

BETWEEN BORDERS

Refugee Realities in
Thailand and Bangladesh

A joint field mission report

Settlement Services International, Asia Pacific Refugee Rights
Network and Amnesty International Australia

Field Mission:
Thailand and Bangladesh
14–20 June 2026

Published:
October 2026

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Executive Summary

Bangladesh and Thailand together host well over a million people displaced from Myanmar, and both countries now stand at a critical juncture. In Bangladesh, nearly a decade after the mass displacement of 2017, 1.2 million Rohingya refugees remain in protracted limbo — a crisis compounded by new arrivals since 2024 and by a humanitarian appeal that has shrunk significantly even as needs have grown. In Thailand, a landmark 2025 policy change now allows registered refugees in camps to work legally for the first time in decades — a moment of genuine promise, but one placed at risk by severe funding shortfalls and by protection gaps that leave tens of thousands without legal status. This report sets out what SSI, APRRN and Amnesty International Australia found on the ground in both countries, and what must happen next, including how Australia may assume different roles in strengthening refugee protection, opportunities and participation in Asia.

Across both countries, a common thread emerged: international attention has waned dramatically precisely as needs have deepened. Refugee women, camp leaders and community organisations described extraordinary resilience placed under mounting strain by diminishing resources and political will. Their testimony, together with the findings of UN agencies, humanitarian actors and government stakeholders, forms the evidence base for the advocacy priorities set out in this report.

This report calls on the Australian Government and the international community to keep the Rohingya crisis politically visible, to protect and expand resettlement and complementary pathways, to close urgent humanitarian funding gaps, in particular at this time with the significant downsizing of UNHCR, and to partner with diverse community-led organisations sustaining dignity and hope for those in their care. These are not abstract policy asks — they are the difference, for hundreds of thousands of people, between prolonged uncertainty and constant human rights risks and a durable, dignified future.

The report is organised around the two countries visited, each with a case study from the ground, followed by a consolidated set of priorities for decision-makers in Australia and the region.



Foreword

In June 2026, a joint delegation from Settlement Services International (SSI), the Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN) and Amnesty International Australia travelled together to Thailand and Bangladesh. The timing was deliberate: the trip coincided with World Refugee Day and marked ten years of partnership between SSI and APRRN grounded in a simple idea — that people with lived experience of displacement should be at the centre of the solutions designed for them.

Over six days, the delegation held more than twenty meetings with UN agencies, government representatives, humanitarian organisations and refugee-led committees — and, above all, with refugees themselves, in the camps of Cox’s Bazar and along the Thai-Myanmar border. What we heard there shaped every page of this report.



While our region searches for pragmatic solutions amid difficult political conditions and limited political will, the lives of children, women, young people and men remain at stake. They cannot wait. They need immediate protection, meaningful inclusion and expanded pathways, with refugee leadership at the heart of every response.

Hafsar, Co-Secretary General of APRRN and a Rohingya Human Rights Defender



This visit has reinforced the importance of partnership, advocacy and lived experience in shaping solutions that are humane and lasting. People forced to flee must not be forgotten, and their voices must remain at the centre of our efforts.

Violet Roumeliotis, CEO of SSI



As a former refugee myself, I know what it means to live with uncertainty and to hope that someone, somewhere, will listen. Refugees do not need our pity—they need opportunity, safety, meaningful inclusion, and the chance to contribute.

Zaki Haidari, Refugee Rights Campaigner, Amnesty International Australia



Bangladesh: A Forgotten Crisis

Bangladesh hosts the world's largest stateless refugee population — approximately 1.2 million Rohingya, most living in 33 overcrowded camps in Cox's Bazar and on Bhasan Char island. Nearly a decade after the mass displacement of 2017, when hundreds of thousands fled targeted violence in Myanmar's Rakhine State, prospects for voluntary return, resettlement or any other durable solution remain as limited as ever.

The crisis is, if anything, deepening. Since early 2024, an estimated 150,000 additional Rohingya have arrived in Bangladesh as violence inside Myanmar has escalated again, placing further strain on humanitarian systems that are already stretched thin. In May 2026, the UN and its partners launched a revised Joint Response Plan seeking US\$710.5 million — an appeal that is itself 26% smaller than the previous year's, despite growing need. Funding is shrinking rapidly as the crisis grows.



