

# Burmese refugees join melting pot of Kiwi life

**More than 200,000 Burmese people are living in refugee camps on the Thai border. ANNA BURNS-FRANCIS, CHLOE DE RIDDER and TESS WOOLCOCK look at the lives of the ones who made it to NZ.**



NEW LIFE: Burmese refugees outside the Beachhaven Community Hall.

While New Zealand is a utopia to many people, for some it's a life-saver. To live in a country bordered by golden white beaches and surrounded by bountiful oceans, is something many refugees can only dream of.

The combined efforts of the United Nations, our Government and independent refugee services ensure that life in New Zealand becomes a reality for hundreds of refugees every year.

Diversity and acceptance of non-indigenous people have always been part of New Zealand's short history, and a key influence on who we are.

We are a multi-cultural nation, represented by a melting pot of ethnic groups who originated from as far away as Europe and as close as the Pacific Islands.

Between 1980 and 2002, more than 16,000 refugees and displaced persons were resettled in New Zealand under the Refugee Quota Programme.

This programme is run by the Department of Labour, and works to settle people living in refugee camps into permanent residency. By the time refugees reach New Zealand, they have often spent many years living outside their homeland in refugee camps.

Burma, also known as Myanmar, is one of the top five sources for quota refugees coming into this country.

There are currently 211,404 Burmese living in refugee camps in Thailand alone. The first group of Burmese refugees came to New Zealand in 2000.

With a population of approximately 50 million people, Burma is bordered by China, Thailand, Laos, Bangladesh and India, as well as the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea.

Human rights are virtually non-existent in the military-run state. Aid groups report human trafficking, torture and extra-judicial killings of civilians.

The reasons behind refugee placement are complex. Burmese people in particular require special consideration. Burma's seven states mean that people living within the different areas are often thought of as distinct ethnic groups.

This is coupled with the fact that although the dominant language is recognised as Burmese, often smaller minority groups such as Mon or Rakhine have their own dialects.

One refugee who was among the first quota to New Zealand was Aung Htay Nyan. He arrived with his family on July

11, 2000 and is of Karen ethnicity.

The Karen people are the third largest group in Burma, comprising 7 per cent of the population. However, they are still considered a minority in comparison to the majority Burmese group, who account for 68 per cent.

Nyan works part-time as an interpreter for the Auckland District Health Board and the Refugees as Survivors organisation. He has previously run interpreting courses at AUT University and is the current president for the United Democratic Burmese Community in New Zealand.

Nyan, who was editor of the Karen historical journal in Burma, says he likes living in New Zealand. "Everything is much different from our previous situation. Everything is good."

He says the main challenge when first arriving in New Zealand was learning English. "Learning the language was hard. It is still difficult for us even today."

But Nyan enjoys reading the newspaper in his spare time to "help learn English better".

He originally settled with his wife and five children in Beachhaven, but for the past five years has lived in Birkenhead. He says his family were provided with a lot of support when they arrived in New Zealand.

"We had Work and Income, they helped us with housing and the refugee services provided a lot of support."

He says the education system has been excellent for his children. "It was hard for them to catch up when compared with their previous situation but they are doing well and trying hard."

Nyan now helps new refugees from Burma settle into the New Zealand way of life. He says they have a strong community on Auckland's North Shore and meet up for religious ceremonies and for their children's soccer. "There are always new arrivals and it is important to help these new families and build our community."

In Auckland there are a number of services available to refugees, some government funded, and other non-governmental organisations such as the Friends of Refugees Trust. They are a group of volunteers, founded in 2001, who primarily work with Karen refugees from Burma on the North Shore.

Pamela Skelton is the chair of the trust and for the past six years has worked as a support person for Burmese refugees.

She says her work supports refugees by getting them involved in the community,

taking them shopping, going to the doctor and "just being a friend."

The Friends of Refugees Trust has a meeting every month and also has refugee representatives on the committee, such as Nyant Yi Thauang, who is also president of the New Zealand Karen Association.

Another volunteer active in supporting Burmese refugees in New Zealand is Fiona Thompson who founded the Burma Support Group in 1995, and for the past 11 years has been putting out a newsletter on Burmese issues.

Her son has worked with non-governmental organisations on the Thai-Burmese border for the past 17 years.

"Human rights in Burma are appalling," Thompson says.

"Humanitarian aid is just not on the agenda."

Children are often recruited as soldiers for the military, who then "confiscate" livestock and personal possessions from villagers in rural areas.

Like Skelton, Thompson gets involved in a lot of Burmese activities and says she is there to act "as a backstop". "Being Grandma or Mum [to the refugees] gives me the opportunity to say 'You're doing this wrong'. I feel privileged to say 'listen'"

Among the main challenges facing the Burmese community in New Zealand is finding areas that are going to welcome new immigrants. Traditionally, Burmese refugees have settled in Auckland.

Antoinette Tanguay, national refugee settlement coordinator for the Department of Labour, says historically more than half of the refugees who arrive in New Zealand under the quota programme are resettled in Auckland. She says this is becoming increasingly difficult due to limited housing.

Thompson says that putting all the Karen refugees on the North Shore, mainly in Beachhaven and Northcote, was a mistake. "It just accentuated divisions in the community."

The trick, says Tanguay, is to find a balance where new refugees still have support networks they will use, while opening up new communities as well.

Another issue can be employment for refugees, whose grasp of the English language is often limited. Skelton says that businesses need to be more open to taking refugees on. "How do they get experience if they're not given a chance?"

Thompson agrees that finding jobs can be a problem. However, both she and Skelton say younger Burmese who start school here find it much easier to adapt.

One such young woman is 21-year-old Tinmama Oo. She came to New Zealand in 2000 with her parents as a refugee and is currently in her third year at the University of Auckland studying politics.

Oo, the president of the University branch of the New Zealand Burma Support Group, says she found it easier to adapt to New Zealand than her parents. "I learnt English a lot easier and was at school, so [I was] mixing with people my own age."

Skelton says it is harder for parents and other older refugees who do not assimilate so easily into New Zealand life.

"Parents have the biggest problem due to their English; however most of them are able to speak good English now," she says.

Thompson says cultural differences can be a hurdle, but compulsory six-week attendance at the Mangere Accommodation Centre is effective.

The programme teaches refugees English and functions as an orientation. "Our six weeks is one of the better programmes."

Tanguay says she wishes the programme was longer.

"There is so much information to fit in. Some of the refugees who come from rural village based societies will have never used an electrical appliance."

Skelton says that services available to Burmese and other refugees have become more readily available over the past five years.

Thompson agrees, saying that refugees are now beginning to recognise services are available and take advantage of them.

Living in New Zealand is a completely different experience to their previous lives. "They've never had any money before."

"We are so fortunate here", says Thompson. "[Someone] once said to me, 'It's fantastic to be able to walk around without looking over my shoulder.'"

She says the refugees she has looked after have taken her out for dinner, and one Burmese man comes and fixes her computer regularly.

When asked about her volunteer services Thompson says she doesn't see it as a job. "It sometimes feels like hitting your head against a brick wall. But it is rewarding, and I can't call it work at all."

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