

BOOK REVIEWS

***Children Affected by Armed Conflict in the Borderlands of Myanmar 2021 and Beyond.* By Kai Chen. Singapore: Springer, 2024. Hardcover: 87pp.**

Since a military coup in February 2021 plunged Myanmar into a nationwide civil war, the country has been gripped by escalating crises. Women and children have borne the heaviest burden. A 2024 UNICEF report painted a grim picture: 3.5 million internally displaced people, over a million of them children. That same year, more than 750 children were killed or injured. According to the World Bank, over 28 per cent of school-aged children are out of school—likely an understatement. On top of this, children have been subjected to forced labour since the junta brought in its conscription law in February 2024. Despite this dire situation, their suffering has received far less attention than it warrants, making Kai Chen's short yet sobering book a welcome addition to the discourse.

Focusing on Myanmar's borderlands and the neighbouring countries (India, Bangladesh and Thailand) that have taken in considerable numbers of Burmese refugees, Chen documents how children have ended up as collateral damage in the struggle between the military junta and multiple political and ethnic militias. Displacement has been the most immediate and devastating impact. In Rakhine and Chin States, the civil war intensified in 2023 after the launch of "Operation 1027", a combined assault on the military by three ethnic armed organizations. But success in routing junta forces came at a cost: a surge in child displacement and casualties. Elsewhere, in conflict-ridden border states like Kachin, Shan, Karen and Kayah, children have fallen victim to landmines and improvised explosive devices.

Chapters Two through Six examine specific ways in which children have suffered in different borderland regions and neighbouring countries. Chapters Seven and Eight assess how domestic and international stakeholders have attempted, but often failed, to respond. The closing chapters venture into the possibility of a humanitarian ceasefire—one modeled after UN-recommended ceasefires in Gaza—that could allow safe aid delivery and secure passage for civilians. Chen argues that even temporary cessations of violence could make a significant difference in protecting the most vulnerable.

While Chen's work sheds light on one of the more neglected issues in Myanmar's civil war, and the breadth of his research is commendable, its depth (or lack thereof) presents some challenges. Though empirically grounded, it lacks strong theoretical foundations, leaving the reader with something that is overly descriptive and insufficiently analytical. Moreover, though Chen touches upon the overarching political issues driving this conflict, his analysis tends towards the superficial and does not convincingly explain how the obstacles to peace relate to the suffering of vulnerable children. A likely reason is Chen's reliance on secondary sources. Though valuable, the lack of firsthand material limits Chen's ability to engage in deeper discussions of complex issues. Much remains unresolved, perhaps due to gaps in the source material. This is quite noticeable when Chen does not provide a detailed explanation of how humanitarian ceasefires, the focus of his later chapters, would actually improve the situation for children in Myanmar.

That said, this book offers valuable insights for scholars, policymakers and humanitarian organizations seeking to address the needs of this vulnerable population. It also opens some space for further research into how children in Bamar-majority areas of Myanmar, not just the borderlands, have been affected by the civil war.

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