



Observations of Karen Resettled in USA

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These notes are based on a trip I made in April 2008 visiting resettled Karen, resettlement agencies and church groups to better understand the process and problems of resettlement in the USA. I travelled with Duane Binkley, a Missionary with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship who was a TBBC Board member for several years. His purpose was also to encourage Baptist Churches to become more involved in supporting the Karen. Nearly all of the discussions with the refugees were conducted in the Karen language with Duane acting as translator, although occasionally some refugees spoke in Thai. We started off by visiting the American Baptist Headquarters in Valley Forge and also attended a dinner celebrating the 150th anniversary of the first Burmese student to attend Bucknell University.

We made a good sweep of the United States but I am conscious that we visited only a tiny proportion of the hundreds of resettlement sites and only small numbers of the many thousands of Karen already resettled. Any observations/ conclusions risk being biased, but there were so many recurring themes that I felt these were worth recording.

Itinerary: (New York) - Philadelphia –Lancaster – Pittsburgh - Bucknell University - Akron- Dallas - Fort Worth – Denver – (Detroit)

The Bottom Line: Refugees are fully supported by Resettlement Agencies funded by the US government for the first 3 months in the USA. They receive cash, are helped to find houses and jobs as well as get their children in school and access the health services. They receive ongoing support such as ESL for another 5 months but are then supposed to be on their own, although many agencies say they try to help if they can for up to 5 years. One said, for example, that if someone needs help applying for welfare after 8 months, they will make the appointment but not take them.

Survival depends firstly on getting a job then whether the job pays enough to cover the bills. The equation is tight. Almost all refugees enter the job market at bottom end wages around \$7 to \$8 an hour, seemingly regardless of city ... mostly factory jobs, hotels, hospitals etc.. Typical rents are \$600/ month (2 bedrooms); typical wages \$ 1,200 a month. Allow \$400 for food for a family of four, \$ 50 for utilities, \$50 for bus fares, \$100 repayment for the airfare for a family of 4 and there is very little to spare. Rents vary from place to place so the survival equation balance depends very much on location. Some people get paid a little more than this but some pay even higher rents. Even in the best of circumstances, it was difficult to do much better than break even with only one family member working, but mostly two family members need to be working to survive without welfare.

Employment: This was the number one concern. Getting work is the key to survival. The Karen refugees work hard and seem to be grateful for any job. This makes them popular with the resettlement agencies and the employers. "The Karen are great ... they don't turn jobs down" said one Agency. "The Karen are the best workers we have ever had" said a farmer.

But there are many problems, the biggest being job security. Many jobs are part-time or seasonal, particularly the hotel business. Workers at the bottom are easy to replace, therefore easy to dismiss. The Karen are not used to working rigid hours and many complained that their jobs ran their lives. Missing work without calling in is a serious offense in the USA and can result in dismissal. Many refugees fall foul of this when they miss work due to appointments or sickness, either not understanding the need to report, or without the language/ confidence to do so. If this happens early after arrival it can be disastrous. The agencies are generally too busy to keep finding jobs after the first one, and language barriers make job hunting difficult. Some complained that job application procedures were complicated.

We had some reports of discrimination. It generally seems to be more difficult for women to get jobs, which makes it difficult for most families to have more than one wage-earner. We also heard of one case of

refugees being laid off in favour of Hispanics. It seems that Spanish rather than English would be more useful in some areas.

Another major problem can be transportation. Unless the housing is close to the job, travelling to work can be very time-consuming and expensive, even by bus.

Talking about farm work conjures up dreams of rural Karen happily tilling the fields and planting rice and beans, but of course farming in the USA has "moved on". Farm jobs we heard about involved picking up thousands of eggs every day in a battery farm or sorting vegetables or fruit on conveyor belts, jobs similar to the factories and at the same base wage rates although farm accommodation and environment might be more 'familiar'. Many US farmers need cheap migrant workers to replace the Mexicans who are being forced out.

Like all bottom-end jobs, benefits seemed to be variable and unpredictable. Some had insurance and health care, others didn't.

From the Thailand end we are concerned that we are losing a disproportionate number of the most skilled refugees such as the teachers and health workers. Whilst some of these are clearly community leaders in the USA there doesn't seem to be much awareness or conscious attempt to use their skills. Their work in their communities is either completely voluntary or at bottom pay rates and I suspect most of the teachers and health workers are also working in factory jobs etc just like the others. If true this seems an awful waste of potential.

Another relevant question which would be interesting to research would be how useful current vocational training activities in the camps are for getting jobs in another country. I wouldn't want to draw any conclusions from just one comment but one refugee did say "It wasn't much use. It mostly went in one ear and out the other". It seems much more could be done to prepare refugees for their new lives ... and to better utilise those with potential ... of course, if there was the time and resources to do so!

