SITUATION OF REFUGEE AND MIGRANT CHILDREN IN THAILAND

4TH CYCLE UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW

Save the Children raises concern regarding the education of conflict-displaced and migrant children along the Thailand–Myanmar border, and calls on the Royal Thai Government to close the gap between its stated commitment to "Education for All" and children's lived reality of access to schooling.

Since the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, the border region has shifted from predominantly economic labour migration to **crisis-driven, mixed displacement**. Over **90,000 conflict-displaced persons** currently reside in temporary shelters, with hundreds of thousands more in precarious conditions outside camp boundaries — driving surging school enrolment, severe funding cuts, and the looming risk of school closures.

In parallel, an estimated **200 or more refugee children** who had been informally attending Thai public schools outside camps — in some cases for several years — have recently been barred from continuing their education, following heightened scrutiny of enrolment practices in border areas. This illustrates the urgent, practical gap between incremental policy deliberation and children's already-existing education needs.

1,554	667	228	15
Temporary Shelter School participants (students, teachers, parents)	Migrant Learning Centre (MLC) participants, focus on Tak Province	Thai Public School participants (Thai & Myanmar students/teachers)	Key informants — OBEC, UNICEF, MOI

Mixed-methods survey (n = 2,464) combining quantitative data (KoBo) with focus group discussions and key informant interviews, Oct 2025–Jan 2026.

64,344	90,000+	61.3%
displaced & migrant children enrolled in border-area schools in 2025	conflict-displaced persons currently in temporary shelters	of MLC students cite "no documents" as the main reason they cannot enrol in Thai public school

Findings: Education on the Edge Survey (Save the Children & JICA, Jan 2026)

Documentation Barriers — the #1 barrier to access

- **61.3% of Migrant Learning Centre (MLC) students** cite lack of documents as the primary reason for not enrolling in Thai public schools; **46% are undocumented or unaware of their legal status.**
- Birth certificates issued outside Thailand are **often not recognised**, creating a dead end from displacement to denied enrolment and lost certification.
- Teachers rank **"documents and legal assistance"** as the single most urgent need for their students.

Retention & the Dropout Crisis

- MLCs recorded a **14.5% dropout rate in 2025 (2,722 students lost)**; roughly half attributed to "unknown causes" / sudden flight. Temporary shelter schools recorded about a **5% dropout rate**, driven by hopelessness and aid cuts.
- Root causes: **mobility** (40% of dropouts move with parents for work or safety) and **economic necessity** (child labour required to replace lost household income).

Teacher Welfare — an education quality crisis

- Camp and MLC teachers, mostly displaced persons or migrants themselves, earn an average of just **1,000–1,160 THB (~US$35) per month**; recent funding cuts eliminated their food rations.
- High annual turnover (**4–5 new teachers per school**) as qualified educators leave; the "right-to-work" policy has unintentionally accelerated this attrition.
- Teachers in MLCs are legally registered as **"general labourers," not educators**, and their credentials are not recognised by the Thai system.

A Safe Space, But a System Starved of Resources

- **85.5% of students say they like their school** and 79% feel safe there — but physical learning environments are deteriorating from chronic underinvestment.
- Resource divide: **59.4% of Thai Public School students** report having "everything" they need, versus only **32.2% of Shelter School students.**
- Shelter and MLC schools report overcrowded classrooms with thin wooden walls, chronic shortages of textbooks/desks/science equipment, and safety risks including dilapidated buildings and **flooding up to 8 times per year.**

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The Language Gap — high aspiration, low proficiency

- **76.1% of temporary shelter students cannot write in Thai**, and 70% have zero or very basic Thai listening skills — a major barrier to transfer into Thai public schools.
- Despite this, aspiration to learn Thai is high: **81.9% of MLC students** and 52.6% of shelter students rate learning Thai as "very important," mainly for future job opportunities (cited by 91.8% of teachers).

Immediate Crisis: Interruption of Schooling Already Underway

- An estimated **200 or more refugee children** who had been informally attending Thai public schools outside camps — in some cases for several years — have recently been **barred from continuing their education**, following heightened scrutiny of school enrolment practices in border areas.
- Scrutiny was triggered in part by advocacy communications addressed to the Ministry of Interior (MOI) regarding refugee education rights, which inadvertently contributed to schools' fear of investigation and subsequent risk-averse exclusion of these children.
- Discussions are reportedly underway between MOI and the National Security Council to explore a phased, long-term pathway for education access alongside parents' permitted work outside camps — but this process remains undefined, with no confirmed timeline, leaving children's continuity of learning unprotected in the interim.

Dreams and Daily Realities: Aspirations & Social Integration

- Despite significant hurdles, students hold strong career aspirations — **doctor, teacher, and nurse** are the most frequently named professions, followed by athlete and engineer.
- Positive peer integration: **65% of Thai students report having Myanmar peers**; 102 of 105 feel comfortable studying and playing with them, and 80% have proactively helped them with schoolwork.
- Remaining hurdles: **45.7% of Thai students** cited teasing and discrimination as a primary challenge, and **33.3% of MLC students** expressed a fear of discrimination.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Immediate / Interim Protection

1. That the Royal Thai Government, through **MOI in coordination with the Ministry of Education**, issue an official statement or directive explicitly permitting refugee children already enrolled in Thai public schools to **continue their education without interruption**, pending finalization of a comprehensive access policy.
2. That MOI establish a **clear, time-bound roadmap** — developed in consultation with MOE, UNHCR, and civil society — for extending regular access to Thai public education for refugee children residing in temporary shelters, prioritizing continuity of learning and the best interests of the child.
3. That any future policy communications or advocacy directed at MOI regarding refugee education be **coordinated among humanitarian and legal actors** to avoid triggering unintended enforcement actions against children already accessing education informally.

Systemic Reform

4. Accelerate **standardized ID systems for long-term migrant and conflict-displaced children**, and clear the policy backlog that keeps education access conditional and fragmented — including revisiting Cabinet Resolutions under the "Education for All" policy that restrict refugee children to studying only within camp boundaries, so that policy on paper reflects the mobility and needs of families already living and working outside camps.
5. **Recognize learning and accredit schools**: establish interim equivalency mechanisms for certificates from MLCs and camp schools to enable access to Thai non-formal education and higher education, alongside a national quality assurance framework for MLCs.
6. **Protect and professionalize teachers**: introduce recognition-of-prior-learning and in-service certification pathways for migrant and camp-based teachers, and revise regulations to allow qualified migrant teachers to be licensed as educators or assistant teachers rather than registered as "general labourers."
7. That the Royal Thai Government **allocate dedicated budget to support Thai public schools in transitioning and absorbing refugee and migrant children** — covering the additional capacity, food, and facilities needed as these children enrol — including exploring revenue from **migrant worker taxation and registration fees** as a sustainable funding stream to ease the transition and reduce reliance on short-term NGO funding.

CONTACT: Warangkana Mutumol · yui.mutumol@savethechildren.org

Findings drawn from: Save the Children & JICA, "Education on the Edge: Access to Education for Conflict-Displaced and Migrant Children along the Thailand-Myanmar Border," Survey Report, January 2026 (n = 2,464; Tak, Mae Hong Son, Ratchaburi).

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