Resettlement: Family Reunification or Family Separation

The KNLA: Hoping for The Best but Preparing for The Worst

The Price of Higher Education in Karen Refugee Camps

Burma Issues: Call for action
Resettlement: 
“Family Reunification or Family Separation”

By Eh Klo Dah

As societies are organized by groups of people, many problems emerge which we all have to face up to, no matter which society we belong to. Such problems can have serious effects on a family. For families in refugee camps, resettlement to third countries (neither Burma or Thailand) is a problem that can have a devastating effect.

Umphiem is one of the refugee camps on the Thai-Burmese border and many refugees have had to flee to this camp because of Burma’s civil war. The civil war forces some parents to send their children to the camps so they can receive an education, some people to seek asylum and some people to work in other countries in order make a living. Due to this, families are torn apart and individuals have to struggle hopelessly for their survival.

Living in a refugee camp off of camp support and rations is dim and people lose hope for their future as they feel as if they are living in a cage under house arrest. People realize that as long as they are living in a refugee camp they cannot improve their future, or the next generation’s future. Thus, many refugees try to find a way to escape from their refugee camp in order to achieve a better standard of living and create a better future for themselves and their family.

Fortunately, refugees got a chance to escape from their lives of captivity in 2005. UNHCR took photos of refugees to register them so they could be officially acknowledged as real refugees. Then those refugees had an opportunity to apply for resettlement in a third country, so some refugees applied and were successfully resettled. However, some family members were unable to register as they were not home at that time or arrived in camp too late for the registration process, so they were left behind. As a result, families were again torn apart by resettlement.

Luckily, refugees are getting a second chance to free themselves from their captivity in the refugee camp. Sadly, however, it does not include all refugees. Currently UNHCR and the Thai government are cooperating together to work on a family unification program which aims to join separated family members together in third countries which are accepting resettlement. However, some family problems emerge in camp because of limitations put on which family members can qualify.

I thought it was important to talk to the refugees in Umphiem about this issue to find out which problems they are facing now and what their feelings are as they are the only ones who can truly express their needs.

When I was wandering around the camp, I saw some people waiting in front of the UNHCR office. I wondered what they were waiting for so I tried to approach one of them and ask. He explained to me, “We are waiting for UNHCR to take a photo to register us as they are working to reunify families. My wife is a new arrival but I have a UN identity card which allows me to apply to a third country. As we cannot go back to Burma, this is a great chance for us. I have a child so it will be great for my child’s future education as well. I am not an educated person so I want my child to be educated. We rely on UNHCR for everything that we need while living here, so I cannot say whether they are good or not. I know other people won’t have the same feeling as me. For me, this reunification opportunity is a great chance. Anything is better than living in a refugee camp.”

A woman then asked me, “Are you a new arrival? Where do you live?” I replied, “No! No! I am a visitor. I’ve come to Umphiem with my colleagues who are conducting a child and human rights workshop in a high school.”

Afterwards, she stood up and said, “My family has newly arrived. If I have a chance to apply to a third country, I would like to do so. The main purpose is for my children’s education. I want my children’s education to be better. Now they are attending schools here. Only my nephews have resettled in a third country so we won’t have a chance to apply for resettlement now. However, I still have hope. Returning back to Burma will not be possible for our family as we have nothing left there. We came here to resettle.”

I was surprised she didn’t have a chance to apply and wondered what she was waiting for in front of the UNHCR office. Then, I realized she wanted to ask UNHCR when new arrivals will have a chance to apply to a third country.

After I talked to them, I had mixed feelings: happiness for the man and sympathy for the woman.

The next morning, when I was walking to the morning market, an old man wearing an ARC hat and carrying snacks greeted me, “Gawlarghay, Thara mu [Good Morning, Teacher!]”. “I was surprised he greeted me in such a familiar manner as I didn’t know him. I stopped walking and asked myself whether I had met him before somewhere.

He stood in front of me and said, “I saw you yes-
terday. You were taking some photos. At first, I thought that you were a foreigner because you have curly hair and were taking pictures. Next time, greet me when you see me”, he said in a friendly way. I smiled at him and listened to his words. Then he went into a betel nut shop.