Actually in Thailand the conclusion is that VT is not really possible to help people leaving for resettlement ... unless it could be provided separately to those actually departing. VT in camp is more appropriate for those staying in Thailand or possibly returning to Burma.

Housing: The housing we saw was OK ... better than I would have expected. They were all very sparsely furnished ... the resettlement agencies have a basic list of essentials they have to provide such as sofa, dining table, chairs etc. But we heard no complaints on this score since it probably compared very favourably with the average refugee camp house and furnishings ... although one refugee wistfully compared his home with the one back in camp "I can't take care of myself here. In the camp I could fix everything in my house myself". Most of the families we visited had been there less than a year and had not added anything except a few photos ... or maybe a Karen flag taped to the wall.

The refugees we met tended to be pretty philosophical about the weather and were not complaining about wearing their woolly hats to combat the cold. We did hear some sorry stories though about refugees not knowing how to live in a western house and of rather limited orientation given on arrival. Duane had a lovely story of one refugee who had been given a TV (not on the standard list) but complained that he couldn't get it to work. He'd tried turning it on and off and moving it around, but although the light came on, he couldn't get a picture. It turned out to be a microwave oven!

Most agencies group the refugees together if they can in the same apartment blocks or housing estates, maybe in 4 or 5 areas of the city. Accessibility varies. Public transportation in USA is generally not great and in some places almost non-existent. This is another crucial factor in the survival equation. In one place the refugees had to travel for an hour by bus, \$4 each way to get to their ESL lessons ... a huge disincentive.

Education: Schooling was never raised as a problem. This seems to work well. Education is free through high school (up to 25 years old). Government schools are obliged to accept the refugee kids and seem to have the capacity to do so. We asked about bullying but it didn't seem to be a significant problem. Several agencies gave schools and teachers orientation/ briefings about the refugees to help assimilation. Schools seem familiar with refugees.

Dreams of higher education for older kids though seemed difficult to attain. Even if they can get funding/ scholarships, there is tremendous pressure to be bread-winners to help their families get established. One very bright student said "I wanted to go to college, get qualified and go back to the border to work for TBBC.

But I am too busy helping all the Karen here and have no time to study". Another very impressive young man had been in the States for a decade but was still two years off graduating because he had been factory shift working to support his family.

Health: Health care was of course much more problematic, language and bureaucracy being major barriers. One Resettlement Agency had set up a health centre specifically to cater for the refugees such that 2/3rds were within walking distance. After 1 year the refugees would be expected to access public health facilities by bus. But this was an exception. We heard several cases where refugees were not getting the treatment they thought they needed.

This was not our area of expertise and we only really discussed health issues with one agency. This may or may not have been typical but the agency raised a number of concerns about refugee health including a high incidence (highest ever seen) of hepatitis (B&C). Two possible theories meriting investigation might be the observed high incidence of tattooing and "penis jewellery". Scabies and intestinal parasites, especially hookworm, were problematic with kids, and iron deficiencies in pre-schoolers. Immunisations are apparently not documented in refugee health records. On the positive side HIV+ rates were low and mental health problems were not as bad as might be expected ... but might surface later.

All health problems can affect employment security especially if it means taking time off for tests and treatment.

Food: The availability of suitable food seemed no problem anywhere. Almost everyone was eating rice and buying their food from Asian stores. The consensus seemed to be that prices were reasonable although transport to shops was a problem in some places. Betel nuts were also noticeably available!

Welfare Assistance: Many refugees are failing to earn enough to support themselves and have to apply for welfare. We couldn't get a clear picture, possibly because it varies from place to place, but possibly because the rules are so complicated! Food stamps seem to be the most common form of assistance but the general complaint was that they were bureaucratically difficult to access and inadequate. They are means tested, available only for the unemployed and reduce in value over time. There is also TANIF, temporary assistance for needy families, but we didn't get any clear picture of how useful this was. One refugee had a good solution ... "Can't TBBC send us rice?!"

It has been confirmed since that benefits do indeed vary widely between states, California being quoted as particularly generous. We did not go there.

Resettlement Agencies: There are 9 Resettlement Agencies contracted to resettle refugees in the United States although many of them have local names. We heard many complaints from the refugee communities and church groups who felt that they were not providing adequate support.

I hope I am not underestimating the refugees' concerns, but whilst undoubtedly standards must vary from place to place and from case-worker to case-worker, I got the impression that most were doing a pretty good job within the limited resources available. The reality is that it is must be impossible for them to meet all the needs and expectations of the refugees. The agencies are contracted by USG and have little flexibility to do more than the basics, other than by raising matching funds themselves or working themselves into the ground ... and some individuals do. As one agency described it "This is a bare-bones programme. The US Government provides only minimum funding and generally takes the line that the refugees should 'just feel lucky to be here'".

