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Limits and Risks of the Thailand–Myanmar Humanitarian Corridor Initiative

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Perspective

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Abstract

In Myanmar, the state is itself a party to the conflict and a principal driver of displacement; to operate humanitarian response “through official channels” is therefore to operate through the perpetrator’s infrastructure. This article examines how humanitarian action in Myanmar’s border areas, and the Thailand and ASEAN “humanitarian corridor” launched in 2024, exposes the moral and political contradictions of aid in authoritarian contexts. Reading the corridor through Johan Galtung’s framework of conflict transformation, the analysis treats displacement not as an emergency to be managed but as the visible expression of a deeper architecture of violence. From this vantage, the corridor delivers a fragile negative peace, the appearance of relief and order, while leaving untouched the structural violence that produces displacement. Drawing on practitioner field observation along the Thai–Myanmar border and engagement with humanitarian coordination platforms, the analysis situates local realities within the wider politics of neutrality and legitimacy. The article advances a conceptual argument for re-politicizing humanitarianism, reframed as a project of conflict transformation oriented toward positive peace: to re-politicize humanitarianism is to recognize that neutrality cannot mean silence but must mean courage, justice, and a willingness to engage with power.

Introduction

I wrote a note for this article from Goh Manao, a small settlement on the Moei River along the Thailand–Myanmar border often described as a “no man’s (is)land.” A new camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs) had taken shape there, providing temporary shelter to families fleeing renewed fighting in Karen and Kayah States. It is an unregistered space, monitored loosely by changing local de facto authorities and existing mostly through the coordination of humanitarian actors and community networks. This setting represents both the spatial and the political frontier of displacement in mainland Southeast Asia, a place where international attention rarely reaches and where the formal categories of refugee law dissolve into improvised arrangements of survival. The camp’s existence reflects the region’s unresolved question: what happens to people displaced by a crisis that is politically recognized but diplomatically denied?

Having recently completed a consultancy supporting humanitarian coordination and service delivery for IDPs and migrants from Myanmar, like many practitioners, I wanted to understand how these interventions materialized beyond donor reports and indicators, so I visited the site after I had officially left the assignment. The field reality was not what I had imagined. The fighting in Karen and Kayah States that produced the camp had also produced an emergency-mode humanitarian response, and that response built a camp with sanitation, health services, and food supplies markedly better than what was available to the village families living only a few hundred meters away, families exposed to the same conflict and the same insecurity, but outside the boundary that humanitarian programming had drawn around “the displaced.” Nearby villagers, in turn, began seeking relocation into the camp. The imbalance revealed its own paradox: in the rush of emergency response, humanitarian agencies and donors had built excellent services for one population while leaving the system that should have served everyone

untouched, treating service delivery to the displaced and system strengthening for the host community as separate problems rather than one shared obligation.

This paradox of humanitarian success prompted me to reflect more critically on how humanitarianism operates within political structures that perpetuate displacement, and to turn to Johan Galtung's peace research for a vocabulary adequate to what I was seeing. In Galtung's terms, the camp at Goh Manao is a small monument to negative peace: suffering is buffered, lives are sustained, and yet the relations that produced the displacement remain wholly intact. The launch of the Thai government's 'Humanitarian Corridor' in 2024, implemented through ASEAN's Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance (the AHA Centre) and the Thai and Myanmar Red Cross Societies, amplified this question on a regional scale. While officially framed as a gesture of regional compassion, the corridor illustrates how ostensibly "neutral" humanitarian mechanisms can become instruments that reinforce, rather than challenge, state power. The displacement it addresses is not the by-product of a natural disaster but the direct outcome of militarized governance; treating it as an apolitical emergency is itself a political act.

