is also the ability of international humanitarian organisations to access the camps where displaced people have resettled; assess the extent of displacement; the circumstances underpinning displacement; the living conditions of displaced peoples; and whether it would be feasible to procure and deliver aid. Although the internal displacement from Kachin villages started from June 2011, INGOs like the UNHCR faced restrictions accessing IDP camps located in KIO-controlled areas for at least a year because the Myanmar military cited safety concerns for the international personnel travelling through conflict zones. Furthermore, the INGOs could not secure permission from the Chinese authorities to visit the IDP camps in the border zone that China



shares with Myanmar. Kachin humanitarian workers explained that this is because the Chinese authorities prioritise national security concerns in a volatile part of the border that it did not want to expose to international scrutiny (fieldwork interviews, 2013). They add that although the KIO welcomes INGOs that can assist in the humanitarian situation, the INGOs are required to work within the parameters set by internationally recognised sovereign states such as Myanmar and China. Such negotiations at the China-Myanmar borderland attest to the power geometries in which the possibilities or limits of humanitarian action are enacted.

In the vacuum left by international humanitarian assistance, Kachin secular and faith-based organisations galvanised to implement temporary relief measures to meet the needs of the IDPs. The secular and faith-based organisations active in delivering humanitarian aid represent a diverse mix of expertise and interests, and most have been active in Kachin state and further afield even prior to 2011. Shalom and the Metta Development Foundation are two prominent NGOs with national-level offices that advocate peace and development agendas in Myanmar. Their founders are both from Kachin state and Metta was formed in 1998 with the express purpose of helping communities affected by humanitarian emergencies. Also active are faith-based organisations such as the Kachin Baptist Convention (KBC) and the Catholic-run Karuna Myanmar Social Services (KMSS). The diaspora-based Kachin Women's Association Thailand (KWAT) in Thailand promotes women's empowerment in Kachin state through the work of members of the diaspora. Other organisations are based in KIO-controlled territories such as the Kachin Development Group (KDG) and Bridging Rural Integrated Development and Grassroot Empowerment (BRIDGE).

Since the outbreak of war in 2011, these groups developed or enhanced strategies to provide humanitarian relief to the Kachin IDPs. Two other groupings, Wunpang Ningthoi (WPN) and the Relief Action Network for IDP and Refugee (RANIR) were established in 2011 in KIO-controlled areas. The former provides humanitarian assistance in KIO-controlled areas and the latter coordinates humanitarian efforts across the different organisations working in both Myanmar government-controlled areas and KIO-controlled areas. These organisations formed an umbrella coalition they refer to as the 'Joint Strategy Team' for jointly campaigning for humanitarian relief. Similar to Horstmann's (2015) observation of Karen civil society at the Thai-Myanmar border, the IDP situation in Kachin state has lent new reason and energy for diverse organisations to work together and with greater urgency than before. Concern over the vulnerability of individuals and families who have been displaced, combined with heightening ethno-nationalism in response to the violence inflicted by the Myanmar military, brought together a constellation of Kachin NGOs and CBOs that devised a division of labour to overcome the geographical and organisational constraints at the borderland and in contested territories.

The geographical bases and mandates of individual organisations affect the extent of humanitarian work they can deliver in Myanmar government-controlled areas or KIO-controlled areas. One of the humanitarian workers explained that organisations like Shalom and Metta are registered with the Myanmar government, which make it easier for them to receive funding from international donors and to deliver aid to the IDP camps in Myanmar government-controlled areas. In comparison, organisations established in or based in KIO-controlled areas are not recognised by the Myanmar government and thus unable to operate freely in government-controlled areas. But the latter set of organisations have strong networks

in KIO-controlled areas to facilitate humanitarian assistance in those places. The faith-based organisations have credibility with both governments and are able to move across the Myanmar government-controlled and KIO-controlled areas with greater flexibility. Faith-based organisations can also appeal for international funding through global religious networks, while the secular organisations such as Metta and Shalom have established a positive reputation with other types of international partners and are better placed to advance advocacy tied to peace-building and development agendas. The translocal and transnational partnerships forged enable humanitarian assistance to reach the IDPs in both Myanmar government-controlled and KIO-controlled areas.

