



Refugee and Migration Affairs Office in U.S. Embassy in Bangkok publishes this newsletter for information purposes only and the articles contained herein should not be construed as official U.S. government position.

Happy New Year! Welcome to the first edition of "Theh Mya Seu/Tha mu Lar", a quarterly newsletter published by Refugee and Migration Affairs (RMA) Office of the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok. "Theh Mya Seu/Tha mu Lar" provides basic information on refugee and migration issues in the East and Southeast Asia regions and updates our readers on what is happening in our section.

What's new?

RMA launched a website:

RMA launched a website in U.S. Embassy site. It includes description of our work and some pictures. We are planning to upload more pictures in the future. Please visit us at <http://bangkok.usembassy.gov/>, and we appreciate your feedback.

Generous donations from Embassy community:

The U.S. Embassy community donated many items to Burmese refugees living along the Thai-Burma border. The donation drive lasted for two months during the Christmas holiday season. The donated items included blankets, basic hygiene kit (soaps, toothpaste etc), toys and books. They were donated to vulnerable groups such as victims of gender-based violence as well as persons with disabilities.

Resettlement

Who are refugees and why is US resettlement program important for refugees?

To be considered a refugee, three requirements need to be met according to the 1951 Refugee Convention: a person 1) is outside of his/her country of origin; 2) has a well-founded persecution due to race, religion, nationality, membership of a social group or political opinion; and 3) cannot return to the country of origin for fear of persecution. Millions of people who lost homes and were displaced as a result of conflicts, violation of human rights or man-made disasters but have not crossed an international border are not considered refugees; they are called "internally displaced persons." In addition, persons who are displaced and cross the border due to natural disasters (flood, earthquake) are not considered a refugee according to the 1951 Convention.

Generally speaking, UNHCR (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the UN refugee agency) determines whether or not an asylum-seeker is a refugee

in consultation with host governments. The response to the claims of asylum-seekers on part of host governments vary depending on whether they are a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention. Thailand is not a signatory to the Convention. However, in the context of Burmese refugees, Thailand is cooperating with UNHCR to register refugees from Burma in each camp along the border and provide protection in the camps. Donors like the U.S. government provide refugees with assistance ranging from food and shelter to health services. NGOs are our implementing partners in the field and are fully equipped with expertise and knowledge in providing assistance. Protection of refugees is the primary responsibility of the UNHCR and donors support this mandate through advocacy and financial assistance.

Resettlement is not an entitlement for refugees. The best solution for the refugees is to return to their countries of origin in a safe and

dignified manner. However, when voluntary return and reintegration is not an option, local integration to the host countries is sought for refugees. In the case of Thailand, local integration is not possible. As means for responsibility-sharing, countries like the U.S., Australia, Canada and some European countries offer resettlement to Burmese refugees. Under the U.S. resettlement program, Burmese individuals who were registered with Thai government and UNHCR prior to November 2005 and reside in the camps are eligible to apply for resettlement, and all cases are referred to the U.S. government by UNHCR.

UNHCR plays a key role in refugee issues around the world, and works with refugees themselves, host governments, donors, other UN agencies and NGOs to protect refugees. If you are interested in UNHCR work, please [v]isit its website at www.unhcr.org and find out how you can help its work.

DHS/USCIS starts interviewing in Mae Hong Son

The U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP), which assists refugees who are particularly vulnerable or trapped in protracted crisis situations, continues to expand and will eventually consider refugees from all of the nine Burmese temporary transit centers (refugee camps) in Thailand.

On December 1st, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) began interviewing residents of Baan Mai Nai Soi camp in Thailand's Mae Hong Son province to determine whether they are eligible for resettlement under U.S. law. The interviews were the first from the four camps in Mae Hong Song prov-

ince, which are home to primarily ethnic Karenni refugees.

Already active in all three camps in Tak province, the USRAP has given tens of thousands of Burmese refugees – more than 14,000 last year from Thailand alone – the opportunity for a new life in the U.S. After DHS approval, the refugees will be given medical examinations and a cultural orientation program prior to final departure. The first Karenni Burmese refugees from Mae Hong Song province will likely enter the U.S. in March or April 2009.



Refugees waiting to go to OPE prescreening interview in Baan Mai Nai Soi camp in Mae Hong Son Province

Journey to America: Refugee's Final Departure

BANGKOK, September 25 -- Even though it's 5 a.m., Myint Myint (not his real name) has been on the move for hours. It was a long way from the refugee camp to the hotel yesterday, and he had to wake up at 2 o'clock this morning to get to the airport on time.

But this is only the latest stage in a journey that has lasted years. Myint Myint and his family, members of the Karen ethnic group, were forced to leave their village in Burma after it was attacked by Burmese soldiers. Burmese troops routinely burn crops, rout villagers from their homes, and force them into portering and other grueling labor. Rape and murder are common. In the last two decades, hundreds of thousands of villagers, most of them from ethnic minority groups, have been violently displaced.

