## Re-imagining the refugee camp

*Sovereignty and time-space formation along the Thailand-Burma borderland*

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# Annex 1

**Chart 1: The total population in all nine refugee camps**

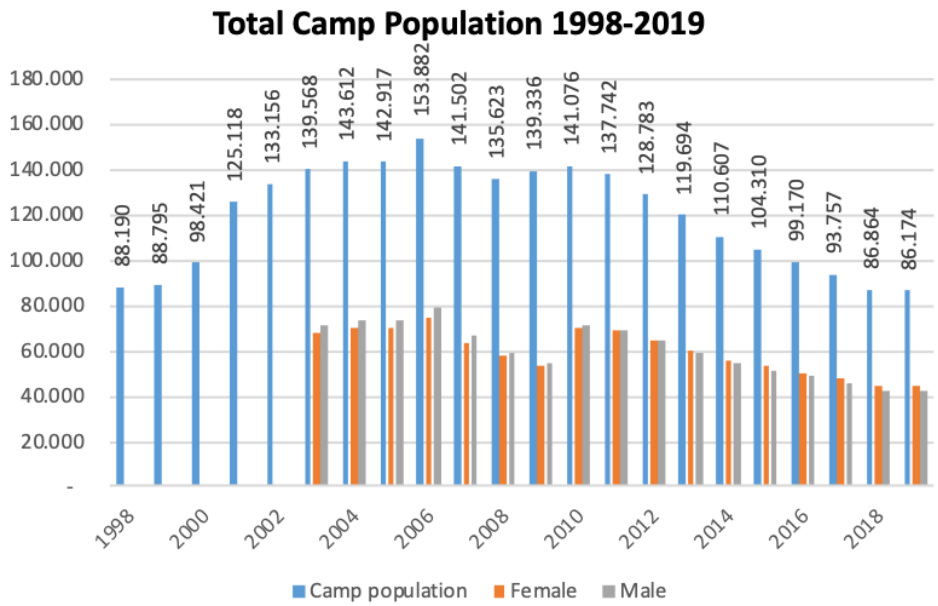

Chart 2: The Total Mae La camp population

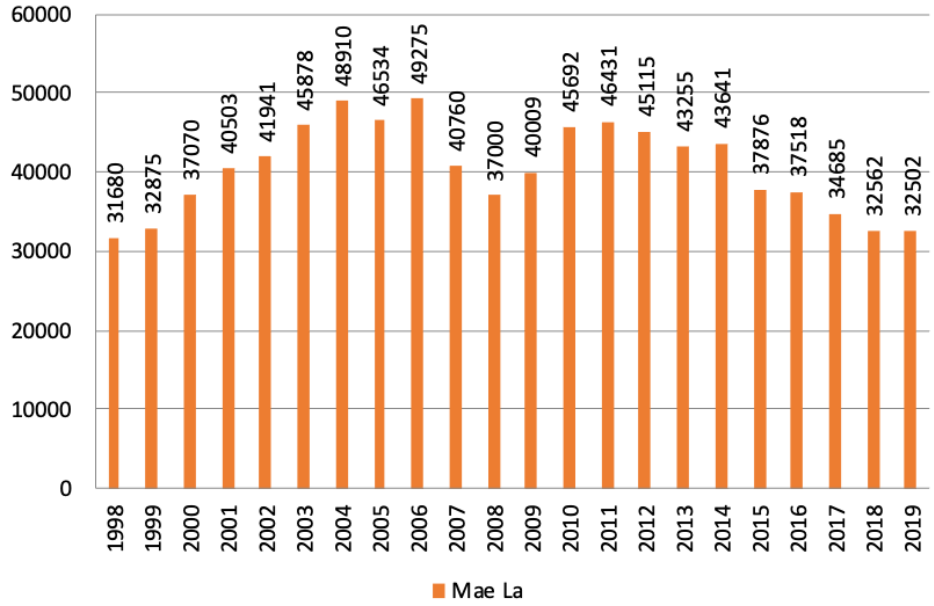


Table 1: Mae La population divides in ethnicity, religion, status, length of stay and generation

| Ethnicities | Religions | Refugee status | Length of stay | Generations |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Karen** (77%) | **Christianity** (37%) | **Refugee** (60%) | **Long stayer** | First generation: is a group of refugees that used to live and have social ties with Burma |
| **Karenni** (12%) | **Buddhist** (50%) | **Provincial Advisory Board** (PAB) (5%) | **Short stayer** | Second generation: children who were born in the camp, or went out of Burma since they were a baby, no memory of Burma |
| **Burman** (3%) | **Muslim** (13%) | | | |
| **Mon** (1%) | **Local religious** (1%) | **New Arrival** (30%) | | Third generation: children of second generation |
| **Others** (7%) | | | | |
| | | **Persons of Concerns** (POC) (5%) | | Fourth generation: children of third generation |