This research examines that contradiction by combining policy analysis, field-based observation, and humanitarian studies scholarship. It poses three interrelated questions. First, how can the principle of humanitarian neutrality be reconciled with state-led violence in authoritarian contexts? Second, what political effects do regional humanitarian architectures, such as ASEAN's non-interference doctrine, produce on access, accountability, and recognition? Third, can humanitarianism be re-politicized as an instrument of conflict transformation rather than conflict management, without abandoning impartiality? The central claim is that, in contexts of authoritarian control, unexamined humanitarian neutrality risks legitimizing the very political orders that create suffering, securing negative peace at the expense of positive peace. The article therefore calls for a re-politicization of humanitarianism, understood not as partisanship but as an ethical and analytical commitment to accountability, to the transformation of violent structures, and to the agency of displaced populations.

Displacement across the Thai–Myanmar border is not new; it is among the most protracted humanitarian situations in the world. Since the mid-1980s, successive waves of conflict in Myanmar's southeastern states have pushed Karen, Karenni, Mon, and Shan communities into camps and informal settlements along the Thai frontier, where they have been sustained for decades largely by ethnic and community networks and by cross-border assistance operating outside official channels (Border Consortium, 2023). The 2021 military coup and the nationwide armed resistance that followed dramatically expanded the scale of displacement. Against this backdrop, the 2024 corridor represents not the arrival of aid where none existed, but the insertion of a formal, consent-based, state-centered mechanism into a landscape already densely populated by community-led responses.

The article offers a situated account of how a high-profile regional aid mechanism operates at the international scale. Conceptually, it specifies what re-politicization concretely requires: not the abandonment of impartiality, but its redefinition as fairness rooted in context, solidarity, and moral presence, and its reorientation from the management of symptoms toward the transformation of the

conflict's underlying contradiction. In doing so, the article distinguishes re-politicization from the depoliticization it critiques and clarifies how each is produced through the same institutional machinery of consent, compliance, and moral vocabulary. The remainder of the article proceeds as follows: it reviews the literature on violence, peace, and neutrality; sets out the methodology; presents field findings from the corridor and its surrounding architecture of aid; synthesizes the recurring patterns; reflects critically on the analytical framework; and outlines the orientations of a re-politicized, transformation-oriented humanitarian practice.

Literature and Context

Violence, Peace, and Conflict Transformation

The conceptual basis of this analysis is Johan Galtung's peace research, which supplies the vocabulary for distinguishing what humanitarian aid relieves from what it leaves intact. Galtung (1969) defines violence broadly as any constraint that prevents people from realizing their potential, and he distinguishes three forms. Direct violence is the visible, intentional harm of one actor against another, the bombardment of a village, the burning of a home, the killing that drives people to flee. Structural violence is harm built into the organization of society itself, into the institutions, laws, and distributions of power that systematically deny some groups security, voice, and the means of life, often without any identifiable perpetrator pulling a trigger. Cultural violence, which Galtung (1990) added later, is the domain of symbols, religion, ideology, and language that legitimizes the other two, making direct and structural violence look right, or at least not wrong. The three form a self-reinforcing triangle: cultural violence justifies structural violence, which in turn erupts as direct violence.

Galtung pairs this anatomy of violence with a corresponding anatomy of peace. Negative peace is the absence of direct violence, the silencing of the guns; positive peace is the absence of structural and cultural violence, the presence of justice, equity, and institutions that meet human needs (Galtung, 1969, 1996). The distinction is decisive for the argument that follows, because much of what humanitarian action achieves, and much of what the Thailand–Myanmar corridor claims to achieve, operates at the area of negative peace: the temporary suspension of acute suffering without any alteration of the structures that generate it. Galtung's (1996, 2000) further distinction among conflict management, resolution, and transformation sharpens the point. Management contains and stabilizes; resolution settles a dispute on agreed terms; transformation works on the underlying contradiction, on the relationships, structures, and cultural narratives that reproduce the conflict, seeking not merely to end the fighting but to change the conditions that make it recur. The argument of this article is that principled neutrality, in a setting where the state is the principal driver of displacement, operates at best as conflict management, and that re-politicization would contribute to conflict transformation.