What we heard

In Cox's Bazar, UNHCR outlined a situation of mounting pressure, citing 150 to 700 new refugee arrivals each week, reports of push-backs at the border and an acute shortage of land to accommodate new arrivals. Australia's resettlement quota for Rohingya — currently 800 places — was raised repeatedly as a benchmark that must be maintained, and indeed increased. IOM's tracking data pointed to a more troubling trend still: 4,134 individuals have already undertaken dangerous onward journeys by sea in search of safety elsewhere.

Government and diplomatic engagements, including meetings with Bangladesh's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Bangladesh Ambassador to Thailand, consistently reinforced a single imperative: the need to sustain the political visibility of the Rohingya crisis,

both domestically and internationally, at a time when global attention has begun to wane. The Norwegian Refugee Council advocated for stronger coordination of the response, including the placement of INGOs as co-leads within sector coordination structures, and for education to be prioritised — noting that its exclusion from humanitarian grants carries significant, and often overlooked, negative implications for the wider response.

The delegation also engaged directly with Rohingya community members and survivor groups, including Shanti Mohila, a collective of Rohingya women survivors based near Cox's Bazar. Their testimony informed the advocacy priorities outlined in this report, and their voices — not statistics alone — underscore why this crisis must not be permitted to recede from view.



CASE STUDY — BANGLADESH

The two case studies below are examples of the impact of flexible funding through APRRN's sub-grants to refugee-led organisations.

Story shared by Rohingya National Education Board (RNEB):

Nasima Akter — Rohingya language teacher, Life Destination High School



"My" name is Nasima Akter, and I am one of the Rohingya language teachers at Life Destination High School. Teaching at this school not only allows me to educate Rohingya children and inspire them toward a brighter future, but it also helps me support my family and improve our daily living conditions. Despite many hardships in the refugee camp, I continue my work with dedication and hope. I am sincerely thankful to the Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN) for their generous support and encouragement. Their assistance gives strength to teachers like me to continue serving our community and helping vulnerable children access quality education and a better future.



Story shared by Youth Rohingya Development (YRD):

Mashara Bibi — Student, age 14, Camp-16



Before the project, Mashara Bibi had stopped attending school. Her father, Abul Baser, believed that girls did not need education and that her time was better spent at home. After YRD conducted community awareness sessions in Camp-16, Abul Baser participated and began to understand the long-term value of educating his daughter. He agreed to allow Mashara to return to school. By the end of the project period, Mashara was attending regularly, her academic confidence had improved visibly, and her teacher reported a significant change in her willingness to participate in class.

