

# A Mixed Blessing:

## Karen Resettlement to the United States

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*Journal of Refugee Studies*, 2011, 21(2): 217-38

### Abstract

Based on ethnographic research and interviews of Karen refugees in Thailand and resettled Karen in the United States, this paper makes a number of contributions to recent debates on resettlement. First, it provides a rich, ethnographically informed description of the migration and resettlement process. Such studies, especially ones that encapsulate both pre- and post-resettlement experiences, remain relatively rare. Second, by comparing the pre-migration attitudes of displaced Karen to newly and established Karen resettlers in the United States, it assesses how well the resettlement process is meeting the needs of refugees. We find considerable variation in the degree to which the refugees in our study sample successfully integrate into American society. Third, we note two key features of Karen resettlement. For the Karen, initial resettlement is not the final phase in the migratory process. In this sense, we see the experience of resettled communities come to resemble that of other migrants, in which settlement patterns coalesce on preexisting ethnic and kinship networks. We also find that United States governmental agencies and their non-governmental proxies were conspicuously absent in the post-resettlement phase, with a number of unofficial non-governmental organizations, primarily religious ones, filling the void.

*After I arrived in the camp, I met a man and we got married. He was unregistered in the camp and I am not sure what village he was from. I found out I was one or two months pregnant and told him. Shortly after that, he disappeared. No one knows where he went. He didn't say anything to me. It was very hard during my pregnancy. I was very sad and didn't eat well. My daughter has a lot of health problems. I do not know what is wrong with her though. I have brought her to the doctor many times because although she is a year and a half old, she cannot sit, stand, walk, or talk. She always cries. I have applied to resettle in America. I will go to any country that will take me, but I have only heard about America from my neighbors. I do not know of any other countries I can go to. I want to go because no one takes care of me or my daughter here. I am alone. I want to go to America because I want care and love for my baby and myself.*

Ler Shwe, Author Interview, Mae La, Thailand, 2008.

*What was life in Kakuma? Was it life? There was debate about this. On the one hand, we were alive, which meant that we were living a life, that we were eating and could enjoy friendships and learning and could love. But we were nowhere. Kakuma was nowhere. Kakuma was, we were first told, the Kenyan word for nowhere. No matter the meaning of the word, the place was not a place. It was a kind of purgatory...*

Dave Eggers, extract from *What is the What*, (on life in the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya).

## **Introduction**

Although Ler Shwe's story is tragic, it is by no means unique. Life on the run in Burma or in the camps of Western Thailand is at best one dominated by a sense of disequilibrium, impotence, and frustration.<sup>1</sup> At worst, the indelible physical and mental scars it leaves make any return to normality impossible. For Ler Shwe, the camp was supposed to be a refuge, yet it only compounded her misery. Resettlement to the U.S. for her, as for many Karen, is another stage in the attempt to survive conflict and its destructive side effects. In July 2007, twelve year old Moo Htoo arrived in the U.S., along with his parents and older brother and sister. His family first fled their home in Karen State in Burma over 20 years previously. After several periods of settlement at temporary sites inside Burma, they were eventually forced to cross the border, and join the thousands of other

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<sup>1</sup> Like all names, this is a pseudonym. Given the oppressive nature of the Burmese regime, we felt that the identifying participants and interview subjects could jeopardize their safety if they chose to return to Burma at any point in the future.

Karen already in residence in one of the dozen or so refugee camps in Thailand. Before Moo Htoo was born, his family had been relocated to Mae La refugee camp, the largest in the country. Like a lot of the refugees at the camp, Moo Htoo had spent his whole life there. For many Karen like Moo Htoo and Ler Shwe, Mae La seemed to be the end point of a tough life spent on the move. Yet, while life in the camp was, in the sense Eggers put it, “no life at all”, resettlement to the United States has been far from easy for Moo Htoo and his family. If Ler Shwe eventually does get resettled, she will soon learn that it is also a physically and emotionally demanding process. The Karen who have resettled to the United States live in meager accommodation, work for minimum wage, are frequently compelled to relocate, all the while struggling to retain their traditional values and practices. For most refugees, resettlement has been a mixed blessing.

This paper is based on ethnographic research and interviews of Karen refugees in Thailand and resettled Karen in the U.S.<sup>2</sup> After reading press reports in the U.S. about the difficulties faced by recently resettled Karen refugees and later witnessing firsthand some of these challenges in the course of volunteer work with a number of Karen families, we decided that we wanted to better understand why there appeared to be so little institutional support for the refugees, how the Karen families dealt with this situation, and ultimately, to see for ourselves the conditions that had brought them to the U.S. as refugees. The purpose of this paper is first to provide a rich, ethnographically informed description of the migration and resettlement process. Such studies, especially ones that examine both pre- and post-resettlement populations, are comparatively rare (Dauvergne 2007). In the second place, by comparing the pre-migration attitudes of displaced Karen to newly and established Karen resettlers in the U.S., it assesses how well the resettlement process is meeting the needs of refugees. We find that refugees experience substantial difficulties in the initial stages of their resettlement, in part due to the lack of institutional support available to them. However, after approximately a year of resettlement, many of the refugees in our study sample have begun to

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<sup>2</sup> We sought and obtained Institutional Review Board approval to for two related research projects: first, we conducted extended ethnographic research and informal interviews in the course of our interactions with the Karen families as we assisted them with everyday tasks and provided them with English tutoring in the U.S.. We obtained the informed consent of all participants and their receipt of any assistance was in no way conditional on their participation in the study. No one refused to participate. We will refer to these individuals as “participants.” Second, as described further below, we went to the Thailand-Burma border region to observe the conditions at Mae La refugee camp and to conduct interviews with some of the refugees housed there. We will refer to individuals who consented to be interviewed as “subjects.”

