Refugees from Burma

Mona T. Han
Facts about Burma

Location:
Southeastern Asia, bordering the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal

Population: 57 M
Eligible Voters: 27 M

Neighbors:
Bangladesh, India, China, Laos, Thailand
Facts about Burma

**Size:** 676,578 sq km (about the size of Texas)

**Terrain:** Central lowlands surrounded by mountains

**Weather:** Tropical monsoon, cloudy, rainy, hot, humid summers

3 Seasons—
- *Rainy Season:* June – September (80 degrees)
- *Cold Season:* October – January (70–90 degrees)
- *Hot Season:* February – May (95-105+ degrees)
Overview

• Eight main ethnic groups with unique languages

• Anthropologists counted more than 130 distinctive subgroups

• Numerous mountains and hills enforce geographically isolated, linguistically and culturally diverse ethnic groups

• Occupying border regions: Chin, Kachin, Karen, Kayah (Karenni), Mon, Rakhine, and Shan, and Rohingya.
Major Ethnic Groups
(2008 census)

Burman: 68%
Karen: 7%
Chin: 0.9%
Karenni: 0.75%
Kachin: 1.5%
Shan: 9%
Mon: 2%
Rakhine: 3.5%
Others: 7.35%
Ethnic Diversity

Ethnically diverse population due to 3 major migrations from Tibet and Central Asia:

1. **Austro-Asiatic:** Mon, Wa, La, Palaung, Pale, Yao, Riang, Padaung, Yimbaw, Zayein, and others.

2. **Tibeto-Burman:** Burman, Karen, Karenni, Chin, Kachin, Lolo, Rahkine, Kadu, Hpon, Maru, Lashi, Rawang, Azi, Nung, Daru, Yaw, Mro, Inthat, Naga, Gauri, Lisu, Lahu, and others.

3. **Thai-Chinese:** Shan, Taungthu, and others.
Linguistic Diversity?

• 40+ Chin Languages, most, *mutually unintelligible*

• Mizo-Kuki-Chin:
  
  – **Central**: Mizo, Zyphe, Bawm, Hmar, Hakha, Ngawn, Senthang, Tawr, Zotung, Darlong, Pangkhua

  – **Northern**: Falam, Anal, Hrangkhol, Zo, Aimol, Biete, Paite, Siyin, Tiddim, Thado, Chiru, Gangte, Kom, Lamkang, Chothe, Kharam, Monsang, Moyon, Purum, Tarao, Purum, Ralte, Ranglong, Sakachep, Simte, Vaiphei, Yos

  – **Southern**: Shö, Mara, Khumi, Daai, Mro, Mün, Nga La, Welaung
Political Background

• Former British colony for over 100 years; gained independence from Britain in 1948

• In 1962, military leader General Ne Win staged a coup and took power, oppressed the people, the economy crumbled.
  – Large outflow of refugees

• Many revolts and peaceful protests for democracy. 1988 popular uprising--over 200,000 people gathered in the capital city of Rangoon, to peacefully protest for democracy. The government fought back.
  – Many were killed, and more left the country as refugees.
Political Background (cont.)

• In 1990, the military held the first nationwide elections in 26 years. (Another elections planned for 2010.)
• Aung San Suu Kyi and her party—the National League for Democracy, won 82% of the parliamentary seats, but the military never recognized the election results.
• Aung San Suu Kyi has been placed under house arrest for most of the past 2 decades.
• Saffron revolution--In 2007, the government fuel prices, and protests led by Buddhist monks was crushed down.
  — More fled to neighboring countries as refugees.
• State of civil war for much of the past 60 years.
Conflict with Ethnic Groups

- “Divide and Rule” strategy: promoting ethnic and language divisions
- 60% of the land is ethnic states bordering Burma
- Human rights violations against ethnic minorities:
  - Murder
  - Military abuse of women, using rape as a weapon
  - Torture
  - Forced labor: human minesweepers, human shields, road and railway builders
- Many fled to Thailand, Bangladesh, India, and Malaysia to seek asylum or as refugees
Most of the Burmans follow the Buddhist religion and live in Central and lower Burma.

