

Refugees from Bhutan

Cultural Orientation for the U.S.-bound Bhutanese refugees in Nepal is provided by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Departures for the U.S. began in early 2008 and as of September 2012, more than 45,000 refugees have received pre-departure orientation training from one of several CO locations surrounding Damak, Nepal.

The IOM CO Coordinator in Nepal has a Master's Degree in Immigration and Settlement Studies, several years' experience in pre-departure cultural orientation as well as with resettlement agencies within Canada. All twelve CO trainers are Nepali nationals, who have travelled and/or studied abroad, and eight have undergraduate degrees (three from educational institutions in the United States) and four have Masters Degrees.

History of the Caseload

The Bhutanese refugee population was originally composed of some 108,000 people living in seven camps in Eastern Nepal, near the town of Damak. Due to an active resettlement program, the population has been considerably reduced and there are currently 41,000 living in four remaining camps (the three Eastern camps of Khundhunabari, Timai and Goldhap have closed and populations have been located to the other camps). The caseload is ethnic Nepalis, the group is known in Bhutan as "Lhotsampas." They speak Nepali, have their own customs and dress different from those of the ethnic Bhutanese, and generally practice Hinduism (60%), Buddhism (30%), Kirat (an indigenous religion), or Christianity.

The group has an unusual history of refugee persecution. Rather than experiencing a war or conflict in the traditional sense, they were stripped of their citizenship by the Bhutanese government, suffering cultural discrimination, marginalization, harassment, and denial of basic services, including access to education, jobs, and healthcare. Some Lhotsampas were also detained, tortured, or compelled to sign documents stating that they would leave the country. As a consequence, refugees flowed out of Bhutan, through India, and into Nepal in 1991. Over 40,000 of the original refugee population were children, so a substantial proportion of the refugees have lived in the camps their entire lives. Many refugees have shown interest in resettlement since the inception of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program in late 2007 and close to 62,000 have departed by October 2012. Some refugees had been vehemently opposed to resettlement, particularly in the early years, in the unsuccessful hope of return to Bhutan. For many,

however, these sentiments have changed as the result of the resettlement process and increased knowledge of the US.

For more information on the population, please see the Center for Applied Linguistics' Refugee Backgrounder, *Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal* (at http://www.culturalorientation.net/content/download/1332/7801/version/2/file/backgrounder_bhutanese.pdf).

Environment in Exile

The refugees are strongly involved in the functioning of the camps, and receive excellent services through various international organizations, as well as World Food Programme food baskets containing rice, pulses (lentils and beans), vegetable oil, seasonal vegetables, sugar, salt, and a wheat/corn/soya blend. Accommodations consist of 12' x 20' bamboo huts that house 6 to 7 people on average. Toilets and showers are shared by two huts, while the wait for tap water runs between 30 to 60 minutes. Education is fully funded by the UNHCR through 8th grade and by Caritas for 9th and 10th grades, while partial funding is available for 11th and 12th grades. Basic medical care is also available. In addition, Caritas runs service centers for disabled refugees in all camps, serving refugees through physical therapy, skills training, and sign language classes.

Refugees tend to be employed as teachers, small shop owners, restaurant workers, or manual laborers in town. Employment is helpful in terms of attaining additional income for clothes, shoes, meat, fish, butter, spices, soap, matches, bangles, and items used in marriages and funerals. The unofficial nature of many jobs, however, can lead to the exploitation of refugees.

CO Classes: Structure and Content

To participate in CO classes, refugees travel to one of two facilities located near the Beldangi camps (3) or the Sanischare camp. Ideal class size is 20-25 students, and classes run approximately five hours a day for five days (*25 hours total*), using a very interactive instructional style to encourage active participation and engage refugees in the learning process. CO trainers are tasked with facilitating learning (developing knowledge, skills and attitudes rather than simply imparting information to participants) as well as providing an inclusive and respectful environment where refugees may express themselves and seek answers to their questions.