successfully integrate.<sup>3</sup> In addition, researchers have argued that refugees, like voluntary migrants, have an idealized expectation of life after resettlement, and that this contributes to feelings of distress and depression when the actual experience does not match the expectation (UNHCR 2004:VI, 38; Pittaway 2005: 28; Ives 2007: 57; Fraire 2009: 13). However, our research on the Karen suggests that many of those preparing to resettle had few illusions about how hard life would be after resettlement. Indeed, we found them to be rather skeptical about the process. As corroborated by research by Banki and Lang (2007), many Karen choose to resettle not because of a strong desire to live in a third country, but to avoid spending the remainder of their lives in a refugee camp. Understandably perhaps, given the hardships they'd experienced up to resettlement, the challenges and uncertainties that would follow seemed tolerable. Third, we note two key features of Karen resettlement that may contribute to improvements in resettlement process. For the Karen, initial resettlement does not appear to be the final phase in the migratory process. Of the approximately 25 families originally resettled to the U.S. city chosen for study in this paper during the summer of 2007, as of mid-2010, only seven remain. In this sense, we see the experience of resettled communities come to resemble that of other migrants to developed countries, in which settlement patterns coalesce on preexisting ethnic and kinship networks; however, the state and its contracted resettlement agencies appear unprepared to deal with this secondary migration. We also found that the local contracted agency designated to assist the resettled community was conspicuously absent, while a number of individual volunteers and unofficial organizations, primarily religious ones, filled the void. This heavy reliance on volunteers is not a new phenomenon in U.S. refugee resettlement and is a money-saving strategy on the part of the relevant Federal and State-level public authorities. However, the longer term effects on the refugees concerned have not been researched, and the broader implications of this policy for the successful integration of refugees into American society remain unclear.

The paper proceeds as follows: first, we provide some background to the Karen-Burma conflict and describe the conditions faced by refugees prior to resettlement. Second, we give an overview of the resettlement process. Third, we present our findings from three months of field work conducted in Northern Thailand in mid-2008, which included a number of extended trips to Mae La Refugee Camp. Fourth, we detail our observations of the experiences of the approximately

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<sup>3</sup> On the meaning of “integration” see Ager and Strang (2008)

70 Karen refugees who were resettled to the city of Westville in the northeast of the U.S. between June 2007 and June 2008. With the exception of immediate relatives, the resettlement agencies placed refugees in these locations according to a quota system. The location of resettlement was in no case based on the prior associations of refugees either in Mae La refugee camp or from inside Burma itself. Westville did not have an existing Karen population, while the closest existing co-ethnic community was a 20 minute drive away.<sup>4</sup> We focus on their experiences in terms of accommodation, health, education, and employment opportunities. Finally, we evaluate some of the key features of Karen resettlement, namely extensive secondary migration and the pervasive involvement of support agencies, namely individual volunteers and local churches.<sup>5</sup>

## The Conflict

In the wake of the British Empire's departure from Burma in 1948, civil war erupted across the country. The newly installed regime found itself at war with native Communists and with a number of ethnic armed organizations including the Karen National Union (KNU). After briefly gaining control over most of the country, the KNU was pushed back to the predominantly Karen populated hills to the east. Although the KNU operated as the *de facto* government in the region during much of the 1970s and 1980s, a major offensive by Burmese state forces in the 1990s forced a retreat of the KNU.<sup>6</sup> Since then, the Burmese State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) has pursued a gradual but aggressive ethnic cleansing of Karen State from South West to North East in a process continuing to the present (KHRG 2001). Government forces have been guilty of countless human rights abuses including indiscriminate artillery attacks, extortion, land confiscation, torture, and rape. The SPDC also demands labor contributions (on roads or new camps) and portering of military supplies from Karen civilians. Although less onerously than the SPDC, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), the KNU's armed wing, also makes demands of Karen civilians in terms of information, recruits, food, and shelter. Like other ethnic armies, the KNU uses landmines extensively, which inevitably result in civilian casualties. Civilians in mixed control areas thus often find themselves trying to balance two masters while still retaining enough independence to survive.

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<sup>4</sup> "Westville" is also a pseudonym. We do not use the real name of the town to preserve the safety and privacy of participants in our study.

<sup>5</sup> In this paper, given the relatively short timeframe over which field work was carried out (two years) we do not address issues of identity salience, and change.

<sup>6</sup> For a background to the conflict, see Smith (1991)

One Karen refugee described the dilemma faced by many Karen families: “The difficulty was that our village was between a Burmese army base and a KNU base. Both armies would come demanding food and money. We had to be very clever. The Burmese of course were more aggressive when they came and would make threats. But also we had no choice but to help the KNLA too.”

The Karen people have deployed a wide range of strategies to resist domination, whether by the SPDC or by armed organizations from within their own community. They have increasingly substituted migratory wage labor (where available) for self-sufficiency, and have resorted to growing cash crops like cardamom, which are more easily concealed from Burmese troops who steal and burn Karen rice crops in unauthorized settlements (Malseed 2008). Traditionally *swidden* (slash and burn) farmers, the Karen are used to migrating as whole villages. They have adapted this survival instinct to the context and thousands of Karen continue to eke out an existence in temporary settlements inside Karen State. Others live in forced relocation sites where they remain vulnerable to a variety of abuses at the hands of the *Tatmadaw* (the Burmese Army). The exact number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) still living in Eastern Burma is difficult to determine; the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC 2009) estimates the number to be well over a half a million. This includes those IDPs who repeatedly move from one temporary site to another in a phenomenon known as *jungle displacement*. When their lives become no longer tenable inside Burma, short of taking up arms, crossing the border is the last resort. Almost 200,000 Karen refugees have now fled to Thailand, many of them to Mae La. Others have self-settled in some of Thailand’s notorious border towns like Mae Sot. Self-settled refugees living in Thailand are considered to be illegal migrants rather than *refugees*. Consequently, they are vulnerable to harassment, violence, exploitation, and refoulement at the hands of Thai authorities. Most manage to find employment in low paying, menial, and often dangerous occupations (Thornton 2006). Although life outside of the camp provides these individuals with more autonomy and economic opportunities than otherwise attainable, it is fair to say that the refugees who have sought to informally integrate themselves within Thai border communities lead lives marked by constant fear and anxiety (Jacobsen 2001; Arnold and Hewison 2005; Purkey 2006; Brees 2008; Kobia and Cranfield. 2009).

