
RI BULLETIN

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Tham Hin: Resettlement as a Durable Solution for Burmese Refugees

Two successful programs to resettle refugees from Thailand have shown the Royal Thai Government, the United States, and United Nations authorities that resettlement is a strategic and durable solution for displaced communities in Thailand. Based on lessons learned, it's now time to initiate resettlement programs for select populations of Burmese refugees within Thailand.

Tham Hin refugee camp, in an isolated, mountainous area about two hours west of Bangkok, is an obvious target for a resettlement program. Tham Hin refugees suffer from lack of land, severe overcrowding, and extreme limitations on movement beyond the camp's boundaries. The population of ethnic Karen, a majority of whom are Christians, fled together from Burma in 1997. Since then the registered population has reached almost 9,000 packed into a 16-acre camp. Despite extreme crowding, Tham Hin is clean and extremely well organized under the direction of the Karen Refugee Committee.

However, the crowding causes social instability and psychological problems for the camp residents. There are also sanitation and health concerns that stem from the overcrowding. Each family, which averages seven to ten people, lives in an area of approximately five square meters with just one meter of separation from surrounding homes. Tham Hin occupants complained to Refugees International about the lack of space, saying that it causes a lot of fighting between family members and among camp children. The use of firewood for cooking in such close quarters causes respiratory problems in 55% of the population. The inability to move freely beyond 300 meters of the camp severely limits the refugees' ability to seek jobs outside of the camp. If arrested by the Thai authorities, one could face deportation. Thus, residents depend on relief agencies for basic survival.

Two successful models have helped to convince the Royal Thai Government (RTG), the U.S. and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees that resettlement can lead to a durable solution for all parties involved. An ongoing program to resettle approximately 15,000 Laotian Hmong refugees to the U.S. from Wat Tham Krabok, a refugee camp at a Buddhist temple outside of Bangkok has led to positive collaboration by the RTG, the U.S. and the UNHCR. The ability of UNHCR and other implementing agencies to manage the "pull factor" at Wat Tham Krabok has shown the RTG that it is possible to run a resettlement program without provoking an unmanageable influx of new refugees.

Second, the RTG allowed the UNHCR to register vulnerable urban refugees, many of whom were democracy activists in Burma, as “persons of concern.” About 4,000 will qualify for resettlement. The UNHCR is resettling this group to Norway, Australia, the U.K and New Zealand, along with the U.S. Though the resettlement program for urban refugees is currently small, it is a promising sign that other countries are willing to protect Burmese democracy advocates, thus building an international coalition for resettlement.

Tham Hin residents need long-term, durable solutions to alleviate their deteriorating living conditions and provide opportunity for work and education, which are basic human rights. The refugees at Tham Hin are eager for solutions that will better their lives. Camp representatives estimate that one third to half of the population would like to be resettled in a third country. Sixty-one families have already applied for resettlement in the U.S. to join family members there. Two families left for Australia last month and Canada is currently processing one case. Four to five other families have expressed interest in resettlement in Australia. Camp residents have noticed that 400 refugees from the Burmese Student Center, who live in a separate area of the camp, have been given the opportunity for resettlement because they are political activists. Thus, there are tensions in the camp because not everyone has been given the same opportunity.

Tham Hin makes sense as a resettlement target for several reasons. First, it is the most crowded, least humane of the Thai camps holding some 140,000 registered refugees from Burma, where a 42-year civil war has been particularly harsh on the Karen and other ethnic groups. Second, recent political changes in Burma have made many refugees less optimistic about the possibility of repatriation. Third, many families at Tham Hin already have family members in the U.S. and other countries, so that resettlement will enable family reunification. Fourth, the RTG and UNHCR are in the process of re-registering the residents of Tham Hin, giving them an accurate list of who is in the camp. Fifth, Tham Hin is an isolated, closely guarded camp, which means that it would be relatively easy to prevent new people from flooding into the camp to take advantage of a resettlement program, thus assuring the RTG that resettlement won't trigger a new refugee flow.

The U.S. boosted refugee resettlement to 53,000 in fiscal year 2004 from 28,000 in FY 2002 and 2003. While the increase is impressive, the U.S. is still falling short of President Bush's announced resettlement goal of 70,000. Continued resettlement of refugees from Thailand, where large numbers of refugees have lived for years, in well-run, but tightly controlled camps, is a logical step toward meeting the President's resettlement goals.

Therefore, Refugees International recommends that:

- The Royal Thai Government, the U.S. and other countries, along with UNHCR, focus on Tham Hin as the next refugee population eligible for resettlement.
- If resettlement from Tham Hin is successful, the RTG, UNHCR and U.S. expand the program to other Burmese refugees in Thailand.
- The U.S. Congress provide the State Department with the funds necessary to meet the President's resettlement goals.

Refugees International president Ken Bacon and development associate Ghazal Vaghedi recently returned from surveying refugee camps in Thailand.