70% of the population speak the Burmese language.

Member of the Tibeto-Burman language family. A tonal and analytic language, and uses the Burmese script.
Karen Ethnic Group

- Both Christian and Buddhist, the Karen live in Eastern and Lower Burma.
- 7% of the population speak the Karen language(s).
- 3 main languages (Sgaw, Pwo, and Pa'o) derived from the Tibeto-Burman language family, and use the Burmese script.
Karenni (Kayah Lii) Ethnic Group

- The name “Karenni” is given by Burmans; meaning Red Karen.
- Less than 1% of the total population in Burma.
- Speak the Kayah languages
- Most are Catholics
Kachin Ethnic Group

- Most Kachins follow the Christian religion.
- No written language until Christian mission came to Kachin territories in 1877; Kachin language uses Roman alphabet.
- **Six tribes**: Jinghpaw, Rhawang, Laowor, La Chik, Lee Su and Azee or Zai War
Chin Ethnic Group

- The name “Chin” is given by Burmans; meaning people of the *Chindwin* river valley.
- Less than 1% of the total population in Burma.
- Speak 25-40+ Tibeto-Burman languages, many of which are mutually unintelligible.
- The Chin writing system uses the Roman alphabet.
Chin Exodus
Chin Refugee Experience

• 20,000 to 25,000 Chin refugees live in Malaysia, mostly young men. (Malaysia has not signed international agreements that protect refugee rights; refugees are considered illegal immigrants.)
• UNHCR in Kuala Lumpur has protection of and assistance to about 1,500 to 2,000 Chin refugees.
• There are an estimated 300 school-age children among the refugees.
Chin Refugee Experience (cont.)

• They are often on the run, taking shelter where they can, finding employment, and often being subjected to detention and deportation.
• Men work as day laborers on construction sites; women as waitresses.
• Suffer harassment and extortion by the police.
• Urban areas: Chins live in extremely crowded conditions, with as many as 40 people sharing a two-bedroom apartment.
• Rural areas: they live in make-shift huts and tents in the jungle.
Detention Center in Malaysia

Undocumented migrants in Malaysia Detention Center
Source: Chin Refugee Committee Malaysia
Chin Refugees in Malaysia

*Chin Refugees set up make-shift huts in the jungle surrounding Kuala Lumpur*  
(Image source: Khonumthung.com)
Burman Refugees

• World’s largest recruiter of child soldiers
• 2100 Political prisoners
• Political refugees from 1988 uprising till Saffron revolution in 2007
• 1988 - Student generation refugees
• 2007 - Monk refugees
• 15-45 year jail term for “Violating the Electronics Act” i.e. owning an “unauthorized” fax machine or communicating with overseas media
• Many flee to neighboring Thailand where Burmans are considered illegal aliens

Source 1. Human Rights Watch
Source 2. Amnesty International
Kachin Refugees

- Human rights abuses
- Lack of freedom of religion or speech or language
- Flee to neighboring Malaysia where they are considered illegal aliens
- Refugees are not distinguished from undocumented migrants.
- Vulnerable to arrest for immigration offences, with subject to detention, prosecution, physical punishment, and deportation.
Rohingya Refugees

- Burmese government does not recognize Rohingya as an official national ethnic group
- 15% of Burma are Muslims; out of 8 million Muslims, 3.5 million Rohingya are Arkanese-Sunni Muslims.
- 1982 citizenship Law, the Burmese regime stripped away Rohingya’ citizenship rights and rendered them stateless.
- Denied citizenship rights and subjected to repeated abuse and forced slave labor by Xenophobic pre-dominantly Buddhist military regime
- Not allowed to travel, marry or practice religion freely
- Conflict with Buddhist Rakhine population
Rohingya Refugee Experience

• Worst living conditions for any refugee camp

• UNHCR in Bangladesh has protection of and assistance to 28,000 Rohingya refugees.

• Huge makeshift camps with little or no basic amenities, including food or water.

