



STORIES OF FORCED MIGRATION: FROM BURMA TO AMERICA

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ABSTRACT

“Sir, this is a Buddhist festival. I can not serve you alcohol. It is not allowed at a Buddhist festival.” The drunken Sergeant replied with a swift blow to the man’s face with the butt of his rifle. This is how one young refugee’s story begins. This project investigates the lives of Burmese refugees living in and around Atlanta, Georgia. How are they assimilated and how do these refugees achieve a successful life after being uprooted from their homes and tossed into a foreign land? Unstructured interviews and sessions of participant observation allowed the study participants to tell their stories of refuge. They were interested in telling others about the inhumane treatment of Burma’s people by the Army Regime that now controls their country. They told stories of daily life within Thailand’s refugee camps. Many Burmese refugees lived illegally in Malaysia where they were exploited. The Malaysian government forced each person to buy their way out of deportation and arrest, only to promise them the freedom of sleeping, still illegally, in a one room flat that housed twenty other men, women, and children. These refugees survived these difficult conditions often without running water, heat, or air conditioning. These monstrosities have been occurring for well over 20 years, and it is time that the rest of the world comprehends what is taking place in Southeast Asia.



Figure 1: Sharing of Rations inside Refugee Camp



Figure 2: Living Quarters Inside Camp



Figure 3 : Refugees From Burma Now Residing in Roswell, GA



Figure 4: Buddhist Monks Inside of a Refugee Camp



Figure 5: All 14 States and Provinces of Burma

FINDINGS

According to statistics taken from the US State Department, over two million refugees from an array of different ethnic minorities have been forced to flee from the tyranny of Burma’s Army Regime. Many people in the Western world have no concept of Burma, geographically, economically, or culturally. A handful of people, made up of scholars, politicians, and refugee resettlement workers, seem to have the most thorough understanding of the economic and humanitarian crisis taking place in Burma, resulting in almost nothing being done to stop the Army Regime from committing acts of robbery, rape, and torture on a daily basis. Most all refugees agree that life has been close to impossible since the 1980s for all of Burma’s people. The majority of people fleeing Burma wish to stay in their homeland, but have been given no other choice for survival. They are forced to take their chances in a refugee camp or live illegally in another country until the United Nations can promise them a safe haven in a new home away from home. Reactions to calling America “home” vary widely across the board, depending upon age and ethnicity. The one thing all the displaced have in common is an anomalous story of survival and a great challenge ahead. For those who choose to remain in Burma, the only hope for freedom, lies in educating the outside world.



Figure 6: Karen Refugee Camp in Thailand



“I want you to know that I love my wife. I haven’t seen my family in 11 years. I just want to call my wife. I want to let her know that I am in America.”