

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT IN THAILAND: THE CASE STUDIES OF MAE LA, UMPIUM AND NUPO CAMPS

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Abstract - This study aims to analyze the procedures of refugee resettlement in Mae La, Umpiem and Nupocamps that are on the Thailand and Myanmar border. With so many varied and unique factors that are involved in the process of the resettlement and the systems in which are uniquely confined to Thailand. It will also provide exact data from all refugee countries and the yearly percentage quotas from those countries. Also included in this research are participating country requirements for refugees which include medical, admissibility and the decision making process.

Keywords - Refugees, Camps, Resettlement, Mae La, Umpium, Nupo, Thailand, Myanmar

I. INTRODUCTION

Refugee resettlement in Thailand has been an ongoing operation in the nine camps in Thailand, beginning in 2004 and ending for the most part in 2014. In Mae La camp alone, between 2005 and 2011, 22,270 refugees had departed to third countries (UNHCR). Despite decades of experience with hosting millions of refugees, Thailand's refugee policies remain fragmented, unpredictable, inadequate and ad hoc, leaving refugees unnecessarily vulnerable to arbitrary and abusive treatment. Thailand is not a party to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951 Refugee Convention) or its 1967 Protocol. It has no refugee law or formalized asylum procedures. The lack of a legal framework leaves refugees and asylum seekers in a precarious state, making their stay in Thailand uncertain and their status unclear (Human Rights Watch, 2011).

Resettlement entails admitting refugees with a permanent resident status in the country of resettlement. UNHCR (2004:2 - emphasis in original) states, "The status provided should ensure protection against *refoulement* and provide a resettled refugee and his/her family or dependents with access to civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights similar to those enjoyed by nationals". UNHCR sees resettlement of Burmese refugees as a tool ensuring protection for the refugees as well as providing a durable solution to end the prolonged encampment - warehousing - for a growing number of refugees. The other durable solutions are volunteer repatriation to the first country and integration in the country where the refugee sought initial protection (second country). Resettlement addresses the special needs of refugees that cannot be adequately met in the second country. It is also a practice in which third countries share burdens and responsibilities. (Berg, 2009, p.26). It should be noted that only refugees that were registered by the Thailand Provincial Administration

Board (PAB) during 2004 are eligible for resettlement to a third country. All other refugees arriving after 2004 are known as "new arrivals". This is done so as to halt or at least diminish what is known as a "resettlement pull." The term refers to that if persons already living in Myanmar get information that they could get an opportunity to be resettled to a third country. Then the host country, in this case Thailand, would be inundated with persons seeking an opportunity to leave Myanmar. The resettlement process starts with a public meeting in the refugee camp arranged by the UNHCR field office where it is informed about the number of places offered by a resettlement country and its criterion of selection. The refugees are told to 'think about it.' A registration is held some weeks later where refugees 'come forward' to UNHCR staff to express their interest. Not all Burmese refugees in Thailand who are offered a possibility to resettle have come forward and expressed their interest in going to a third country (Berg, 2009, p. 28). The UNHCR then prepares a list of those with family reunification priorities or those at risk (usually the elderly or single women with children).

A delegation from the resettlement country comes to the refugee camp to conduct interviews and decide who will be accepted for resettlement. It has to be understood that it is the resettlement country that makes the decision on whether a refugee will be accepted for resettlement based on its own regulations and procedures. It has been maintained that some countries have stated potential for integration as a criterion for selection, based on an assessment of professional and educational background (Berg, 2009, p.33).

