

The Irrawaddy Online Edition

Welcome to Texas

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Karen migrants find life in America has its downside

When members of the Thai community in the US are asked to help resettle newly arrived Karen refugees from the Thai-Burmese border, old clichés surface. “Are these people members of the God’s Army?” ask some. Others recall headline-grabbing incidents like the murder of a Thai woman by her Burmese maid.

Many Americans share this prejudiced view of the Karen arrivals, believing they have no idea of civilized bathroom or kitchen hygiene. Some are surprised that the Karen actually wear shoes.



It’s difficult enough for Karen émigrés to cope with the prejudices of their adopted country, but further shocks await them.

“I came to America hoping to study, but ended up cleaning in a hotel six days a week in order to help my family pay the rent,” said Htoo Paw, one of the first Karen refugees to arrive in Austin, Texas, under the US resettlement program. “I’ll have to put my dream of further education to rest for a while.”

Htoo Paw is too old to qualify for free education in the US. He’s 18, one year over the age limit. Further education will now have to wait until he can pay for it. His working hours at the hotel also prevent him from taking advantage of English lessons provided by the resettlement program.

Htoo Paw set off for the US from Tham Hin refugee camp on the Thai-Burmese border last September, together with 30 other Karen refugees. Tham Hin is one of nine refugee camps along Thailand's border with Burma, and it's providing the first batches of Karen for resettlement in the US. Its 9,500 residents are mostly ethnic Karen who fled Burmese army aggression in Karen State.

Until recently, the US Homeland Security Act banned migrants who had contact with armed rebel groups—effectively excluding from resettlement in the US almost all Karen residents of camps along the Thai-Burmese border, because they lived among the Karen National Union rebel movement. But last year, the US government waived the exclusion clause for the Karen, allowing the first groups into the country last August and September.

After approving refugees for admission, the US Department of Homeland Security allocates them to 10 US resettlement agencies. Karen migrants are cared for by the Episcopal Migration Ministries, a nonprofit organization of the Episcopal Church. The EMM, in turn, assigns migrants to its agencies in cities throughout the US.

Austin's Refugee Services of Texas, an EMM affiliate, took 30 Karen last September and is expecting 300 more this year. Refugee Services of Texas greets arriving migrants, provides them with housing, settles them into their new communities and helps them find employment. Modest monetary assistance and food stamps are also provided to help migrants over their first four months in the US.

"I learned last year that America is taking us as refugees, but I had no idea where and how I was going to live," said Ba Zoe, whose mother and sisters had left Tham Hin camp a few months earlier to resettle in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

"I wanted to go to Milwaukee because my mother and my sisters were there, but they just sent me here to Austin," she said. "They sent a car to pick us up from Tham Hin and gave us the airplane ticket. Then, when we arrived, they came to meet us at the airport and took us to the apartment and taught us how to use the heater, air-conditioning and all the electronic devices.

"It was quite difficult at the beginning to express what we wanted. For example, we cannot live on western food. We need shrimp paste and fish sauce as our staple food, but we did not know where we could buy it. Then, one day, a few Thai students who lived here came to visit us. We told them what we wanted, and they took us to an Asian grocery. Life here is not that bad after we got to eat our own food."

But life in the US can still be hard if the newcomers don't speak English. Although Refugee Services of Texas offers English classes, instruction begins at the lowest level and progress is slow. A pregnant woman said she was nervous when the agency told her to call the emergency services number 9-1-1 if she felt the birth coming on during the night or at the weekend—the number means nothing to her.

Refugee Services of Texas found one bilingual translator, but she spoke a Karen dialect scarcely understood by the migrants. A Burmese interpreter was enlisted to help out, but few of the migrants understood Burmese.

The problem was summed up by Ba Zoe: "I don't understand a single word that the Burmese interpreter speaks, but I don't know how to tell the agency because I don't speak English."

Lack of language skills also condemns migrants to accepting menial, low-paid work.

"The agency told us that the financial help will last for the first four months and that we need to get a job as soon as possible in order to be self-sufficient and to pay back the airfare," said Aung Gyi, a

30-year-old Karen.

“The women are told to stay home to take care of the children while their men folk work—as hotel housekeepers, for example. once we get jobs, we are automatically cut off from an opportunity to learn English,” Aung Gyi said. His wife is pregnant and his 2-year-old son has a heart problem. Aung Gyi’s job pays him \$7.50 (9,370 kyat) an hour.

“Life here is certainly better than in the refugee camp,” said Aung Gyi. “We can go anywhere we please, and we have more things to do than wait for food handouts. And there’s no longer that fear of the Thai police if you sneak out of the camp. But living in America is also a struggle. I can only hope for the future of my children.”

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Selected article: *Welcome to Texas*, pages 28-29.

Activities to do Before Reading

Activity 1

Title

This article is called *Welcome to Texas*.
What do you think the article will be about?

Activity 2

Texas

a) Texas is one of the states in the USA. Where is it? Choose the correct location.



b) Here are some statements about Texas. Which ones are true, and which are false?

- i. George W. Bush comes from Texas.
- ii. There are a lot of Mexican immigrants in Texas.
- iii. Texas is the biggest State in the USA.
- iv. Texas produces a lot of oil.
- v. Every adult in Texas owns a car.

c) What do you know about Texas? Do you know of anyone who has gone to Texas?

Activity 3

Predict the answers

You are about to read an article about refugees from Burma who resettle in Texas.
Guess the answers to these questions.