Humanitarianism and the Politics of Neutrality

Neutrality has long been central to humanitarian identity. From the International Committee of the Red Cross to national societies, the principle is enshrined as both protection and legitimacy (ICRC, 1993). Yet, neutrality has never been absolute. As Barnett (2011) and Fassin (2012) observe, humanitarian action is inseparable from the political conditions that enable or constrain it. In conflict zones where the state and violence are intertwined, neutrality can become a mechanism of containment rather than a guarantee of independence. Read through Galtung, neutrality that addresses only the immediate emergency while declining to name the structural and cultural violence around it is confined to producing negative peace. Neutrality always operates within, and is shaped by, the power relations, institutional dependencies, and moral hierarchies that define the humanitarian field (Barnett, 2011; Fassin, 2012; Weiss, 2013).

These dynamics mirror what Donini (2012) terms the politics of managed humanitarianism, in which access and neutrality are negotiated within the boundaries of state sovereignty. In such arrangements, the humanitarian actor can become a vehicle for the state's image of legitimacy: neutrality, rather than shielding aid from politics, becomes the language through which power asserts moral authority, an instance of cultural violence, in which a moral vocabulary lends a veneer of virtue to a coercive order. The consequence is a subtle inversion of the principle's original purpose. Conceived as a shield that allows aid to reach all sides, neutrality can be repurposed as a credential that the controlling party displays to demonstrate its own benevolence, thereby converting humanitarian access into political capital.

The tension between moral aspiration and political constraint has been widely discussed in the anthropology of humanitarianism. Fassin (2012) describes humanitarian reason as a politics of life, a moral economy that prioritizes saving bodies over addressing the causes of suffering, an orientation that, in Galtung's terms, privileges the relief of direct violence while leaving structural violence unexamined. Ticktin (2011) argues that humanitarianism often operates through exceptionalism, responding to suffering as an emergency while leaving structural injustices intact. Barnett (2011) traces this tendency to the historical evolution of humanitarianism from a religious duty into a bureaucratic enterprise, a shift from compassion as moral conviction to compassion as management. In this view, neutrality is not a safeguard but a professional stance that transforms moral choices into technical procedures.

As Weiss (2013) observes, neutrality has often functioned as the moral alibi of inaction. The rhetoric of neutrality also produces what Redfield (2013) terms minimal humanity, a form of care that sustains life but not dignity, the biological minimum of negative peace rather than the fuller flourishing of positive peace. By insisting on impartiality in contexts of state-led violence, humanitarian institutions risk normalizing inequality, allowing the perpetrator to claim participation in humanitarian processes as evidence of legitimacy. Barnett's (2013) account of humanitarian governance underscores how this managerial turn becomes institutionalized across an increasingly internationalized field, in which the measurement of relief gradually displaces the question of justice.

Critiques of Neutrality and the Question of Humanitarian Resistance

Critiques of neutrality are not calls for partisan humanitarianism but appeals for moral clarity. Slim (2015) distinguishes between political neutrality and ethical neutrality, arguing that while humanitarian actors should avoid taking sides between belligerents, they must never be neutral about violations of human rights. This distinction is the conceptual hinge of the present analysis, and it maps directly onto Galtung's peace categories: political neutrality may preserve a negative peace between belligerents, but ethical neutrality, the refusal to be neutral about violations, is the precondition for any movement toward positive peace. Re-politicization, as used here, does not mean aligning aid with one party to a conflict; it means refusing to treat the political production of suffering as if it were an act of nature. It is, in this sense, the opposite of the depoliticization that the corridor exemplifies, and the first step from conflict management toward conflict transformation.

A growing body of scholarship has questioned the classical, Dunantist model of principled neutrality adopted by the ICRC, and traced the emergence of alternative paradigms. Hilhorst (2018) distinguishes classical humanitarianism, rooted in exceptionalism and the primacy of international agencies, from resilience humanitarianism, which begins from the premise that crisis is the new normal and that local people and institutions are the first responders. The Thai–Myanmar border areas, where cross-border community organizations have sustained displaced populations for more than three decades, are a paradigmatic setting for the second paradigm, yet the corridor analyzed here reasserts the logic of the first.

