

In India's Mizoram, ethnic ties drive response to Chin conflict

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Thousands fled Myanmar after the coup to India's northeastern border state, where the local authorities and communities have offered protection and help despite a lack of central government support, but the response is under increasing strain.

By EMILY FISHBEIN | FRONTIER

In mountains close to Aizawl, the capital of India's northeastern Mizoram state, 27 families have spent the past year sheltering in bamboo longhouses 800 kilometres from their homes.

The families fled Matupi Township in Myanmar's Chin State because junta soldiers were occupying their villages and intermittently clashing with resistance armies. Now, they face new hardships as they wait for the day they can safely return home.

Food donations come irregularly, and the families mostly eat rice with vegetables they plant themselves. Some earn occasional day wages on farms or construction sites, but jobs are so scarce that sometimes weeks go by without work.

Still, with the protection of the Mizoram government and support of the host community, the families in the camp are getting by. "We can live and have food to survive. We understand that we are living in other people's country and state, so we have to accept the situation," said Salai Hla Paing, a camp leader.

Since the February 2021 military coup, [1.3 million people](#) are internally displaced and nearly [50,000](#) have fled overland to India, according to the United Nations. Within Myanmar, the junta continues to [restrict](#) aid access, but the refugees in India are also in a precarious situation: the central government in New Delhi has [labelled](#) them "illegal migrants", while international aid has been [scarce](#).

However, in Mizoram, where the majority ethnic Mizo population identifies closely with the Chin and shares a common Christian faith, the state government has offered the arrivals refuge. Meanwhile, Mizo voluntary associations, churches and local individuals have led a grassroots humanitarian response.

Interviews with five representatives of local voluntary associations and more than 20 Chin people across Mizoram's Aizawl, Lawngtlai and Siaha districts indicate an overwhelmingly positive Mizo response towards Chin people in the state.

But while Mizo host communities still openly welcome Chin people and do what they can to help them, the local response is struggling to keep up with ongoing humanitarian needs. With few job opportunities, Chin people in the state are mostly relying on money from relatives abroad and Chin diaspora groups to survive.

"It's very difficult to get a job here," said Biak Tha Lian Thang, who fled Chin's Thantlang Township in September 2021 with his wife and two children. Now living in a camp in Sangau village, Lawngtlai district, he tends to a small garden and raises chickens for subsistence. "We have no work, so we stay like this, and people in foreign countries support us. That's all we have," he said.



A woman and her baby at a camp in Lawngtlai district, Mizoram, India sheltering families mostly from Matupi Township, Chin State. (Emily Fishbein)

‘Our brother Chin refugees’

The people now called Mizo in India, Chin in Myanmar and Kuki in Bangladesh share common ancestry but were divided between separate administrative territories under British colonial rule. Cross-border movement has since been common, especially during periods of unrest.

In 1958, the mountainous area spanning northeast India, northwest Myanmar and the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh suffered a devastating [famine](#), caused by a cyclical bamboo flowering that brought on a plague of crop-eating rats. Mizo discontent with the Indian government’s response drove the Mizo National Front, Mizoram’s current ruling party, to take up arms for independence in 1966. When the Indian air force retaliated with [airstrikes](#) – the only time in history it has bombed its own citizens – many Mizo fled to Myanmar and Bangladesh. Although a [peace accord](#) was reached in 1986, there are still many Mizo in Myanmar’s northwest, especially the Tarhan ward of the city of Kalay in Sagaing Region, bordering the Chin hills.

Chin people began crossing into Mizoram by the thousands in 1988, following the Myanmar military's violent crackdowns on pro-democracy protests. By 2004, the Mizoram government [counted](#) more than 9,000 Chin people in the state, while the Chin Human Rights Organisation put the number at more than 50,000.

This history has factored strongly into Mizoram's response to the 2021 coup. On February 3, just two days after the military takeover, the Mizo Zirlai Pawl, a student group, held a [sit-in demonstration](#) in Aizawl to show solidarity with Mizo people in Myanmar and condemn the military's violation of human rights.

Within weeks, attention in India had turned towards the growing number of people crossing its northeastern border, at the time mostly [defecting Myanmar police officers](#). On February 25, 2021, India's Home Ministry [instructed](#) the Assam Rifles, a paramilitary border guard, to "take appropriate action to prevent a possible influx".

