

Karenni Refugees in Mae Hong Son, Thailand
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Overview

Cultural Orientation for the U.S.-bound Karenni refugees in Baan Mai Nai Soi camp, in northwestern Thailand's Mae Hong Son province, has to date been provided by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) South-East Asia Cultural Orientation team. Departures for the U.S. began in early 2009, and as of mid-April some 547 people have been resettled in the U.S. An estimated 7,000 Karenni are in the process to travel to the U.S. before the end of September 2009 (US fiscal year).

The IOM CO Coordinator in Thailand is a cultural orientation expert with many years' experience in several locations worldwide. The 10+ trainers on the team are mostly Thai nationals with several years of experience conducting CO classes with the Karen. Some of the trainers are Karen with Thai nationality, and two of the trainers are Karen with Burmese nationality, who are fluent in both the Burmese and S'gaw Karen languages.

History of the Caseload

The Karenni population in Thailand is comprised of some 20,000 people living in two camps in remote northwestern Thailand, in the province of Mae Hong Son. Although in many ways similar to their Karen cousins living to the south, the Karenni have their own culture, languages, and history. (For more information on these topics, see pages 41-47 of the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) publication, *Refugees from Burma*, at <http://www.cal.org/co/publications/profiles.html>).

Camps for displaced Karenni people have been established in various locations on both sides of the Thai/Burmese border since 1989. Several camps were consolidated into the camp at the current location in 1996. This camp, called Baan Mai Nai Soi (pronounced "bahn my ny soy") or often referred to as "Site 1," with a population of approximately 20,000, is located about 26 kilometers from Mae Hong Son town. Another much smaller and much more remote camp with a population of 4,000 or so is located some distance to the south, and is called Baan Mae Surin, or "Site 2."

Camp Environment

Baan Mai Nai Soi camp (Site 1) is rather isolated, being a one-hour drive along paved and unpaved roads from Mae Hong Son town in the dry season. The camp is located only one kilometer from the Burmese border, and was attacked by the Burmese army a number of times in the late 1990s. The camp is built in a very hilly region, with very few flat areas large enough for even a soccer field.

The camp is divided into twenty sections, each with its own local flavor deriving from religion (which may be Catholic, Adventist, Baptist, animist, etc.), ethnicity (there are about 10 distinct ethnic groups within the camp), or even location of the original home village, as each village may have its own distinctive dialect and residents tend to gather in language-based groups.

The camp is much like other Thai camps described in CAL's *Refugees from Burma*. It is run by an elected Camp Committee and twenty section leaders, with the support of the Karenni Refugee Committee (KnRC). Various NGOs provide health, educational, food and infrastructure services. There are no Muslims (traditionally the business class) in the camp, so the availability of outside goods is minimal.

Refugees are not allowed out of the camp. In the past, this regulation was not strictly enforced, with the result that some of the more educated refugees managed to work outside the camp, earn enough money to buy TVs and motorcycles, and get some experience of life beyond the borders of the camp. In recent years, however, the rule prohibiting leaving camp has been more heavily enforced, and, except for those few refugees who work for NGOs, refugees generally have little contact with the outside world. Some people have radios and mobile phones, although phone reception is limited.

Some 94% of the camp population is Karenni (85% Kayah), with minorities of Karen, Burman, Shan, Bwe, Manaw, and Pa-O, amongst others.

Baan Mae Surin camp (Site 2) is even more difficult to reach, entailing a two-hour-plus spine-jolting ride from the district town along a jungle road and fording a river about a dozen times to reach the main part of the camp. The camp was established along the Mae Surin river in 1991, and after several consolidations with other camps over the next decade, the population has risen to over 4,000. Although it is located only three kilometers from the Burmese border, the camp has never been attacked.

The ethnic make-up of Baan Mae Surin differs from that of Baan Mai Nai Soi in that only some 40% of the camp is Karenni; 30% is Karen, and the remaining 30% is comprised of several other ethnic groups. The "flavor" of the camp is quite different from many of the other camps in Thailand since its isolation gives the camp much more of the feel of a traditional jungle village, with the riverside location lending to an idyllic appearance.

CO Classes: Structure and Content

CO classes are taught in five classrooms located within Baan Mai Nai Soi camp. Western-style toilets were built next to the classrooms to prepare CO participants for the change from the more traditional Asian squat toilets in use throughout the camp. Class sizes usually range from 20 to 25 participants, and run for five hours a day for three to five days, depending on the departure scheduling. The training style is based on an interactive, experiential method of instruction: the participants are encouraged to learn not only the important facts of resettlement, but also to develop the skills and attitudes which help to make for a successful resettlement experience. Self-study materials and picture-based materials for pre-literate refugees are employed to help

participants develop the notion that learning about their upcoming resettlement is their own responsibility, and that an attitude of pro-activity will be essential to their own resettlement.

