

FEARFUL & FORGOTTEN

Young Karen refugees tell asia! about their plight.
BY TERESA CHEONG

Karen refugee Saw Edwin Kya* was only three years old when the Burmese army raided his village in 1985. His mother quickly bundled him into a basket and darted into the jungle, leaving behind their precious poultry and thatched bamboo hut. It was a cat-and-mouse "game" which his tiny Karen village of 20 families played repeatedly with the Burmese troops since the first raid.

As a young child, Edwin cheerfully welcomed the skirmishes as exciting, adrenalin-pumping, joy rides into the jungle. He recalled,

"Ma carried me in a basket. I was so happy at that time because my Ma carried me. I did not have to walk."

As he grew older, these "excursions" turned into flights of terror. The villagers often stayed holed up for a month or more in secret hideouts in the surrounding mountains. "When we hid in the jungle, we could not make any noise. So we killed the chickens and dogs. Sometimes, we left our home at night. Sometimes, during the day. The most difficult was at night because we had no light. Even if we had light, we were not allowed to use it. If the Burmese

soldiers saw us, they would shoot us".

Another Karen refugee, 21-year-old Naw Mary Aye* witnessed her first raid on her village in 1995 when she was only 10. "The Burmese soldiers came to my village. They threatened the villagers and killed some of them brutally; they burnt the barns and slaughtered our animals. Whenever they entered our village, we had to escape and flee to the jungle for our safety. If we didn't give them what they demanded, they would threaten us with guns," she said.

The relentless raids to "loot, burn, kill and destroy" were meant to instill fear among the Karen villagers, forcibly displace them and remove any shred of support for the guerilla Karen army. For over 50 years, the Karen National Union has waged a losing, secessionist war against the ruling Burmese military government.

Poverty, hunger and fear of further persecution drove thousands to leave the Karen state. In 1994, 12-year-old Edwin left his village with an uncle, leaving behind his parents and a few siblings. After several months of vicious attacks, Mary's family abandoned their village and crossed the Thai-Burmese border. It was a treacherous two-week journey across a rugged, mountainous terrain. They risked being killed or blown up by landmines planted by Burmese soldiers before reaching the border camps.


"We carried blankets, some clothes, kitchen utensils and food for the journey...we had to sleep on the ground, there was not enough food...There were many children who were my age or younger who found it very difficult to endure such a horrible and dangerous journey,"

Mary recalled.

Between Edwin and Mary, they have chalked up about 20 years of camp life. They had no access to life outside the refugee camp, no chance for higher education, no right to dignified work, no legal status. With no end to the political impasse in sight, what does the future hold for this generation of young Karens who grew up in a refugee camp? Will they ever have a chance at a normal life like any other young person in the world? Or will they waste away into oblivion?

