

**China urged to safeguard refugees from Myanmar**  
**By XINYAN YU, Associated Press**  
**26 June, 2012**

As many as 10,000 ethnic Kachin refugees who fled Myanmar are facing food and water shortages and inadequate sanitation at makeshift camps in China and need support and protection, a human rights group said Tuesday.

The report by Human Rights Watch said the refugees in Yunnan province were at risk of being returned to a combat zone, and urged the Chinese government to give them temporary protection. It also called for permitting the United Nations and humanitarian agencies free access to them.

The Kachin minority in northern Myanmar has been fighting government forces since last June, when the authorities sought to shut down a Kachin militia base near a hydropower dam construction project. The hostilities ended a 17-year cease-fire and displaced about 75,000 people.

"Many Kachin refugees have already endured terrible abuses and war in Burma, only to settle into a life of dire struggle in Yunnan," Sophie Richardson, China director at Human Rights Watch, said in the report. Burma is Myanmar's former name.

"Until it is safe for the Kachin to return home, the Chinese government has a responsibility to ensure their safety and well-being," Richardson said.

At a news conference in Bangkok to release the report, a Human Rights Watch staff member noted that no reports had been received lately of Kachins being barred from entering China or forced to return to Myanmar. "Credit should be given where credit is due to the Chinese government," said Phil Robertson, Human Rights Watch's deputy Asia director.

The report said that while China has generally let Kachin refugees stay, it had ordered about 300 people in two groups to return to Myanmar about a year ago.

In Beijing, Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei said the report of refugees being turned back was inaccurate. He told a news conference that the refugees had entered China to escape the conflict and returned when it had ended. He said they had been provided with humanitarian assistance while in China.

Human Rights Watch said the main problems facing the refugees are shortages of food and potable water, and inadequate shelter, sanitation and medical care.

"We live in a group, side by side, so sicknesses spread quickly," a Kachin farmer told Human Rights Watch researchers. "If one child gets sick, every child gets sick, and we don't have any medicines. The children have diarrhea and colds constantly."

The report also says that most refugee children in Yunnan have no access to schools and that the adults, desperate for work, are forced to be day laborers and are at risk of exploitation.

The refugees currently depend on limited support provided by local aid organizations, churches and a few small international organizations in southwestern China, according to Human Rights Watch. All of them are short of funding and resources.

"What we need urgently now are medicines and drinking water," Zhang Shengqi, a Chinese journalist and aid volunteer who blogs about the refugees, told The Associated Press in a telephone interview from Bangkok.

He said the Chinese government has been reluctant to send aid to the refugees because it didn't want to disturb its friendly relations with Myanmar's military, which still wields much power despite giving way to an elected, nominally civilian government last year.

Associated Press researcher Zhao Liang in Beijing contributed to this report.