### **Karen in Thai Refugee Camps**

Mae La is the largest refugee camp in Thailand. The first impression that a visitor to the camp gets is of its sheer enormity. A mass of single- and two-room, bamboo-framed houses covers the lush mountainside. Small paths – little more than muddy slides in monsoon season – snake between the wooden-stilted huts. Drying clothes hang from windows and litter covers the ground. Although the scene of so many traditional houses in close proximity to each other gives the appearance of a well-functioning, jungle metropolis, the density of residences is completely alien to traditional Karen hill-tribe society, where villages would be inhabited by no more than a few hundred families (Renard 1980; Marshall 1997). Approximately 37,000 refugees were living in Mae La as of June 2009. Across the camps in Western Thailand, there are around 42,000 unregistered migrants in addition to approximately 138,000 registered inhabitants (TBBC 2009). 61 percent of the registered refugees come from Karen State and a further seventeen percent from Karenni State. Most of the remainder come from Pegu, Mon, and Tenasserim Divisions, which also have significant Karen populations. Although the camp opened in 1989, its population rose precipitously in the late 1990s for a number of reasons. First, the *Tatmadaw* intensified its war against the armed forces of the KNU, producing a substantial increase in the number of refugees. Second, the Thai government decided to consolidate many of the small refugee camps in the border region into a few mega-camps beginning in 1995. Thai officials were motivated to consolidate camps both for the safety of refugees residing in small camps which were subject to frequent attacks by Burmese militia and proxy forces, and to limit the freedom of movement of refugees in order to prevent them using the camps as a segueway to the sizable black labor market in Thailand.

Given the appalling conditions faced by the estimated half-million IDPs in eastern Burma, Mae La and the other large refugee camps are a relative safe haven. Although subject to occasional attack by the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) or other Burmese military proxies, refugees in the camp are safe from many of the most immediate security concerns. In addition, refugees at the camp receive a number of benefits including food rations, medical care, basic shelter and clothing. Education is provided in the camps but does not go beyond grade 10 and does not typically include vocational training. That said, some residents come specifically for the purpose of attaining even this level of education, which is unavailable to them inside Burma. A number of the children in the camp, classified as orphans, have actually been sent there by their parents who remain in Burma in order to obtain an education (Cusano 2001: 166-7). Refugees in the camp are

also able to freely practice their religion. There are Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim refugees living side-by-side with little apparent tension between them (Lee 2001). Furthermore, the refugees themselves are responsible for much of the day to day decision making, organization, and management of the camp. There is a strong and well-established presence of community based organizations (CBOs) like the Karen Women's Organization (KWO) in the camp. In addition to possible positions within the various CBOs, there are some limited employment opportunities within the camp in education, missionary, medical care, distribution of supplies, and various non-governmental organization (NGO) activities. There are also a few income generating programs currently underway including a weaving project where the TBBC provides the thread and then buys the final products to distribute among those in need.

While these provisions compare favorably with those available to individuals still living in Burma, they are unquestionably meager. Malnutrition continues to be pervasive problem, especially for infants, nursing mothers, new arrivals, and other vulnerable camp populations (TBBC 2009). Each individual receives an allotment of rice, fish paste, mung beans, chilies, 'Asia mix,' salt, and sugar, as well as cooking oil. While the food basket does meet international nutritional standards, fresh vegetables and fruit are conspicuously absent from the food basket. Health NGOs provide public healthcare and medical training for camp residents. The TBBC acknowledges, however, that these organizations often do not have the capacity or resources required to adequately address some of the common health problems faced by refugees including mental disorders, the prevention and treatment of HIV, and the management of common chronic conditions like diabetes and hypertension. Refugees who require medical care that is not available within the camps can be referred to a Thai hospital for treatment but this is very costly and therefore not always feasible (TBBC 2007a). Shelter and clothing, like all other provisions, are basic. Refugees are provided with the building materials and materials necessary for repairs. Although the TBBC adheres to international standards, homes in Mae La are usually quite crowded, especially as there are many unregistered migrants in the camp (TBBC 2009).

Life in Mae La, like any refugee camp, is characterized by a stifling sense of frustration and powerlessness. The wastage of human potential in protracted refugee situations, vividly captured by the term *human warehousing*, has been well documented (Jacobsen 2001; UNHCR 2006; Lui 2007;

Deardorff 2009).<sup>7</sup> Refugees who have lived in Mae La speak passionately about the lack of opportunities and freedoms. Several interviewees freely expressed their frustration with life in the camp. At one time, refugees at the camp were able to find work in the black market, laboring on Thai farms in the vicinity. However, in recent years, Thai authorities have drastically curbed the practice (TBBC 2007a). One refugee told us: “Mostly during the day I do nothing; just sitting at home. I used to work on local farms as a day laborer, but now I can't get that kind of work anymore. Mostly now, I want to resettle.” This sense of impotence coupled with traumatic displacement experiences can be destructive to individuals and relationships. A growing body of research documents the occurrence of domestic and community violence within the various stages of refugee migration, much of it within the refugee camps (Pittaway 2005; Deardorff 2009). Despite substantial efforts by camp officials and the community organizations, cases of domestic violence, crime, drug and alcohol abuse and rape, including that of minors, continue to be reported at increasingly high levels (Karen Women’s Organization 2006: 14; TBBC 2007b: 29).