I thought he wanted to chat with me so I followed him. I explained to him where I came from and why I was in Umphiem. I then asked him about the current situation in the camp in terms of family unification. He said, “Yes, it is good for a family but it is difficult to say.” I thought he didn’t want to express his opinions about it so I changed to another topic. After we had talked for around 20 minutes, he told a joke to the betel nut shopkeeper’s daughter.

The female shopkeeper then told me about her experience of the family reunification process, “My husband is handicapped so we were selected to register with UNHCR to apply to a third country. My husband couldn’t get treatment in Burma as it would have cost 5 million kyat and we couldn’t afford it. So we came here but AMI (Aide Medicale Internationale) also doesn’t have enough funds to cover the treatment. It would be great if we pass the interview and have a chance to get him cured in a third country with support. However, other new arrivals are jealous of us and they said, “We also want to be handicapped. If we were handicapped, we would have a chance like you. We are all the same, we are all new arrivals, but you have more opportunities than us.” What could I say my sister? I just responded to their sarcastic comments by saying, “If you want to be handicapped, try breaking your legs!” For me, if we cannot resettle in a third country, I want to live here as we are a poor family and we cannot make our own business in Burma. Also, we are daily workers. It is better to live here. This shop is supported by Handicap [an organization that provides support to the disabled] so we can earn some income by selling betel nuts.”

Later, I heard from the camp committee that they also face similar kinds of complaints. Most of the new arrivals want to know when their turn will be and whether they will have a chance to resettle in a third country. A camp leader shared his experiences with me, “Yesterday, one of the refugees from America phoned me, “Chairman, please help my daughter-in-law to be united with her family. My son has been here for a long time. Chairman, what are you doing? Why do some people get a chance to unify their family, but we don’t?” He complained to me and told me that it was my fault. I explained to him that the program is being implemented by UNHCR. Our camp committees don’t have the authority to implement this family unification program. Similarly, some refugees phoned their more distant family members who have already resettled and asked angrily, “Couldn’t you prove to UNHCR that I am your close relative - that I am your mother, your wife, husband or your daughter or son so that we can become part of the family unification program.” So it is creating a lot of family problems in camp right now.”

I understood the refugees’ feelings and sympathized with them. On my way back to the house where I was staying, I thought about the refugees’ lives of captivity. When I got home, I shared the betel nut shopkeeper’s feelings with one of the teachers from Kaw Mu Rah High School. As soon as I finished describing them, she responded, “We and the new arrivals are all the same, but we might not have had the same experiences. I don’t live with my family here as my husband is in a third country but those new arrivals can live here with their families. You know, some couples have family problems. One of my friends’ husbands went to a third country and got married with another woman, so did the new arrivals sympathize with my friend at that time? So reunification is a really good chance for families who have been torn apart. However, I am not sure that we can really apply to a third country even though UNHCR is trying to take photos and do interviews for registration. If this photo becomes a UN card which will allow us to apply to a third country, I will be happy.”

Resettlement causes families to tear apart and is serious issue. A camp leader told me, “Some children were 9 or 10 years old when their parents went to a third country. Wives or husbands are sometimes left behind in camp after their spouses and children resettle in a third country. They then try to build a new family. As a result, that family cannot unify their family members anymore. It seems resettlement tries to tear a family apart. What I mean is, I want unregistered family members to have an equal opportunity just like the registered family members. Afterwards, I want them to resettle together.” He added, “Our camp committee’s opinion is that one family torn apart by a third country is too many. I can prove this with evidence. However, UNHCR thinks that one family torn apart by war is too many.”

I realized that every family wants to be together
in one place. No-one wants to be apart.

Some of the students on camp are struggling with their education. One of the former students from Kaw Mu Rah School said, “My father is in the USA. Our family finances rely on his income and camp support. I want to go there. We have been apart from each other for a long time. I also want to continue my studies further. Then, I will go back to my native town, Kyeik Gyi, in Burma and I want to help with my community’s development.” I really appreciated his aim and that he wanted to help his community as youths are a community’s strength and play an important role in bringing about constructive changes.

