

***Children Affected by Conflict in the Borderlands of Thailand.* By Kai Chen. Singapore: Springer, 2021. Hardcover: 88pp.**

Children tend to be the most affected by war, which makes protecting children from the effects of armed conflict a moral imperative and an essential element to break the cycle of violence. Kai Chen's *Children Affected by Armed Conflict in the Borderlands of Thailand* contributes to our understanding of the causes and dynamics of child soldiering along the Thai-Myanmar border and in Thailand's Far South (where a Malay-Muslim insurgency has been raging since 2004), and discusses steps taken by the Thai government to confront this issue.

The book is comprised of nine chapters. The first three chapters engage with methodology, a review of child labour in history, and an overview of the nexus between child labourers, child soldiers and children affected by armed conflict. The fourth and fifth chapters examine the children exposed to armed conflicts on the Thai-Myanmar border and in Thailand's Far South. The next three chapters explore the Thai government's efforts to protect children from armed conflict and the obstacles it faces. The concluding chapter proposes alternative solutions to the problem.

The book provides a good background for readers to understand the effects of violent conflict between the Myanmar armed forces (Tatmadaw) and ethnic-based militia in Myanmar on displaced children on the Thai-Myanmar border. Some vulnerable children volunteer to be child soldiers while others are recruited by the Tatmadaw and ethnic militia groups. There are about 120,000 long-term internally displaced persons and refugees in camps along the Thai-Myanmar border. This figure includes displaced children who fled from Myanmar as well as those who were born in the refugee camps. To survive, many of these children become child labourers. Unfortunately, some of them go on to face even more severe exploitation in the form of forced indentured labour.

Chen stresses that peace and security in Myanmar is a precondition for the resettlement of children affected by armed conflict. He points to other resettlement concerns, including the challenge of identifying returnees and verifying their ages and other issues such as security, safety, landmine clearance and the provision of adequate housing. As armed conflict in Myanmar is likely to continue for the foreseeable future, he predicts the high levels of emigration from Myanmar to Thailand along the borders will continue.

In examining children affected by armed conflict in Thailand's Far South, Chen provides readers with detailed descriptions of the dynamics of the security situation. First, he points out that the new generation of insurgents employ tactics different from those of previous generations. They embed themselves within the local population in the Far South and typically hold no prior criminal records, making it difficult for authorities to identify them. They also tend to be sceptical of government peace initiatives. Second, Chen discusses measures taken by the Thai government which intensified violence in the Far South. These measures included the passing of special security legislation, support for paramilitary organizations and the militarization of monasteries. He stresses that immunity provisions in the special security legislation shield the military and other officials from accountability for torture and other ill-treatment of those known or suspected to be involved with separatist groups. As the violence between the security forces and insurgents intensified, the trust gap between authorities and the Malay-Muslim population widened considerably. Paramilitary organizations and insurgent groups have reportedly recruited, armed and deployed children in this conflict.

In the final section of the book, Chen sets out to examine the "most effective solutions offered by the Thai government" in the form of supportive arrangements, criminalization of child soldiering and strengthening legislation to protect children (p. 57). On the Thai-Myanmar border, the Thai government established 130 migrant learning centres that provide a safe place for children to learn and develop with support from local and international donors and volunteers. The Thai authorities also legalized formal and non-formal education given to undocumented and non-Thais in these learning centres. The issuance of identity cards for stateless children in Tak Province in northern Thailand also allows them to access the country's primary education. Chen maintains that language obstacles and the lack of sustainable funding are difficulties the Thai government faces in protecting children affected by armed conflicts on the Thai-Myanmar border.

Readers may wish to see a richer discussion about the solutions for the Far South. Chen notes that child development centres, one of the most significant supportive measures in the Far South, were closed down after 2004. With brief information about the Southern Border Province Administration Centre's Hotline, he concludes that it helps protect the children affected by armed conflict. Additional statistical data of the hotline's user satisfaction survey or interviews

are needed to validate his claim. Another effort that Chen illustrates as an effective government solution is the Child Support Grant (p. 58). However, this scheme is a nationwide scheme to narrow the poverty gap among the population, and is not a government effort explicitly designed to provide support for children in the Far South.

Chen describes obstacles faced by the Thai government to protect children affected by armed conflicts in the Far South. These hindrances include contrasting demands between insurgents and the Thai government concerning autonomy. Additionally, the Thai government has relied mainly on a security-centred approach without considering alternatives. Corruption by officials and stakeholders who benefit from prolonging the conflict also threatens to stall efforts to de-escalate the conflict. To protect children from armed conflict in the Far South, Chen suggests the government rely less on paramilitary organizations and provide amnesties to the insurgents. Some readers may be disappointed by the superficial discourse and unsubstantiated claims about the government's effectiveness in protecting children in the Far South. This shortfall suggests the need for further research.

It is always a challenge to conduct research using solely secondary sources, as the author admits from the onset. While more data is needed to validate some of the author's assertions, the book contributes to the literature on children affected by conflict, focusing on the borderlands of Thailand. It also raises many interesting questions. Further inquiry into the Thai government's measures and their effectiveness in protecting the children in the Far South would be a welcome companion to this book.

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