A parallel literature on so-called humanitarian resistance describes how aid actors move from neutral service provision toward more justice-oriented and solidaristic roles, a trajectory that resonates with Galtung's call to act on structures rather than symptoms. This article is close to, but distinct from, that literature: rather than asking how neutral actors might become activists, it examines the prior problem of how regional and state actors mobilize the language of apolitical compassion to insulate a repressive order from scrutiny. The object of critique is therefore the claim of neutrality itself, as deployed by ASEAN and Thailand.

Read together, these critiques converge on a single diagnosis. Neutrality is not a fixed property of humanitarian action but a relation that acquires different meanings depending on who invokes it and to what end. Where the perpetrator of displacement also controls the channels through which relief must pass, an unexamined commitment to neutrality tends to ratify the perpetrator's authority, and to consolidate the very structure that generates the harm. The analytical task, then, is to make visible the political work that neutrality performs, and to ask what a principled, transformation-oriented alternative would look like in practice.

Religion as a Moral Language of Governance: Cultural Violence

Anthropologists such as Asad (2003) and Mahmood (2015) remind us that religion functions not only as faith but as a political language through which states regulate emotion, ethics, and belonging. This is precisely the terrain Galtung (1990) names cultural violence: the symbolic sphere in which religion,

ideology, and language are enlisted to legitimize domination. In Myanmar, Buddhist morality has been harnessed to depoliticize resistance. The slogan amyo, batha, thathana (race, language, religion) encapsulates the regime's vision of a nation united under Buddhist virtue, and the Tatmadaw (official Burmese name for the armed forces of Myanmar) has instrumentalized religious discourse to naturalize its authority for decades (Walton, 2016). As Mahmood (2009) argues, the affective and ethical force of religious vocabularies makes them especially effective instruments of governance, because they translate political obedience into the register of moral virtue. Humanitarian interventions framed in similar moral terms, compassion, harmony, benevolence, risk reproducing this depoliticization, lending the vocabulary of care to a project of control, and thereby supplying the cultural legitimation on which structural violence depends.

Humanitarian Corridors and the Politics of Containment: Structural Violence

Duffield's (2001) concept of the development–security nexus helps explain why humanitarian interventions in fragile states often serve dual functions: alleviating suffering while stabilizing political orders favorable to regional or international actors. In Galtung's terms, such interventions operate on direct violence while reinforcing the structural violence in which it is rooted. The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (ASEAN, 1976) and subsequent doctrines codify the principle of non-interference, under which sovereignty takes precedence over rights and humanitarian assistance must be delivered with the consent of the affected state. Such a mode is structurally incapable of transformation; it is engineered to manage the conflict's surface while preserving its foundation.

The corridor must therefore be read against a longer regional history in which the Thai state has managed displacement from Myanmar through containment rather than protection, alternating between tolerance and restriction as strategic interests shift. Cross-border assistance has, for decades, been provided by ethnic and community networks operating outside official channels; the corridor's novelty lies less in reaching the displaced than in routing assistance through formal, consent-based mechanisms that privilege the central state.

Local Trust, Access, and the Moral Economy of Aid

In protracted displacement settings, access is mediated less by policy than by trust. This reliance on personal reputation, while pragmatic, can reinforce social hierarchies and exclude the most vulnerable, echoing Fassin's (2012) observation that humanitarian proximity often produces new inequalities, a micro-level structural violence reproduced within the relief encounter itself.

Brun's (2016) analysis of protracted displacement adds a temporal dimension to this picture: when emergency becomes protracted, the humanitarian promise of a return to normal life recedes indefinitely, and assistance settles into a routine management of waiting that rarely confronts the political causes of immobility. This permanent management of waiting is negative peace stretched across time: a holding

pattern that substitutes for, and quietly forecloses, the structural change that positive peace would require.

