

To Sheffield with love

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Some 174 refugees from the Thai-Burma border have been resettled in Sheffield in the UK between May 2005 and September 2007. Better preparation and more practical assistance could have eased their integration into British society.

Since March 2004, the UK has run a resettlement programme, known as the Gateway Protection Programme, for 'quota refugees'. Refugees are selected by UNHCR field officers and arrive in the UK with permanent legal status. To date, refugees from Burma, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Liberia have arrived through this programme and have been accommodated in cities such as Sheffield, Hull and Norwich.

The majority are from the Karen ethnic group who have lived in refugee camps along the Thailand-Burma border. The rest are from other groupings including Mon, Pa'O and Rohingya as well as Burmese students in opposition to the military regime who fled to the border areas following a national uprising in 1988 and who are recognised as Persons of Concern to UNHCR.

The UK government works with three UK organisations – the International Organization for Migration,² the Refugee New Arrivals Project and the Refugee Council – to facilitate this resettlement. Once in the UK, the Refugee Council provides casework, housing and interpreting support to new arrivals for the first 12 months, in collaboration with Sheffield Community Access and Interpreting Service (SCAIS) and a housing association, Safe Haven Yorkshire. At the end of the 12 months, support is provided by local Citizens Advice Bureaux (CAB), the Northern Refugee Centre and the government's Sure Start programme.

There is no doubt that the resettlement of Burmese refugees allows for lives to be rebuilt and dignity to be regained. The camps in Thailand are rigidly controlled environments with serious gaps in services – particularly those services relating to protection, education and training, and the significant mental health needs of refugees suffered as a direct result of the prolonged nature of the conflict and lives lived in refugee camps. Refugees arriving in Sheffield have an opportunity to emerge from the camps' environment

Resettled Burmese refugees, including co-author Yin Mon Thu, adjusting to life in Sheffield, UK.



of disempowerment but the effects of life in the camps impacts on the resettlement process and this needs to be taken into account when providing support arrangements. Although some counselling services were available for the resettled refugees, the waiting times and difficulties accessing this care were problematic. Extra funding is needed for counselling to help people deal with the trauma they have experienced.

Better orientation and information about rights and entitlements upon arrival in the UK could have increased their confidence

– such as knowing that they had a right to use interpreters or could ask for help. Some months after arriving in Sheffield, one female refugee who needed repairs to the electricity supply in her new accommodation commented:

"I don't want to keep complaining to them. I am afraid to receive their anger and I am afraid they will ignore my requests because I keep complaining."

This lack of confidence and their fear of authority of any kind are a barrier to accessing other services necessary for settlement. The need for resettlement aid agencies to factor in this fear factor became clear early on in the process and it was widely considered that the 12 months of support offered initially was inadequate.

Over time, three main challenges were evident during this early period of resettlement. These are: language issues; problems with technology; and difficulties associated with living within a different culture and new environment.

"The UNHCR field officer turns up and refugees in the camps have to make this life-changing decision with no knowledge or facts about the countries they can go to."¹

Language issues

As with many other asylum and new migrant arrivals within the UK, language acts as a barrier to communication, even though some language training is provided before arrival. People are made aware of emergency telephone numbers, for example, but clear explanations of when to use them and what to do and say once their call is answered were missing in the training. Communication when dealing with benefits agencies was also reported as an issue, as were dealing with problem or noisy



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neighbours, buying bus tickets and following directions or signs.

The provision of English language classes is central. Those arriving around the UK's September enrolment date can access classes, with childcare available for those in receipt of benefits. Refugee Council volunteers assisted with language homework and extra learning support. Children enrolled in certain schools were eligible for Ethnic Minority Assistance Support (EMAS). But these places were not always close to their homes so they needed to travel by bus, again experiencing communication problems.

The language and employment issues are inextricably linked. One Karen man reported:

"I cannot speak English. It means it is difficult to find a job. When

I told the truth to the benefits agency they cut my benefit straight away for not looking for a job."

Needing to prove intention to find a job is particularly difficult in these cases. If the officer they encounter at the Job Centre is particularly stern, and interpreters are not available, this puts pressure on the individual and may lead to misunderstandings and the ending of benefits. If a refugee finds unskilled employment, their inability to understand safety regulations may become an issue. Those providing refugee employment and training in the UK should be aware that refugees coming from Thailand have had little opportunity of working, as restrictions on refugees working outside camps were strictly enforced. The scale and range of obstacles facing refugees being resettled in an industrialised country without training for the employment sector need to be borne in mind.

