

Burmese refugees fearful of new life in USA

By Jesse Wright for USA Today (Updated 1/22/2009 7:15 PM)

MAE SOT, Thailand — The bus rumbled to life, and Hsar Say took one last look at the only home he'd known for the past 20 years. The lime green rice paddies, the banana trees, the bamboo huts he shared with the other refugees — they were all part of his past. In a few hours, Say would board a plane to America with his wife and two kids. Whether that was a good thing, he wasn't sure.



"Basically I think (America) will be better than a refugee camp," he said. "In a refugee camp, you have no rights. You are put in a cage. It's illegal to travel outside the camp, so it's very different from being a human." On the other hand, Say was a very important man — a teacher — among the other Burmese refugees at the Mae La camp in western Thailand. His wife taught adult literacy classes. He confessed to being "a little afraid" that in America, they'd end up like his wife's cousin, who moved to Kentucky and toils in a clothing store packing boxes. "Maybe in America, I can work at a job to help other people," he said hopefully. "I like social work."

Such are the dilemmas facing Say and the 15,000 other refugees from Burma who have arrived in the USA since 2006, making them the biggest single group of refugees to enter the country during that time, according to the State Department. Those who have escaped from Burma, also known as Myanmar, are in many respects a special case: They have fled a military regime that the Bush administration had singled out as one of the most brutal in the world. A cyclone in May killed at least 85,000 people and sent even more Burmese streaming across the border into Thailand, where there are about 100,000 refugees packed into nine camps.

Former first lady Laura Bush, who had made the plight of Burma's people one of her main causes, visited the Mae La camp in August and met a group of refugees on their way to South Carolina. "It was very moving for me to see how thrilled they were to be able to leave," she recalled in a recent interview with USA TODAY. President Obama, in a statement in June, condemned the oppressive Burmese regime, saying the situation there "offends the conscience of the American people."

Adjusting to outside life is a particular challenge for many Burmese refugees. Many, including Say, have spent most of their adult lives in the camps, leaving them unprepared for life on their own. Those who are granted passage to America by U.S. immigration officials must first take part in classes on how to provide for their own basic nutrition, how to change a diaper and how to use the bathroom on an airplane. The fear of the outside world is so strong that about 60% of the refugees refuse to leave the camps, according to the International Organization of Migration (IOM), which is paid by the U.S. government to administer the classes. "They don't know what's going on in America," said Peter Salnikowski, the IOM's cultural orientation program coordinator. "They ask: 'What are the camps over there like?'"

Spread over a dense green range of jagged low mountains, the Mae La camp is one of the largest camps in Thailand. Tall, barbed-wire fences separate the 40,000 residents from the rest of the world. Huts have been built with bamboo and teak hacked out of the jungle. Some residents carry water from a nearby well; others cook curry over wooden fires. Many are members of the Karen ethnic group, whose half-century struggle for independence within Burma has made them particular targets of the military. The Karen Human Rights Group, a local aid agency, says the military attacks Karen villages, burns homes and uses

civilians as human minesweepers. In defending its actions, the Burmese regime has said it is in a battle against separatists and terrorists.

The Karen make up about 7 million of Burma's 48 million people, though they are not the only group that suffers. Last month, the United Nations criticized the Burmese regime for its failure to allow aid groups access to victims of Cyclone Nargis, eight months after the storm made landfall. Despite it all, leaving is a difficult decision for Karen who fear their way of life will be lost in a new country. "We're afraid that if we go (to America) we will lose our culture," said Naw Janey, 46, a mother of four. She moved her family to Mae La this year after Cyclone Nargis destroyed their bamboo home on the Irrawaddy River delta. Despite her misgivings, she is applying for refugee status. "We don't want to go to America, but it would be a good chance for my children to study," she said.

The U.S. government had closed its doors to most Karen refugees after the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks, after which it classified the Karen National Union — a group that includes guerrilla fighters as well as politicians — as a terrorist organization. The ban was lifted by the State Department in 2006, although former guerrillas are still denied entry. To get to the USA, camp residents first must be formally classified as refugees by the United Nations. Then they can apply to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, a process that can take months. The ordeal gets no easier when they arrive in the USA.

The Karen speak their own language and only sometimes speak Burmese, which means good translators are hard to find, according to Interfaith Ministries of Greater Houston, an organization that helps Karen settle in the USA. Local resettlement agencies are tasked with teaching the refugees English and helping them find a job once they arrive. Say was lucky: Among the three dozen passengers on the bus leaving the Mae La camp, he was the only one who spoke English. That will ease his transition to life in America.

As the refugee camp disappeared from view and the bus approached the Bangkok airport, his thoughts centered on the life he was leaving behind. "One day, if it is OK, or even if it's not OK, maybe I can come back and visit and help the people who are struggling," he said. "Peace will take time."

Contributing: David Jackson in Washington