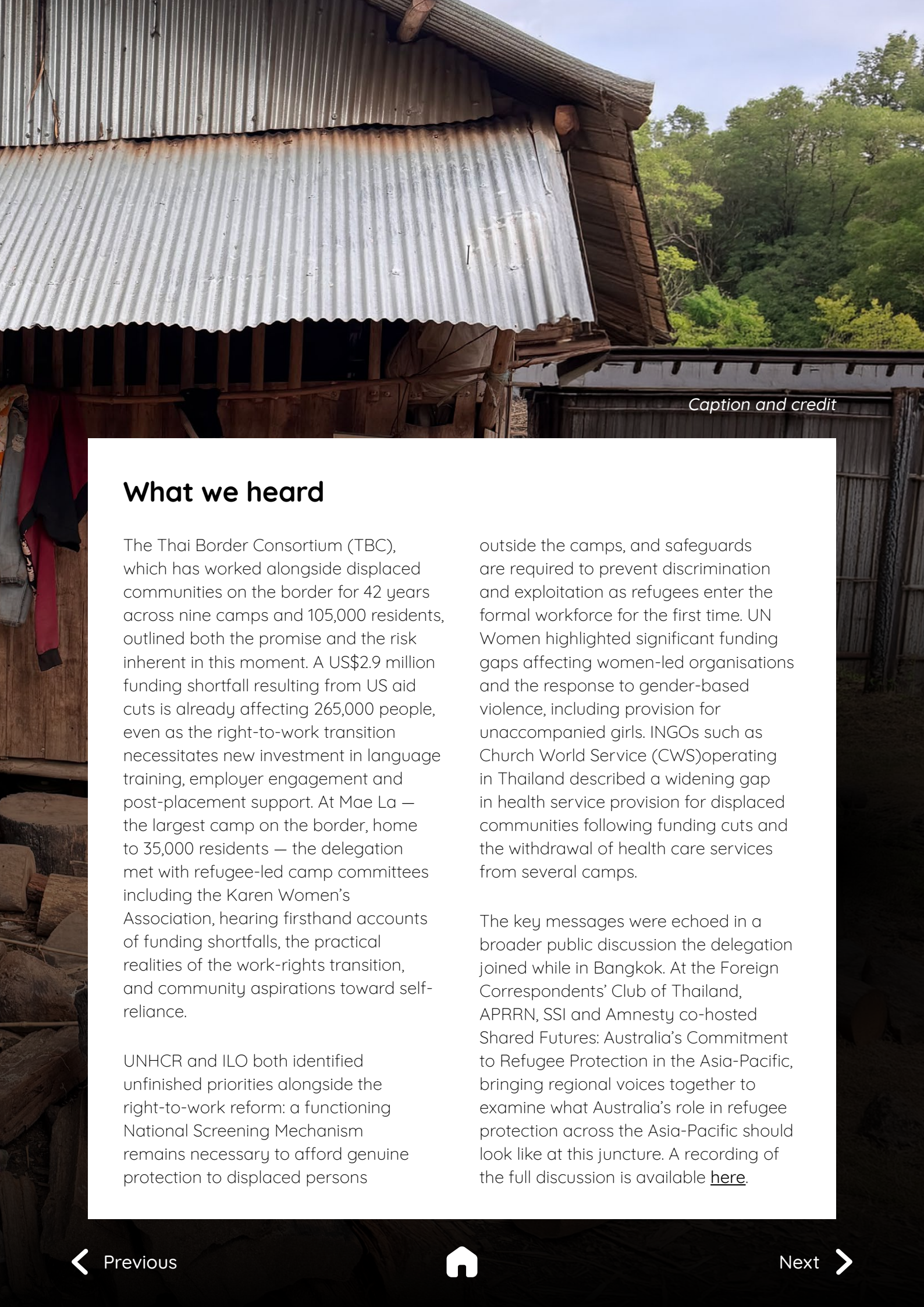




Thailand: A Fragile Turning Point

Thailand hosts people displaced from Myanmar across three settings: long-established camps on the Thai-Myanmar border, urban centres such as Bangkok, and informal settlements elsewhere. Thailand has not signed the 1951 Refugee Convention, yet it has become an important hosting country and a hub for refugee-led organisations and advocacy networks working across Southeast Asia.

Between 81,000 and 86,000 registered refugees live in the nine official border camps, many after decades of displacement — nearly half were born there. In August 2025, the Thai Cabinet approved a landmark change: registered refugees in the camps can now apply for legal work permits and leave the camps for employment, opening legal work access to more than 42,000 working-age people. It is the most significant shift in Thailand's refugee policy in decades, and one the Thai Government has framed partly as a response to its own labour shortages.



Caption and credit

What we heard

The Thai Border Consortium (TBC), which has worked alongside displaced communities on the border for 42 years across nine camps and 105,000 residents, outlined both the promise and the risk inherent in this moment. A US\$2.9 million funding shortfall resulting from US aid cuts is already affecting 265,000 people, even as the right-to-work transition necessitates new investment in language training, employer engagement and post-placement support. At Mae La — the largest camp on the border, home to 35,000 residents — the delegation met with refugee-led camp committees including the Karen Women's Association, hearing firsthand accounts of funding shortfalls, the practical realities of the work-rights transition, and community aspirations toward self-reliance.