• Increasing violence and intimidation in a makeshift camps in Bangladesh

1. Doctors without borders
UNHCR statistical snapshot of vulnerable population from Burma (2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Refugees</th>
<th>Asylum Seekers</th>
<th>Internally Displaced Persons</th>
<th>Stateless Persons</th>
<th>Total Population of Concern</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inside Burma</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>67,290</td>
<td>723,571</td>
<td>790,861</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside Burma</td>
<td>184,412</td>
<td>22,338</td>
<td>67,290</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>274,040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>184,412</td>
<td>22,338</td>
<td>67,290</td>
<td>723,571</td>
<td>1,064,901</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Thai-Burma Border
Refugee Camps (03.2010)

1. Ban Mai Nai Soi (Karenni, Karen, other) (15,058)
2. Ban Mae Surin (Karenni, Karen, other) (3,545)
3. Wieng Hang (Shan) (654)
4. Mae La Oon (Karen, all) (16,165)
5. Mae Ra Ma Luang (Karen) (17,476)
6. Mae La (Karen, all) (39,278)
7. Umpiem Mai (all) (17,784)
8. Nu Po (Karen, all) (15,532)
9. Ban Don Yang (all) (4,394)
10. Tham Hin (all) (8,143)

Total: (138,029)
Source: TBBC (www.tbbc.org)
Wieng Heng (Shan) Refugee Camp
(654 refugees)
Elementary School at Shan Refugee Camp
Kindergarten
### Snapshot of Refugees from Burma resettled in the US

(Source: www.wrapsnet.org)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Refugees from Burma</th>
<th>Total Refugees resettled in the US</th>
<th>Percent of Total Refugees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>28,423</td>
<td>0.71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>1,056</td>
<td>52,873</td>
<td>2.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>1,447</td>
<td>53,813</td>
<td>2.68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>1,612</td>
<td>41,279</td>
<td>3.90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>13,896</td>
<td>48,282</td>
<td>28.78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>18,139</td>
<td>60,191</td>
<td>30.13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>18,202</td>
<td>74,654</td>
<td>24.38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010 (estimated)</td>
<td>16,500</td>
<td>80,000</td>
<td>20.62%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Refugees from Burma**
- **Refugees resettled in the US**

© Coalition for Refugees from Burma. 12/1/2010
Median Age and Gender of Resettled Refugees from Burma

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Refugees Admitted</th>
<th>Median Age</th>
<th>% Females</th>
<th>% Males</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>18,139</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>44.7%</td>
<td>55.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>13,896</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>44.0%</td>
<td>56.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>1,612</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>47.9%</td>
<td>52.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>1,447</td>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>45.1%</td>
<td>54.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Select Age Categories of Refugees from Burma (2008)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Refugee Arrivals in US</th>
<th>Under 5 Yrs</th>
<th>School Age (5-17)</th>
<th>Working Age (18-64)</th>
<th>Retirement Age (=or &gt; 65)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18,139</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
<td>28.3%</td>
<td>62.7%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Refugees from Burma resettled in WA State

Ethnic Distribution (approximate #)

- Karen: 50%
- Chin: 35%
- Karenni: 10%
- Other: 5%
WA State Counties / Cities Resettled

Resettlement by Counties (approximate #)

King/Snohomish County:

1. Kent
2. Seatac/Tukwila/Burien
3. S. Seattle
4. Everett
5. Federal Way
6. Tacoma
Challenges in accessing information and resources

- Lack of English *language skills*
- Not understanding the *systems in place that provide services*
- Inexperience adapting to the *financial, medical and social service systems*
- Lack of *education*, in some cases, many are illiterate in their own native languages and have no exposure to written languages
- Lack of *technology skills* to use computers or the Internet
- Lack of skills for *employment*
Coalition for Refugees from Burma (CRB)

- Mutual Assistance Association (MAA) formed in 2009
- Non-profit 501(C)(3) organization registered in WA
- Helping refugees from Burma since 2006
- Board: 70% former refugees from Burma; Karen, Burman, Karenni, Chin, Kachin, and Burmese Muslims