Inter-Asian connections are evinced in several ways at the interface of humanitarian efforts. Successive cohorts of Kachin people have migrated, some by crossing the land border by land via northern Shan state, to seek asylum, work or study in Thailand. The liberal political climate in Thailand (until the military coup of 2014) has enabled emigrant and exile populations from Myanmar to develop advocacy channels and networks with international organisations concerned with development or human rights agendas. Links with the Kachin diaspora in Thailand are significant as organisations such as KWAT contribute to humanitarian relief through fund raising and advocacy efforts internationally. Other diaspora organisations that emerged in Chiang Mai include the Pan Kachin Development Society and the Kachin National Organisation amongst others. Wider Kachin diaspora connections are found within India (where there are also cross-border co-ethnic ties), and in Japan, Malaysia, the United States, the United Kingdom, and in Europe.

One of the humanitarian workers, previously based in Chiang Mai, told me that when the IDP situation became a visible humanitarian crisis in 2011 he decided to return to Myanmar and contribute to humanitarian relief efforts (fieldwork interview, 2013). Members of the Kachin diaspora like himself travel frequently between Myanmar government-controlled areas, KIO-controlled areas and Chiang Mai in order to coordinate humanitarian projects between the INGOs, Myanmar government agencies, KIO government agencies, and Kachin NGOs and CBOs. Previously when Myanmar faced international sanctions, INGOs had worked with diaspora organisations such as those based in Thailand to deliver aid. Now that Myanmar is undergoing political reform, my informants revealed that international funding to diaspora organisations has declined as more donor agencies prefer to work with local organisations based within the country (fieldwork interviews, 2015). Aid is also increasingly tied to the interests that donor countries can derive from the country in question (Hyndman, 2009). In Myanmar's case this might mean preferential treatment for investment, natural resource extraction and infrastructure development projects. The humanitarian workers stressed that local organisations in Myanmar continue to face political restrictions to do with their government registration status and when carrying out their work. This is reflected in the differentiated extent of humanitarian relief extended to the IDPs depending on whether they are located in Myanmar government-controlled or KIO-controlled areas.

Another set of inter-Asian connections are established with China through practical forms of aid extended by co-ethnic and religious. Given the difficult terrain on which several IDP camps are sited, the delivery of food supplies is more feasible via China rather than by roads in northern Myanmar which may be in poor conditions or unsafe due to the conflict. The Kachin organisations leverage on co-ethnic networks with the Jingpo people and churches in

China to procure supplies and for translation purposes. The Chinese church networks also extended the appeal for humanitarian assistance to its counterparts in other Chinese provinces. At one of the Jingpo churches I visited in China, a humanitarian worker showed me a large room lined on one side with water filtration kits bought with donations from a Chinese church in Sichuan province, while the other side of the room was lined with boxes of dehydrated rice dumplings (that contained meat fillings) which had been donated by another Chinese church. The humanitarian worker, who was of Chinese nationality and familiar with culinary practices in China, explained that the rice dumplings have to be steamed in hot water to be ready for consumption. He added that dehydrated food like the rice dumplings are both nutritious and easier to transport to the remote camps at the border area. During the Sichuan earthquake in 2013 this type of rice dumplings were distributed to and consumed by displaced people in China. However, another humanitarian worker from Myanmar told me quietly that the Kachin IDPs may not be accustomed to consuming rice prepared in this manner. Dehydrated food was not common in Kachin state and rice dumplings were not part of the regular diet of the Kachin people. As the opening anecdote on rice procurement for the IDPs indicates, even a basic subsistence product like rice is debated in terms of its cultural appropriateness and the human dignity of those who consume it.