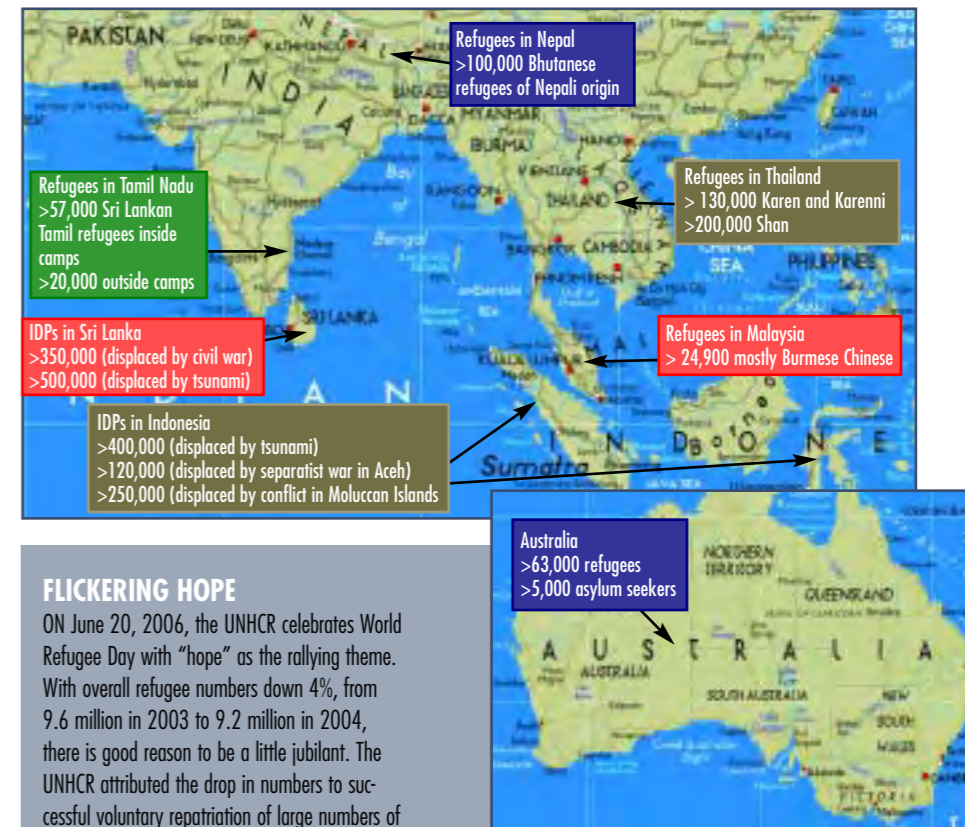
The present situation remains woeful. Peace talks have stalled. Renewed raids have been reported. To forcibly repatriate when conditions of security and protection are not met, is a violation of a refugee's basic human rights under the international refugee law. The UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights upholds gallantly that "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights," and "they are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."

If "in the spirit of brotherhood," we regard a refugee as a fellow human being, there is really, only one right thing to do: Give these forgotten refugees a lifeline.

"As a refugee, I need help from friends of the outside world. I ask them to open their eyes and see what is happening and respond to it. Without outside help, we cannot survive; we can never fulfil our dreams" says Saw Edwin Kya. 

* Not their real names

A group of Singaporeans are helping the Karen refugees. For more information on how you can support these forgotten refugees, go to <http://www.lifebridges.com.com/helrefugees.htm>



FLICKERING HOPE

ON June 20, 2006, the UNHCR celebrates World Refugee Day with "hope" as the rallying theme. With overall refugee numbers down 4%, from 9.6 million in 2003 to 9.2 million in 2004, there is good reason to be a little jubilant. The UNHCR attributed the drop in numbers to successful voluntary repatriation of large numbers of Afghan refugees from Iran and Pakistan to Afghanistan, and returns in South Africa and West Africa.

At the porous Thai-Burmese border, however, over 130,000 Karen and Karenni refugees continued to languish in bamboo camps. Another estimated 200,000 Shan refugees eked out an illegal, subsistence existence outside the camps. With repatriation back to Burma and local integration into Thailand ruled out as viable options at this point in time, and peace talks floundering, it would be another protracted wait for these Burmese refugees. Over in Sri Lanka, the UNHCR reported the return of 10,000 refugees from Tamil Nadu. However, renewed tension between the government forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) would most certainly derail the pace of future voluntary repatriations.

Refugees were part of a larger worldwide problem of forced displacement.

Growing in number were internally displaced persons (IDPs). Unlike refugees whose basic human rights were enshrined in the 1951

Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, IDPs had limited protection as they resided within their countries.

In the Asia Pacific, major IDPs came from Sri Lanka (about 350,000 from previous civil war and 500,000 from the tsunami), and Aceh, Indonesia (over 500,000 from the tsunami and the previous separatist war).

According to UNHCR estimates, there are about 30 to 34 million refugees, IDPs, returning refugees and stateless persons exiled from their homes or countries in the world today. With traditional resettlement countries closing their doors to asylum seekers and refugees, where can they go? Voluntary repatriation may be the only durable and viable solution in the future. But for repatriation to succeed, root causes for displacement have to be resolved; safe passage home has to be guaranteed; and reintegration back into society properly managed.

UNCHR urges developed nations to offer the forcibly displaced hope and passage to new life. Let's hope it will not fall on deaf ears this time.