Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal

The United States has launched a program to resettle tens of thousands of Bhutanese refugees from refugee camps in Nepal. The refugees, almost all ethnic Nepalis from southern Bhutan, have been living in camps in eastern Nepal since they were expelled from their homes in Bhutan more than 16 years ago. The refugees are unable to return to Bhutan or to settle permanently in Nepal.

Of the more than 100,000 refugees in Nepali camps, the United States will consider for resettlement at least 60,000. The first small group of refugees is expected to arrive in the United States before the end of 2007, with larger numbers anticipated by March and April 2008.

This Backgrounder provides Reception and Placement (R&P) agency staff and others assisting refugee newcomers with an overview of the Bhutanese refugees to help them prepare for the refugees’ arrival and resettlement needs. The Backgrounder briefly discusses the causes of the refugee problem, explains the need for third-country resettlement, and describes the characteristics of the refugee population.

Causes of the Refugee Problem

The great majority of Bhutanese refugees are descendants of people who in the late 1800s began immigrating to southern Bhutan—lowland, malarial-infested regions shunned by the Druk Buddhist majority—in search of farmland. There they became known as Lhotsampas (“People of the South”).

Contact between the Druk in the north and the Lhotsampas in the south was limited, and over the years, the Lhotsampas retained their highly distinctive Nepali language, culture, and religion. Relations between the groups were for the most part conflict free. Under Bhutan’s Nationality Law of 1958, the Lhotsampas enjoyed Bhutanese citizenship and were allowed to hold government jobs.

In the 1980s, however, Bhutan’s king and the ruling Druk majority became increasingly worried about the rapidly growing Lhotsampa
work and earn a living. Only a small number of refugees have been able to acquire legal citizenship in Nepal. This occurs through marriage or descent.

With neither repatriation nor local integration a realistic possibility for the great majority of refugees, resettlement to a third country, such as the United States, has emerged as the only durable solution to the 16-year-old problem. The plan to resettle the refugees has been a divisive issue in the camps. While many welcome the chance to begin new lives in other countries, a group of politically active refugees opposes the resettlement plan, saying that repatriation to Bhutan is the only acceptable solution.

Characteristics of the Refugee Population

Camp Demographics

Approximately 107,000 refugees reside in seven camps in eastern Nepal: Beldangi-I, Beldangi-II, Beldangi-II Extension, Sanischare, Goldhap, Timai, and Khudunabari. A few hundred refugees are living outside the camps.

The population is nearly evenly divided between males and females. Children under 18 make up a little more than 35% of the population, with nearly 8% under the age of 5. Adults age 60 and older make up nearly 7% of the population.

Ethnicity, Language, and Religion

Almost 97% of the refugees are ethnic Nepalis. The non-Nepalis include the Sharchop, Drukpa, Urow, and Khenpga ethnic groups. Nearly all refugees speak Nepali as a first or second language. UNHCR estimates that about 35% of the population has a functional knowledge of English.

Of the refugee population, 60% are Hindu, 27% are Buddhists, and about 10% are Kirat, an indigenous religion similar to animism. The percentage of Christians in each camp varies from 1% to 7%.

Need for Resettlement

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), many Bhutanese refugees say they want to return to their homes in Bhutan. Despite this desire—and despite numerous high-level meetings between the governments of Bhutan and Nepal to resolve the refugee crisis over the past 16 years—Bhutan has not permitted a single refugee to return home.

Local integration has not been possible for political reasons. Moreover, Nepali government policy denies the refugees two basic rights that are prerequisites for local integration: freedom of movement and the right to
Gender roles are distinct and clearly defined. Girls experience heavier household workloads than boys, a distinction that continues into adulthood. Women generally do not have equal access to information and resources and do not enjoy equal decision-making authority in the family and the community. In certain social groups, divorced and widowed women have a low position within the extended family and often must raise children without the support of family members. A female victim of sexual abuse or rape and her family typically face ostracism and harassment by the community.

Ties to the United States
The Bhutanese community in the United States is extremely small, with an estimated 150 Bhutanese living in areas surrounding Atlanta, New York City, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C. As a result, almost none of the refugees have family ties in the United States.

Diet
A typical meal for the refugees consists of rice, lentils, and curry. Some people abstain from meat. Because of the Hindu belief that cows are sacred, Hindus do not eat beef, and as a result it is generally not available in the camp. Refugee camp residents commonly eat chicken and goat.

Exposure to Modern Amenities and the West
The camp population includes refugees with little exposure to urban amenities and very limited knowledge of life in the West. Refugees cook on solar rice cookers and with charcoal; most will not be familiar with modern cooking appliances and practices.

Traditional Practices that May Conflict with U.S. Customs
In addition to the occasional practice of polygamy, arranged and early marriages are a feature of traditional culture. Traditional medicine practices exist alongside modern medicine. Among Hindus, animals are sacrificed during festivals and marriage ceremonies.
Resettlement Considerations

Refugees approved for resettlement will undergo an intensive 3-day/15-hour pre-departure orientation to prepare them for their first few months in the United States. Cultural Orientation (CO) sessions will be held initially at the Damak Office of the International Organization for Migration in eastern Nepal. It is envisioned that once conditions allow, 3-day CO courses will be held in the refugee camps with a 1-day refresher class to be held at the transit center in Katmandu before departure. Based on CAL’s Welcome to the U.S. guide and video, the CO curriculum will cover the following topics: pre-departure processing, role of the resettlement agency, housing, employment, transportation, education, health, money management, rights and responsibilities, cultural adjustment, and travel.

For rural refugees who have lived for years in camps with little opportunity to work, employment will be a challenging experience. English language training will be an important need for many within this population, who will arrive in the United States with little or no English. Some refugees will have completed secondary school and will arrive with aspirations for higher education.

The refugees are reluctant to be separated from extended family members and may prefer to adapt to their new surroundings amid strong and supportive family relationships.