One obvious challenge is that the resettlement agencies are constantly dealing with a flow of new arrivals. We asked one worker whether the agency helped with housing and jobs after the first 3 months and the reply was that they couldn't because more refugees kept arriving all the time and they had to prioritise them. Basically if refugees had been found housing and a job once, then that was it, even if they were made redundant or the housing proved unsuitable.

Language: One of the biggest challenges for the refugees is language and since I normally meet with the leaders when I visit the camps and see English classes going on in the schools, I was surprised at just how weak the Karen are in English. This of course is a major barrier to getting work and being able to function in their communities. We heard stories of people being literally house-bound because they were afraid to go out and stories of people who had gone out and wandered for days because they didn't know their address or how to ask for help.

The Karen also seemed somewhat lazy about learning English ... obviously a few are go-getters but most didn't seem very enthusiastic about ESL lessons. These are supposed to be compulsory for those without jobs (only for first 8 months) but some seemed to be only going to ensure they get their food stamps. One problem is the timing of lessons. Some claimed that the lessons were only available during work hours whilst others complained that the lessons were just after work when they were too tired to study.

Language classes are not part of the essential assistance package and it seems that many of the classes are taught by volunteers with very variable standards. The refugees often said they need more classes but one agency said "The community has to want to learn, but many don't. Their priority is to work".

This was perhaps the most striking weakness in the system of all. To survive in the USA, getting a job quickly is essential, but once in a tiring job with a thousand other things to worry about, learning a language must be an incredible challenge for most. As I have said to others, if I could wave a magic wand, nobody should leave Thailand for the USA without having passed at least a course in survival English.

Community: The safety net seems to be the Karen/ Burmese community or churches. Within each group we visited there seemed to be at least one good English speaker who ran around trying to sort out everyone's problems ... sometimes voluntarily, sometimes as employed translators. If employed, this seems also to be at entry-wage levels. These people are in danger of burn-out and, given their essential role, exploited ... although we were assured that amongst previous refugee case-loads many have eventually progressed even to Agency Director level.

It seems that the Karen strengths are often their weakness. It seems that many do not ask for help when they should and accept conditions that they shouldn't. They also perhaps rely too much on each other. If one of their numbers knows English and sorts out everyone's problems, this seems to be a disincentive for others to learn.

Many of the resettlement agencies emphasised how popular the Karen were compared with other refugee groups. They are liked because they don't complain and they work hard. "Karen don't complain even if they are short of food" said one. They are also liked for their sense of responsibility. They conscientiously pay back airfares ... more so than any other refugee group.

I didn't get a clear picture of church sponsorship, but clearly they offer one of the best safety nets available. Since many of the Karen are Christian they can also provide their spiritual base, and many Karen refugees are breathing new life into ageing and dying American church communities. Duane had amusing stories of Baptist churches panicking when suddenly one Sunday morning dozens of exotic people turn up at church in their Karen costumes calling themselves Baptists. "But why are these Koreans living in Taiwan?" reputedly asked one church leader trying to understand who they were.

Obviously some of the resettlement agencies are, and some are not, involved in church sponsorship. Church World Service has a policy to try to get sponsorship for all of their cases although does not get anywhere near 100%. Churches of course can donate needed household personal needs, can help with ESL and transportation, teach refugees to drive and generally help beyond the agencies' mandated 3 month support. Just regular home visiting can be a major support and help solve many problems before they become critical. Resettlement Agencies are under strong rules against proselytizing, so when church groups are involved, they have to restrict themselves to social assistance. However since many Karen actually want to go to church, this makes things easier and helps with recruitment of the potential co-sponsors.

Almost every place we visited there was a mixture of Christians and Buddhists with a few Muslims. There did not appear to be any issue about the acceptability of the Muslims although in one place we told there was some distrust between the Karen and Muslims.

In the resettlement process there is no attempt to keep communities together or place anyone in areas to their advantage. It is, by design, a complete lottery where people end up and I was struck by the diversity within each group ... refugees from all camps and all religions all seemingly randomly thrown together. All the more remarkable then the community spirit displayed ... one agency said the Karen had the best community support systems they had ever seen amongst refugee groups. Of course they "love cooking for new arrivals"!

Secondary migration: Not surprisingly there is significant secondary migration. Refugees leave their host communities because they have relatives elsewhere, because housing was simply too expensive where they were sent or because there are better job prospects elsewhere. Some single people simply take off to join friends.

The resettlement agencies strongly discourage this because if refugees leave their designated base they lose all rights for ongoing support and these are very difficult to reinstate even if they subsequently come back. But of course, as contractors, they are also the agencies' "bread and butter" and we got a sense that they had a vested interest to dissuade anyone from leaving. One agency said that if more than 20% of the case-load leaves, that resettlement office is closed, but I have since been reassured that there is no such policy.

