

Burmese Resettlement from Tham Hin Camp in Thailand

Reasons for Refugees Fleeing

The majority of Burmese refugees now in camps in Thailand fled between 1995 and 1997 following a series of military offensives by the SPDC against opposition movements in the Kayah and Kayah states. There has been a fifty year on-going armed conflict between the government and ethnic based groups seeking greater autonomy for these states. The opposition groups include political and military organization such as the Karen National Union (KNU) and its armed wing, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), the Shan State Army (SSA), the Chin National Front (CNF), and the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP). During this conflict, ethnic groups and individuals living in the disputed areas have been subjected by the government to forced relocation, arbitrary arrest, detention, forced labor, conscription (including minors) as well as general repression of cultural and religious identities. Not all refugees in these ethnically controlled areas directly participated in opposition movements or military action. Government actions were often based on imputed support for the opposition based solely on the individuals' ethnicity. Persons closely associated with the KNU or the KNPP were particularly vulnerable to serious abuse, as were their family members.

Others in the camp include ethnic Burmans who have been forced to flee due to their association with pro-democratic movements. These include members and supporters of groups such as the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF). Many Burman refugees were forced to flee after the government crack-down on political opponents following the failed 1990 elections and support for Aung San Suu Kyi.

Background on Myanmar (Burma)

The Southeast Asian country of Myanmar (also known as Burma) is roughly the size of Texas with a population of some 50 million. The country is divided into seven states and seven divisions. The country is one of great ethnic diversity with at least 15 major ethnic groups. The largest ethnic group is the Burman (Bamar) who comprise about half the population. Some of the other major ethnic groups include the Karen (6-7 million), Shan (4 million), Mon (4 million) and Chin (1.5 million).

The area now occupied by Myanmar has been populated for over 2,500 years by a number of ethnic groups. Burma was colonized by the British during the 19th century and achieved independence in 1948. In the 1960's the government came under the control of the military led by General Ne Win. General Ne Win stepped down in 1988 and was succeeded by the State Law and Order

Restoration Council (SLORC). That same year the regime changed the name of the country from Burma to Myanmar.

Following a nationwide pro-democracy uprising in August and September 1988 and widespread opposition activity against the SPDC throughout 1989, Parliamentary elections were held in May 1990 and were widely reported to have been won by the party of Aung San Suu Kyi. The results of the election were ignored by the regime, however, and Aung San Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest. Fighting between the government and ethnic opposition groups and pro-democracy supporters escalated during the 1990's. This led to major refugee outflows into neighboring countries, including Thailand, Malaysia, and Bangladesh. While fighting has diminished in recent years, problems still persist and refugee flows



have continued. Since 2005, there have been more than 8,000 new arrivals in Thailand. In 1997, the SLORC changed its name to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) and remains in power. The SPDC and its predecessor SLORC have been frequently criticized by the international community for human rights violations.

Although Myanmar has abundant natural resources, it is economically one of the poorest countries in Asia. The average life expectancy is less than 60 years, and the infant mortality rate is 10%.

Burmese Refugees in Thailand

There are approximately 129,000 Burmese refugees in Thailand registered with the Royal Thai Government and UNHCR. While Thailand is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, it has allowed registered

refugees to remain in Thailand with a temporary status. Most Burmese refugees are restricted to live in nine camps along the western Thailand border with Myanmar. There are approximately 11,000 more registered Burmese

living in urban areas in Thailand, and another 10,000 Burmese living in camps who have been provisionally registered by UNHCR but whose status is still pending with the government.

Refugee Living Conditions

Although UNHCR continues to work with authorities and NGOs to improve conditions in the nine camps, life remains difficult for most refugees. Refugees live in bamboo and thatch housing that has been built by the refugees themselves. Some camps, such as Tham Hin are extremely crowded and unsanitary. Food, water and medical care for refugees are rudimentary. Officially not permitted to leave the camps, many refu-

gees risk arrest or deportation by going in search of work in the informal sector in Thailand. Those who do find work in factories or farms often fall victim to abuse and exploitation. Security in the camps also remains a concern, given their close proximity to Myanmar and the potential for cross-border fighting. Refugees have also been the victim of forced return or *refoulement* to Myanmar.



Resettlement Process

In August 2005, UNHCR identified 9600 refugees in the Tham Hin Camp as the first large group referral of refugees from Myanmar. This decision was based on the extremely poor conditions of the camp where these refugees have resided for more than a decade. UNHCR proposed the entire camp to the United States for resettlement consideration. The US subsequently accepted the referral and designated the entire camp eligible for US consideration in August 2005. As of December 2006, more than 5500 refugees in Tham Hin had applied for resettlement.

The total number of refugees from Tham Hin who will ultimately reach the US is difficult to predict. While 98% of the refugees interviewed by the US so far have been found to meet

the US refugee definition, some 20% of those refugees remain on indefinite hold. This is because US law bars admission to refugees who are members of certain types of opposition groups in Myanmar, as well as those who received military training at some time in the past from these groups. Thus, a significant number of refugees interested in resettlement will not be able to be resettled to the US, and UNHCR may have to resubmit them to other countries. Nevertheless, by the end of 2006, more than 1800 refugees from Tham Hin had departed for the US. That number is expected to more than double during 2007.

In 2007, UNHCR will be expanding resettlement operations to the other eight camps

in Thailand where Burmese refugees are located. UNHCR will prioritize resettlement efforts towards refugees with particular vulnerabilities and protection problems, as well as, to those who have been in the camps the longest. The pace and size of the resettlement program will depend on discussions with the Thai government, and on the capacity of resettlement country programs. Among the other countries who have expressed an interest in assisting Burmese refugees through resettlement are: Australia, Canada, Finland, Netherlands, New Zealand, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.