### **Opportunities and tensions at interfaces**

Scheel and Ratfisch (2014, citing Malki, 1995) argue that by insisting on working with the institutions of the sovereign nation-state, the international refugee regime reinforces methodological nationalism. The humanitarian workers I interviewed often expressed frustration over how their efforts to escalate the IDP situation to international attention was impaired through the barriers posed by other geopolitical actors and their lack of ‘expert knowledge’ at lobbying internationally. One of the humanitarian workers in an organisation belonging to the Joint Strategy Team told me that the coalition of Kachin organisations had petitioned the United Nations Human Rights Council and the United National Security Council multiple times about the human rights violation in Kachin state, and the spread and intensity of internal displacement. But their appeals had been blocked by countries which have friendly relations with the Myanmar military, including China (fieldwork interview, 2013). He added that the Myanmar government has signed both the conventions related to the rights of women and children (CEDAW and CRC), but that has not deterred violations by the Myanmar military. He asked rhetorically, ‘what good are international conventions?’.

Interfacing the respective strengths and weaknesses of the various organisations (and individuals) represented in the Joint Strategy Team and beyond allows the Kachin organisations to navigate some of the constraint posed by operating under a humanitarian regime that channels aid only through institutions recognised by the sovereign state. Several international partners and donors have internal requirements to work only with the Myanmar government (recognised under the inter-state system), rather than the KIO government. Thus RANIR was established as a separate and non-governmental network to coordinate and channel funding from international partners and donors to local NGOs that have legal registration status with the Myanmar government (key leadership positions in the government remain populated by military staff). A staff member from RANIR explained, ‘If the INGOs

need a contact person then a NGO is better'. As another example, a Kachin health NGO said it was able to receive funding from a British NGO to work with the IDPs at contested border zones under the jurisdiction of armed groups because the parent British NGO has previously partnered the Chinese government to promote health protection to China's border communities (fieldwork interview, 2014).

Partnership with the INGOs opened the door to greater funding and resources for the IDPs, but proved challenging to the Kachin humanitarian organisations for other reasons. Across the interviews with different humanitarian organisations, the humanitarian workers highlighted that the INGOs and international donors provide funding for short periods of one to three months even though the organisations request for six months or longer. They explained that short-term funding makes it difficult to recruit and deploy human resources when appointing staff for projects (fieldwork interviews, 2014). Further, different INGOs and international donors sponsor specific programs, depending on their own mission statements. For example, a British NGO agreed to sponsor food for the nutrition needs of children in IDP camps because it saw that their meals only consisted of rice and bean paste. But during winter, the children lack warm clothes and there is a gap in funding for this expressed purpose (fieldwork interviews, 2014 and 2015). Both food and warm clothing are essential for protecting the human security of vulnerable IDP children. The ad hoc and conditional nature of international aid, while meant to ensure accountability for the funds spent and to signal that donors discourage expectations of prolonged aid, can be paralysing to the planning purposes of local organisations.

Working with INGOs also means it becomes necessary for Kachin humanitarian organisations to conform to 'international' practices in order to maintain funding and qualify for follow-on funding opportunities. For example, a humanitarian worker with a faith-based organisation told me a local office of another organisation had used funds meant for food distribution to repair a broken road that impeded the delivery of food supplies to an IDP camp. But the headquarters of that organisation found out and admonished the local office staff because their actions could jeopardise the international funding for the wider organisation. The funding regulations of the international organisations are strict about diverting funds to other purposes, even though repairing the road would have helped in food distribution since the road conditions of the IDP camps at the border areas were especially poor. In another case, the field distribution records of an organisation did not tally with the database of supplies funded by a British NGO. The British staff told the Kachin staff that if they did not meet those standards they would have to repay all the funding that had been channelled to them previously. The Kachin humanitarian worker said, 'before we worked with the INGOs we did not have to consider such matters'. He added that the regulations of international organisations restricted the flexibility needed to organise aid under uncertain conditions in border areas. Living with risks and practising contingency is part and parcel of the work they do (also see McNevin and Missbach, this issue).

