

Migrant and Refugee Aid Agencies Refuse Total's Money

Saturday 18 November 2006, by [Khun Sam](#) (Date first published: 25 May 2006).

Two non-government groups working with Burmese migrants and refugees in Thailand have declined a US \$6.12 million package offered by French oil giant Total.

The NGOs say they refused the money because of Total's business dealings with the Burmese military regime and its alleged involvement in forced labor and human rights violations in the construction of the Yadana pipeline project from Burma to Thailand in the 1990s.

Jackie Pollock, coordinator of the Chiang Mai-based Migrant Assistance Program, told The Irrawaddy that her organization refused to be involved with Total because of the company's record on human rights in Burma. "It would be unethical to be funded by a company that has ignored human rights abuses and violations," she said.

In spite of its willingness to spend money on aid projects, Total is still strongly criticized by human rights advocacy groups because of its business involvement with the Burmese regime.

The Thailand-Burma Border Consortium, which provides assistance to Burmese refugees in camps along the Thai border, has also declined Total money. "Basically, we don't want to take money from Total; we would not accept funding from Total," said the TBBC's Sally Thomson.

Two humanitarian organizations, however, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the National Catholic Commission on Migration, have said they will accept Total financial aid.

Sumit Punnakari, project coordinator of NCCM, says his organization has taken responsibility to carry out educational, health and other aid projects in Mon and Karen State and to assist migrant workers in Thailand. "With good management, accountability and transparency, I am sure that we can save and help a lot of people," Sumit said.

The UNHCR will spend its slice of the Total funding on aid projects in seven border refugee camps.

Some human rights advocates and NGOs complain that a "lack of clarity" exists about how money earmarked for projects is to be implemented and claim Total is enhancing its public image by controlling how its funding money is to be spent.

Mael Raynaud, a Chiang Mai-based French political analyst, said NGOs should be cautious about accepting money or implementing projects from Total's funding. "They should not accept money from Total," he said. "If NGOs or any groups working for society accept the money they will lose their credibility and ability to criticize Total," he said.

There was a difference, Raynaud said, between victims of forced labor accepting money and NGOs taking financial aid from Total.

Total has consistently rejected pressure from anti-regime campaign groups to end investment in Burma, claiming that if it withdrew other companies would simply take its place. "Total should

withdraw from Burma,” said Raynaud. “It is not acceptable that a company is making money out of the suffering of people.”

P.S.

* From The Irrawaddy website. <http://www.irrawaddy.org/aviewer.asp?a=5785&z=154>

and BurmaNet website.

<http://www.burmanet.org/news/2006/05/25/irrawaddy-migrant-and-refugee-aid-agencies-refuse-total-s-money-khun-sam/>