Then on March 10 it advised the chief ministers of the northeastern states of Mizoram, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland to identify and take steps to deport "illegal migrants".

But while Manipur authorities have since [arrested](#) around 300 Myanmar nationals, Mizoram chief minister Pu Zoramthanga has repeatedly [appealed](#) to the central government to provide asylum, food and shelter to those seeking refuge in his state. The state government itself has offered Chin people access to healthcare and public education, and allowed them to rent accommodation and enter the local workforce.

Mizo voluntary associations, meanwhile, have coordinated with the state government, Christian churches, Chin non-profits and diaspora groups to attempt to meet people's basic needs.

"We cannot ignore the conditions of our brother Chin refugees who suffered a lot and are taking refuge in Mizoram. We will give all our efforts for them, for their safety and livelihoods," said Professor Malsawmliana, assistant secretary of the central office of the Young Mizo Association, the state's largest and most influential voluntary group. "We are a close-knit society, so whenever

we ask to donate or give something, most of the Mizo people are eager to do this kind of good thing.”

This sentiment was shared by Ricky Lalbiakmawia, spokesperson of the Mizo Zirlai Pawl. “[Chin people] are running from death, so it is not good to look the other way,” he said. “Even though the Indian government is against what we are doing, we are doing it... It is our duty as Christians, and as humanitarians, and as brothers and sisters.”



Displaced people from Chin State’s Matupi Township have spent the past year in a camp in Sihhmui village near the Mizoram State capital of Aizawl. The camp was built by the Young Mizo Association, a local voluntary organisation. (Emily Fishbein)

‘They don’t want to return our hospitality in a bad way’

There has been a [similar](#) response to the arrival in November of around 300 ethnic Bawm people from the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh. The arrivals, who belong to the Kuki-Chin ethnic

community, fled clashes between the Bangladesh military and autonomy-seeking Kuki-Chin National Army.

Although India's home ministry [considers](#) the arrivals illegal immigrants, Mizoram has [offered](#) them refuge and humanitarian assistance, while Mizo voluntary associations have led vocal advocacy [campaigns](#) on their behalf. Central authorities, however, still try to enforce their writ: on March 12, the Assam Rifles [arrested](#) two men in Mizoram's Lawngtlai district for alleged association with the Kuki-Chin National Army and plans to smuggle weapons from Bangladesh into Myanmar.

In contrast to the Chin and Bawm, other groups are less welcome in Mizoram. In 2019, thousands of Mizo took to the streets to [protest](#) an amendment to the country's Citizenship Act that the chief minister [warned](#) could open a "floodgate of illegal immigrants" to the state.

The amendment, which offers a pathway to citizenship for persecuted non-Muslim religious minorities from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan, has been widely [condemned](#) by human rights groups for its exclusion of Muslims, but the Mizo are among several ethnic groups in India's northeastern states who say it [threatens](#) the preservation of their Indigenous identities.

Most of these groups, including the Mizo, are granted special protections under India's constitution, which stipulates that people from mainland India must apply for [permission](#) to enter and [restricts](#) "outsiders" from buying tribal land. Mizo voluntary associations have alleged that the Citizenship Act amendment would [undermine](#) these protections by enabling citizenship for the Chakma, a predominantly Buddhist ethnic group spanning the mountainous borders between India, Myanmar and Bangladesh. Although the Chakma have an autonomous district council in Mizoram, Mizo voluntary associations [claim](#) many of them are illegal interlopers from Bangladesh.

Since the 2021 coup in Myanmar, New Delhi's hostile response to Chin arrivals appears to have rekindled Mizo grievances, based on a perceived bias towards certain ethnic and religious groups. "Why should they send these Myanmar [people] back? Why don't they send these other people back also?" the MZP spokesperson said to *Frontier*.

However, he believed Mizo support for the Chin newcomers would overcome New Delhi policy. “We are so determined now, I think [New Delhi] won’t even try to stop us,” he said. “We are the most peaceful state. They want us to stay like this. If they are always opposing what we are doing, we may not become the most peaceful state.”

In contrast to the current welcome, some of the same Mizo groups turned against Chin people in the state in the 1990s and early 2000s, according to reports by the [Chin Human Rights Organization](#) in 2004 and [Human Rights Watch](#) in 2009.