### **The U.S. Resettlement Process**

UNHCR recognizes three durable solutions for refugee situations: voluntary repatriation to the home country; local integration in the country of asylum; and resettlement to a third country. UNHCR does not officially place preference on any particular solution. In practice, however, the international community, refugees, the host countries, and some have argued, the UNHCR itself follow a hierarchy of solutions (Lang 2001; Crisp 2004; Deardorff 2009). It is not surprising that most refugee populations hope to one day safely return to their home country (Crisp 2004: 5; Brees 2008: 385; UNHCR 2010: 55). For their part, host countries also tend to prefer repatriation over resettlement (Lang 2001: 2). However, despite this mutual preference for repatriation, it is dependent on “a fundamental change in the underlying causes of displacement” (Lang 2001: 1). Repatriation should not be pursued unless the physical, material, and the *de jure* and *de facto* safety of the refugees can be assured. Unfortunately, given the SPDC’s atrocious human rights record, its continued refusal to accept responsibility for those internally and externally displaced, and the continued violence in the country, it is unlikely that the Karen will be able to return to their homes in the foreseeable future. Indeed, given the widespread dissatisfaction following the fraudulent nature of the November 2010 elections, an end to disorder in the state does not appear in sight. As a

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<sup>7</sup> See also the website of the US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants <http://www.refugees.org/>

result, it is more likely that the number of new refugees seeking asylum in Thailand will continue to increase (Guest et al 2000; TBBC 2009).

Although local integration typically requires less of an adjustment for the refugee population than resettlement, formal local integration tends to be unpopular with host countries, including Thailand, due to the perceived security and economic implications (Jacobsen 2001; Crisp 2004; Kobia and Cranfield 2009). Refugees are confined to closed camps to emphasize the temporary nature of their stay and to discourage new arrivals. Regardless, spontaneous integration always occurs to some extent. Resettlement becomes a priority in those situations in which the refugee population continues to be in significant danger in the host country or when refoulement is a distinct possibility. Thailand's vow to repatriate Burmese refugees after the November 2010 elections in Burma is a distressing example.<sup>8</sup> However, as protracted refugee situations become more common, resettlement is increasingly a consideration for refugees who are not in active danger but for whom voluntary repatriation or local integration is not feasible. For these individuals, resettlement provides a chance of a better life but the process only serves a small portion of the total number of displaced persons and it can have an adverse knock on effects for those left behind (Banki and Lang 2007).

According to the UNHCR, the resettlement of Burmese refugees from Thailand is both the largest resettlement program to date, with 50,000 individuals resettled so far, and one of its most successful (Furukawa 2009). Some 17,000 people resettled in 2009 and a further 15,000 are expected by the end of 2010. The majority, 73 percent, resettled to the United States with a further eleven percent going to Australia, seven percent to Canada, and two percent to each of Finland and Norway (TBBC 2009). However, these numbers are a small portion of the total number of Karen refugees living in Thailand. Not all who apply will be approved and many Karen choose to stay in Mae La or Thailand, especially those with ties to the KNU.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, resettlement is currently only possible for the portion of refugees who were registered or reregistered in the camps during 2004 and 2005.

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<sup>8</sup> "Welcome Withdrawn," *The Economist*, 15 Oct 2010, available at: [http://www.economist.com/blogs/asiaview/2010/10/burmese\\_refugees\\_thailand](http://www.economist.com/blogs/asiaview/2010/10/burmese_refugees_thailand)

<sup>9</sup> Author interviews. For a discussion of other Karen organizations, see also South (2008)

The United States Refugee Admittance Program (USRAP) allows refugees to gain access to the resettlement process in three ways. Refugees can be referred on an individual basis by an official of UNHCR, or less frequently, through a referral from an American embassy or an authorized NGO. Refugees can also gain admittance through a referral from an immediate family member who has already resettled in the United States. Finally, refugees can gain admittance on the basis of being a member of a designated group. The Karen refugees are one of the designated nationalities selected by the U.S. government to be of special humanitarian concern. In Thailand, UNHCR and camp officials give priority to those individuals who are most in need of protection. Among those who desire resettlement but who are not in active danger, priority is given according to the date refugees first sought asylum in Thailand. After an individual has been identified as a potential candidate, UNHCR selects the country to which the case will be referred. In the U.S. case, each candidate is then referred to the Overseas Processing Entity (OPE) to be pre-screened for the U.S. refugee admission requirements before he or she is referred to the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) for interview. The USCIS, which falls under the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), is responsible for adjudicating all refugee cases. An approval by USCIS is contingent upon the results of security and medical screenings. The OPE then refers the case to United States Refugee Processing Center for sponsorship assurance. Once the refugee has passed all of the screenings, the location of the sponsoring organization is then relayed back to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) so that transportation arrangements can be made. Shortly before traveling, the refugee may choose to attend a brief cultural orientation program specific to the destination country.

While the first half of the U.S. resettlement process is primarily conducted by the government and agents working on its behalf, the domestic aspect of the resettlement program is almost completely managed by voluntary organizations or *volags*. Such organizations have been providing resettlement services since World War II when the U.S. began resettling large numbers of individuals fleeing Nazi persecution. There are ten national *volags* that oversee a network of around 350 affiliate resettlement organizations. The sponsoring *volag* typically assigns refugees to one of its affiliates. Beyond the provision of immediate basic services like shelter, food, and cash assistance, the level of assistance provided to the refugee varies significantly from organization to organization. The result is a kind of ‘lottery effect’ for the refugees (Brick et al 2010: 12). The affiliate

organization must find employment for the refugee as soon as possible. As a result, refugees are not given time to recover from any traumas they have experienced, adjust to their new home, improve their language or job training skills or wait for a job that utilizes their existing experiences and qualifications (Brick et al 2010: 11-2). Refugees therefore tend to be constrained to low wage service sector or manufacturing jobs. Self-sufficiency has always been the cornerstone of the U.S. resettlement policy, but in consideration of the changing nature of the refugee populations the U.S. seeks to admit, many have begun to question the appropriateness this goal (Wright 1981; Pressé and Thompson 2007; International Rescue Committee 2009; Brick et al 2010). Against that, however, the U.S. laudably seeks to resettle those who are most vulnerable rather than just those who are most qualified.