The curriculum is based on standard curricula used by IOM CO programs elsewhere, and all essential topics in the Welcome Guide are covered. Yet the curriculum is also a living document and continues to be adapted based on feedback from the United States.

In response to reports of mental health concerns among the Bhutanese resettled in the United States, the CO program has developed a variety of lesson plans and activities that encourage refugees to consider how various situations might affect them after they arrive in the US. These include various exercises about culture shock, changing family/ gender roles, and intergeneration conflict. A video was

also produced in-house by the CO team, to help refugees understand and identify symptoms of culture shock and to empower them to ask for help.

Shortly before departure, refugees receive an additional two-hour pre-departure orientation course at the IOM Transit Center in Kathmandu, to reinforce information given about travel and reduce anxiety regarding the flight. Participants review and practice finding seats on the plane, the use of airplane toilets, general information about airports, etc.

Optional supplementary classes are also provided at the Transit Center in Kathmandu for refugees to participate in as they await their international travel. The classes were selected and designed on the basis of interests demonstrated by the departing refugees, and allow the program to address in more detail topics that may not have been able to be fully explored within the limited amount of time in the CO session beforehand.

Hopes, Fears, and Questions

Among the hopes expressed by the Bhutanese refugees in CO class are access to better education and health care, a brighter future for their children, to no longer be called refugees, to be able to get a job and be paid for work like other Americans, and to have their basic human rights acknowledged and respected. Fears mentioned include losing their culture and language, living far from friends and family, not being able to afford to visit family and friends resettled in other locations, not living near a Hindu temple, not being allowed to practice their religion and culture, threats to their daughters' security (crime, harassment), struggling with language and jobs, difficulty repaying the travel loan, losing their farming lifestyle, and never returning to Bhutan.

Refugees continue to be eager to know what type of jobs they will be able to secure, information about likely wages and hours, and whether their certifications will be taken into account for employment or additional education. Class participants also frequently ask about the cost of housing, the cost of healthcare after their period of Refugee Medical Assistance ends, and the availability and cost of medical insurance, especially for the elderly. Other questions involve flexibility regarding repayment of the travel loan, and the ability to conduct Hindu funeral rituals and cremations.

Strengths and Challenges

The CO team has identified a number of strengths that the Bhutanese refugees will bring to their resettlement. First, they note that the refugees have exercised a strong voice in the process. The group adheres to a democratic system and recognizes the role of women. In addition, they have benefited from good health and education services in the camps, access to vocational training, and, among the younger population, exposure to computers. Indeed, there are many recognized leaders in the camps with higher education and job skills. In addition, the group is oriented towards community and family. Challenges for the group, however, will include an almost 20 year dependency on aid organizations; a lack of English language skills, particularly among women and members of the older generation; various

health and ability challenges, as well as anxiety regarding being separated from the community in Nepal as well as being resettled apart from their family US who may have been resettled earlier.

Considerations for Domestic Service Providers

The Bhutanese are strongly attached to community and family. Cases are generally small, but there is a large population of elderly and of single adult cases to consider when planning for resettlement and other services. In addition, while the group includes many English speakers, especially teachers, there are also many Bhutanese who do not have English language skills. It is very important to the Bhutanese to have access to Hindu temples and shops selling South Asian foods and goods, especially those used in weddings and funerals (*thika*).

Domestic service providers should also be aware of the caste system practiced by the Bhutanese (see CAL's [Supplement to Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal](#) at <http://www.culturalorientation.net/content/download/1372/7974/version/1/file/Backgrounder%2C+Bhutanese+Refugees+Supplement.pdf>), and the common practice of arranged marriages, often at the age of 18 or so.

In addition, all Western appliances will be new to the refugees, including Western toilets. Children go to the bathroom outside or on the side of the road. Refugees are introduced to Western toilets and toilet paper in CO class, and while hygiene products are familiar to the refugees, they will need additional guidance with their use.