The CHRO report described a “foreigner is foreigner” campaign launched by the Young Mizo Association in the late 1990s. Modelled after an earlier MZP campaign against the Chakma, it targeted Myanmar nationals, many of whom were registered voters. Although the MZP refused to participate in the campaign, it accused Myanmar nationals of bringing “evil deeds” including drug peddling and sex work into Mizo society, to an extent that “the people of the state could not maintain their sympathy towards their brothers and sisters”, the CHRO report said.

Then in 2003, Mizoram authorities accused a Chin man of raping a Mizo girl. The YMA subsequently told all Myanmar nationals to leave the state, and then collaborated with local authorities to drive out more than 8,000 people, according to the CHRO report. The [Human Rights Watch](#) report estimates that 10,000 Chin people were “rounded up and forcibly returned by Mizo voluntary associations and Mizoram authorities” during that time.

Asked about this history, Malsawmliana of the YMA told *Frontier* that “such kind of things will not occur again.” He also provided a printout stating: “YMA always opens its arm to welcome Chin refugees to take shelter and to live safely in Mizoram. YMA always backed and cooperated [with] the state government in providing support and help to the refugees.”

The MZP spokesperson also said he was confident the past hostility would not be repeated, while implying that it had been justified. “We retaliated so effectively... so they don’t dare to do the same mistakes that they did before,” he said. “Everything is going well, because they also know that we are showing them mercy and humanitarian [support]... and they don’t want to return our hospitality in a bad way.”



A makeshift church in a camp sheltering families from Matupi Township, Chin State in Siaha district, Mizoram, India. (Emily Fishbein)

Cooling response, dwindling aid

Chin people who took refuge in Mizoram's Siaha and Lawngtlai districts told *Frontier* they have good relations with local Mizo people, especially in areas where people speak Lai, a dialect similar to that spoken in parts of Chin.

"I don't know about other places, but here, [local people] love refugees," said Paul* from Thantlang, who now rents a house with his family in Lawngtlai district's Bualpui village.

Van Kung, also from Thantlang, rents a house with his family in the district's Sangau village, where he also said he feels welcome. "For the most part, we don't feel that much like refugees here," he said. "Whatever place or shop you go to, they don't look at you that differently."

This feeling is not shared by all Chin people in Mizoram, however. “Coming here, everyone sees us as refugees. We can see it from their looks, the way they talk to us,” said Mung Te, an NGO worker in Aizawl.

There are additional signs that the warm Mizo welcome may be cooling. In September last year, the Aizawl district administration issued a public [order](#) instructing Chin people not to buy land or run businesses without prior permission and reminding them not to engage in illegal businesses, enrol in state voter lists or obtain driving licences.

Then in October, the YMA’s central office passed a [resolution](#) calling on the Mizoram government to place Chin people who have sought refuge in the state in a “compact” area. The state’s home minister replied that his office would find it difficult to meet the request, but [told](#) Indian newspaper *The Hindu*, “Wherever they are and whatever be the cause, the refugees are always a burden in one way or the other.”

Then in February, the Mizoram government [prohibited](#) birth and death certificates for “illegal immigrants and refugees” in the state and nullified past certificates.

Despite these developments, Chin sources familiar with the history told *Frontier* that bonds between the Chin and Mizo had grown much stronger over the last 20 years, and they credited the Chin diaspora with helping to bring the communities together even before the coup.

Over the past two decades, tens of thousands of Chin people [resettled](#) as refugees in the United States, Canada, Europe and Australia; Vanceuuk Khenglawt, a board member of the Chin Baptist Convention-USA, said this diaspora has “tried to have a good relationship with the people of Mizoram, because we know that bad things can happen in our country any time”.

He is also president of an awards ceremony run by [ChinTube](#), a Christian organisation that seeks to celebrate Chin culture, music and other achievements. In addition to its awards ceremony, held this year in Aizawl, the group recently sponsored a music video [cover](#) of Michael Jackson’s “We are the World” that brought together Chin and Mizo singers and got 1.6 million views within a month. It was also formally [praised](#) by Myanmar’s parallel National Unity Government.

In addition, Chin diaspora groups have been leading funders of the humanitarian response. The Chin Baptist Convention-USA alone raised about US\$10 million last year, according to Vanceuuk, although this amount included support for Chin armed resistance groups fighting the junta.

