

# Refugee Resettlement

## Taking a Leap of Faith

By Moo Ko Htee

"Leaving the refugee camp and going to foreign country is not like an ordinary fun game I play everyday. It is a fight that I must fight for my future. It's a good thing that I could get out from the camp that I had spent decades in. But it is also sad that I had to leave my friends, relatives and family members behind in Burma or in the camps. Being a man stuck in refugee camp for the rest of your lives is not a good idea. It is important that I must be free to do my will and enjoy my rights that I was born with."

Saw Poe Klein, a young Karen man, had spent much of his life in the refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border. Ten months ago he resettled to the United States, found a job and started college – an opportunity he would never have in the camps. His adjustment to life in the US has had its challenges. "Language barrier has sometimes been one challenge and understanding the health care systems in United States is hard. There are lots of nationalities from all over the world live in my city. Sometimes it is hard to understand those people's culture."

In 2005 the United States agreed to resettle 60,000 Burmese refugees by 2010. This figure represents around 42 per cent of the Burmese refugee population in Thailand. In addition to the US's resettlement efforts, Australia, Canada, Norway, Sweden, the UK and other nations also welcome refugees from Burma.

When choosing to resettle one must weigh up the option of life in a new country where everything is different, or the continued uncertainty of life in the camps. Many refugees from Burma who live in the camps along the Thai-Burma border have never left the surrounding areas around the camps. The change to a new country and life can be overwhelming, confusing and scary.

For those who choose to stay there future becomes particularly fragile. The camps themselves are in an extremely vulnerable place with non-governmental organisations that support the refugee population severe facing funding shortages as a result of rising food prices, a stronger Thai currency, and less funding from donors.



Funders to the Thai-Burma border are suffering donor fatigue after 25 years of supporting refugee communities and as opportunities to fund projects and programs inside Burma open up are looking to send their funding inside the country rather than to the border.

Despite increased development and humanitarian work in Burma, the exodus of refugees to neighbouring countries is continuing. As the economic situation worsens, political repression increases and the brutality of military offensive targeting villages amplifies people have become unable to sustain a subsistence existence in their homeland. With no other option, people cross the border seeking protection and shelter from neighbouring countries.

But these are not new reasons why people are fleeing Burma. They are the same experiences to hundreds of thousands of refugees and millions of migrant workers, including Saw Poe Klein. "My life in Burma was always in danger. There was no guarantee of security. My village was attacked and brutally burned down when I was very young. We worked really hard for our daily survival. I fled to Thailand and lived in the camp where the circumstances are a bit better than Burma. Food and shelter are provided in the camp but no chance to experience community development. The gates to education and knowledge from the outside world were strictly guarded. There were lots of negative social symptoms for the youths who mostly were born in the camps." "Now, in a third country the situation is opposite to where I had lived before. As a human being, I can now enjoy my rights in a third country, unlike life in the camp or in Burma."

Despite the efforts to promote resettlement and Thailand's alleged commitment to the program, only about half of the refugees along the Thai-Burma border have expressed interest in resettlement. Many fear that they will not be able to adapt to life in a new country, culture and language, while others are concerned with the ongoing struggle for human rights and democracy in Burma. Some do not want to leave family members who are still in Burma behind.

In many cases, within a family there is not a unanimous decision about resettlement, with some members for it, while others strongly against. What results is either a compromise, with some family members making the sacrifice of giving up their home or an opportunity at a future in a third country, or the family separates with some going and others remaining behind. One Karen community worker whose family resettled to US said "my family was not destined to be together. When we were in the refugee camps we lived apart from each other. Now most of my family has gone (to a third country). We are not meant to be together in this life". For numerous families in the camp who have already endured forced separation whilst living in Burma, this further separation for an indefinite period of time can be heartbreaking.

When asked about why he chose to resettle, Saw Poe Klee answered "why do I have to waste my entire life in the camp? Opportunities are scarce in every camp. I spent most of my life in camps and thought resettling to a third country would bring hopes and opportunities especially to youths more than living in camps. That's why I chose to resettle."

According to a paper released by Refugees International in 2007 the Royal Thai Government supports the resettlement of the 140,000 refugees temporarily living in Thailand and the Thai authorities hope to empty the nine camps along the border. However, each refugee requires, in all essence, an exit visa from Thailand with the signature of the relevant Thai authorities. As a result individuals hold power over someone's future, and can lead to possible exploitation. There have been reports of Thai authorities refusing to sign these exit visas or delaying them indefinitely, particularly for refugees from camps near Mae Hong Son. If the Thai government does support resettlement and doesn't want to have refugee population in Thailand, why then are refugees being prevented from resettling by Thai officials?