One of the IHE [Institute of Higher Education] students also shared his feelings with me as well. “Family unification is good for a family who has left nothing in Burma, I mean no relatives left. However, I would like to choose to return to my first country – Burma - as all of my family members are there. I just came here for education so I don’t want to resettle in a third country.”

Family is important for everyone but some of my interviewees were far with their family members due to different reasons. Even though these two students were far from their parents and struggling with their education in camp, they never give up and keep studying to try to reach their goals.

During the trip, I found out that living in a refugee camp is similar to living in a prison. Yes, it is almost a prison. Refugees have to survive with support from other people. They don’t have much of a chance to improve their future and to apply their skills, and it is difficult to travel without an official identity card as well. It is like they are living under house arrest. In this situation, some refugees cannot endure the camp difficulties anymore so some of the new arrivals have already returned to Burma.

The current reformist president U Thein Sein has recently removed over 2000 names from the Burmese government’s blacklist which previously blocked Burmese dissidents living in foreign countries from entering the country so some people now dare to go back home as some people want to improve their future in their motherland. At the same time, everyday some refugees plan to resettle in a third country. This is one of the refugees’ rights. No-one wants to live in a refugee camp anymore so they want to grasp any chances that arise.

Refugee life is similar to a surface of a lake. When the wind is blowing, its surface is moving. When you throw a stone or a piece of bamboo in a lake, its surface moves again. Refugee life is never stable. Thus, when there is a chance to escape from a camp, most refugees want to grasp that chance firmly. They often do not pause to think whether it is a good chance or not, they just want to grasp any chances. However, when refugees grasp a chance for resettlement in a third country, families are torn apart again.

Refugee families are often torn apart two times: because of civil war and resettlement. It is a problem that refugee families currently face in camp. Even though UNHCR tries to unify families, problems persist. Some refugees have been living in camp for a long time so some family members don’t want to resettle or to make unification again, especially elderly people. They have already adopted this environment and they don’t want to have to adapt to living in a new environment again. In some families, one person wants to apply for resettlement but other people don’t want to so it creates family disagreements. Societies and families are complex. Unfortunately in refugee camps, resettlement is destroying the unity of both.

The KNLA: “hoping for the best but preparing for the worst”

By Saw David

Monday 10th September 2012, 05:30.

“Time to get up, the ceremony will start soon”.

I wearily untangled myself from my mosquito net and performed a death-defying balancing act to free myself from my hammock. It had been a hot and clammy night and instead of sleeping I had passed my time restlessly listening to buzzing mosquitoes and watching armed Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) soldiers patrol the perimeter of their 101 Battalion base in Karen State’s 7th Brigade.

During a changing of the guard, one of the soldiers asked me, “If we are attacked by the Burmese army, are you ready to pick up a gun and fight?” Fortunately he was only joking; only trying to test my mettle. “Sure, but you’ll have to teach me how to shoot while I’m running backwards” I replied, referring to my pre-planned retreat to the safety of Thailand. He laughed at my frank admission and disappeared into the murky night.

There may be on-going peace negotiations between the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Burmese government, but the KNLA, the KNU’s armed wing, has seen times like this before and has too much experience to be lulled into a false sense of security. With war raging in Kachin State and a lack of troop withdrawal from Karen State, the trust of Burma’s ethnic peoples is something
that the government lacks, so it must give evidence of its sincerity and work tirelessly to achieve good faith.

It was the KNLA’s Basic Training Closing Ceremony, after which graduates assume active positions in the army. The solemnity of the ceremony made it clear that the officers and their 49 new recruits remained sceptical of the government’s intentions and were not expecting to have it easy so were preparing accordingly for the worst.

“Any country or army who enters soldiers into battle has to give them basic training beforehand. If any soldier doesn’t attend the basic training, if we send them to the battlefield it is nearly the same as if we are sending them to the cemetery” explained Lieutenant Commander Paw Doh.

