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News Brief
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 bru-
tally 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.

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 protection 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 lim-
ted 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.

What does the referendum really mean to the people in Burma?

Not free - not fair - isn’t worth calling people’s referendum.

By: Peh O0 Du

On May 10, voters from Karenni state went to polling stations with fear in their hearts. It is understandable that people fear the Burmese authorities since they have been harshly oppressed for nearly half a century by the junta. However, acts of intimidation had increased in the lead up to the referendum on the new constitution. Due to the air of intimidation that was present, people went to polling stations and voted ‘Yes’ against their own will.

The outcome of the referendum will determine if the constitution, that is allegedly based on drafting points from the national convention, will be accepted or not. The constitution in its current format does not include the views of the people, will further ingrain the military into power, and if adopted and accepted by the people and international community, will make reforms impossible. Whilst there may be an appearance of democratic reforms and a sense of change, these are nothing more than an illusion and behind the smoke and mirrors is only further repression and suffering.

Prior to the referendum, military officials organized meeting and training to make sure that the polling commissioner did their job properly during the voting process. Polling commissions and staff had to encourage people to vote in favour of the draft constitution.

However, the strategies used by the regime to ensure a “Yes” vote were not uniform; they differed depending on location and population. The authorities strategies include: incentives, threatening people, and doing great numbers of advance voting (please see box for more information). It is observed that fear is the most common reason for people to vote ‘Yes’.

In the remote villages, members of the military were employed as security officers and they closely monitored the referendum so they could know what the people vote for. If the military was not used, organisations or individuals with ties were used, such as the Union of Solidarity and Development Association1, retired soldiers, trusted civil servants, and members of junta-backed women’s associations, were used to monitor the voting process and intimidate voters. People feared retaliation from the Burmese army if they voted “No”.

Many polling commission chairman, village chairmen and ordinary polling commissioners did tell voters to vote ‘Yes’ even though they, themselves wanted to vote ‘No’. However, they acted as if they were junta’s puppet. “If they did not act this way or disobeyed the authorities they don’t know what the consequences for voting “NO” in the referendum would be,” claimed a meeting participant.

A village headman said that there were many ways that they military could punish them, if the majority of people in the village voted ‘No’. “Military official could say, “give them a little lesson” and what he actually means is our water can be cut off or he can restrict our traveling and he can accuse us for having contact with rebels.”

Nonetheless, a few people dared to go to the polling stations, put a cross out the ballot papers - voting ‘No’ - and expressed their will.

This constitutional process is not fair and is not democratic. The tactics used by the Burmese military ensure that the constitution that they, for all intensive purposes, drafted is adopted, enabling them to stay in power indefinitely. When thieves rob people, they usually use weapons
wear a mask to hide their face, when the military stole people’s ballots and their opportunity to have their vote, they did it without wearing a mask, because they think that their will be no consequences for their action or that no one will stand up for this injustice – which is worse. How will we as individuals, members of communities and the world stand up for those who are being intimidated into silence by the Burmese junta?

The author meet face to face and talked to more than 30 local residents in Karenni area – including a chairman of township, polling commissioners, chairman of section and villages level electoral commission staff, ordinary member of electoral commissioners, workers from education department and voters.

(Endnotes)

1 The Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) is a junta-back association, with many similar objectives to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). Many high ranking members of the junta are members of the USDA, and membership is forced upon civil servants. The USDA has been used by the SPDC to suppress protests and is responsible for the deadly attacks on Aung San Suu Kyi and her followers in May 2003.

Strategies used by the military:

- The junta scared people by spreading rumors that people who vote ‘No’ will be fined for 300,000kyat ($300) and/or punished with one years imprisonment.
- The junta intimidated people by cracking-down on whoever campaigning for vote ‘No’ and treated them like criminals.
- Village/section headmen were forced to tell their villagers to vote ‘Yes’ because the Burmese military had created an intimidating environment.
- The ceasefire groups and their families had no chance to vote and one leader from each group voted ‘Yes’ on behalf of all the soldiers and their families.
- For civil servants, there were issued compulsory advance voting where people were forced to vote in front of their supervisors or leaders.
- Almost all polling stations had no secret voting system because the polling commissioners were watching whether people voted ‘Yes’ or ‘No’, this forced people to vote ‘Yes’ as they feared about consequences because they were being watched.
- The polling commissioners helped people who seem not understand how to vote and on behalf of them by ticking ‘Yes’ for them.
- The polling officers stood behind and shouted at the voters to tick which marked ‘Yes’ vote.
- On behalf of the registered voters who did not come to vote, the commissioners voted ‘Yes’ right away on their behalf.
- Some villagers did not even come to the polling stations and touched the ballot papers, but their votes were already turned into ‘Yes’ vote by the commissioners on their behalf.
- In the remote villages, the commissioners together with military travelling village to village collected list of voters and make them sign/give their finger print. Then the commission went home and they themselves tick ‘Yes’ on behalf of those voters.
- In many villages, the villagers voted ‘Yes’ not in support of the constitution – but they voted in favor of the military in hoping that there will be lesser torturing in the future.
Burma’s constitution:
“Yes” or “No”, it’s not a big deal.
What constitution gives people rights?
By: Saw Eh Doe Doh Moo

The constitution proposed by the military junta, the so-called State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), does not guarantee the fundamental rights of ethnic minority groups or the grassroots people and is unacceptable. This constitution, which the population is voting on during in the May 10th referendum, was drafted, in all essence by and for the military - not for the people of Burma.