Methodology

Research Design

This article adopts a qualitative, case-study design that combines field observation and documentary analysis. The single primary case, the Thailand–Myanmar humanitarian corridor and its surrounding architecture of aid in the Thai–Myanmar border area, is examined as an instance of regional humanitarian diplomacy operating under authoritarian conditions. Goh Manao, an informal IDP settlement, serves as an additional field site, complemented by data collected from coordination meetings, official public hearings, and informal exchanges with field workers.

Positionality and the Practitioner Perspective

Immediately before this study, the author completed a consultancy supporting humanitarian coordination and service delivery for IDPs and migrants from Myanmar. The field visit to Goh Manao was undertaken after the formal consultancy concluded, which created an analytical vantage point that is intentionally hybrid: it draws on practitioner familiarity with coordination platforms, while reading those platforms critically from outside their professional incentive structures.

Data Sources

Three streams of data inform the analysis. The first is direct field observation in Goh Manao and other border sites between December 2023 and April 2024, recorded as field notes attentive to material infrastructure and supplies, governance dynamics, and the everyday discourse of camp residents, teachers, health volunteers, and aid workers. The second is informal conversation with humanitarian coordinators, community-based organization (CBO) staff, ethnic health network representatives, and Thai officials, comprising of roughly twenty individuals and small-group discussions held during the same period through coordination meetings, public hearings, and follow-up visits. Interlocutors were selected purposively, drawing on the author's pre-existing practitioner network from the preceding consultancy, and were prioritized for their direct, current knowledge of corridor implementation and cross-border coordination rather than for representativeness; identifying details have been withheld to protect interlocutors operating in a securitized environment. The third is documentary analysis of official statements from the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Public Relations Department of Thailand, the ASEAN Secretariat, and the AHA Centre, as well as civil-society human-rights reports and academic scholarship on humanitarianism, neutrality, peace research, and the politics of religion.

The Goh Manao findings rest substantially on direct observation, made possible by physical access to an informal, community-monitored site. The account of the corridor's operational logistics, by contrast, draws primarily on the third stream, official communiqués and secondary reporting, since the security

environment and the corridor's own opacity precluded direct observation of implementation on the Myanmar side of the border.

Data Analysis

Field notes and conversation records were analyzed through iterative narrative synthesis \and organized manually into the recurring patterns reported in the Field Findings section below, using Galtung's violence triangle as the organizing framework. This interpretive approach suits the scale of the data and the practitioner-reflexive aims of the article.

Analytical Framework

The analysis is structured by the Galtung framework set out in Literature and Context above, and is elaborated here through three complementary mid-level lenses applied to the same case. Empirically, the violence triangle maps onto the material as follows: direct violence appears as the military operations that depopulate villages; structural violence, in the consent-based aid architecture, the non-interference doctrine, and the administrative geography that determines who can be reached; and cultural violence, in the religious and moral vocabularies that recast a war of dispossession as the restoration of harmony. The negative–positive peace distinction supplies the evaluative yardstick, and the aspiration of conflict transformation defines the normative horizon for the analysis.

Within that frame, three mid-level lenses sharpen the analysis. Fassin's (2012) moral economy of humanitarianism diagnoses how compassion is distributed as a system of value, in which delivery metrics, tonnage, reach, visibility, substitute for accountability; it illuminates the camp–host imbalance at Goh Manao as a distributional pattern that is itself a form of structural violence. Donini's (2012) managed humanitarianism and Duffield's (2001) development–security nexus read the corridor as an instrument of containment, moral and geopolitical, that manages rather than transforms the conflict. Slim's (2015) distinction between political and ethical neutrality serves as the normative compass for re-politicization, while Asad (2003), Mahmood (2009, 2015), and Walton (2016) inform the reading of religion as an instrument of legitimacy and as cultural violence. The lenses are applied to three intersecting dimensions, the political economy of access and recognition, the moral and religious vocabularies that legitimize aid, and the structural relationships between donors, regional bodies, and state auxiliaries such as the Myanmar Red Cross Society (MRCS), with each finding interpreted through at least two lenses and located within the violence triangle.