However, the process in itself is a complicated, long process. From the process for the US can take up to six months from start to finish (longer if issues arise along the way) and for Australia it is longer.

Through out the process refugees undergo a documentation process which examines their background, medical history and security clearance, via interviews and medical checks. From the interviews and applications countries determine if the refugee is in fact a refugee and is eligible for resettlement.

After they have finished the process the waiting game begins: successful applicants receive letters (sometimes after prolonged periods of time), while those who were not accepted often receive no notification at all.

**“ The USA is country known as a "Land of opportunities" for those who are committed to grab them ”**

Without a doubt life in a new country offers new advantages. Employment and education opportunities are often better. Authority figures are there to help them, not exploit or abuse them. However it is the personal freedom, the life without fear, or constantly looking over one's shoulder that the majority appreciate the most. This simple freedom is worth leaving everything known to you behind. Whether

people are taking a leap of faith into the unknown or are being pushed by the situation both in Burma and Thailand, who knows, but it is a huge challenge and adjustment and sometimes people are not as prepared as they could be.

Prior to departure refugees undertake a cultural orientation classes, specifically designed to help those resettling adjust to life in their new countries. Once in country further training and assistance is offered by agencies who are receiving the refugees. Despite these efforts one criticism of the resettlement programs is that whilst refugees are being processed it is an opportunity to build up language skills, helping them transition to life in their new country easier. It would also be cheaper to conduct this training in Thailand, than in the country to where they have been resettled, and would reduce strain on agencies providing assistance in these countries.

Despite the fact that resettlement has been ongoing for a number of years now, the populations in the camps has not decreased. As a result of the worsening economic and humanitarian situation in Burma, ongoing military attacks against villagers and human rights abuses a steady stream of people are crossing the border in search of asylum. These new arrivals and children who are born to refugees are replacing the departing population. Consequently, Thailand's belief that the resettlement program would empty out the camps is not being realized and it seems likely that the protracted refugee situation will continue while the internal situation in Burma remains unchanged.

Presently Thailand is not registering new arrivals as refugees, and has on occasion been turning people seeking asylum away before they reach Thai soil. As Thailand is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention on Refugees they are able to implement their own criteria for assessing if someone is in genuine need of protection. To date the guidelines that have been used have been very narrow and only include fleeing fighting. The argument put forward by the Thai authorities for not accepting new arrivals is that the people who are seeking shelter are not fleeing fighting but looking for resettlement opportunities.



Furthermore Thailand already houses an additional 1.5 to 2 million Burmese people who have fled their homeland. This group includes approximately 200,000 people of Shan ethnicity who have been unable to gain recognition as a refugee despite fulfilling international criteria and Thailand's own narrow definition. Their existence in Thailand as migrant workers is precarious at best, and most are exploited and abused by their employer and the Thai authorities who have the power to arrest and deport illegal workers.

One must wonder what will happen to these new arrivals once resettlement winds down in 2010. With the Thai authorities seeing

resettlement as a solution to the so called refugee issue, no doubt they are awaiting the day when there will be no more camps on in the Kingdom. If the trend of not processing or recognising new arrivals as refugees continues the camps will become a distant thing of the past and most asylum seekers in need of protect will be increasingly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

Whilst a protracted refugee situation does strain the resources of the host country and international donors, without addressing the root causes of why people are exiting the country any initiative to reduce the refugee population is going to fail. While international donors are interested in sending funding and resources into Burma to address the ongoing humanitarian crisis, it is also important for a genuine commitment from the donor community to support activities aimed at building a lasting peace based on human rights and justice for all. Sadly, these vital activities are often overlooked or forgotten when funding dollars are being dished out.

But whether resettlement works is dependent on those who left the camps. Saw Poe Klein does not regret his decision to resettle. "The USA is a country known as a "land of opportunities" for those who are committed to grab them. I made a very careful thought before making my decision to resettle. I had planned and I am following my plan. Which is good, I guess." the camp who have had extremely limited opportunities and for the most part have been forced by the policies of the Thai government to be entirely dependent on foreign aid. However, it is not a solution to the refugee situation and any one who thinks so is just fooling themselves.