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## Trip to Bangkok and Northern Thailand

Written by Mariano-Florentino Cuéllar (<http://blog.unhcr.org/globalviews/author/tino-cuellar/>) | May 8, 2014 | UNHCR (<http://blog.unhcr.org/globalviews/category/unhcr/>) | 0 Comments (<http://blog.unhcr.org/globalviews/trip-to-bangkok-and-northern-thailand-with-deputy-United-Nations-High-Commissioner-for-Refugees/#comments>)

In early November 2013, I traveled to Northern Thailand and Bangkok with T. Alexander Aleinikoff, the current United Nations Deputy High Commissioner for Refugees. The primary purpose of the trip was to visit the UNHCR staff serving thousands of refugees in Northern Thailand. The trip also coincided with a meeting in Bangkok of the agency's "innovation fellows" — individuals selected from among thousands of UNHCR employees around the world and committed to finding better ways to carry out the UN refugee agency's mission of offering legal protection, emergency relief, and long-term solutions to help the millions of displaced people around the world.

### About

The UNHCR Global Views blog is a forum to discuss refugee policy and practice. While news agencies actively cover the latest refugee news, in-depth policy discussions about refugee issues are largely absent from the public eye. Global Views aims to fill this void by providing a place for research and practice to come together. We see the blog as an opportunity for policy thinkers, academics, and interested readers to join us in an important and timely discussion.



(<http://blog.unhcr.org/globalviews/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/country-tha-400.jpg>)

For years, I've been drawn to the problems faced by those displaced from their homes by persecution and violence. Not only are the lives of many of these individuals extraordinary, but their stories also showcase unresolved problems of transnational governance that are shaping our world. I've worked on refugee and migration issues as a lawyer, a government official, and a scholar at Stanford University, where I lead the university's Freeman Spogli Institute for International

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Studies. In the last year, the Institute has worked in partnership with UNHCR to support innovation in the design of refugee communities, in the use of technology, and data analysis. Our initial efforts have brought together leading architects and UN planning experts, and helped connect Stanford students skilled in technology and design within UNHCR. This trip was a chance to learn more about the challenges UNHCR faces, and to plan further steps in our collaboration.



Mae Sot is a city of just over 40,000 people with a tropical savanna climate and in close proximity to Myanmar. We flew into Mae Sot's small airport and received extensive briefings from UNHCR staff, who do their best to keep track of refugee concerns, local conditions, changes in the population of refugee settlements, and longer-term prospects for resolving the situation of refugees. From a small complex off one of Mae Sot's busy streets, the UNHCR staff in Mae Sot coordinate legal protection, service provision, and information for refugees at Mae La camp, about thirty kilometers away, and in several other camps. The refugees in Mae La and its sister camps are overwhelmingly Myanmarese of Karen origin who fled their country during the last three decades. Over 100,000 are now in Thailand, in Mae La and eight other camps.

The first thing one sees about Mae La camp is its striking, almost heartbreakingly beautiful location, amidst stark rock cliffs and lush vegetation. From a distance, the wooden structures housing the refugees look like pint-sized, picturesque settlements of contented residents perched on rolling hills. A closer look reveals a far more complex and challenging reality. The camp has grown in fits and starts over many decades, beginning well before UNHCR was even permitted by the Thai government to begin operating in the area so it could meet the needs of refugees. A walk around the camp brings images of families going about their lives, children (some in brightly-colored traditional clothing) playing in dusty spaces between dwellings, and farm animals. At the same time,

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1.  UN Refugee Agency  
(<http://twitter.com/Refugees/>): As more #Syria (<http://twitter.com/search?q=%23Syria>)'n refugees arrive #azraqcamp (<http://twitter.com/search?q=%23azraqcamp>) starts to come alive. Now 3,700+ residents including almost 2,000 kids <http://t.co/MwjoVb5KDa> (<http://t.co/MwjoVb5KDa>) about 16 minutes ago  
(<https://twitter.com/Refugees/status/465879855188692992>)
2.  UN Refugee Agency  
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the risk of fire is pervasive. Sanitation is a problem. Many refugees have had trouble obtaining documents or access to the chance to earn a living. The rickety wooden structures that make up the vast majority of the camp's haphazard infrastructure house nearly fifty thousand people, all in an area not much larger than a single square mile.

It is certainly true that many refugees around the world live in more squalid and difficult conditions. Mae La's resourceful refugees have created bustling markets in certain quarters of the camp, and the community representatives have worked with Thai authorities and non-governmental organizations to meet various needs among the camp's population. But perhaps the most daunting challenge looming over Mae La is the question of what will happen to the refugees in the future. If history is any guide, only a small number of the refugees there are likely to be resettled to the United States, members of the European Union, or other advanced industrialized countries. As conditions improve in Myanmar and some of the displaced people gain trust in the peace process there, a chunk of Mae La's population may choose to return to their country. Their willingness to return, however, and their fate in Myanmar will depend in no small measure on how they are able to earn a living back in Myanmar. And for younger generations — Thai born children whose parents left Myanmar long ago — Mae La and its environs is the only home they've ever known. Their future may depend as much on domestic laws and regional arrangements allowing cross-border flows of workers as it does on the dynamics of peace in Myanmar.