Field Findings

Goh Manao: Violence, Displacement, and the Imbalance of Humanitarian Support

Goh Manao, established informally in early 2021, hosts roughly 1,000–2,000 residents. The violence that produced the camp also produced the emergency logic that shaped the response: donors and agencies

moved quickly to install water systems, latrines, and a medical clinic for the displaced, while the surrounding host community, exposed to the same conflict and the same shortages, received none of this investment. This is the problem of a humanitarian system that, responding to direct violence under emergency conditions, delivers services to those inside the boundary of “displaced” while leaving the community around them to manage the same crisis with what it already had. Nearby villagers, predictably, began seeking relocation into the camp rather than waiting for assistance that was not coming.

The imbalance is more than an oversight of program design. Viewed through Galtung’s notion of negative peace, it is a small but exact instance of structural violence reproduced by the relief operation itself: a distribution of resources, embedded in funding lines and classifications, that systematically advantages one conflict-affected population over another equally in need. Under emergency conditions, agencies and donors are organized, funded, and measured against speed of service delivery to a defined affected population, not against the slower work of strengthening the systems, water authorities, health posts, schools, that already serve everyone in the area. People still living in the villages, not formally displaced, fall outside that classification.

The Thai–ASEAN Corridor: Scope and Limitations

Launched in March 2024, the corridor was framed as a pilot for cross-border aid under the AHA Centre, with the Thai Red Cross Society (TRCS) as lead national partner and the Myanmar Red Cross Society (MRCS) as in-country implementer (Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024; Thai Red Cross Society, 2024). Official Thai data indicate that the first phase delivered approximately 4,000 relief packages containing food, hygiene kits, and medical supplies to three locations in Kayin (Karen) State: Nabu, Paing Kyong, and Thamanya (Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). All three are areas under government control.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA, 2025) estimates that more than 2.7 million internally displaced people in Myanmar, and nearly 300,000 of them living along or near the Thai border. The corridor reached less than 0.2 percent of those in need. The mismatch between the scale of need and the scale of delivery is itself analytically telling: it indicates that the corridor’s primary output is symbolic rather than material. In Galtung’s terms, the corridor manufactures the appearance of peacemaking, a performance of negative peace, while functioning as an instrument of the very structural violence it claims to relieve.

The corridor’s institutional design helps explain this selectivity. It operates under the AHA Centre, whose mandate is consent-based and therefore conditioned on the approval of the recognized state authority, in this case, the very regime driving displacement. This arrangement is the operational expression of ASEAN’s diplomatic framework for the crisis, which subordinates humanitarian access to the preservation of intergovernmental consensus and the principle of non-interference. The effect is a structural bias built into the mechanism itself: because assistance can move only where the state consents, and the state consents only where control is assured, the corridor is engineered to reach

government-held areas and to bypass the resistance-held territories in which most displaced people live. What appears as a logistical limitation is in fact a political design feature. The mechanism does not merely fail to reach the displaced; it is configured to make reaching them improbable, converting the conflict's contradiction into a constricted operating condition rather than a problem to be transformed.

Trust, Access, and Faith in the Cross-border Operations

In reality, humanitarian operations on the Thai–Myanmar border are negotiated through a constant balancing act of trust, access, and ambiguity. The humanitarian landscape is not a fixed architecture of institutions but a dense web of personal relationships, unspoken compromises, and moral tensions. Aid workers, local volunteers, and community leaders described their work as "walking a line," a metaphor that captures both the physical geography of the border and the ethical uncertainty that defines their daily practice. To deliver aid packages to Goh Manao, "I have to pretend to be a Buddhist and suggest to the military officers controlling the access point to let me through so as to 'do merit' together," a coordinator of a local Christian group told me, a small, telling concession to the cultural suppression that governs who may pass.

