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Oldest Burmese Group

The Karen community seeks Australian haven

This year 2,600 refugees from Burma (Myanmar) will settle in Australia, the largest number ever. Most will be members of the Karen ethnic group. Their arrival represents a significant increase in the Karen population in Australia, and more than doubles the total number of arrivals from Burma in the last five years.

Transitions speaks with community elder and National President of the Australian Karen Organisation, Mr Mahn Orlando, about how they are faring in Australia and the struggle for self-determination in their homeland.

The second largest cultural group in Burma, the Karen have been fighting for their autonomy since the country gained independence from the British in 1948. The first of Burma's eight major ethnic groups to settle in this South East Asian land, the Karen arrived more than 2,700 years ago.

While there are no official figures, it's estimated that there are between seven and 11 million Karen people living in Burma or just over the border in Thailand. Until recently the Karen have been living in three regions of Burma, including the Delta and Pegu areas. However, war, forced removal and persecution, have concentrated the population in the central mountain ranges on the Thai/Burma border.

Traditionally the Karen are animists, believing that spirits inhabit natural objects in the environment. However, most have now adopted Buddhist or Christian beliefs,

while those in more remote areas retain their traditional animist practices.

In Burma, the Karen are forbidden from speaking, reading or worshipping in their own language. They are officially discriminated against in employment, and often have to move to remote regions just to get work.

For years, the Karen have been victims of a vicious and sustained campaign to destroy their way-of-life and hopes of democracy and self-determination. The very early days of their struggle were peaceful. However, the Karen soon took up arms against their oppressors after the government attempted to quash their dreams through violent means.

Since the 1970s various governments have attempted to isolate the movement and its supporters by cutting them off from

raped, while others have been imprisoned without trial or following unfair trials.

In the high altitudes of Burma, the Karen are forced to flee into the jungle to escape the violence. During the monsoon season they hide without shelter, food or medical care, while torrential rain makes it almost impossible to run.

Estimates of how many Karen have escaped over the border to Thailand vary, but Australian Government figures put the number at more than one million.

There is little hope for the people living in the United Nations-run refugee camps. Many are still very basic. Families live in tent-like structures with tarpaulins as roofs.

Although children can attend school, there are no jobs once they finish their studies. They are not allowed outside

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food, information and financial support.

Since the notorious military junta came to power in 1988 violations of their human rights have intensified. Villages have been bombed, burned or otherwise destroyed, the Karen forced from their homes, their food and crops destroyed and their way of life totally disrupted. Many Karen have been arbitrarily killed or

the UN designated area. Most have been living in the refugee camps for ten years or more. For many of the young adults, living in a refugee camp is the only life they have known.

Only in the last two years has Australia accepted significant numbers of refugees from Burma. A small trickle that started about 20 years ago is now a steady flow.

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OLDEST BURMESE GROUP

About 100 Karen families are living in NSW, almost all of them in south-west Sydney.

Others live in Victoria and Western Australia. For the first time a group of 50 newly arrived Karen has just settled in Brisbane.

Most Karen arriving in Australia come with their families, which are typically larger than Australian families. The Karen generally have three, four or five children. Mr Orlando estimates that up to half of the families coming to Australia will have lost at least one member to the fighting.

Like many refugee and migrant communities before them, Karen parents and community elders are concerned for the welfare of their youth. Although very few young Karen people have gotten into serious trouble in Australia, Mr Orlando and others in his community wish to keep it that way.

"If the youth aren't doing well there is no future," he said.

"We want to bring up our children in a good way, to give back to this country."

"[The young people] enjoy the freedom. They've got extra time on their hands but without activities they might go the wrong way."

The Karen community are using a variety of strategies to prevent problems from developing between generations, or between Karen youth and other young people.

In Guildford they organised a youth seminar where the police talked to adolescents about drugs. They also wish to organise sporting activities but at the moment have no meeting place.

"Language is one of the main problems. The children get irritated at school. African children's communication is better than the Karen's," Mr Orlando said.

"Sometimes the [Karen] boys get offended and they can't express their feelings so they burst out and punch other boys. We try to encourage them to complain to a teacher if there is a problem



but they can't because of the language barrier."

Education is a big issue for both parents and children. Almost all the Karen in Australia want more education.

For some Karen parents, particularly those that came out on a 'Women at Risk' visa, supporting their children's education is problematic. They have limited education themselves and are unable to help with their kids' homework.

The Karen community have set up a homework support group in the Karen Baptist Church on Sundays but they would like to do more. Now they are looking for volunteers to give children and young people individual attention at a more regular homework club.

While Mr Orlando is elated about the increased intake of refugees from Burma, he is concerned that interpreting services may find it difficult to meet the demand. Already there is a shortage of Karen interpreters, and many in the ethnic group are unable to communicate in English or Burmese. Often, Mr Orlando and others in the community are called upon as volunteer interpreters.

Like most refugees, the Karen are trying to gradually deal with the effects of their experiences in Burma. Some have trouble sleeping, suffer from nightmares

and are anxious or depressed. They long for the land and culture they left behind. Other people become easily irritated and find small things can turn into large arguments.

Years spent in refugee camps or isolated in border villages have also led to some health problems. Teeth problems have resulted from poor dental care and about one third of families have been exposed to hepatitis B. Some Karen also have eye problems as a consequence of the trauma they have suffered.

While cultural adjustment is always difficult, Mr Orlando believes that generally speaking the Karen are doing well. "We want to express our thanks for the assistance given to refugees. We are very happy with the help," he said.

The Karen's hospitality and generosity to others was exemplified in the short time Transitions visited Mr Orlando at his Fairfield home. Laid on the table were delicious biscuits and tea.

A family, recently arrived from the refugee camps of Thailand, was staying with Mr Orlando, his wife and seven children. In between our discussions, Mr Orlando answered the telephone, helping to solve the various problems of other members of his community. ■