

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:

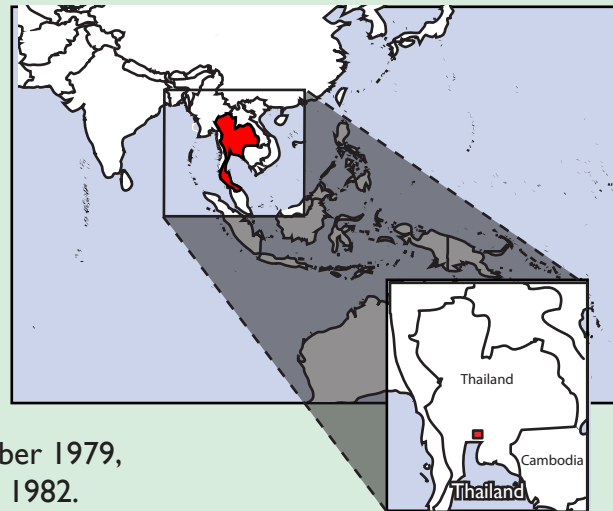
- Khao-I-Dang refugee camp went from 29,000 people shortly after its opening in December 1979, to 130,000 -160,000 in March 1980, to 42,000 by 1982.
- Sakeo camp had 28,000 people shortly after opening, dropping to 17,000 when it closed in July 1980 (the remaining 17,000 were transferred to other camps).

Occupancy rate on handover:

- 100%

Shelter size

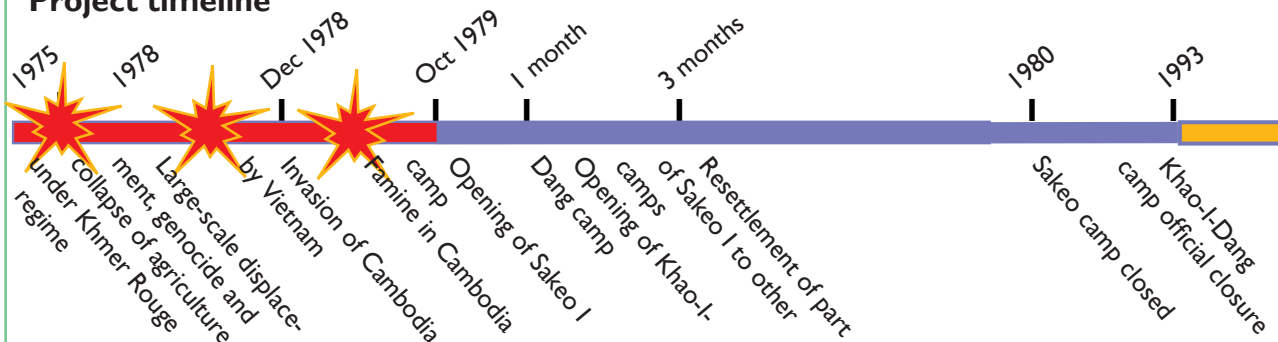
- 16m² (in multi-family units)



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.

Project timeline



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 variability of the experience of the UN and NGO staff, a consultancy firm was hired to develop a manual of standards. Many of those policies and standards were implemented at the Khao-I-Dang and Sakeo camps.

After the opening of the camp

Both camps opened in October-November 1979 and quickly filled to capacity. Khao-I-Dang camp was initially intended to be temporary, housing people who would be then transferred to other camps, repatriated, or resettled in other countries. The camp also became a collection point for those who had been injured during the conflict.

Despite the later population reduction of the Khao-I-Dang camp, the initial increases in population had posed severe challenges for control of the camps. Overcrowding and the high-turnover nature of camp residents caused the camp to descend into violence and to become extremely difficult to govern at times.

Selection of beneficiaries

The mass numbers of the influx and the political pressures exerted by the Thai authorities and the Khmer Rouge did not permit beneficiary selection upon arrival. Resettlement programmes and transfers influenced the selection of who later left the camp.

Land rights / ownership

Thai authorities designated the camp site and the camp administration assigned individual plots to refugees. All rights of occupancy were understood to be non-permanent. When all the camps closed 1993, repatriation was supported through UN-backed programmes aiming for land grants and providing legal advice.

Standards manual

A policy and standards implementation manual was drafted for the UN by consultants during the last months of 1979 and published in draft binder form by January 1980. The camp sites and services part of the manual had eight initial parts focused on water and sanitation issues, and one part on housing and construction. It emphasised minimum numeric standards, along with clearly defined job roles and responsibilities within the camp.

Implementing agencies in the camp were to be held accountable to these standards through routine assessments undertaken by the UN. The stated goals for the manual were:

- To ensure that all services meet a basic minimal level of quality;
- To ensure that all services are provided in a uniform manner;
- To provide the basic information necessary to successfully implement UNHCR standards;
- To standardise routines and to facilitate reporting and monitoring;
- To provide a guide for those who have had no prior experience in the field; and
- To ensure that the mistakes of

previous relief operations were not repeated.

Through regional workshops with the consultant and others in 1980, this manual formed the starting point for the first draft of the UNHCR *Handbook for Emergencies*.

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.

Logistics and 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.

Materials
Bamboo poles
Plastic sheeting
Rope or wire
Thatch (palm)
Fire-resistant wallboards
Timber flooring