### **Attitudes and Expectations about Resettlement**

Mae La Camp is approximately an hour drive from the town of Mae Sot. The Thai-Burmese border region and Mae Sot in particular bring together an unusual ensemble of “rebels, refugees, medics and misfits,” all of who have some interest in the ongoing ethnic conflict in Burma (Thorton 2006). As academic researchers with an interest in the humanitarian plight of the Karen, we fall into the “misfit” category. In Mae Sot and nearby border towns we were able to draw on existing contacts and establish new ones. We conducted a large number of extended, repeat interviews with rebels, aid workers, doctors, and undocumented refugees of several ethnicities, including Burmese. With SPDC spies and informants heavily active in the area, we had to proceed with caution. Research in the camp presents additional challenges. Entry to the camps by foreigners is restricted but we were able to gain access with the assistance of the KWO. The KWO is acutely aware of the lack of information that refugees had about post-resettlement conditions and happily assisted in facilitating our research project. It also provided translators for our interviews, which were conducted on the basis of informed consent and anonymity.

Over three days, we conducted semi-structured interviews approximately an hour with 21 subjects. In addition, along with our affiliates from the KWO, a further 50 subjects consented to shorter structured interviews of around 30 minutes, while another group of 50 subjects also answered a short survey in which their responses to specific questions regarding their expectations

about several aspects of life after resettlement were sought.<sup>10</sup> Given the difficulty of conducting research in the camp, interview subjects were obtained by the KWO on our behalf. We were thus unable to ensure that the “sample” of interview subjects was random, although we believe it fairly represented the underlying adult camp population on a number of key criteria. Critically, the interview group included both old and young, married and single, literate and illiterate, and Christian and Buddhist subjects. The youngest interview subject was 20 and the eldest 66. Minors were not interviewed. While the underlying Karen population is believed to be about two-thirds Buddhist to a third Christian, the latter were overrepresented in our sample. Only four of the 21 extended interview subjects were Buddhist. We are unsure why it is the case, but the overwhelming majority of Karen in our research group in the U.S. was also Christian. We speculate that it has something to do with the predominance of Christians at the organizational level in the main Karen political organizations in the camps such as the KWO. Subjects varied in the number of years of schooling from none to grade 10. Most were literate. In many cases, subjects had been in Mae La or other camps for more than a decade. A small number of subjects had been in Mae La for less than a year, but the majority had lived in there for more than year. The population from which subjects were obtained was restricted to individuals in the process of applying for resettlement. Some individuals were due for resettlement in the coming weeks, while others had not received a final approval or fixed date for their resettlement. Ultimately, while emphatic statements about the expectations of refugees at the camp or refugees in general cannot be provided on the basis of this set of interview subjects, we have reason to believe that the responses obtained are not systematically biased, and give a fair representation of the views of refugees preparing to migrate.

We first asked refugees where they were due to resettle and how they felt about the destination. With little influence over the destination of resettlement, many of our interview subjects did not have a response to this question. For those interviewees who were currently in the application process, the applications for all but one were being considered by the U.S.; the other was being considered for resettlement in Australia. While we had heard of a number of Karen refugees

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<sup>10</sup> A list of questions was prepared in English and translated into Karen prior to the interviews to mitigate the loss of response accuracy in translation on the day. We chose to record interview responses by hand rather than by audio recording for the safety of our subjects. We assigned subjects a numeric code so that they could not be linked to their responses except by the authors. Responses were transcribed and uploaded to a server in the U.S. shortly after the interviews were conducted and hard copies of interview notes were then destroyed. Given the small sample size and our lack of confidence in any bias in the sample we do not report statistical results from the survey questionnaire.

being resettled to Norway and Canada, none of the individuals whom we interviewed had been referred for resettlement there. When asked if they had a preference for a particular resettlement country, the most common response was the U.S. because resettlement was more quickly obtained there than for other countries. According to the U.S. Department of State the resettlement process on average takes eight months to a year; many of the refugees we spoke to, however, said the process occurred usually within three months. The second most common response was the presence of family members who had already resettled in the chosen country. One respondent said: "I want to resettle to America. I don't really know why to America. My uncle filled out the application form for me. I have an aunt and uncle in America, and I think that I will go to the same place they are, but I do not know where that is." Another said "I want to resettle to America because America is well-known. I have an uncle there, but it is up to the U.N. where I will go." Others hope for the U.S. simply because that is what the majority of others in the camp had done. One respondent told us: "No one applies to other countries, just America." Another, when asked why she had applied to go to America, responded, "It doesn't matter to me. I think every country would be better than here." While many refugees shared the perception that the conditions facing resettled populations may be preferable in Australia and Canada in particular, the prospect of spending up to three years waiting for an application seems to explain the preference for the U.S.

Having witnessed the precarious financial situation of resettled refugees in the U.S. we next asked individuals about how they planned to earn and manage money. Most interviewees were cautiously optimistic about their financial future. According to our estimates, a majority of respondents expected that getting a job would be somewhat or very difficult upon resettlement. Many of the individuals with whom we spoke had heard reports either first or second hand about job prospects in the U.S.: "We have heard that it is easy to get a job in America and I am excited to work and earn money." In addition, almost all of the respondents believed that they would have enough or a lot of money left over after paying for basics like rent and food. Yet interviewees were realistic, even skeptical, about the quality of employment they could expect. Most of them anticipated factory or service sector work: "I would like any job that is good for a woman. Maybe I can find a job cleaning or working in a store." Another individual said: "I have had job training in Mae La as a family planning counselor. I know I will not be able to do this in America though; the standard is not the same. I am looking forward to going to America because there will be good

opportunities for us if we work hard.” Respondents were generally skeptical about the prospects of receiving further (adult) education in the United States. As we describe below, this pessimistic expectation turns out to be justified. However, for those refugees with children, the prospect of providing them with an education was a significant motivation. One respondent hoped that her “...kids can go to good schools with Westerners.”