The MRCS and the Abandonment of Impartiality

The principle of impartiality, providing aid based solely on need, without discrimination or political consideration, sits at the heart of the humanitarian ethos. In Myanmar, this ideal has been profoundly compromised. The MRCS, historically mandated to act as an auxiliary to the state, now operates under a regime that is itself a party to the conflict and a primary driver of displacement. Human Rights Watch (HRW) (2023) reported that humanitarian access in Myanmar was strongly controlled by the military. Aid delivery routes and convoys have been restricted to areas under junta control, leaving many displaced communities outside government-held territory without assistance (HRW, 2023).

Religion as Legitimacy

On the ground, the military's co-optation of Buddhist symbols is visible in both urban and rural contexts, and it is here that Galtung's category of cultural violence becomes most tangible. State media reframed the post-coup resistance as a breakdown of social harmony, with the regime describing counter-insurgency operations as efforts to restore peace among communities of different faiths (International Crisis Group, 2022). Analyses of online regime messaging document how systematically this narrative of moral legitimacy has been propagated (Myanmar Institute for Peace and Security, 2023). Each of these gestures performs the work Galtung assigns to cultural violence: it makes the structural and direct violence of military rule appear, in the moral grammar of the nation, as the restoration of order.

This framing has direct consequences for humanitarian practice. In areas under junta control, local administrators often require that aid proposals emphasize “unity,” “reconciliation,” and “cultural respect.” As Mahmood (2015) argues, religion in modern governance is less about belief than about regulating political conduct through moral vocabularies. In Myanmar, Buddhist morality becomes an apparatus for obedience: compassion without critique, harmony without justice; negative peace disguised under the flag of morality.

Cross-Cutting Synthesis:

Across field observation, civil-society documentation, and official statements, three patterns recur. First, the corridor produces visibility without accountability: high-profile deliveries and joint communiqués substitute for the protection of rights. Second, access is geographically and politically pre-selected: aid follows the junta’s administrative map, and resistance-held areas, where need is greatest, are systematically excluded. Third, the institutional architecture is self-reinforcing: ASEAN’s non-interference doctrine, the AHA Centre’s consent-based mandate, and the auxiliary status of the MRCS and TRCS together channel resources toward state-controlled intermediaries and away from cross-border community networks.

These three patterns correspond to the three faces of Galtung’s triangle: visibility without accountability is the signature of negative peace, a performance of relief that leaves the contradiction untouched; pre-selected access is structural violence operationalized as logistics, the conflict’s power asymmetry encoded in routes and permits; and the self-reinforcing institutional architecture is the mutual support of structure and culture, in which non-interference doctrine and the moral vocabulary of regional harmony sustain one another. Viewed through Fassin’s (2012) moral economy, this is humanitarianism as parallel welfare without redistribution of power. Viewed through Slim (2015), it is political neutrality misrecognized as ethical neutrality. And viewed through Galtung (1969, 1996), it is conflict management masquerading as peace: the depoliticization of compassion, a weak practice that celebrates access as success even when access is conditional upon silence.

Toward a Re-Politicized Humanitarianism: From Negative Peace to Conflict Transformation

Galtung’s notion that transformation works on structures and narratives rather than symptoms gives the following orientations their common logic, and each targets one face of the violence triangle: accountability confronts the negative peace that masks direct violence; solidarity and community agency confront structural violence; and the refusal of co-opted moral language confronts cultural violence.

Humanitarian agencies must document and disclose which populations remain unreachable. Transparency about exclusion is not a threat to neutrality but a condition for trust, and the first move from negative peace toward an honest reckoning with the conflict’s structure.

