

# Burmese refugees find new hope and work in the west

**Julie Power**

MORE than a dozen Burmese refugees who failed to find steady work in Sydney have done what many other long-term unemployed refuse to do: go west.

After three years of unsuccessfully looking for steady work in Sydney, refugee Gay Htoo Paw from the Burmese Karen community travelled to Western Australia in search of work, first to Perth and then to Albany, where he landed a job at an abattoir owned by Fletcher International Exports.

Before moving to Australia, Mr Paw and his family spent 10 years in a refugee camp on the border of Thailand and Burma, struggling to find enough food to feed his family.

So when the *Herald* asked Mr Paw if the decision to move his family of six 3290 kilometres west in search of work, he shrugged it off. "It was nothing," said Mr Paw.

Since Mr Paw made the move, another five Karen families have followed his lead, with more than a dozen young Karen men and women finding work at the abattoir.

Mr Paw and other members of the community paid for the move themselves.

In contrast, only 559 unemployed people out of a possible 4000 have taken advantage of the federal government's \$29 million pilot scheme, Connecting People with Jobs. It provides a subsidy of as much as \$9000 to help workers from areas of high unemployment to move to mining and agricultural areas which desperately need workers.

The Karen community has proved a surprising source of labour for the Albany abattoir's general manager, Greg Cross, who thought he'd tried everything over the years to recruit workers.

For a couple of years, labour shortages were so bad that the plant could only work one shift. Now he says skilled workers are being poached by industries who serve the mining industry.

When asked if he'd employ more Karen refugees like Mr Paw, Mr Cross said: "Crikey, yeah, I've got to."

Mr Cross said it was hard to get people to move. "People say a lot of Australians won't get off their bums and have a go, but that's changed a bit," he said.

"I don't think it is as bad as it was two decades ago. But the hardest part is relocating. WA is a long way from the eastern states."

The Karen workers were "tremendous workers", said Mr Cross, who said they'd integrated extremely well, quickly establishing community gardens in Albany.

Because most of the Karen are farmers, they were highly motivated to move from Sydney to towns where they could grow their traditional vegetables, said Gary Cachia, a community development officer at the NSW Service for the Treatment And Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors.

He said many found their lives in Sydney's south-west suburbs harder than when they were in refugee camps. They couldn't afford the rent, the cost of living was high, and they couldn't grow their own food.

'The hardest part is relocating. WA is a long way.'

**Greg Cross, employer**

