D.7 Thailand - 1979 -1980 - Political conflict

Case study: Refugee camp

Project type:
Construction of two refugee camps
Development of a manual of standards

Disaster:
Invasion of Cambodia by Vietnam,
December 1978

No. of people displaced:
About 1 million people crossed the border
into Thailand at the height of the displacement.

Project target population:
Khao-I-Dang refugee camp went from
29,000 people shortly after its opening in December 1979,
to 130,000 -160,000 in March 1980, to 42,000 by 1982.
Sakeo camp had 28,000 people shortly after opening, dropping to
17,000 when it closed in July 1980 (the remaining 17,000 were transferred to other camps).

Occupancy rate on handover:
100%

Shelter size
16m² (in multi-family units)

Summary
For the first time, clear numeric standards were introduced via the distribution of an operations
policy and standards manual to each camp to ensure equitable minimum services, based primarily on
public health and water/sanitation concerns. Two camps were planned according to these standards,
using a decentralisation of services, and in later cases a ‘checkerboard’ design that provided internal
space for some expansion.

Strengths and weaknesses
X Creating a written manual provided a clear checklist for
the many organisations with limited prior experience.
X Spaces for expansion within the camp permitted some
release of pressure from increasing population levels.
X Advocacy of an incremental approach to shelter
provision allowed for a response to continued influxes and
increasing camp populations.
X Innovations in water/sanitary latrine technology
(‘aquaprivies’) permitted more flexibility in shelter layout
design.
W Although multi-unit longhouses freed up more external
space in extremely cramped sites, their use postponed
rather than solved the problem of overcrowding, and at
the expense of privacy and security.
W An overall lack of space and poor drainage contributed
to health problems.

Case study credits: Cuny Center
Before the opening of the camp

The invasion of Cambodia by Vietnamese forces in December 1978, the escalation of fighting between Vietnamese and Khmer Rouge forces after June 1979 and famine in October 1979, caused a mass influx of refugees across the border into Thailand, peaking at approximately 1 million people in late 1979 and early 1980.

The Thai government was initially reluctant to host the refugees. After early incidents where 40,000 refugees were returned to Cambodia, the Thai authorities agreed to permit camps in nine locations in the border area. However, they insisted on close control of access and the delivery of services to the camps, and on the basic and supposedly temporary nature of those camps.

The refugee population had been severely traumatised by four years of forced displacement, genocide, famine and armed invasion.

Of the nine camps, eight were internally controlled directly by the Khmer Rouge army or its affiliates. The camp at Khao-I-Dang, however, was the only one under clear Thai government authority, administered by the UN. Leaders of the refugee groups presented themselves to the camp administration at the opening of the camp.

Due to the size, speed and high-profile nature of the emergency, the UN had to cope with a rapid expansion of its own staff and the arrival of large numbers of NGOs, many without prior experience in the field. Because of the lack of space, the shelters were constructed as multi-family longhouses, using mainly traditional materials (bamboo and thatch). Fire-retardant wallboard was used for the sides of the longhouses and for the internal divisions between individual families. However, this did not remove problems caused by lack of privacy or communicable disease.

For the most part, the larger longhouses in Khao-I-Dang were laid out in parallel. Some reduction of space was achieved through a 'checkerboard' layout, with blocks of open space throughout the camp. This also allowed for additional shelters, if required. In the Sakeo extensions, the longhouses were grouped into four to eight houses around small internal squares. These were intended as private outdoor space or vegetable gardens for each grouping of refugees. Later shelters were also improved by building them on stilts, to avoid flooding during the rainy season.

Implementation

The organisation assigned a number of NGOs to undertake the different phases of camp construction, upgrading and maintenance, using the manual as a general guide. The refugees themselves were responsible for the construction of their own shelters.

Materials

The basic materials were provided to the refugees by the humanitarian organisations.

Materials list

The following is a partial list of the materials used for the multi-unit shelters.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Materials</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bamboo poles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plastic sheeting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rope or wire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thatch</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fire-resistant wallboards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timber flooring</td>
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</table>