Engaging all sides does not mean treating perpetrators and victims as equivalent stakeholders. Re-politicization requires recovering Slim's (2015) ethical neutrality: a refusal of complicity with violations even where political neutrality between belligerents is preserved. In operational terms, it requires that program design and advocacy be informed by, and accountable to, displaced communities rather than to the diplomatic priorities of host states or regional bodies. Solidarity in this sense is not partisanship; it is the insistence that the moral asymmetry between those who displace and those who are displaced be reflected in how aid is governed.

Local actors, ethnic health organizations, women's networks, faith-based charities, and cross-border CBOs operating since the 1990s, must strive to work and be recognized as potential conflict transformation partners, not simply supplies distributors. Funding instruments, compliance regimes, and coordination architectures should be redesigned so that independence is rewarded rather than penalized. The Border Consortium (2023) documented that community-led responses already reach populations excluded by the corridor; the policy challenge is to resource and protect, this capacity. This is the practical face of the resilience paradigm identified by Hilhorst (2018) and of Galtung's positive peace: an acknowledgment that, in protracted crises, local institutions are not stopgaps but the durable backbone of protection, and the everyday infrastructure through which a more just order is built from below.

These orientations place specific obligations on donors, whose compliance regimes currently reproduce the very depoliticization, and the very structural violence, they can help to undo. A re-politicized funding architecture would treat the willingness of an actor to reach excluded populations as a qualification rather than a risk, fund flexible and unearmarked support to ethnic health systems and community networks, and accept the reputational discomfort of working outside state-sanctioned channels. Donors cannot escape the political field by invoking neutrality; their funding decisions already determine which humanitarian order is sustained.

Critical Humanitarian Reason

These orientations operationalize what Fassin (2018) calls critical humanitarian reason: a practice that combines compassion with accountability, and care with justice. Re-politicization does not abandon impartiality; it redefines impartiality as fairness rooted in context, solidarity, and moral presence, and it reorients humanitarian action from the negative peace of symptom management toward the positive peace that conflict transformation seeks. The point is not to strip aid of moral language but to refuse the version of that language that demands silence as the price of access.

Conclusion

Displacement in Myanmar is not a natural disaster nor an accidental by-product of civil unrest. It is the direct consequence of political violence and militarized governance. Regional humanitarian responses, however, continue to treat displacement as an apolitical emergency. Thailand's humanitarian corridor

exemplifies the limitations of this approach: designed to provide neutral relief, it has become a symbol of the broader depoliticization of aid in Southeast Asia and a producer of negative peace. The reliance on state-linked actors such as the MRCS, combined with a moral rhetoric of compassion and harmony, obscures the structural nature of displacement and converts presence into performance.

None of this is an argument against relief. The families sheltered at Goh Manao need clean water, medicine, and food, and the workers who provide them deserve recognition rather than reproach. The argument is rather that relief and justice must be held together, that negative peace, while necessary, must not be mistaken for the positive peace that the situation demands. A re-politicized practice, understood as a humanitarian contribution to conflict transformation, would keep the aid moving while refusing to be silent about the root of the displacement. It would publish what it cannot reach, fund those whom the corridor bypasses, and name displacement as a political act rather than a misfortune.

The residents of Goh Manao, on their island in the middle of the border river, the displaced are marooned twice over, by the water that belongs to neither nation and by a conflict, kept isolated by aid that is steered toward no future. To witness suffering without addressing its cause is to risk complicity. Re-politicizing humanitarianism begins with this recognition: that neutrality cannot mean silence. It must instead mean fairness and the willingness to engage with power, and, in Galtung's sense, to work on the structures and stories that produce suffering rather than only on its symptoms. The displaced communities along the Thai–Myanmar border do not ask for neutrality; they ask for acknowledgment, solidarity, and a future in which their displacement is not endlessly managed but finally transformed and resolved.

Declarations

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Conflicts of Interest Declarations

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Data Availability

NA

Research Ethics

No individual interlocutors are named, no precise location data are disclosed beyond what is already in the public domain, and material that could expose community-based responders to surveillance has been withheld.

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