However, as well as preparing for the worst, the KNLA is also using the current fragile peace to prepare for a possible future without fighting. I asked three star General Saw Klor Say how these new graduates’ service could differ from graduates before them?

“Theyir service will be different because before this course we only gave training for fighting. Some of the teachers on this course have already finished training and know more about politics – they have a higher education and more ideas than before. These graduates will be different to previous graduates as this time is not like last time. Before, we had to fight with guns. Now, we have to fight with our minds and our words” explained Lieutenant Commander Paw Doh.

He continued, “Over the last 4 years, we have not had the time to give our soldiers skills which relate directly to our communities. Now, in this time of peace, the ceasefire has given us a good opportunity to introduce our soldiers to politics and community development”.

This new forward-thinking focus on community-based skills seems to be popular with the new graduates.

Saw Bodate joined the KNLA after witnessing many atrocities being committed by the Burma Army while they repeatedly attacked his village. I asked him what he would do if the ceasefire holds and he no longer needed to be a soldier, “If there is peace, if we really get that opportunity, I will stay in the army and help with our community’s development. Personally, I want to help my people and keep developing as a soldier for the rest of my life”.

Saw Eh Kho Thaw also joined the KNLA after witnessing Burma Army atrocities in his home village in the Delta region. “I’ve wanted to be a soldier for 4 years” he told me. “I was really happy to get the opportunity to join the training, and am really happy to be part of this battalion”.

I asked him if he worried about the resumption of hostilities, “I worry because we are all people and we do not want to fight each other, but if the Burmese army attacks our villages we will have to fight”.

This longing for peace was also shared by Saw Bodate. When I asked him what he thought of the peace negotiations he replied, “I think the ceasefire is good because we do not want to fight each other any more. The people of Burma do not need civil war. I think the negotiations are good”.

There are a lot of loose ends and unanswered questions regarding the ceasefire but it’s clear that the KNLA wants peace for their people after they’ve had to endure over 60 years of unimaginable suffering.

I wondered what the future could hold for the new graduates, and for the KNLA in general, if a peaceful and democratic Burma is achieved.

After I put this question to him, General Saw Klor Say answered, “If the ceasefire is successful and hostilities end, we will join the government, but only if it is fair and balanced. We want a federal system like the United States where there are equal opportunities for all states and ethnicities. However, due to the 2008 Constitution, it is currently not balanced so it’s too early to talk about this. The Burmese authorities made the constitution, not us. It controls the whole country, yet was only made by the military so is not fair and equal”.

Any scepticism towards Thein Sein’s ostensibly reformist government is entirely understandable. Reforms have been undertaken at a dizzying pace and the dust needs to settle before anyone can really analyse the incumbent Union Solidarity and Development Party’s (USDP) true intentions. That will take time and it would seem unwise to prepare for any one scenario before all the facts are known.
In July 2012, I visited one of the Institute of Higher Educa-
tion in Karen refugee camps. I had a meeting with both teachers and students in separate sessions. Before hav-
ing a meeting with administrative and teaching staff, the school principal asked me to meet with the students and give words of encouragement to them. In fact, I was enthused by her in-
vitation because I always have a feeling that in an educational domain, students must be our priority. While giving my speech, I was aware that these students were curious to know more about further education opportunities, whether in this camp or other places. They were young, energetic, motivated, and passionate learners whose dream was to be equipped with the quality of education needed to serve and work for their community and people afterwards. I was impressed by their determination in-

Then, after facilitating the seating arrangement in a semicircle, I started to have a conversation with the second year students, who were considered as being the seniors in the school. One female student, who at that time was the Student Committee's chairperson, happened to ask me, "Does KRCEE have any plan to offer or implement a specialized program at our school?" Frankly, I responded to her that it would be possible but would take some time.

Apart from this female student, other students in this school were highly motivated in their studies because they were ambitious and enthusiastic to carry on their further education at university or college. Particularly, one female student asked me a question and then told me that if she had a chance to further her studies at university, she would choose to study biology and would like to offer a ‘Biology major’ in this school one day in the future.