II. MAE LA, UMPIEM AND NUPO REFUGEE CAMPS: BACKGROUNDS AND RESETTLEMENT STATISTICS

2.1 Mae La

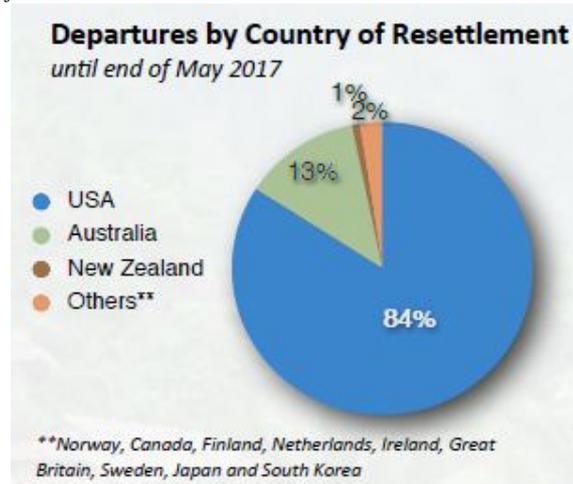
Mae La is by far the largest of the nine camps, with a population of over 42,000 people. Mae La is also known as 'BehKlaw' or 'cotton fields' in the Karen/Kayin language. The name refers to the agricultural activities around which Karen/Kayin leaders negotiated permission for refugees to cross into the area in 1984 (TBC, 2008). The camp was originally established following the fall of a Karen National Union (KNU) base near the Thai village of Mae La on the border in 1984, with a population of 1,100. After the fall of Manerplaw (KNU headquarters in Karen/Kayin State) in January 1995, a number of camps were attacked in cross-border raids and the Thai authorities began to consolidate camps to improve security (TBC, 2008). Mae La was designated as the main consolidation camp in the area. In April 1995, Mae La increased in size from 6,969 to 13,195 due to the closure of five camps to the north – Mae Ta Waw, Mae Salit, Mae Plu So, KlerKho and KaMawlayKho and the move of HuayHeng later in October of the same year (TBC, 2008).

The camp has been the focus of several military attacks. It was infiltrated by Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) troops in 1997 with support from Burma Army units. The DKBA is a faction of the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) which split off and aligned itself with the Burma Army in 1994. There have been no incursions since then, although a mortar shell landed in Section A5 in March 1998. Every dry season, this area is quite tense with concerns relating to camp security – threats of armed attack and/or attempts to burn down the camp (CCSDPT 2008).

Over the following year, the camp doubled in size again to 26,629 as those lost in the move came back into the camp. In March 1997, some people were relocated to Mae La following the closure of Huai Bone camp and again in February 1998 when Shoklo camp was closed (TBC, 2008).

Due to its size, Mae La has a wide range of educational opportunities and is considered a center of study for refugees, so the current population includes a few thousand students who come to study in the camp (some from other camps, but most students come from Burma/Myanmar). They are registered only as temporary inhabitants (TBC, 2008).

Since 2008 mobile phone coverage has been available to the camp, and this has also facilitated privately-run Internet services in the community. A year later, the camp was connected to the mains electricity grid. The camp office and most health, education and social centers, as well as a number of households now have access to 24 hour electricity (TBC, 2008).



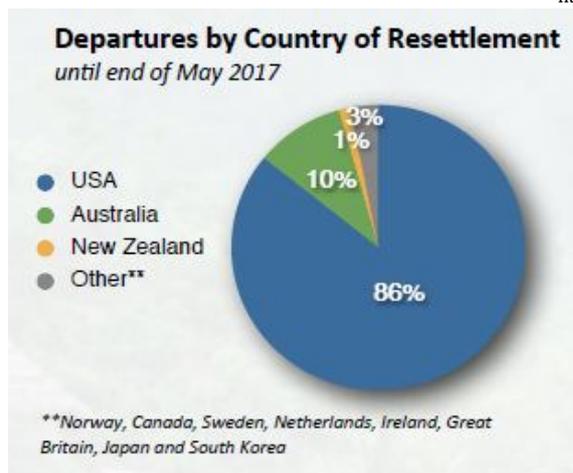
2.2 Umpiem Camp Background

Umpiem camp was established in 1999 to accommodate refugees relocated from Huaykalok and Mawker which were subject to cross-border attacks at that time, requiring the transfer of their residents to a new and safer location (TBBC, 2008). In March 1998, Wangka camp was 80% burnt to the ground and 4 people killed, the camp had also been attacked in 1997 and 1996). The decision to locate the new camp near a Hmong village called Umpiem Mai was made by the Thai authorities (CCSDPT, 2008).

Umpiem was initially a harsh environment with little tree cover, torrential rain and a cold climate (the altitude is over 1,200 meters). The camp is situated on very hilly terrain and there was a significant danger from soil erosion particularly during the rainy season (CCSDPT).