Tensions exist between what INGOs see as 'universal standards of relief – setting targets for a new sector' and what those from affected communities see as 'bureaucratisation and target setting' (Taithe and Borton, 2016:214). The Kachin humanitarian organisations expressed that INGOs and foreign donors need to consult with local organisations when implementing projects so as to take into account cultural differences in the local context. A

humanitarian worker from a secular organisation who was familiar with the international protocols said dismissively, ‘We referred to the [name of INGO anonymised] guidelines and the international humanitarian principles listed [such as] impartiality, respect... This is common sense but we follow so that nobody can make a case against us for not following it’. She added, ‘Most [INGOs] do not ask what IDPs want; they carry out what they think is best... I say to the UN workers, “you are educated but your technique is not suitable for us”. Now they are better at coordinating with local NGOs.... But most of the UN staff are Burmese people and the IDPs may not feel comfortable’.

The above anecdote signals the tensions that exist between local practices and global prescriptions of humanitarianism (Hyndman, 1997). The Kachin humanitarian organisations draw lessons from the protocols required by the INGOs and international donors. However, they also question the efficiency and effectiveness of those practices in a cultural context that is different from the wealthier countries in which the INGOs and international donors are based, and the other places in which such organisations have supplied aid. Some of those protocols are, as the humanitarian worker above puts it ‘common sense’ and having it drummed into them as international standards (or universal norms) seems patronising. Studying the interfaces of how Kachin humanitarian organisations negotiate partnerships and funding from INGOs and international donors brings to view the opportunities as well as the challenges that local organisations face.

## **Conclusion**

In examining interfaces, this paper has drawn out the constellation of relations that impact humanitarian intervention and the lives of displaced people. Interfaces function as an analytical framework that brings together the multi-dimensional facets of humanitarianism, underlining the legacies and contemporary social relations that forge webs of connection. Interfacing the array of social actors and institutional regimes active in managing displacement destabilises the neat categorisation of governmental structures through which sovereign states and international NGOs seek to operationalise humanitarian assistance. This paper signalled the politics of classification that place internally displaced people as an anomaly within the international system. They are not accorded the same level of protection as persons who have crossed an international border and thereby receive recognition as refugees. On another level, those who manage to cross the border to China are treated as irregular migrants or security risks and thus vulnerable to punishment. Accentuating the vulnerability of the IDPs are the constraints to humanitarian assistance at the border area because of the competing sovereignty claims and resource war between the Myanmar military and the KIA, and given their location at the China-Myanmar border. Emergency relief to the IDP camps is blocked by border controls established by both the Myanmar military and China. Interfaces illuminate the power geometries at the borderlands in which humanitarian actors operate.

This paper has directed attention to the role played by community-based organisations during the absence of humanitarian intervention from the international community. As the Kachin IDP situation evolved from 2011 to 2015, INGOs gradually came to play a more prominent part in providing expertise, funding and material assistance. But their technical solutions and protocols are questioned by the Kachin secular and faith-based organisations that claim greater familiarity with the ground. They mediate and adapt the operations of INGOs

and other international donors to the local context. This paper's study of interfaces also provides insights for the ongoing peace negotiations and democratisation processes in Myanmar. The paper has signalled the pivotal role of China in inducing resource-led conflicts at Kachin state to meet its domestic demands, while it simultaneously brokers relations with both the KIO and the Myanmar military and government so as to stabilise border relations for its national security. The Kachin case discussed also shows how the emergency situation and political economy of humanitarianism only serve to heighten demands for separatism by fuelling 'humanitarian nationalism' (Horstmann (2015:58). For inroads to be made in the peace process, the displacement of ethnic minorities like the Kachin must cease, and systematic steps taken to reconstruct trust in the central government through political rehabilitation, cultural redress and economic policies that allow for greater parity.

Conceptually, studying the interfaces at which social actors and institutional interact and in which processes intersect flags up the webs of connection that are forged across space and scale. The constellation of relations arising reinforces scalar displays of power at times, but are just as likely to traverse the discrete scales at which decisions are made and implemented. Interfacing reveals the convergences, gaps and the power geometries that characterise the exercise of state or international levels of power during conflict and humanitarian crises. Interfaces function as an analytical perspective that draws attention to tenuous negotiations amongst an array of social actors and institutional regimes; the nodes where translocal and transnational processes meet; and the modes of engagement brokering the maintenance and survival of marginal populations nation-states or aspiring states.

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