Characteristics of the Population



The ethnicity of the camps is approximately 80% Karen, 15% Karenni, and 2% Burman. Smaller numbers of Shan, Mon, Arakanese and Rohingya compose the remainder of the population. It should be noted that among the Karen and Karenni are a number of distinct ethnic and linguistic sub-groups.

Most of the population speaks as a native language one of three main dialects of Karen: 68% speak S'gaw Karen, 9% speak East Pwo Karen, and 4% speak Western Pwo Karen. About 15% speak a dialect of Karenni. About 20% can speak Burmese. Less than 2% can speak English.

The average household size in the camps is five persons. Gender is evenly divided between male and female. Almost half the camp population is under the age of 18 which means that many children have spent most of their entire lives in the camps. Less than 3% of the camp population is over the age of 60.



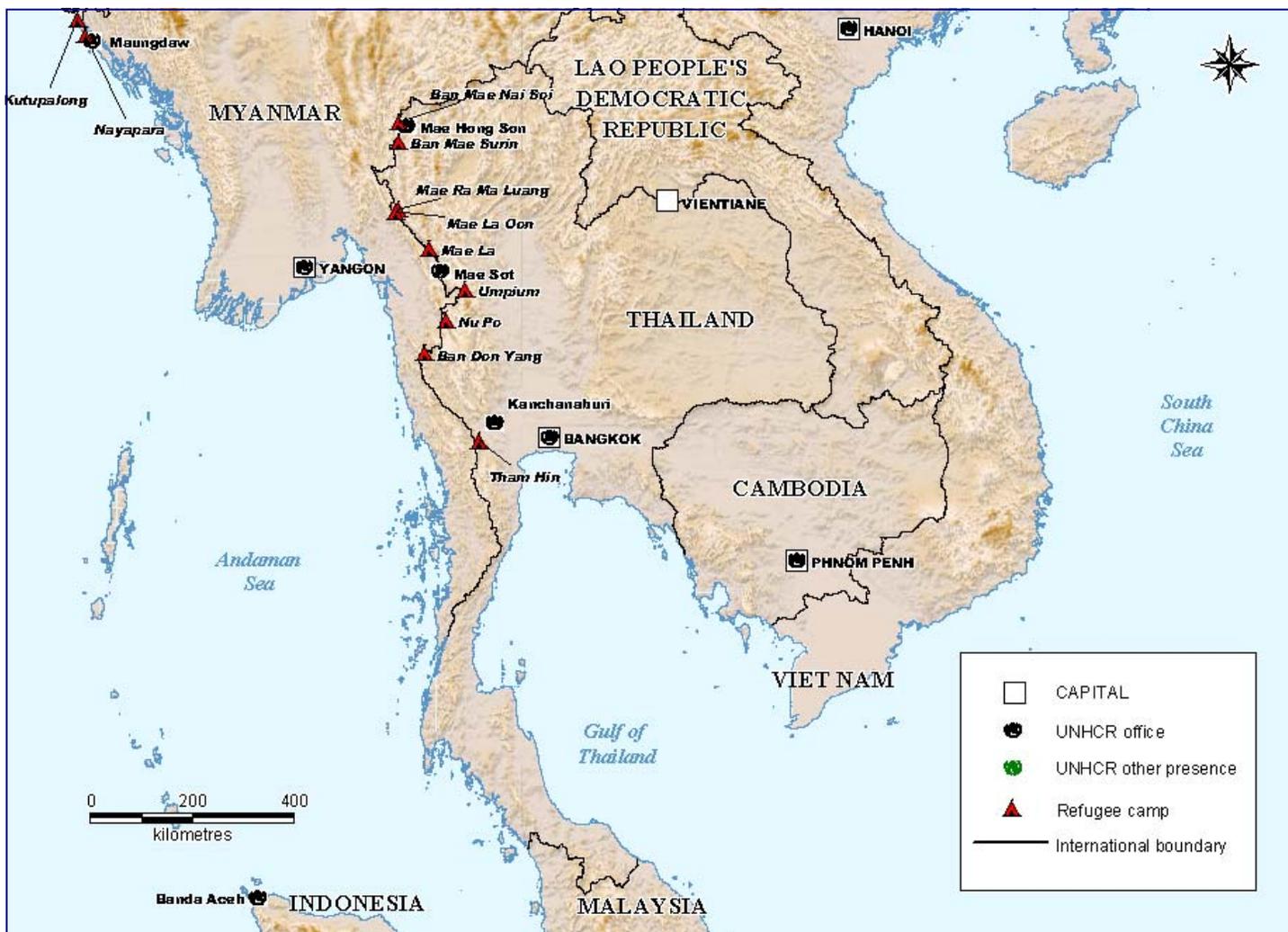
UNHCR Office Tham Hin



Approximately 52% of the population is Christian, 30% is Buddhist, 11% are Muslim, and 7% are Animists. Less than 1% of the refugees are practicing other religions.

Education in the camps is generally limited to grades 1-10. Some camps do provide for additional schooling and vocational training. Most of the adult population (54%) have engaged in some sort of farming. Other common occupations include teachers (4%), weavers and knitters (2%), vendors (2%), medical professionals (1%), and religious professionals (1%). Some 26% of the adult population indicate they have not had an occupation. This is not surprising as many adults arrived in the camps as children, and have had limited opportunities to develop skills or to legally work.

UNHCR in Thailand



UNHCR is the U.N. agency charged with protecting and assisting the world's refugees and finding long-term solutions. Currently, UNHCR is responsible for nearly 21 million people, including 8.4 million refugees; 6.6 million internally displaced persons, 773,500 asylum seekers, 2.4 million stateless people, and 1.1 million returnees.



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