We were also interested to know whether refugees believed that they would be able to practice the religion of their choosing upon resettlement. Interestingly, most respondents believed that it would be difficult to find a church, temple, or mosque, where they could practice their religion. This included Christians. That said, none of the individuals with whom we spoke freely brought up religious freedom as a major concern. We also asked refugees if they had concerns about other forms of discrimination once they had migrated. A majority felt they would face discrimination once they had resettled, and that integration into American life in general would be difficult or very difficult. We are not sure of any systematic source for this skepticism but given the attitude of the Thais in the camps towards the Karen, such feelings are understandable. On the whole, refugees seem to have a relatively pessimistic set of expectations about resettlement. None of our respondents mentioned the prospect of government handouts or enrichment as a motivation for their resettlement or for their selection of a resettlement location. On this evidence, generalized claims that resettled populations suffer from psychological distress because of a failure of the resettlement process to live up to unrealistically high pre-migration expectations seem unfounded.

### **Karen Resettlement to the United States**

By necessity, our research strategy in the U.S. was quite different to that in the camp. We opted for sustained participant observation, which involved weekly (at minimum) visits to Karen families in Westville between September 2007 and June 2008. On return from Thailand in September 2008 we maintained regular, but less frequent, contact with the Karen population in Westville until June 2009, by which time most of our original contacts had moved out of the state. In the course of our interactions with the Karen, we provided some translation assistance, gave practical advice ranging from the use of public transportation to the payment of utility bills, and acted as intermediaries with local agencies. Over time, we were also able to conduct sustained and unstructured, repeat interviews with many of our subjects. In this section we discuss the experiences

of the resettled Karen in the areas of shelter, healthcare, employment, education, and community integration.

### *Shelter*

Westville is one of the largest cities in the state with a population of just over 100,000. It is a multiethnic city, which while historically wealthy, has suffered from substantial urban decay in recent decades. It currently has an unemployment rate well above both state and national averages. Additionally, the city has been the location of numerous waves of immigrant settlement, and has become partially ghettoized as a consequence, with neighborhoods segregated not only by socio-economic status, but by race. Nevertheless, as across the northeastern U.S., the cost of living is relatively high, with monthly rent typically falling between \$650 and \$700. Unfortunately, as the Westville Karen learned, affordable inner city housing is typically found in the most dangerous neighborhoods in the city.

The agency first housed seven of the Karen families in a 72 year-old apartment building located in one of the most dangerous sections of the city. The apartment building was on a street notorious for gang, drug, and prostitution activity. The building was in a state of semi-disrepair with broken windows, leaking ceilings, rodent infestations, and unreliable plumbing. The apartments themselves were overcrowded often with six to seven individuals sharing a two-bedroom space. The apartments were also initially unfurnished. The families lived in these conditions for six months. After the local press ran several stories deploring the circumstances in which the families were living, the resettlement organization moved the families to two other apartment complexes in the downtown area, which were in slightly better condition and in somewhat safer neighborhoods. The latter apartments did not suffer from any serious health and safety problems.

However, the apartments were still cramped with families often forced to put beds in the living room area. In addition, appliances, such as refrigerators, broke down and were not fixed, while interior moldings like door frames and windows were in a state of disrepair. Other residents in the apartment complexes had numerous complaints about the Karen refugees, such as the odors produced by Karen cooking, the congregation of Karen in large groups in the hallways, the flushing of disposable diapers, which caused plumbing problems in the building, and the disposal of

prohibited items in the apartments' dumpsters. The authors did not hear of any incidents in which the Karen were physically confronted by the buildings' residents; rather, complaints were filtered through the landlords and subsequently the resettlement organization and volunteers.

The Karen were charged rent and utilities on their accommodation from day one. They were given minimal assistance by the resettlement organization in dealing with paying bills and generally managing a household. In some instances, families fell behind in the payment of utilities, while they were also overpaying because they were unaware of the discounts available to them because of their low incomes. The only assistance the families received in dealing with these administrative tasks came from volunteers, especially those from religious organizations. These volunteers instructed the families how to obtain money orders, pay bills, cash checks and so on.

### *Healthcare*

While all of the families were provided with free medical care through Medicaid, communication and transportation issues frequently prevented individuals from receiving the care to which they were entitled. The local health clinic began to express frustration because, unaccustomed to strict timekeeping, Karen families would often miss their scheduled appointments at the clinic. Often, the resettlement organization would schedule appointments for the families but then fail to clearly communicate this information to the individuals or families concerned. The agency would notify the families of their appointments by mailing letters to them, written in English, but few families could understand these letters. When individuals did make it to their appointments, they often came without their insurance cards or other necessary documentation. As a further complication, most of the Karen did not speak English and the clinic had to rely on a telephone translation service. However, Burmese translators were not always available and in any case, many of the refugees only spoke Karen, not Burmese. Eventually, volunteers took over the scheduling of medical appointments and provided assistance with transportation for the Karen families.

The resettled Karen did not in general suffer from any extraordinary medical issues. However, those who had non-acute conditions such as problems with their vision, hearing, or chronic pain often went without adequate medical care until a volunteer realized the need for treatment. Some individuals who needed prostheses because of injuries experienced during the war

faced greater difficulties. The children who were resettled were generally well-nourished and healthy. When the Karen children began school, they were required to receive vaccinations. Problematically, when those appointments were missed, the school system required that they stay home until their vaccinations were up-to-date.