Many refugees may need to re-skill or gain accreditation

for skills already gained – which can be both demoralising and disempowering. Even when they have the required skills, the maze to accreditation or further training again acts as a barrier. As one Karen refugee woman explained:

"I worked for almost 20 years as a qualified midwife in the camp but here I feel almost like a disabled person."

Technology

Moving from a refugee camp where water is carried from wells every day to a country where hot and cold water run out of a tap is easily accepted. However, the technology involved in banking, computing or using the internet takes time to learn. Not all banks accept Home Office papers proving residence in order to open a bank account, something essential for receiving benefit payments. Basic banking transactions such as

paying in money or using automatic machines to withdraw money proved difficult to learn. Refugees who had been used to using cash in camps did not automatically trust the banking system, sometimes preferring to keep their cash more readily accessible.

For some new arrivals, it took around six months to become fully familiar with using kitchen appliances. Learning how to open doors on buses and trains and use lifts or escalators also took time. A system of volunteers available during the initial stages of resettlement would have helped refugees meet these daily challenges.

Unchanged gender roles for new arrivals and the need to cook, wash, feed children, clean and shop meant that women had fewer chances to develop these skills or further their education. Projects to address this and women's empowerment would be beneficial. For older women, building confidence in use of technology is essential.

Most of these considerations have been well documented before and many of these points should be known. Failure to address them early on has contributed to the social worlds of Burmese refugees becoming smaller and smaller. Because of problems with transport and technology, some individuals become afraid to venture out of their houses and have to rely on other members of the group. The desire to live in close proximity to other Burmese refugees is therefore unsurprising and is comparable to the energy and effort previous groups refugees have put into secondary migration to be close to community members.

A different culture and environment

"You all right, love?" Refugees arriving in Sheffield are familiar with the word 'love' in English, relating this to personal relationships. Upon arrival in Sheffield, however, they were surprised to find locals putting this word at the end of greetings and many were uncomfortable with this. Whilst this may seem to be a minor cultural adjustment, for many new arrivals it was difficult.

After the initial shock and adaptation to the UK weather, the task of

understanding the laws, systems and unwritten rules of a society follows. People experience loss of status (especially for those who had been fully employed within the camps), shifting gender roles and different cultural norms. For a Burmese or Karen woman, shaking hands and receiving a stranger's hug, especially if the stranger is male, is completely alien. Seeing people kissing in public or women with short skirts will shock new arrivals, male or female, as commented on by one man:

"I feel really shy when they kiss in front of me at the bus stop and I don't really know where I can hide my face."

The realisation that health and education are free is good news for all but the refugees need to adjust to different customs – such as those surrounding ante- and post-natal care. Traditionally, Burmese post-natal care involves women staying in the house for 45 days and following specific health treatments such as eating plain food; the UK's focus on post-natal depression is not something Burmese women will have encountered previously. Furthermore, appointment times with doctors is a new concept and a motto has developed within the community of 'Do it or cancel it' following several missed appointments.

Depression, loneliness and a lack of social support have all been identified but a stigma around mental health remains and counselling is often declined in favour of pills. This is due in part to translators coming from within the community and refugees' fear of having their problems made public.

Information about the laws surrounding child protection or domestic violence is provided prior to arrival but it has been found that the serious consequences of these laws are not fully understood. Workshops to discuss these issues would require sensitive handling but would assist in the process or resettlement.

The challenge of developing a sense of belonging whilst maintaining an identity rooted in the customs of Burma is not easy. In contrast to provisions for these Burmese refugees, the Lao, Vietnamese and Khmer refugees who were resettled

in the US during the 1980s received six months' intensive language training and cultural orientation prior to departure, covering most of the issues highlighted within this article. Better orientation for resettlement for Burmese refugees should be prioritised if this particular durable solution is to be given its best chance of success.

Policy recommendations

- Provide better information to refugees about resettlement countries prior to arrival.
- Provide good quality, accessible information about rights, entitlements and regulations upon arrival.
- Provide extra funding for counselling services throughout the process.
- Extend the initial 12-month period of support.
- Use refugee advocates during the initial stages to help with bureaucracy and daily practical challenges.
- Set up projects to address women's empowerment and training.
- Provide accessible skills training for employment.
- Regularly evaluate the aims and successes of the Gateway Protection Programme.
- Develop culturally sensitive access to mental health professionals.
- Provide workshops in domestic law involving child protection and domestic violence on arrival.

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This article is based on the observations, interviews and experiences of both authors and does not represent the views of any organisation.

1. Conversation with NGO employee, Thai-Burma border, March 2007.

2. www.iomlondon.org