Cultural orientation: We did not probe deeply into the effectiveness of cultural orientation given before the refugees leave Thailand or their induction in the United States and it is doubtful whether any programme could adequately prepare refugees for the complete change they face in almost every aspect of their lives.

However there was a recurring theme that many refugees said they that what they were told in Thailand about resettlement in USA was exaggerated and some said that if they had known the truth they would never have come. One said that a Thai staff had told them "Even if we are dying we will get better when we go to the USA". One refugee asked quite seriously "Why do Americans joke with us? (not tell the truth)". Another, "What we were told would happen when we arrived was not true".

There was some evidence that some of the worst exaggerations had been during cultural orientation for the earlier departures and that perhaps this problem was being addressed. One refugee did emphasise that she was told clearly that the decision to come was completely up to her.

Communications: One surprising and an important solution to the lack of good information was that everywhere we went refugees had phone cards which they bought for \$2 or \$5 with which they could call Thailand for 3 to 10 hours! This meant that many of them were regularly talking with their families and friends back in the camps and the realities of life in the USA must be filtering back.

When we asked what they were telling their friends/ families it was a very confused message ... some were saying "Come" ... some were saying "Don't come". Some said that when things were going well they said "Come", but when they were having problems they said "Don't come".

This is surely better than being given one-sided propaganda and at least people this end can ask all the questions they want.

To Come or not to Come? We usually asked people what was good and bad about their new lives including their views on camp life. The number one concern was almost always job stability and earning enough to survive. When asked, the immediate response to the question "Would you like to go back?" was "Yes!". But, when probed, most would say they would stay for their children's sake. It was striking in many places we visited that whilst we talked to a room full of worried adults, there would be a handful of young children happily playing around, oblivious to the surroundings and all the problems. Of course it is this generation that will really benefit from the opportunities of a new life

The most important benefit of resettlement was always "Safety" ... then "Education". Interestingly when asked about safety it was usually safety from the Thai police that came first, the Burmese Army second, and rarely was the KNU mentioned. Many people spoke of the problem of being confined to camps. They needed to go out to get some work. They were bored, they needed to earn some money to buy clothes or treats for their kids ... but if they went out the danger was of being arrested, beaten, and having their money/ property stolen. Some complained about the lack of vegetables and meat in the camps and the shortage of water.

Money transfers: Remembering the days when we used to often be asked to smuggle money to Indochinese refugees, another surprise to me was just how easy and cheap it was to send money back to Thailand via the Western Union. It seems that transfers can be made within minutes with the designated person collecting cash at the other end with normal exchange rate/ charges. We didn't really ask about if/ how much people are sending back, but obviously it is happening.

Family separation: Clearly there are many cases of family separation for many different reasons and we were asked to help with several cases. The refugees of course do not understand the bureaucracy ... cut-off dates, registered/ unregistered, student classifications/ lost paper-work etc. There is clearly a need for people to find out where to ask these questions. We also heard of other kinds of legal problems such as some Karen being denied green cards because they were formerly KNU/ combatants. All these kinds of problems test the resettlement agencies resources and competencies.

Karen Community Organisations: The Karen do form remarkable communities even when they come from different places and never knew each other before. They already help each other a lot and in the future will surely become stronger and stronger.

One new organisation with lots of potential is the **Karen American Community Foundation (KACR)**, founded in December 2007 with an all-Karen board after two years of informal biweekly telephone calls between several cities across the USA. It is awaiting non-profit organisation status and its primary purpose is “to provide culturally and linguistically appropriate humanitarian and social support services to improve the living conditions and quality of life for the Karen people from Burma who are living in the United States”. Its objectives include “forming local assistance groups for the Karen Communities”

Conclusions: Resettlement in the USA is a tough for the generation making the choice, but the Karen’s own community strength is a major hope for the future.

Unless more resources can be made available in the USA to provide more thorough orientation and language training on arrival, attempts should be made to improve preparation before departure from Thailand ... especially competence in English.

It would be good if more could be done to more methodically identify, support and maximise the potential of many capable Karen leaving Thailand. Initiatives such as KACR should be encouraged and supported

Problems of disinformation will probably lessen naturally as more people are resettled and more stories get back, greatly facilitated by easy telephone access.

For the Christians, involvement with the American Churches can be a two-way benefit, the churches supplementing the support of the resettlement agencies, the Karen bringing new life and enrichment to the churches. There was an obvious need for more understanding and mutual (if appropriate) support between the resettlement agencies and local churches.

Notes: *I usually refer to the Karen and it was mostly Karen we met. Some groups were also working with Chin and other Burmese.*

All of the above relates only to resettlement in USA. Other countries have very different systems, usually providing support for much longer periods with intensive language training etc. However UDSA is currently taking around 80% of all resettlement cases from Thailand.