

Raltlan Across the Border: Everyday Governance of Myanmar Refugees in Mizoram

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Abstract

Following the military coup and escalating violence in Myanmar, many citizens sought refuge in Mizoram, not merely as refugees but as individuals seeking shelter among the ethnic community they relate to. Mizoram's geographic proximity and cultural ties to Myanmar positioned it as a critical sanctuary for Raltlan escaping violence. Although India has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention or the 1967 Protocol and is therefore not bound by specific international refugee obligations, the Indian government has classified asylum seekers from Myanmar as "illegal migrants" and has directed state authorities to secure borders and prevent further influx.

In contrast, the state of Mizoram has adopted a welcoming stance toward Myanmar refugees. This approach is rooted in strong ethnic and cultural connections between the Mizo and Chin communities. India's Mizoram not only shares a border with Myanmar but also has a large population belonging to the Zo tribe, which is divided by this border. These individuals consider themselves "unau" or "zohnahthlak," terms in Mizo that refer to siblings or descendants of the Zo people living in both India and Myanmar.

The civil society and the Churches take it as a shared responsibility to shelter refuge seekers especially in the initial years. Focusing on Myanmar nationals locally described as Raltlan, a term in the Mizo dialect referring to individuals fleeing danger or fear, this study investigates how care, shelter, and documentation are organized beyond formal state mechanisms in Mizoram. Drawing on ethnographic observation and in-depth interviews with church organisations, village councils, and civil society actors, the paper demonstrates how alternative systems of care and governance emerge in the absence of formal refugee policy. These practices reveal a form of grassroots political imagination rooted in ethnic solidarity, moral obligation, and community-led governance.