

Karen voices on resettlement

The Karen Women's Organisation, with Sarah Fuller and Eileen Pittaway

With little support and often under threat, members of the Karen Women's Organisation have conducted research, provided programmes and support, and challenged the wisdom of international NGOs and UNHCR.

In 2005 the Royal Thai Government eased restrictions and allowed resettlement from the camps on the Thai-Burmese border to countries in the West. The impact of resettlement in the camps has been of great concern to the Karen Women's Organisation (KWO)¹ for several years. They want the voices of the refugees, in particular refugee women, and of their community-based organisations to be heard in discussions on the provision of durable solutions. Sadly, refugee women have to scream to be heard whispering.

As a result of the ongoing conflict, persecution and human rights abuses suffered by the Karen people, caused by the SPDC and ongoing encampment in Thailand, resettlement was requested by local refugee-run Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) on behalf of some refugees in the camps. Approximately 4,500 refugees were resettled to several third countries in 2006, and up to 15,000 by the end of 2007.²

Since the resettlement programme began, the situation in the camps along the border has worsened significantly; as many key community members were speedily resettled, camp facilities and services suffered from lack of structure and capacity. Various reports compiled by NGOs detail some aspects of the consequences – but mainly present the NGOs' and UNHCR's views.



IOM, 2007/MTT+02T9/Thierry Falisse

They do not look at resettlement from a cultural identity perspective and they do not show the full impact of resettlement on people living in the camps. Despite the fact, for example, that rape and sexual violence are part of the SPDC's strategy and a big problem in the camps, there is little acknowledgement of gender issues in the reports.

Refugees' voices

The KWO and the Karen Refugee Council (KRC) are part of the refugee entity; we are from the camps and we

are refugees. The people in the camps need us to be a voice and to speak out on their behalf. The authorities (donors, UNHCR, supporters) need to talk to the people in the camp and they do that through us. However, when we look at ourselves we are weak because Thailand is not a signatory to the Refugee Convention and has no obligation to support refugees or even accept them. They do not want to jeopardise their relationship with the de facto government in Burma but they do have humanitarian obligations. As a result, we can work and live here but we are kept in hiding. They will seldom permit foreigners into the camps, especially the media. We are always cautioned to be discreet when speaking with foreigners.

We have lived in these camps for 20 years. The conditions are very poor. What has kept people going is hope – and the belief that one day we will return to our homeland, to a peaceful and democratic Burma. We have kept these dreams and have fought to educate our children and maintain a community structure which would sustain them when they return.

The introduction of the resettlement programme is a major challenge to that dream. While the Karen community fully supports the rights of its people to seek safety and security in a third country, this comes at a high cost. It challenges the struggle we have been engaged in for the past 20 years and the meaning of this to so many families. This is causing a deep loss of hope and grief for a homeland that may never be regained.

A Burmese refugee weeps as a relative leaves Mae La camp to start a new life in a third country.

"Our home is not home anymore; our beautiful land is no longer beautiful. This is why we called for resettlement for our young Karen people."
Karen Refugee Activist

Initially people wanted repatriation. This is not possible – but people need a place to belong so we were the first to call for resettlement, especially for the young people who need good education. Education in the camps stops at level ten, which is not enough. We do not worry about the old people. Our concern is the young people; they are our future and they need citizenship and a place to belong where they are treated as human beings. Some young people have been in camp for 20 years.

Resettlement has become a love/hate issue for us. On the one hand it can provide good opportunities, including education. On the other hand, however, our camps need harmony and organisation and skilled people. We don't want to object, because we called for this and it will be good for those resettling, but it has left the community without resources and support and fearful for the future. All the educated and skilled people are being taken. From what we hear, their skills will be of little use to the country they are going to but they are important here. People think that if they have been teachers in the camps they can be teachers in the new country but it does not happen like that. And for those left in the camps it is having a terrible impact on health and education.

We already struggle for our identity and our freedom, and we are losing this even more through all the people who are leaving. Community structures are falling apart because everyone is waiting for resettlement. It is causing a lot of stress and conflict within families. Some family members wish to resettle while others wish to stay. We still need to consider those refugees who remain here. It is the people who can speak out and have capacity who are leaving. Those left are illiterate, simple, hidden people. They will have no voice. Some of us need to stay because we need to help and work for the people here.

Journey to the new country

For those who opt to resettle and are selected, the process of resettlement itself is often traumatic. IOM and the NGOs in the camps do not tell the community the negative aspects of a country or the challenges.

People choose quickly because they are encouraged to put their names down. The process happens very fast and then they find themselves in the third country and many want to come home again.

CBOs report that there is insufficient time allocated and information provided for pre-departure briefing. Only three days' orientation is provided – insufficient for covering all the information needed to facilitate a dignified, positive and stress-free transition to a new life. Many refugees have lived in these camps for much of their lives. They have not been to doctors' surgeries, driven cars, lived in Western-style houses; they do not speak English and know little or nothing about the culture or laws of their destination. If they had more information, they could make better decisions.

Something else that is needed is gender sensitivity from staff and translators. Refugee women report that they have to sit in public waiting rooms and are not given the option to have a female translator or a female doctor for medical check-ups.

As conflict continues in Burma, more refugees are seeking entry to the camps. Fearing that resettlement is becoming a 'pull factor', the Thai government has closed the border with Burma, and UNHCR is not registering new arrivals. Those newly arriving have generally spent long periods in hiding in the jungle before crossing the border. Their health is not good and they are suffering from malnutrition. But they receive no food rations nor health services. There is not enough food in the camps for everybody and this is causing great hardship.

Recommendations

The Karen CBOs and Karen leaders do not wish to stop people resettling to third countries but they do want concerns openly discussed in order to maximise the possibilities for successful resettlement. We recommend that:

- third country governments, UNHCR, IOM and other agencies a) consult with Karen leaders to discuss the whole process of resettlement before implementation and b) plan how best to handle the negative consequences of resettlement
- all information be made available in the Karen language
- resettlement country governments provide information about their country's resettlement policies to the Karen CBOs
- general information about third countries and their social welfare, political and legal systems be provided, in a way that is accessible for rural refugees from extremely isolated situations
- the experiences and circumstances of families already arrived in third countries be reported back to the Karen community in Thailand – including both positive and negative aspects
- the process of resettlement be slowed down so that refugees have more time to make decisions and sufficient time to hand over their work to others and so that the community has time to train replacements
- an in-depth evaluation be conducted of the impact of resettlement on the community remaining and funding be allocated to enable CBOs to provide intensive training for new staff in the community to replace those leaving to resettle.

The Karen Women's Organisation (www.karenwomen.org) is a community-based organisation of Karen women working in development and relief in the refugee camps on the Thai border and with IDPs and women inside Burma. The KWO also encourages awareness of women's rights and promotes women's participation in community decision making and political processes.

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1. www.karenwomen.org

2. www.tbcc.org/resources/2007-6-mth-rpt-jan-jun.pdf