The curriculum and training methodology are continually being developed and refined. All essential topics in CAL's *Welcome to the United States* guidebook are covered. However, the Karenni have had little exposure to the "outside" world and few opportunities for education. In particular for this ethnic group, new materials for teaching CO to pre-literate peoples are being developed. Learning takes place at a slow pace, and it may take several days for a trainer to bring a Karenni class up to the same levels of participation and interaction that a different class might have after only a few hours.

Hopes, Fears, and Questions

In general, the Karenni refugees from Site 1 are facing resettlement to the United States with a great deal of fear and trepidation. They have heard from previously resettled refugees, or from the camp rumor mill, how difficult it can be to make the adjustment to life in the U.S., particularly for those who have no English skills. Many see their lack of education and English ability as insurmountable obstacles to getting a job, and view the future with some degree of despair. The fact that they have applied for resettlement at all given these concerns is an indication of how poor they feel their current living conditions are. There is a high expectation that the U.S. government, having accepted them for resettlement, will also accept the responsibility for taking care of them for some time after resettlement.

CO trainers have reported that some class participants have shown a high level of apathy towards learning about what to expect upon resettlement, only showing interest in the matter of what they are, and are not, allowed to bring with them to America. When told that there are some items that cannot be brought (herbal medicines, etc.), some have expressed the attitude that, "If I can't take my ____, then I won't go!"

As is the case for many refugee caseloads, the hope of many of the Karenni is that their children will be the ones who learn to adapt and become successful in the new culture. Few refugees over 40 years old have any expectations that they themselves will be able to make the adjustment. However, the younger generation, who have learned to speak, read, and write Burmese in school, have a more optimistic view of the possibilities that resettlement may hold, and express interest in their educational opportunities in America.

Strengths and Challenges

The Karenni are survivors. That they have managed to keep their communities and culture relatively intact after decades of repression and persecution from the regime in Burma is a testament to their tenacity and determination. And this persistence in the face of enormous odds will serve them well when faced with the overwhelming changes that resettlement to the United States will bring.

However, the flipside of this tenacity is a reluctance or self-perceived inability to adapt to the changing realities of the modern world, and this will make resettlement to the United States a huge challenge for many of the Karenni. The younger generation in general has learned to read

and speak Burmese, and has attended some school, and is thus better equipped to deal with the very concepts of learning and adaptation. However people of the older generation, identified as those above 40, often only speak Karenni or a dialect thereof, and are unable to read and write in even that language.

Major challenges that can be identified at this stage include:

Illiteracy / Pre-literacy: As literacy is one of the major indicators of successful resettlement, this is going to be a significant challenge for the Karenni. Their own language has only been in written form for several decades, and the number of Karenni who can read their own language is relatively low. Many of the younger people are able to read Burmese, having learned it in school. Few are able to speak, read, or write in English.

Lack of confidence: CO trainers report that many of their class participants, upon learning of the challenges they will face in the US, focus on their lack of education and English ability and come to the conclusion that adapting to life in America is beyond them. This lack of confidence is reflected in the difficulty in getting CO participants to make eye contact with the trainer and each other, despite in-class activities that encourage this. Participants are also very reluctant to volunteer answers to questions in class unless they are 100% sure that they are correct beforehand; this has been seen in the youth and children as well as with the adults.

Passivity of “older” people: The feeling that resettlement may be “beyond them” applies largely to refugees over 40 years old. In addition, older people often do not seem to feel that they belong to the class, and do not even want to join the others to stand in a circle for a class activity. This group of non-active participants could include up to half of the students.

Apathy: Although life is difficult in the refugee camps, it is relatively safe compared to life on the other side of the border. For many refugees, it may be the best living situation that they have ever had. Food, shelter, and medical services have been provided cost-free for many years now. This has led many to the assumption that life will continue in the same way once they reach America, and that all of their necessities will be provided for them by the government. When told that they will be expected to get jobs to pay for housing and other basic necessities, many are shocked, and develop an apathetic attitude towards resettlement.

Considerations for Domestic Service Providers

Helping the Karenni adapt to their new surroundings in America is going to be a very time-consuming exercise. Refugees are going to need intensive survival English training.

Incorporating confidence-building activities and exercises into any domestic cultural orientation / adaption program will be of great benefit to the Karenni. The CO sessions they attend in Thailand attempt to instill these attitudes of self-confidence and pro-activity, but there is only so much that can be done in a three- to five-day class.

Ask Karenni refugees if they have brought their “Life Books” from CO class with them, and if they would be willing to share them with you. These notebooks are psycho-social tools used in

class to encourage refugees to reflect on their resettlement experience, beginning from life in the camp and continuing, if the refugee finds it useful, to their thoughts and feelings about their experience post-resettlement, as well.

Modern technology will be unfamiliar to many, and particularly the older generation. Items as common as doorknobs, sit-down toilets, common hygiene products, and everyday household appliances will be completely new and baffling. Service providers are going to need to be very patient.