### *Education*

Approximately twenty Karen students were enrolled in various public inner-city schools, from elementary to middle school level.<sup>11</sup> The majority were enrolled in a large middle school with over 1,200 students that had been labeled as a “failing school” by No Child Left Behind. The school was predominately attended by Hispanic and African American students with less than a one percent population of Asian students. The Karen students were placed in a Language Transition Support Services (LTSS) class with mostly Spanish speaking students for additional English instruction. There were no Karen, Thai, or Burmese speaking instructors or translators available to the school.

A number of teachers at the school volunteered their time to teach the students and their families English. During the first year of Karen student arrivals, they were accepted enthusiastically by teachers and other students. The latter donated clothes, shoes and toys. Most students sympathized with the Karen, but soon came to treat them with a benign neglect. In addition, the Karen boys would occasionally hold hands, wear pink clothes, or act in ways that simply marked them out as different. While the majority of Karen students kept to themselves, one or two of the younger Karen students managed to integrate with successfully and have made friends with local youth. In subsequent years, very few of the school-aged Karen refugees kept up their education. Many of the students enrolled in the middle school were significantly older than their classmates. For example, one seventeen year old student was put in a seventh grade class, in which most of the other students were twelve years of age. The majority of those who left school did so because they wanted to start working. Mostly young men, while they initially enrolled in adult education after leaving school, they have since quit, with no high school diplomas or formal educational credentials. They now work in factory jobs alongside their parents.

### *Employment*

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<sup>11</sup> The number of students enrolled fluctuated wildly. Some students would leave after a few months, when their families decided to change city, while new students arrived to replace them.

Within a month of resettling to the United States, the resettlement organization placed the Karen in jobs. Most of the refugees were only fluent in Karen, while some were also illiterate, uneducated, and did not have any employment experience. They mostly worked in assembly jobs in two manufacturing factories. Many individuals had difficulty adjusting to a 40 hour work week on the assembly line. Workers earned approximately \$250 per week after taxes. Later, when their English had improved, some of the Karen found jobs stocking shelves in supermarkets through the help of volunteers. Despite working full-time, many individuals found that they could not make ends meet. For example, Ler Per Her (26 years old) arrived in September 2007. In Mae La camp, he worked as a geography teacher, and his ambition was to be a teacher in the United States. In his first factory job following resettlement, he earned \$7.75 an hour, which gave him a monthly take home of \$993.81, supplemented by an additional \$298 a month in food stamps. Paying \$550 monthly on rent, \$96 on transportation, \$100 on utilities, and \$32 a month towards his loan (to repay the cost of his resettlement to the United States) he was left with a mere \$170 a month for clothes and additional requirements for his wife and infant daughter. Such a meager income has forced many Karen to relocate outside of the northeast as the cost of living is high and the opportunity for upward social mobility so constrained. That said, of the 33 refugees remaining in Westville, all (eight) who want to work are employed.

### **Additional Features of Karen Resettlement**

Karen resettlement to the United States has been characterized by two further interesting features. The first is the tendency for refugees to quickly resettle away from the communities in which they were first located. Despite the efforts of the resettlement agencies to disperse clusters of refugees across the country, there has been a marked agglomeration of Karen into certain areas. The second striking feature about Karen resettlement has been the intensive involvement of various churches. All of the Karen who resettled to Westville were sponsored by one affiliate resettlement organization and managed by two caseworkers. However, almost immediately after the Karen arrived in the U.S., community churches opened their doors to them, acting as both intermediaries to and surrogates for government social welfare organizations. While both phenomena are not unique to Karen refugees, little research exists on the impact of secondary migration and voluntary support.

### *Secondary Migration*

The high cost of living coupled with their inadequate salaries resulted in considerable secondary migration among the Karen. As the refugees learned from friends and relatives living in different parts of the state and different parts of the nation, the cost of living was lower elsewhere. The first group of Karen left Westville within six months of their arrival. For example, Lay Paw, a mother of three, lost her husband while they were still living in Mae La so it fell on her to support her family. She decided to move to Texas where there is a large Karen community, the weather is warmer, and most importantly, the rent is lower. Other families soon began to follow suit after some of the Karen were laid off from their factory jobs. Within 18 months of their arrival, 25 of the 69 resettled Karen had left Westville for other cities within the state as well as outside the state. As of mid-2010, there are 25 of the original refugees, 5 children born in the U.S., one new refugee, and two who have moved to Westville from a nearby city, totaling 33. Many Karen families have resettled to the Midwest, especially Nebraska, in order to gain employment in the region's meat processing and packing factories. This industry, although dangerous, is one of the few where unskilled and illiterate immigrants can gain employment at a decent wage (Champlin and Hake 2006; Pachirat 2008). Other families moved to Colorado and upstate New York. The lack of economic security was the major reason for their migration from Westville.

### *Relations with Church and State*

Contrary to popular perception, while the Christian minority (itself primarily made up of Baptists and Seventh Day Adventists) has been at the forefront of the Karen political movement, the majority of Karen are Buddhist-Animist (Smith 1991). The majority of families relocating to our research site in the United States were Christian, but there were a small number of Buddhist families and a single Muslim family. In this sense, our sample is unrepresentative of the Karen population in general but seemingly consistent with the Karen who have been resettled elsewhere in the United States. State contracted resettlement agencies have historically relied on and encouraged on community volunteers to meet the needs of the refugees. Organized sponsorship programs which enlist and monitor the support of churches, individuals, families, and corporations can be immensely beneficial to all parties (Wright 1981: 167-8; Ives 2007: 60; Nawyn 2006:1512-3). Congregational sponsorship and support has always played an important role in resettlement and while there is no

suggestion that the intentions of churches and church members are anything other than benign, that the State has absented itself from the process of integration of its future citizens is cause for some concern. However, as the State heavily relies on increasingly underfunded and overburdened resettlement organizations to meet the complex needs of today's refugees, a number of consequences including an overreliance on informal and unsupervised voluntary support from the community follow (Sargent et al 1999). We have witnessed some disconcerting evidence that access to certain services may be dependent on membership in particular churches.