This year, when I returned in July to visit the same school, I met a few of those students who I had met last year. The good news that I received from the principal was that all of the
After spending some time having a conversation with these students, I came to realize that like me, whose enthusiasm and motivation when I was studying in a refugee camp over the last decade was to go to college or university once in my lifetime, these students were also aiming higher for their educational journey as well. It is undeniable that education plays a very pivotal role in individuals’, society’s, and a nation’s development and prosperity. Despite living in a very restricted environment where there are insufficient resources and facilities, refugee students are never reluctant in their pursuit of education. Education is a lifelong process, and if one can use and apply it in an appropriate and useful manner, it can certainly bring a change in one’s life, society, and the whole country.

Education is highly valued not only by students, but by parents, community leaders, and teachers. They are aware that having a good quality of education is the most promising component to bring back refugees’ hopes and build a brighter and better future, especially during this very critical period of uncertainty. In addition to other humanitarian assistance such food, shelter, health, and others, the provision of educational opportunities and sustaining the quality of education to refugee students has to be one of the highest priorities.

**Call For Action & Support**

The people of Burma are not the silent victims of the civil war in their country. They are organizing themselves to struggle in countrywide grassroots movements for true and lasting PEACE and JUSTICE in Burma. They need and want your help.

**DON’T LET THE OPPRESSION OF THE BURMESE PEOPLE CONTINUE BECAUSE OF YOUR SILENCE! JOIN THEM IN SOLIDARITY BY ADDING YOUR VOICE TO THEIR CALLS FOR AC TION AND SUPPORT FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE IN BURMA/MYANMAR**

**Call for Action**

To the democracy and ethnic opposition groups, we urge you to:

- Encourage and support inclusive and united opposition leadership which is decisive, proactive, and has the necessary skill sets to oversee the broad range of activities to free Burma.
- Enlarge the United Nationalities Federal Council to be more representative of ethnic groups (including Burman) and ensure their inclusion in future negotiation processes.
- Insist the government starts negotiations leading towards a federal agreement detailing ethnic rights and autonomy, which is recognized and respected by all groups. Ethnic opposition groups should agree on a common position in regards to this in order to present a united front to the government. There must also be clearly defined military demarcation zones, including Burmese troop withdrawal from areas under the influence of negotiating ethnic parties, until the time that true negotiations on disarmament can begin.
- Support the current democratic reforms, yet insist on the completion of a new constitution before the 2015 general election which entails the inclusion and participation of democratically elected ethnic parliamentarians at Regional, State, and Union levels at the expense of the power currently given to the Burmese military.
- Encourage and support grassroots civil society to train and mentor a new generation of community leaders who will have the capacity to actively engage in the current democratic reforms and a future democratically elected national parliament. This would entail supporting a grassroots movement that is capable of exploiting the opportunities the proposed 2015 general election could provide.

- Educate and empower grassroots communities so they understand their human rights, voting rights, political rights and how to participate effectively in a democratic system.
- See each ‘small victory’ as only a small part of the overall goal and not a conclusion or solution to the on-going struggle for justice and peace. Each small victory such as political prisoner release, ceasefire talks, access to education, healthcare, or the issuing of identity cards must be built upon and not considered as a final result.
- Learn lessons from the past in order to act effectively in the present and plan strategically for the future.
- Understand that while there are on-going peace negotiations, grassroots people are still being subjected to human rights abuses and continue to struggle to survive. For them, tangible evidence of change needs to follow dialogue with the government.