Charity [concerts](#) with Mizo and Chin singers have also generated donations, but these and other funds still aren't enough, say people active in the response.

"Morally, we are 100 percent, but financially... it may be a little bit decreased for the next year because of the income limits," said Vanceuuk. "I am a little worried that if we don't get international assistance, our people will be in a very bad situation."

Malsawmliana of the YMA was also concerned. "We have given temporary immediate relief, [but] we don't have any such kind of long-term plan. We suggest the state government chalk out this long-term plan for the refugees," he said.

With aid dwindling, Pu Van Te of the Myanmar Refugee Relief Committee, a Mizoram-based organisation established in response to the coup, was hopeful that over time, Chin people in Mizoram would become less reliant on aid. "That will be a big relief to the community and the refugee society too," he said.

But nearly all Chin people interviewed by *Frontier* in Siaha and Lawngtlai districts said they were still far from being self-reliant. "To open a shop, you need an ID, and we aren't from here," said Cung Cung* from Thantlang, who rents a room in the town of Siaha with nine family members. At most he says he can find casual labour work 10 days a month, earning 500 Indian rupees (\$6.10) a day, but some months go by with no work at all.

"[Locals] pity us, but the difficult thing is that we don't have work," he said. Although his sister found a job as a waitress, she only earned 5,000 rupees a month for working 12 hours a day and quit after a few months.

Those living in camps are also underemployed. On the outskirts of the town of Lawngtlai, Johnson* from rural Matupi Township, estimated that no more than 10 of the 66 households in

his camp had any income. “There’s not much work here, and many of us can’t work,” he said, citing reasons including old age and poor health.

He added that food donations stopped coming months ago but new families continued to arrive. “We accept new people here, and we help them to build bamboo shelters, but we can’t provide food,” he said. “We help each other individually when new people need something, because it’s our own ethnic people.”

Assistance is also drying up in Sangau. “At first, [local] people came to give us donations, but after a while, we didn’t get that aid anymore,” said Ciin Par* from a village near Hakha, the Chin state capital. “Those of us who have relatives abroad receive support, but the rest of us face serious trouble.”

Still, a handful of people have managed to run small businesses in Sangau, where unlike in other areas, the local village council has allowed Chin people to register small shops. Among these small business owners is Van Kung, whose family sells boiled rice and a Chin traditional corn and beef soup known as *sabuti* out of their kitchen. He also serves on the Thantlang Placement Affairs Committee, a volunteer group assisting people displaced from the Chin township.

“Sometimes, I think, ‘This is a very normal life. I can live like I lived in Thantlang,’” he said. “But the feeling of doing something in Thantlang and doing something here will never be the same.”



A Christmas service at a Chin church in Aizawl, Mizoram, India. (Emily Fishbein)

Aid trapped in donor red tape

Some Chin organisations are also operating in Mizoram with the support of Mizo groups and delivering aid on both sides of the border, but they described significant constraints.

Salai Van*, operations director of an organisation that relocated from Chin after the coup, said his team has been cautious about engaging formally with other humanitarian responders for fear of coming under scrutiny from Indian authorities.

Identifying donors has also been difficult, he said, because many international organisations in Myanmar are limited to funding groups inside the country. And while some of these international organisations are also present in India, few are operating in Mizoram. “It would be much more effective if donors based in Myanmar could also support cross-border aid or provide any assistance for refugees as well, because our donors on this [India] side don’t have much access to the border area,” he said.

Dr M*, general secretary of a Chin organisation providing healthcare, described onerous administrative requirements from international donors, leading to funding shortages that have limited her organisation's delivery of services.

"We spoke with a number of [donor] organisations, but as a startup organisation, we needed to pass an overwhelming number of assessment processes," she said. Her organisation has also found it difficult to meet some donors' requirements for financial documentation because it has been unable to register in India.

Dr M said that despite the presence of local organisations like hers that take few administrative costs, respond quickly to needs and have strong networks and access, humanitarian services in the area remain chronically underfunded.

"This highlights the need for donors to provide more flexibility, more funds and recognise the unique value of local organisations in meeting the needs on the ground," she said.

**A pseudonym or shortened form of some names has been used for security reasons.*

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