The Karen in Westville were initially welcomed into several different churches in the area, including a Baptist church practicing a religion very similar to that of many of the refugees. However most of the Karen chose to attend the services given by a church affiliated to the Horizon Christian Fellowship. This particular church does not claim membership in a particular branch of Christianity, but appears to be broadly Evangelical. Several members of the church became very involved with the Karen, including "adopting" several of the families. Church volunteers organized donation drives, gave their time to take families to doctor appointments, grocery shopping, and various cultural and recreational trips such as to zoos and museums. Not long after the Karen were settled in Westville problems arose between the refugees and the local resettlement organization. Some of the families became confused and frustrated by the frequent broken promises of agents, their lack of communication with refugees and a variety of other grievances. Although the affiliate organization was evidentially struggling to meet the needs of the Karen, the organization did not recruit or monitor any of enthusiastic volunteers who came to work closely with the refugees. Many of the volunteers felt that the needs of the newly resettled refugees were being neglected, but the volunteers from the Horizon Christian Fellowship church became especially involved, advocating on behalf of the refugees, insisting on attending meetings between the resettlement organization's case workers and the Karen, speaking to the local media, and advising the Karen on how to deal with state requirements. A contentious relationship developed with the refugees left in the middle. The affiliate organization was reluctant to interact with members of the church and excluded them from the meetings with family members.

The influence of this particular church can be observed in other areas of the lives of the Karen. Within the first year of their migration to Westville, two Karen babies were born. Surprisingly, members of the church were present in the delivery room for each baby. The first baby

was named Joseph and the second baby was named Christopher. These names are quite unusual for the Karen, and the two boys became the first Karen living in Westville to be given Christian names. Another woman who became pregnant in that first year also initially wanted to terminate the pregnancy, but a member of the church explicitly dissuaded her from doing so. As we noted above, most of the Karen who came to Westville were Christian but there were also a few Buddhist and Muslim Karen. The Muslim family did not attend religious services, although there are a few mosques in the city. One Buddhist man did go to the Christian church with the other families. In an interview with one of the authors, a church member related the story of the man's conversion. During a church service, as the congregation was singing a song about "Jesus's love," the man began to cry. When she asked him why he was crying, he responded that he wanted to Jesus to love him too.

Perhaps the most unusual involvement of the church relates to its treatment of Nam Bah, a 9 year-old transgendered individual who was born a boy but who felt, acted and dressed as a girl. The pastor told her that she could not come to church dressed as a girl. The church stated that this decision was made as a result of the discomfort of other church members. Church officials also refused to allow her access to either the male or female restroom. Nam Bah was understandably upset and refused to go back to the church. Currently, there a few Karen who still attend this church regularly, most Karen still in Westville now attend services at another church with more liberal views.

## **Conclusion**

Although the Karen have undoubtedly faced enormous challenges during the resettlement process, one cannot ignore the substantial benefits it has brought about. Employment, education, and healthcare continue to be significant challenges for resettled populations. Yet, from our observations, the Karen have made significant progress. Many now drive cars, have leisure time, and have begun to settle into the routines of American life. Contrary to popular to belief, refugee populations like the Karen typically don't become dependent on public assistance (Franz 2003). Despite the best efforts of resettlement agencies to disperse refugees across the U.S., there has been a notable agglomeration of Karen refugees into a small number of population centers, especially in the Midwest and the South. Although secondary migration is not unique to Karen refugees, the U.S.

resettlement program is ill-prepared to deal with this natural and expected movement. While those Karen who choose to join preexisting communities may be more likely to find employment and support, the benefits they are entitled to as refugees do not follow them to their new location (Brick et al 2010: 13). This naturally raises the question of whether the resettlement apparatus is fulfilling its responsibility to integrate refugees into the local population. It also challenges whether the current strategy of dispersing refugees across the country is the most efficient one.

In addition, the presence of overlapping, but underfunded, institutions in the United States makes coordination of the resettlement process difficult. This decentralized approach means that agencies are inconsistent in their level of provision (Brick et al 2010:12). There is a greater need for language capability and other resources, which are supplied at the local level. Although the public-private partnership model of resettlement is by no means unique to the U.S., what is unique is the extent to which it relies on voluntary organizations for the domestic portion of the resettlement program. This in itself is not a weakness as *volags* and their affiliate organization have successfully resettled most of the refugees living in the U.S. Unfortunately, these organizations are so underfunded and overburdened that they are in turn required to rely on churches and volunteers to supplement services they are unable to provide. We are not the first to find that churches replace the social networks left behind by migrants. Those who are supported by churches are often better off in terms of employment, language, emotional support, advocacy, and friendship networks than those who do not have membership in such a community. Religious groups also foster integration with Americans (Wright 1981; Ives 2006). With benefits such as these, we are not proposing the removal of volunteer support; far from it. Rather the solution appears to be greater monitoring of the volunteers. According to the Department of State, resettlement agencies are not allowed to proselytize, but there is no such mandate for the volunteers who supplement resettlement services. Refugees with whom we spoke reported feeling obligated to attend church services because of social support that they received; nor are we the only ones to have such a finding (Smith-Hefner 1994). Refugees may inadvertently become highly constrained in terms of their religious freedom because of their dependence on the services these organizations provide. While this approach presents state and federal agencies with a short-term cost saving the longer term implications for refugee populations and the communities into which they are resettled are uncertain and further research needs to be done.

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