UNHCR and ILO both identified unfinished priorities alongside the right-to-work reform: a functioning National Screening Mechanism remains necessary to afford genuine protection to displaced persons

outside the camps, and safeguards are required to prevent discrimination and exploitation as refugees enter the formal workforce for the first time. UN Women highlighted significant funding gaps affecting women-led organisations and the response to gender-based violence, including provision for unaccompanied girls. INGOs such as Church World Service (CWS) operating in Thailand described a widening gap in health service provision for displaced communities following funding cuts and the withdrawal of health care services from several camps.

The key messages were echoed in a broader public discussion the delegation joined while in Bangkok. At the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Thailand, APRRN, SSI and Amnesty co-hosted Shared Futures: Australia's Commitment to Refugee Protection in the Asia-Pacific, bringing regional voices together to examine what Australia's role in refugee protection across the Asia-Pacific should look like at this juncture. A recording of the full discussion is available [here](#).



CASE STUDY — THAILAND

The case study below shows how the Karen Women's Organisation's awareness programs help refugee women know their rights and protect their community.

Story shared by Karen Women's Organisation (KWO):

Naw Wah, age 30 — Participant of the KWO Women's Empowerment Program



My name is Naw Wah. A few years ago I was a victim of abuse. But now, after attending awareness sessions many times provided by KWO, I have gained more knowledge and confidence to respond when I see things that are not right. Now, I understand better, that I have rights. If I feel that someone is treating me unfairly or doing something wrong, I know how to respond and speak up instead of staying silent as I did before. This awareness program is very useful and should be provided to more people, especially those who have not yet had the opportunity to attend.

Not only for myself, but for others who are vulnerable in my community, I have also learnt about their rights. For example, through the child protection awareness sessions, I have become more aware and careful in protecting my own children and other children in the community. And I am confident to share the information I learned with my neighbors. In the past I did not pay much attention when I saw children walking in dangerous parts of the road, or being in unsafe situations. Now I notice that kind of thing, and I take action to protect them. Now I know I am also responsible to protect the rights of others.







Recommendations

Drawing on what the delegation saw and heard across both countries, SSI, APRRN and Amnesty International Australia are calling on the Australian Government and the international community to act on the following priorities.

Bangladesh

Keep the crisis visible and share the responsibility

Shared international responsibility — the international community must step up with durable solutions, not aid alone — Bangladesh should not carry this responsibility on its own.

Political visibility — Australia should keep the Rohingya crisis on the agenda in bilateral and multilateral forums, including ASEAN, and support Bangladesh's own diplomatic efforts.

Link the Myanmar peace process to Rohingya outcomes — a durable solution in Myanmar must address the Rohingya situation directly, including engagement with the shadow government and people in exile; Australia is well placed to adopt a more active engagement strategy.

Australia as an honest broker — Australia should push for credible political engagement on Myanmar, including transparency around the role of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar and support a neutral mediating partner.

Protect pathways to safety

Resettlement based on need — share Australia's resettlement and complementary pathway criteria with Bangladesh's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to find ways forward with third country solutions. Resist any reduction in UNHCR-referred places — complementary pathways must add to the program, not replace it.

Push for protracted crisis recognition — support UNHCR's push to have the Rohingya situation formally recognised as protracted, unlocking the funding and durable-solutions frameworks this requires.

Expand the pool of resettlement countries — use diplomacy to encourage Malaysia, Türkiye, Japan and the Republic of Korea to expand resettlement and complementary pathways.

Partner with community leadership

Amplify Rohingya voices — support the APRRN Rohingya Working Group and help the community build coordinated, recognised leadership — including young people already amplifying community voice online.

Livelihoods, health and nutrition — work with UNDP, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and Bangladesh's Ministry of Foreign Affairs so Rohingya can access livelihoods, healthcare and nutrition support.

Education as a priority — invest in classroom infrastructure and skills training — with half the population under 18, this is a generational emergency, not a secondary priority.

Land, overcrowding and basic services — address the shortage of suitable land and invest in sanitation, water and electricity; land, housing and property governance is a protection issue, not just a technical one.