Over the first year, the camp saw some significant programs initiated to ensure the integrity of the environment and to help promote a more pleasant living area. Catholic Office for Emergency Relief and Refugees (COERR) and UNHCR surveyed the area and developed tree-planting programs along with soil erosion projects. Water supply provided by the American Refugee Committee (ARC) is available in all sections of the camp, however as new arrivals build houses higher up the slopes their availability to piped water is compromised. Nonetheless, the water supply for the camp is so far sufficient even during the hot season (CCSDPT).

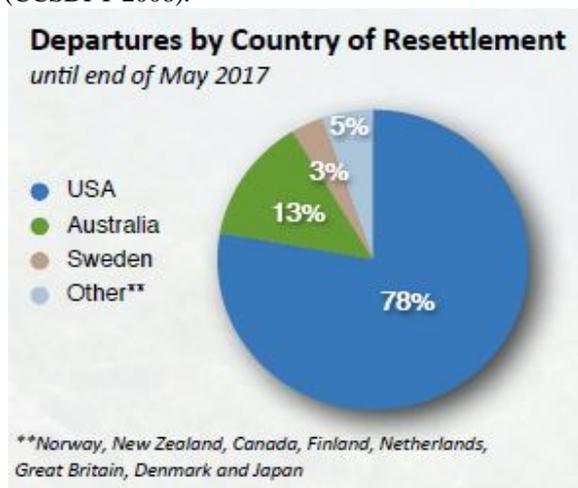
In August 2009, mobile phone coverage was made available to the camp, and this has also facilitated privately-run e-mail and Internet services in the community. One year later, in September 2010, the camp was connected to the main electricity grid, with the camp committee and most health, education and social service centers now having access to 24 hour-a-day electricity (CCSDPT).



2.3 Nupo Camp Background

Nu Po camp was set up in March 1997 after a major offensive during which the Burma Army took control of Duplaya District in Karen State. It was established to consolidate the existing refugee populations of Meteroke and Baw NerHta camps (both were set up in 1992 and had populations of 4,595 and 2,078 respectively) and to house new arrivals fleeing from the current offensive. The original caseload was predominantly of Karen ethnicity, with a significant Muslim contingent (CCSDPT 2008).

Currently, due to its isolated location, the camp is off the mains electricity grid, although the camp office, health, education and social service centres in the camp have access to power from electric generators. Hydro electricity is also widely generated in the camp, mainly to recharge vehicle batteries to power household lighting. Several privately-operated mobile phone and internet services exist in the camp (CCSDPT 2008).



CONCLUSION

The refugee resettlement program in Thailand is a unique situation and the only one to be conducted in this manner. Referring to research question one, to be

eligible for resettlement the refugee must be registered by the PAB in 2005 as stated in chapter one of this research. The Thai government was correct to assume that the resettlement program would draw other persons from Myanmar to its borders in hope of fleeing a repressive government or simply wanting to start a new life. Hoping and incorrectly assuming that another PAB registration would take place, those refugees arriving after 2005 are still residing in the camps as of 2017. The UNHCR and the IOM are the predominant organizations to take a central role in the resettlement process. Research question two is addressed in chapter one of this research. A PAB registered refugee must first approach the UNHCR and register for the resettlement program. After being interviewed and counseled, the UNHCR will advise the refugee which country is available at the time. In chapter four of the research, the U.S. overwhelming accepted more refugees than all off the other third countries combined. If approved, the IOM would arrange medical exams, orientation and travel arrangements. Approximately 52,000 refugees were resettled in the three camps examined in this research. Research question three is studied in a yearly basis in chapter four. The peak years of submissions and departures are 2006-2007 respectively. The U.S resettled approximately 85% of the refugees from Thailand, with Australia resettling approximately 13%.

Resettlement policies greatly vary from country to country as stated in chapter five of this research. Research question four is addressed in chapter five. Each resettlement country has their own specific resettlement criteria. The countries differentiate mostly in medical criteria. For example, Australia has a very strict medical criteria policy, disqualifying any person with a serious medical condition. On the other hand, the U.S. allows persons with treatable serious medical conditions and would not disqualify any person for that reason.

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