Source: TBC and UNHCR report

# Summary

Refugee camps are often depicted as temporary and isolated spaces in which lives of refugees are understood as bare life, stuck in between, or waiting. However, as refugee camps around the world are increasingly turning into long-term camps, and temporariness becomes permanence, dominant discourses about the refugee camp no longer adequately address the changing situation. This thesis takes the Mae La camp along the Thailand-Burma borderland as a case study to contribute to a better understanding of such long-term camps. It addresses questions of time and temporality that relate to this refuge space: what is the nature of a long-term camp and how can it exist for such a long period of time? How do spatial and temporal processes and events transform the organization of the camp and how do these affect refugees' daily lives? Through extensive ethnographic fieldwork in the Mae La camp and the borderland, the thesis argues that this camp, which has become more or less like a city, is an outcome of refugees' agency over time. Negotiations and 'guested' sovereignty are giving refugees a certain autonomy of governance, while they remake the camp as a productive space to fit their social world and a place of opportunities. Moreover, flows of refugees and their mobility have turned the camp into a hub of connection in the borderland. The camp's urban transformation therefore blurs the boundary between the 'camp refugees' and 'urban refugees.' This thesis provides an alternative understanding of a space and life in transition in refugee studies, corresponding to contemporary reality in which long-term refugee camps have become a global phenomenon.

# Samenvatting

Vluchtelingenkampen worden dikwijls afgeschilderd als tijdelijke en geïsoleerde plekken. Het leven van vluchtelingen in deze kampen wordt daarbij gekenschetst als leeg, continu in afwachting en als machteloos ingeklemd tussen (twee of meer) staten. Vluchtelingenkampen wereldwijd, hoewel als tijdelijk bedoeld, krijgen echter steeds meer een permanent karakter: het worden langetermijnkampen. Heersende theorieën over vluchtelingenkampen dekken als gevolg deze veranderende situatie niet langer adequaat. Om tot een beter begrip te komen van dit soort langetermijnkampen, neemt dit proefschrift het Mae La kamp op de grens van Thailand en Burma (Myanmar) als onderzoekscasus. Het proefschrift gaat in op vragen over tijd en tijdelijkheid met betrekking tot deze 'vluchtruimte': wat is de aard van een langetermijnkamp en hoe kan het zo lang bestaan? Hoe transformeren ruimtelijke processen en gebeurtenissen over tijd de organisatie van het kamp en hoe beïnvloeden deze het dagelijks leven van vluchtelingen? Op basis van uitgebreid etnografisch veldwerk in het Mae La kamp en het grensgebied van Thailand/Burma (Myanmar) stelt dit proefschrift dat de aard van dit kamp, wat inmiddels min of meer tot een stad verworden is, een gevolg is van sociaal handelen ('agency') van de vluchtelingen in het kamp gedurende langere tijd. Onderhandelingen met diverse machthebbers in het grensgebied en 'gast-soevereiniteit' geven vluchtelingen een zekere autonomie van bestuur, waarbij ze het kamp als een productieve ruimte beschouwen en gebruiken om er een plaats van te maken waar ze zich thuis voelen, die past bij hun sociale wereld, alsook een plek van mogelijkheden. Nieuwe migranten komen naar het kamp op zoek naar kansen en ook de mobiliteit van de vluchtelingen zelf maakt Mae La tot een knooppunt in het grensgebied. De stedelijke transformatie van het kamp vervaagt daarmee de grens tussen 'kampvluchtelingen' en 'stadsvluchtelingen'. Dit proefschrift geeft een alternatief inzicht in een ruimte en leven in transitie in vluchtelingenstudies, wat overeenkomt met de hedendaagse realiteit waarin langdurige vluchtelingenkampen een wereldwijd fenomeen geworden zijn.

Refugee camps are often depicted as temporary and isolated spaces in which lives of refugees are understood as bare, stuck in between, or waiting.

However, as refugee camps around the world are increasingly turning into long-term camps, and temporariness becomes permanence, dominant discourses about the refugee camp no longer adequately address the changing situation.

Through extensive ethnographic fieldwork in the Mae La camp and the Thailand-Burma borderland, this thesis argues that the camp, which has become more or less like a city, is an outcome of refugees' agency over time, as negotiations among multiple sovereigns have given refugees a certain autonomy of governance.

This thesis provides an alternative understanding of a space and life in transition in refugee studies, corresponding to contemporary reality in which long-term refugee camps have become a global phenomenon.