These challenges are not lost on UNHCR's Thailand country team, which is simultaneously trying to work with refugees on current problems while also planning for the future. Nor are they lost on UNHCR's regional staff in Bangkok, or on the Deputy High Commissioner. Meeting long-term goals while addressing short-term needs is also a major motivation for the two dozen or so innovation fellows gathering in Bangkok to help


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bridge the divide between the day-to-day challenges of refugee protection in the field and the broader policy challenges facing refugee advocates at UNHCR headquarters in Geneva. Gathering to listen, learn from each other, and forge alliances, the innovation fellows I was able to meet were brimming with creativity and energy. Some sought to take on the legal and policy challenges of extending protection to displaced people who might not fit narrow, legalistic definitions of a refugee under international law. Others were more focused on practical problems involving water, firewood, or shelter. Still others exchanged ideas on how to make better use of the voluminous data that UNHCR has gathered on refugee conditions. When the discussion was at its best, there was critique as well as creativity — a focus not only on how to do things differently but on why promising ideas might not have taken root in the past, whether in Colombia, or Kenya, or Thailand.

Thailand is of course just one front in the global effort to address the needs of millions of refugees. But what's happening there sheds some light on two larger issues playing out in the region and elsewhere in the world. The first issue concerns the fact that effective protection involves constant adaptation — to local conditions, to changing economic circumstances, to developments in technology and information, and to political and organizational opportunities that arise unexpectedly. The focus on adaptation is reflected in the work of the staff in Mae Sot, the creativity of the refugees in Mae La, the discussion of the innovation fellows in Bangkok, and the innovation agenda that the Deputy High Commissioner is pursuing in earnest. The need to adapt underscores the importance of innovation to address concrete technical problems like water distribution and camp design, but also cross-cutting challenges like providing physical security and integrating refugees more thoroughly into the governance of their communities. Adapting the right way, though, and doing so

(<http://t.co/xpBQZYGa2V>)  
about 2 hours ago  
(<https://twitter.com/Refugees/status/465839052873551873>)

4.  UN Refugee Agency  
(<http://twitter.com/Refugees/>): We've helped Minda & her daughters build a new home in E.Samar, after #Haiyan  
(<http://twitter.com/search?q=%23Haiyan>)'s destruction <http://t.co/VmESjU5bub>  
(<http://t.co/VmESjU5bub>)  
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(<https://twitter.com/Refugees/status/465826294610268161>)

5.  UN Refugee Agency  
(<http://twitter.com/Refugees/>): Photo of the day: A dozen Syrian #refugee  
([#refugee](http://twitter.com/search?q=%23refugee))  
([#refugee](http://twitter.com/search?q=%23refugee))  
#families  
(<http://twitter.com/search?q=%23families>) in an informal settlement in



in a manner that reflects fidelity to core humanitarian values, is often easier said than done.

The second issue concerns the central importance of expanding viable solutions to protracted refugee solutions. Crucial though it is to offer refugees and displaced people a place to arrive when they are forced to leave their homes — the kind of protection that Mae La offers — refugees need a future as well as a present. Regional migration agreements, development assistance and livelihoods, integration into urban settings, and thoughtful long-term planning of refugee communities — these are all pieces of a puzzle, perhaps, that in many corners of the world has yet to be fully assembled.

My experience on both legs of the trip underscored the creativity, resilience, and energy of so many among the staff of the UN refugee agency — qualities also found among many of the refugees living in Mae La and its sister communities. But the trip also illustrated some of the enormous challenges that continue to bedevil refugee protection in Thailand and throughout the world.

Since November, UNHCR and Stanford have continued to work together on innovation projects involving settlement planning and related issues. Earlier this year, a team from Stanford, Ennead Architects, and UNHCR traveled to Rwanda to consider how to implement changes in the planning of settlements within the context of specific conditions affecting the population of refugees arriving to Rwanda from the Democratic Republic of Congo. In Thailand, Rwanda, and around the world, the core challenge is to find practical ways of harmonizing UNHCR's fundamental protection mission, its crucial emergency relief functions, and its goal of promoting refugee livelihoods and durable solutions.

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### About the author

Mariano-Florentino Cuéllar: Mariano-Florentino Cuéllar is the Director of Stanford University's Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies and a Senior Fellow at the Institute, the Stanley Morrison Professor of Law at Stanford Law School, and Professor (by courtesy) of Political Science. During 2009-2010, he served as Special Assistant to the President for Justice and Regulatory Policy at the White House. Among other issues, Cuéllar worked on enhancing food safety standards, improving public health agencies, law enforcement and sentencing policy, regulatory transparency, immigration, and the Quadrennial Homeland Security Review. Before working at the White House, he co-chaired the Obama-Biden Transition's Immigration Policy Working Group. During the second term of the Clinton Administration, he worked at the U.S. Department of the Treasury as Senior Advisor to the Under Secretary for

Enforcement.

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