To the United Nations (UN), International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs), and Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), we strongly urge you to:

- Advocate for international monitoring of the 2015 elections to ensure that they are free and fair in all areas of Burma. Political campaigning must also be free and fair and current illegal political entities must be given legal status so they can participate without fear of prosecution.
- Encourage the establishment of a Commission of Inquiry into War Crimes and Crimes against Humanity which deals with both conflicts from the past and on-going offensives against ethnic groups, as well as a Truth and Reconciliation Process that will heal the wounds of the past and aid national reconciliation by creating an understanding of the reasons which contributed to the peoples’ suffering in order to ensure that atrocities do not happen again.
- Ensure that the Burmese government’s chair of ASEAN in 2014 does not give the regime enough respectability that their past and current contempt of the Burmese people is forgotten, and normal relations are assumed with other nations before a demonstrable and sustained peace is achieved.
- Make sure that while sanctions are being dropped, Burma’s army is deprived of weapons and other military matériel while there are on-going offensives against ethnic groups and continuing human rights violations committed against civilians.
- That Burma’s need for development is balanced with the
ensuring of human rights and the needs of her people. If any investment or ‘development’ project, be it foreign or domestic, can be proven to be causing human rights violations - such as land confiscation, forced displacement or forced labor - or environmental degradation it should be halted with immediate effect.

- Ensure that profits made by the Burmese government in this time of investment are used to benefit the people and not just a privileged elite. This entails increased governmental spending on education that respects and promotes ethnic diversity and healthcare that is accessible to all the peoples of Burma.
- Continue to advocate for free humanitarian access to all necessary areas in Burma, especially remote and rural communities, and to allow humanitarian and civil society organizations to develop a systematic monitoring system to ensure its effectiveness in giving assistance based solely upon need as well as preventing misuse and theft.
- Organize humanitarian and civil society organizations working inside Burma so they can cooperate together to improve the health, education, and livelihoods of the people in all areas of Burma with a high sensitivity toward their respective ethnic cultures, traditions, languages, and religions.
- Support and encourage humanitarian and civil society organizations working inside Burma, especially in the ethnic areas, to develop a comprehensive and coordinated humanitarian assistance plan in collaboration with humanitarian and civil society organizations working cross border. This would entail the inclusion of community based organizations in the planning of issues of importance to the communities they represent, such as refugee repatriation.
- Encourage the Burmese government to increase its liberalization of the media, with the inclusion of exiled and ethnic media groups, so that its citizens become better informed about social, economic, political, military, and international affairs.
- Publicly acknowledge that although the situation in Burma appears to be changing, certain issues are still threatening regional and international security and stability, such as drugs and human trafficking. International organizations and CBOs must not forget about these issues and instead undertake strong actions and firm stances against the Burmese government in these important respects.

Call for Your Public Support For:
- A federal system with democratic form of government with free, fair and regular elections enshrined in a new constitution that gives power to the people instead of to the army.
- Pressure by the international community for a nationwide ceasefire.
- Monitoring by international and community based organizations of the government’s adherence to current ceasefire agreements with ethnic armed opposition groups in regards to human rights abuses and troop withdrawal.
- Cross border humanitarian assistance of food, healthcare, shelter, clean water, and sanitation.
- International monitoring of foreign investment, especially in regards to mega-development projects.
- Continued action by ASEAN towards Burma for regional security, respect for human rights, and a peaceful and just resolution of internal political conflicts despite Burma’s forthcoming chairmanship of the organization in 2014.
News in Brief

• The fighting between the Burmese army and the Kachin Independence Army has now continued for one year even though ceasefire negotiations have been held.

• The reported rift in the Karen National Union (KNU)- which started in September after a KNU liaison office opened in Hpa-an Township apparently without central-level permission- has blamed on miscommunication between the KNU and its armed wing the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). After a serious discussion, Central Committee members stated that there was no longer any internal conflict.

• David Htaw, a senior leader in the KNU, passed away in Mingalardon military hospital, Yangon, while being treated for health complications. He had recently been dismissed by the KNU Central Committee for traveling to Hpa-an, the capital of Karen State, and opening a liaison office without their approval. He joined the KNU on 23 May, 1979, due to his love for Karen people and was very active in advocating for peace.

• In Taungoo Township, Pegu Division, the Taukyekhat dam, which was built jointly by the Burmese government and the Aisa World company, has caused the river water to stop flowing. As a result, local people now face transportation problems which are affecting local communities.

We would like to request our readers to kindly notify us of any changes to your mailing address. You can inform us at burmaissues@burmaissues.org
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