Fund the humanitarian package — Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) new three-year, up to AUD\$370 million humanitarian program for Myanmar and Bangladesh, announced in 2026 and building on \$1.26 billion in humanitarian assistance committed since 2017, is a welcome and substantial commitment to the region. DFAT should build on this momentum by prioritising and resourcing the joint UNFPA/UNHCR US\$270 million humanitarian package across Bangladesh and Myanmar, ensuring this recent funding translates into coordinated, adequately resourced delivery against the UN's consolidated appeal.

Thailand

| Support a successful right-to-work transition

Sustain and expand the policy — the next two to three years are critical — development funding, language training, cultural orientation and employer support are essential if the goal of local integration and self-reliance is to be realised.

Protect workers' rights in practice — robust complaints mechanisms, interpreter access and post-placement support are needed to prevent discrimination and exploitation as refugees enter the formal workforce.

Close the registration and documentation gap — around 38,000 people remain excluded from work rights — eligibility should be extended, ID issuance sped up, and statelessness addressed, including for children born in Thailand.

Extend work rights beyond the camps — the scheme should extend beyond registered camp populations to include urban and non-border refugees.

| Strengthen legal protection

National Screening Mechanism — Thailand should strengthen the National Screening Mechanism and accede to the Refugee Convention, extending protection to displaced people — including post-coup Myanmar nationals — outside the UNHCR system.

| Close funding and service gaps

Address the humanitarian funding crisis — US aid cuts have reduced food support to just 16% of camp needs; Australia should increase its contribution and help mobilise Japan, the Republic of Korea and other regional partners — and close the gap of funding needs in Thailand.

Support those not covered by work rights — children, people with disability, older people and those outside the work-rights scheme still need sustained humanitarian support.

Fix the health transition — the withdrawal of the International Rescue Committee from the border area as a result of the US funding cuts has left a critical gap — affordable, accessible health coverage and stronger Thai health system capacity are urgently needed.

Education and language training — camp-based education credentials should be recognised and Thai-language training put in place, so people are prepared for work and integration, including pathways to higher education.

Regional

Expand resettlement and regional cooperation

Maintain and grow Australia's resettlement program — maintain the 1,000-per-year resettlement quota and resist pressure to reduce UNHCR-referred places — work rights and resettlement are not mutually exclusive — and grow Australia's 20,000 humanitarian intake within the region.

Expand the 'Train to Hire' model — the IOM-managed 'Train to Hire' program in Malaysia should expand to other countries and larger cohorts as an additional complementary pathway.

Bring protection back to the Bali Process — humanitarian assistance, durable solutions and search-and-rescue at sea should return to the centre of the Bali Process, addressing deaths on the region's most dangerous routes.

Use bilateral relationships to drive systems change — work with IOM, DFAT and Home Affairs on joint approaches, encourage Malaysia and other states to become resettlement countries, and use the Brazil-Thailand exchange as a model for regional learning.

Support women-led organisations — flexible, sustained funding for women-led organisations, for example the Muslim Women's Association. Flexible funding is needed to sustain gender-based-violence response, protection work and community leadership on the border.

Build the evidence base

Capture the economic case for refugees

— systematically document remittances and the economic contributions of diaspora and working refugees to strengthen the case for Australia's domestic and international advocacy.

Invite the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to visit

— encourage the new UN High Commissioner for Refugees to visit Australia via Asia, seeing both the camps and the Australian resettlement context firsthand.



SSI, APRRN and Amnesty International Australia are committed to working together to advocate for these recommendations with the Australian Government, regional governments, UN agencies and other partners. Building on the collaboration that shaped this mission, we will prioritise these recommendations in our respective work plans. Drawing on our combined networks, expertise and platforms we will work to keep them visible, drive systems change through sustained advocacy and work alongside refugee-led and women-led organisations. We will report back on progress as this work moves forward.



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from Bangladesh](#)



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[View photos from the Foreign Correspondents'
Club of Thailand and other meetings](#)

With thanks to the many individuals and organisations across Bangladesh, Thailand and Australia who gave their time and insight to this mission. This field mission and report were made possible with SSI support. Photography by Ro Yassin Abdumonab.