1. Can adults get free education in the US?
2. How many Karen people are resettling to Texas in 2007?
3. Can you get Asian food in Texas?
4. Are English classes available to refugees in Texas?
5. Who pays the airfare for refugees from Thailand to Texas?
6. Is it easy for refugees to get a good job in Texas?

Activities to do During Reading

Activity 4

Check your predictions

Quickly scan the article, and check your answers to Activity 3.

Activity 5

Match the vocabulary

a) Go through the article and underline the words you don't understand.

b) Match these words with their definitions.

- | | |
|---------------------|---|
| 1. cliché | a. anger, leading to violence |
| 2. incident | b. to distribute |
| 3. prejudice | c. boring work that uses physical rather than mental skills |
| 4. civilized | d. to not allow someone to participate |
| 5. aggression | e. to do something secretly |
| 6. exclude | f. an organisation that does not make money |
| 7. waive | g. surviving independently, not needing outside help |
| 8. allocate | h. a phrase that people use too often |
| 9. non-profit | i. summarise |
| 10. menial | j. something happening, an event |
| 11. sum up | k. opinions about people based on their ethnicity/religion |
| 12. self-sufficient | l. polite, can live in polite society |
| 13. sneak | m. to allow someone to participate without necessary qualities or qualifications. |

c) Fill the gaps with words from exercise b.

1. Most NGOs are _____ organizations.
2. Because the student was very bright, the school _____d the need for her to sit the examination.
3. He didn't get the job because of _____ against Hindu people. The company wanted to _____ Hindus from the company.
4. My cleaning job is very _____ - I want to work in an office, but I haven't found a position yet.
5. I will _____ the situation for you: The _____ happened last night at 10pm. Two groups of drunk youths started a fight outside a teashop. Luckily, nobody was seriously hurt, but we don't like _____ in our community. We like people to behave like _____ humans.
6. Because nobody is allowed to leave the camp, we have to _____ out over the mountains.
7. We grow our own vegetables – we are trying to be as _____ as possible.
8. Most love songs are _____s – they just say the same things again and again.
9. The school _____s one exercise book and two pens per student.

Activity 6**Phrases in context**

Choose the word or phrase that means the same as the underlined phrase from the article.

1. Others recall headline-grabbing incidents like the murder of a Thai woman by her Burmese maid. (paragraph 1)

- a. very popular media story
- b. prejudiced against Burmese people
- c. stealing newspapers
- d. very dangerous

2. It's difficult enough for Karen émigrés to cope with the prejudices of their adopted country... (paragraph 3)

- a. to understand
- b. to deal with
- c. to dislike
- d. to be unhappy about

3. ... working hours at the hotel also prevent him from taking advantage of English lessons provided by the resettlement program.. (paragraph 5)

- a. stealing from
- b. identifying good things about
- c. using for his benefit
- d. avoiding

4. Modest monetary assistance and food stamps are also provided to help migrants over their first few months on the US. (paragraph 9)

- a. Bank loans
- b. Scholarships
- c. A lot of money
- d. A small amount of money

5. ...but she spoke a Karen dialect scarcely understood by the migrants. (paragraph 14)

- a. difficult to understand
- b. easy to understand
- c. from a different region
- d. in a strange accent

6. ...once we get jobs, we are automatically cut off from an opportunity to learn English. (paragraph 18)

- a. provided with
- b. recommended to
- c. sliced up
- d. separated from

Activity 7

Comprehension

a) Answer these questions. Write a short answer.

1. Once refugees have been approved for resettlement to the US, who decides where in the US they will live?
2. How many Karen people are moving to Texas in 2007?
3. Who helped Ba Zoe's family find Asian food?
4. What do you do in the US if you have a medical emergency?
5. Why did the migrants have difficulty understanding the Karen translator?
6. How long do refugees get financial help for?

b) Answer these questions. Write two or three sentences.

1. What prejudices do some Thai people in Texas have about Karen people? Why do they have these prejudices?
2. Why is it difficult for Htoo Paw to study?
3. What was Ba Zoe's communication problem?
4. What are Aung Gyi's main problems?
5. What does Aung Gyi see as the benefits of living in Texas?

Activity 8

The US Homeland Security Act

a) Look at paragraph 7. What is the US Homeland Security Act?

b) Here is an explanation of the US Homeland Security Act, and its consequences for refugee resettlement from the Burma border. Join the sentence halves.

1. The Homeland Security Act bans migrants with
2. This 'exclusion clause' applied to
3. This was most people
4. Last year, the US waived
5. This is because

...this law for Karen and other refugees from Burma
...people from Burma who lived amongst KNU, KNPP and other ethnic
resistance groups.
...who were applying for resettlement.
...contacts with armed rebel groups.
...they do not consider the KNU or KNPP to be a threat to US security.

Activities to do After Reading

Activity 9

Resettlement – Advantages and disadvantages

In groups, think about the advantages and disadvantages of resettlement, to both the individual and family who are resettling, and for the community here. Complete this table, and present your ideas to the class.

	Advantages	Disadvantages
Individual/family		
Community		

Activity 10

Presentation - Problems and solutions

There are many problems around the issue of resettlement. Choose one of these problems, and in groups brainstorm possible solutions to it. Here are some suggestions for problems to focus on – you may like to think of a different one. Present your ideas to the class.

Some suggested problems to focus on:

- *There is not enough accurate information about life and conditions for refugees in third countries. People don't know what they are going to.*
- *Only some people have access to resettlement process. Many groups, such as the Shan, are not eligible for resettlement.*
- *It is hard for resettled people to study.*
- *Many educated people are resettling, so there is a shortage of educated people left in their communities.*
- *Resettled people lose contact with their communities back on the border.*