**Goal**: to provide culturally and linguistically appropriate humanitarian and social support services to improve the living conditions and quality of life of resettled refugees

**Approach**: CRB intentionally reaches across ethnic, religious, and language barriers to provide services

**Focus**: community-based system of training to enhance basic life skills, and crisis resolution skills
CRB Objectives

Newly arrived refugees will have:

– shorter initial resettlement adjustment period by acquiring Life Skills

– culturally and linguistically responsive social services

– increased knowledge of and effective access to available service and support networks

– increased cross-cultural collaboration and relationship between refugees with disparate ethnic backgrounds

– broader integration due to help provided by volunteers from the local community

Vision: Refugees from Burma as successful, contributing members of society
Critical Needs for Refugees

1. Homelessness Prevention:
   - *Emergency Rent Assistance* for those losing benefits
   - *Safe, affordable housing* options

2. Employment/Job Training: For illiterate refugees, Level 1 English language capacity

3. Health care: Basic, Mental Health, Alcohol abuse treatment

4. Support for *Victims of Domestic Violence*

5. Legal help: For those who cannot afford attorneys

6. Youth programs: For after school homework help; summer camps; job training for at-risk youth; suicide and violence prevention

7. Support for *Elders*
CRB Activities 2006-Present
(partial list)

Basic Help:
• House visits for newly arrived refugees
• Clothing & Household goods Drive
• New Shoes and Shirts "Back to School" Project
• Reading Mail for illiterate or limited English refugees
• Fill out DSHS Forms, Low Income Housing Forms

Employment:
• Pre-Employment training, job application, and referral
• Co-op Farming Need Assessment and Informational Meeting
• Information exchange between Hmong Farmers and Burmese refugees interested in farming
CRB Activities (cont.)

Emergency Help:
- Accompany refugees for Medical Emergencies
- Domestic Violence Interventions
- Find Emergency Shelters & providing support for domestic violence victims & families
- Interpret for mental health clients
- Advocate for jailed refugees by mediating between prosecutors and public defenders and appeal for leniency
- Intervene with Child Protective Services when refugee youth are taken away
Health Care:

- Take new refugees to DSHS & Public Health for appointments
- Announced information on Flushot clinic at churches, provided transportation for elderly and youth for 2 day free H1N1 flu shot clinic with Public Health, and filling in consent forms
- Participated in Mental Wellness Helpers workshop for new arrivals
- Referrals for Substance Abuse Issues
**CRB Activities (cont.)**

**Education:**
- Preliterate ESL classes
- Computer Literacy classes using a mobile lab
- Liaise with Federal Way, Kent, Tukwila, Sammamish, and Seattle School Districts
- **Facilitated Parent-Teacher Conferences**
- Scholarship applications for 7th, 8th and 9th graders for College Bound Scholarship offered by Washington State
- World Affairs Council’s Global Youth Leadership training (8<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> graders)
- Summer Multi-media Storytelling Workshops
- **College Preparation Workshops**
CRB College Preparation Workshop
Parents-Teachers Night at Tukwila School District
CRB Activities (cont.)

Partner Workshops with Service Providers:
• Dialog on Domestic Violence with API Women and Family Safety Center
• Mental Health Workshop with ACRS and Lutheran Community Services

Other:
• Provide Burmese Cultural training to agencies and organizations
• Sponsor Refugee Awareness Raising Event - "Burma VJ" screening
• Organize Wing Luke Asian art museum's refugee exhibit
Community Building:

- Senior “lunch-n-learn” program
- Annual Refugee Picnic
- New Year Celebrations
- Refugee Youth Field Trips
- Civic Engagement - Citizenship Swear-in ceremony for refugee youth, and participation in Seattle Mayor McGinn’s Youth and Families Initiative program
- Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Atheist refugees all marching together at the Seeds of Compassion event featuring Dalai Lama
- Finding places of worship & spiritual support for newly arrived refugees: Catholics, Baptists, and Muslims
Senior Lunch-n-Learn
Civic Engagement—Mayor McGinn’s Youth and Families Initiative
Contact

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