

10,000 refugees leave Thailand in biggest resettlement programme

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Karen refugees from Myanmar (Burma) in Tham Hin Refugee Camp bid farewell to fellow refugees headed for resettlement in the United States last October, part of 10,000 who have been resettled from Thailand under a UNHCR programme. © UNHCR/K.McKinsey

BANGKOK, Thailand, July 27 (UNHCR) – More than 10,000 refugees – mostly from Myanmar – have now left their temporary homes in Thailand to start new lives in third countries, as the world's largest resettlement programme picks up steam.

"After many years of living in closed camps with limited opportunities for education and no opportunities to work, finally refugees have hope for a new life filled with exciting opportunities in a new country," said Jeffrey Savage, Resettlement Officer in the UN refugee agency's regional office in Bangkok.

Since the UNHCR programme to resolve one of Asia's most protracted refugee problems began in January, 2005, 10,078 refugees have left Thailand, mainly from the nine refugee camps along the Thai-Myanmar border. The 10,000th refugee departed last Tuesday. The camps are home to 140,000 refugees – ethnic minorities who fled fighting and oppression in Myanmar (Burma) over the past 11 years.

The largest numbers of refugees are departing for the United States, which made an open-ended offer in 2005 to take ethnic Karen refugees from the camps in Thailand. So far, 4,876 have gone to the United States, settling in places like Syracuse, New York; Phoenix, Arizona; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Fort Wayne, Indiana and Dallas, Texas.

Departures for Australia since January 2005 total 1,774 refugees, and another 1,269 have left for Canada. Other resettlement countries for Myanmar refugees are Finland, Great Britain, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, New Zealand and Sweden.

"We are very grateful to the U.S. and other countries for offering these opportunities and for their commitment to durable solutions for these refugees, who do not have the option of settling in Thailand," said Savage. "Obviously, most refugees would prefer to go home, but for those from Myanmar, this is unfortunately not a possibility either. So resettlement is

their one durable solution."

Savage said UNHCR is making good progress in extending the resettlement opportunity to more of the refugees in the nine camps. Last week the refugee agency completed its initial mass registration of applicants for resettlement from Nupo and Umpium camps, the third and fourth camps to be included in the U.S. offer. Departures for the United States from Tham Hin camp began last year, and departures from Mae La camp began in May this year.

Departures are picking up, with additional refugees leaving Thailand every week. More than 3,800 Myanmar refugees are scheduled to depart Thailand between now and the beginning of October, and the number is expected to rise even further.

"What's really gratifying is to see the change that hope of resettlement has made in the camps," said Savage. "An air of excitement has replaced resignation and hopelessness. You see lots of smiles on the refugees' faces these days."

In addition to the large-scale departures under the U.S. programme, small numbers of refugees from as far afield as Africa, who had been stranded in Bangkok and other Thai cities, have also left to start new lives in third countries.

*By Kitty McKinsey
in Bangkok*

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