However, before the voting can take place, it is the responsibility of the military regime, political opposition parties, non-governmental organisations and human rights activities to impart the real meaning of what a constitution is to the people. Without truly understand what a constitution is, what is included in this constitution and how it will affect their lives people are unable to make informed decisions when casting their votes.

Sadly this was not the case in Burma. The constitution was not made widely available and the limited number of copies needed to be bought, people were prohibited from freely discussing and debating the constitution by the regime with the threat of imprisonment, and the referendum process itself was unfair and unjust. The constitution and referendum do not reflect a genuine move towards democracy.

In order to get recognition and support for their governing system from the international community, Burma’s infamous generals are seemingly acting in accordance to pressure of international community. Shortly after the brutal crackdown on the non-violent protests lead by Buddhist Monks’ last year and the mounting international pressure that followed, the SPDC announced the referendum on the draft constitution in 2008 and elections in 2010. However, their actions, despite claiming they are bringing about democratic reforms, will for sure result in the opposite. Metaphorically, they are like “the white tomb”, which its surface appears to be good-looking and pleasant but inside the tomb, it is full of the horrible and unpleasant things.

The proclaimed seven steps “Road Map to Democracy” is a flawed process that only furthers the military’s strangle hold on the country. The restrictions that were placed on the first step of the road map – the national convention charged with drafting the constitution – ensured that the resulting document did not reflect the needs and wants of the population, instead it excluded the participation of all stakeholders with the exception of the military. Consequently, the draft constitution ensures that the military will retain power.

As a result, we totally reject this so-called constitution proposed by the military regime. Nevertheless a righteous, just and fair constitution that guarantee the fundamental rights of Burmese people and ethnic minorities, that balances power and transparency between the government and civilians equally is urgently needed in Burma.

Being a person from an ethnic minority group raised in grassroots community who has been going through severe circumstances such as intimidation, hardship, mistreatment, and discrimination by the oppressive regime, I personally believe that this constitution is not meaningless for the people. It like a wolf covered itself with a sheep’s skin, while it may appear meaningless, in reality is very dangerous. There are lots of people like me who are uninterested in and unconvinced by the military regime’s ongoing activities and tasks regarding to the constitution.

Furthermore, many people from Burma have been excluded from casting their vote on the new constitution including internally displaced persons (about 2 million), refugees (150,697) and migrant workers (over 1 million in Thailand alone). These groups represent a portion of the population and their voices on this issue deserve to be heard.

The forced adoption of the constitution proposed by the military regime does not unearth profound meaning, further the rights of the Burmese people or protect them from harm. The constitution entrenches the military into power in Burma and permits the continued brutal oppression of the population today, tomorrow and for the foreseeable bleak future.
After cyclone Nargis slammed into Burma, the military regime has been blocking the relief teams and supplies from the international community from reaching survivors. The United Nations, International NGOs and governments have been asking the regime to allow aid supplies, grant more visas and allow more assistance for victims of the cyclone.

The SPDC response to the outpouring of international assistance by delaying the issuing of visas to aid workers. The military regime failed to provide timely assistance to the cyclone victims. Many of Burmese people are frustrated because they have watched their government, reject international help everyday ignoring pleas from the United Nations, foreign governments and aid agencies.

Aid groups say survivors are crammed into makeshift refugee camps, schools and monasteries, living on food donations from private citizens who are ferrying rice, noodles, biscuits and other aid materials.

The greatest concern is over a possible spread of waterborne diseases due to lack of clean drinking water and sanitation. Major concern also includes food shortages, respiratory illnesses among children, and injuries suffered during the storm.

Rangoon resident said that SPDC authorities failed to provide timely assistance to the cyclone victims. SPDC army soldiers were reportedly only clearing streets where top military officials resided. Hundred of monks intervened and helped clear the storm debris and provided victim with food.

State television showed a truck distributing water, and how the governments are given rice to the people affected by the cyclone, though residents said they hadn’t seen any water trucks around the city. There were no image of the hundreds monks helping the recovery effort. In the face of an escalating humanitarian crisis, on May 7th state run television quoted SPDC Rangoon official Gen Ta Aye as saying the situation was “returning to normal.”

Despite the need to mount a massive aid effort, the regime continues to concentrate more than 30 percent of its troops in Eastern Burma to carry out attacks against civilians.

Up to date, it is estimated that 100,000 to 150,000 people were killed and more than 1.5 million people homeless when Cyclone Nargis tore through Burma, razing thousand of buildings and smashing up trees.