Burmese troops pushed Myint Myint's family out of their village in 2004. After weeks of moving through the jungle, Myint Myint and his family crossed the border into Thailand and arrived at Umpiem Mai Refugee Camp. None of them thought that they would spend the next several years there. Myint Myint and his family always hoped to return to their village, but with each passing year of continued

conflict that dream seemed more and more like an illusion.

Then, last year, Myint Myint learned about something exciting: a way out. As part of a long-standing commitment to the world's refugees, the United States contributes nearly a billion dollars a year to provide millions of refugees around the world with food, housing, education and a sanitary environment. To the most vulnerable refugees, the United States offers a chance to apply for resettlement. Every year the United States accepts more refugees for resettlement than any other country.

Myint Myint and his family are among the last to depart in fiscal year 2008, when over 60,000 refugees worldwide were admitted to the United States. More than 14,000 of these refugees are Burmese who fled to Thailand. Many of them have lived in refugee camps for decades, or, in some cases, all their lives. The United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) in Thailand is a humanitarian partnership between the United States Government, the Royal Thai Government, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Two implementing agencies, the Overseas Processing Entity managed by the International Rescue Committee and the

International Organization for Migration, coordinate the processing of refugees for admission to the United States.

Myint Myint was one of the thousands of Burmese refugees in Thailand eligible to apply to the U.S. resettlement program through UNHCR. After completing his initial paperwork with the Overseas Processing Entity, Myint Myint was interviewed by a U.S. immigration official to determine his eligibility for entry into the United States.

As he waits in the airport, Myint Myint is not sure what he will find in the United States. Upon arrival he will be greeted by representatives of the sponsoring resettlement agency that will provide initial services, which include housing, essential furnishings, food, clothing, community orientation, and referral to other social, medical and employment services, for the refugees' first 30-90 days in the United States.

The normally bustling airport is quiet at this hour. Myint Myint and his family wait quietly near the gate. While the small children smile and play, the older relatives look anxious. Understandably, Myint Myint admits to feeling a little overwhelmed. For him and other refugees, many more challenges lie ahead, including learning English, finding a job, and adapting to a new culture. It has been a long journey from a Burmese village. But Myint Myint is hopeful that when he gets to America, he will have arrived home.

Assistance

Trip Report: Gender Based Violence program in Mae Hong Son Province

When I entered the Karenni Women Community Center (WCC) in Baan Mai Nai Soi camp, Mae Hong Son Province, two girls were running after each other, smiling. They suddenly stopped as they saw me and chuckled and hid behind the wooden poles. I learned later that the girls are daughters of two female survivors of Gender Based Violence (GBV). GBV encompasses an array of human rights violations against both men and women: domestic violence (both verbal and physical), sexual abuse of the children, rape, other sexual harassment and assault. RMA funds the International Rescue Committee (IRC) to implement GBV programming in two camps in Mae Hong Son Province.

Both girls have been in this center, called 'safe house' by camp residents, for a few months with their mothers, who suffered from serious domestic violence from their husbands. At the time of my visit, one mother was interviewed by a Thai lawyer, who works for Legal Assistance Program, funded by UNHCR and the (IRC). The mother was severely injured and threatened by her husband, and she wishes to leave the camps and resettle in the U.S. Her husband has finally agreed to relinquish custody of their two small children after grueling and prolonged negotiation. After her consultation with the lawyer, she was relieved with the resolution of the custody issue and said she was excited to go to America.

Domestic violence is often seen in the refugee camps. A dozen of women report to WCC every month, but WCC staff told me that there are many unreported cases due to the hesitation on the survivors' part. It is, however, important to note that the existence of domestic violence in the camp should not be considered a sign that refugees are violent, says the GBV Program Manager. She says that refugees get frustrated as there are no employment opportunities in this closed camp and thus male refugees now have lost their status as breadwinner and lost self confidence. Refugees are not allowed to go outside of the camps by Thai government, and therefore, food and other basic necessities are provided by donors in the camp. In addition, until the resettlement program started, there were no durable solutions for refugees to get out of this protracted situation. Just imagine losing your job, houses, belongings and living in refugee camps for more than a decade...

The mother was interviewed by a DHS/ USCIS officer in December last year. She will likely to wait a few more months before departing for the U.S. She is still afraid of her husband, who is still living in the camp, but at the same time, she is sad that things happened and will end this way.

To know more about IRC, please visit <http://www.theirc.org/>.



Burmese refugees leaving Bnagkok

In the Next Issue.....

-Overviews of the refugee camps in Thailand

-Interview with a Burmese refugee who resettled in the U.S.

-Introduction to our assistance programs (health, education and gender based violence) in Malaysia