

**International Organization for Migration/Bangkok
Cultural Orientation Southeast Asia Program**

Current CO Provision to Refugees from Burma

Thailand

Population and Environment

CO activities are currently centered upon Mae La camp (population almost 50,000), some 50 minutes north of the town of Mae Sot. The camp is about 70% Karen, 25% "Burmese Muslim," and small numbers of other ethnicities. The option of applying for resettlement to the US was offered to the entire population of Mae La. To date, some one-third of the population has taken up the offer. Smaller numbers of refugees reside in Umpiem and Nupo camps, to whom resettlement was also offered; the populations there are roughly similar in composition to that of Mae La. For more information regarding the camps, please see Annex 2.

Activities: CO Classes

CO classes in Mae La are three to five days in length, covering the attitudes, knowledge, and skills refugees will need to make their resettlement experience in the U.S. as successful as possible. Class size is ordinarily about 25 for adults, and 20 to 25 for children and youth, although classes become larger and shorter, perhaps only one or two days, if we receive the list of departures only a few days before they travel, as can happen when the number of departures increases dramatically toward the end of the fiscal year.

Although refugees learn about the kinds of assistance they can expect to receive from resettlement agencies and government services, CO classes also emphasize the importance of self-sufficiency and the need to find a job as quickly as possible. Recent additions to our curriculum include 'family day,' when parents and children are brought together to discuss the changes they will experience in family roles, methods of child discipline, and maintaining the valuable aspects of their own culture. Simultaneous with this session single students have their own group discussions on dating in the US and other facets of living as a single person in a new country.

The Karen, in particular, can be rather shy and reticent to voice legitimate requests for assistance or complaints, so CO classes also focus on the need to be pro-active, and to take responsibility for obtaining help and achieving one's own success in the United States.

Activities: Daycare and Parenting

An experienced child care worker on IOM staff developed a daily program of activities for the young children in the CO day-care center. A total of ten refugee daycare workers were hired and received an initial two-day training course in the care of the children, safety issues, and conducting activities (with further daily training and supervision for the first month). Activities included in the daycare program include music, singing, chanting and dance, drawing, arts and crafts, English lessons, and storytelling, as well as basic care of the children's physical needs.

Two child care rooms are used; one for tiny babies and one for children up to age ten. Daily attendance varies considerably, from a low of eight to a high of 66. The rooms are too small for the larger groups, but the space allotted to IOM is extremely limited and there are no options to expand.

A parenting program targeting the parents of the children in the daycare center was developed for implementation at the start of July. The one-day course focuses on hygiene (30-45 min), nutrition (1 ½ hrs), disciplining children and teenagers (1 ½ hrs), and other topics such as maintenance and cleanliness of the home, and topics related to schooling and parents.

Activities: The Information Campaign

IOM is currently conducting a multi-faceted information campaign to provide refugees with accurate information about the U.S. refugee resettlement program.

Newsletters, addressing resettlement issues, camp rumors, and misinformation about resettlement, cover explanations of the OPE and DHS interviewing process; the IOM medical screening process; facts about travel loan repayment; jobs for refugees in the U.S.; transportation; education; and many other aspects of resettlement life in America. Many bits of misinformation circulating in the camps are addressed in the newsletters as well, such as the rumor that all refugee males must join the U.S. army, or that Asians and Muslims face heavy discrimination in America.

Meetings in the various camp sections and with leadership groups such as the influential KWO (Karen Women's Organization) and KYO (Karen Youth Organization) continue to be an important part of the campaign. IOM staff organizes Q&A sessions in various camp sections, addressing questions on topics from the OPE interview and medical check processes to the education, employment, and health care systems in the U.S., and exactly how much support would be provided by the government, and for how long. In addition, IOM continues its 'tea-shop diplomacy' and house-to-house visitation strategies, to learn of the latest rumors and general camp attitudes toward the resettlement program.

Picture boards, showing general images of life in America, and in particular, refugee life in America, serve as "24-hour cultural orientation information centers," and always have crowds of refugees keen to get a visual notion of what life in America may be like for them. Pictorial topics are arranged on three-and-a-half foot feature boards, and topics have included American food, famous locations in the U.S., American holidays, refugee jobs, refugee housing, pictures of departing refugees, American leisure activities and sports, transportation, letters from resettled refugees, resettlement agency services, and more.

Theater: Four shows, staged between the end of June and October 2007, were performed by a team of refugee actors from Mae La camp. The shows followed one refugee family's decisionmaking process of whether to resettle in America or not, and then their adventures in traveling to the US and trying to adapt to life there. The shows were performed in the large Mae La camp, and permission was obtained from the Thai authorities to allow the actors to travel to Nupo and Umpiem camps, as well, making this effort our first "road show." Interest in all the camps was very high, with usually one to two thousand people in the audience for each performance. The shows have been filmed and put onto VCD, for later distribution in the camps.

Malaysia

Population and Environment

Participants in Malaysia are mostly ethnic Chin from Burma, living in an extremely-urbanized and hostile environment and trying to avoid the notice of the Malaysian government and populace. Midnight raids by government-sanctioned vigilante groups on refugee squatter communities are common, and on the day after a raid (or even the rumor of a raid) students arrive in class tired, haggard, and distracted from stress and lack of sleep. Sometimes, trainers learn that a student who is absent has been arrested. In this case, the trainer informs the CO administrative assistant, who forwards the message to OPE and UNHCR, who then take the necessary actions to get the person released.

Activities: CO Classes

With the waiver for material support for Chin refugees in Malaysia now in effect, refugee movements and CO sessions (provided for adults, pre-teens, and teens) have picked up considerably over past months, and it is anticipated that the number of refugees accepted for resettlement next year will further increase. There is a possibility that session length will increase from three to five days, but this needs further consideration, since refugees in Malaysia receive little or no UNHCR assistance and have to work to support themselves. Attendance at a CO class means they miss three days' pay; something few can afford. We have heard of instances where refugees have actually lost their jobs due to the fact that they were attending a CO class rather than being at work.

Contacting refugees for classes is sometimes difficult. If need be, assistance is sought from the grassroots Chin organizations who list the people scheduled for sessions in their community newspaper and otherwise get the word out into the community.

Trainers report that, as a result of their lives in Burma and the harassment they receive in Malaysia, the Chin refugees are likely to have an abiding fear and distrust of the police and a deep reluctance to call on the police even when needed; to accept bribery as a way to get out of difficulties, especially with authorities; and to resign themselves to be cheated by employers, not complaining when they are cheated as they have no recourse to justice.