

Statement  
Of  
Anastasia K. Brown  
U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops  
On  
FY 2008 Refugee Admissions  
(Burmese Refugees)  
To  
Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration  
U.S. Department of State

June 6, 2007

I am Anastasia Brown, the Director of Refugee programs for Migration and Refugee Services of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. I would like to thank the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration for calling this public hearing. I will focus my remarks primarily on the situation of Burmese refugees.

### **Burmese Refugees:**

Unfortunately there is no progress on the situation within Burma since my testimony last year. If anything the situation has continued to deteriorate. The Burmese military has continued its offensive against ethnic minorities causing even more people to flee into Thailand and other countries.

For the past two decades, the military regime in Burma has targeted ethnic minorities with policies of ethnic cleansing and eradication of religious minorities. Entire villages have been displaced from their land and churches have been destroyed. Persons have been forced into slave labor, conscription, and have experienced torture and systematic rape. We should take note that the current regime in Burma seized power from a democratically-elected government, and has held the elected leader under house arrest for many years

It is important to note the entire population of uprooted Burmese stands at an estimated 1.5 million. Of that total, as many as 800,000 are internally displaced within Burma while about 700,000 are refugees located in neighboring countries.

Of the neighboring countries, Bangladesh hosts about 150,000 Burmese refugees, mostly ethnic Rohingya. Of those, only 20,000 are in the two camps operated by the United Nation's High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), while the rest are outside the camps with no official status and living in difficult conditions. The regime in Burma does not even consider the Rohingya to be an ethnic minority of Burma, they are classified as foreigners. The situation is dire and UNHCR registered cases are beginning to take flight by boat to Thailand and Malaysia. About 60,000 ethnic Chin from Burma live in Mizoram State, in the eastern half of India. India considers this population to be illegal and will not grant UNHCR access to them. Smaller number of Burmese Chin and other ethnic minorities live as urban refugees in New Delhi and are extremely marginalized and vulnerable. MRS/USCCB and other refugee organizations have long advocated for the resettlement of the Burmese in New Delhi.

An estimated 25,000 Burmese refugees and asylum-seekers, mostly ethnic Chin and Rohingya, live in Malaysia, and they, too, live in extremely difficult conditions. Those that are in more remote areas have little access to the UNHCR.

Thailand hosts the majority of Burmese refugees. According to recent statistics, more than 450,000 refugees and asylum-seekers reside in Thailand. Of those, approximately 140,000 live in 9 camps along the Thai-Burma border, most of which are of the Karen and Karenni ethnic groups. Unfortunately many of the 8,000 unaccompanied minors living in camps, remain unregistered, or were designated as "students" and therefore have no access to the current

resettlement initiatives. There are also an estimated 200,000 ethnic Shan refugees living in Thailand with no legal protection and no access to the camps. The remainder of the refugees in Thailand are living outside camps in various rural and urban settings.

### The Option of Third Country Resettlement for Burmese refugees

There are three durable solutions for refugees in the world: 1). repatriation to their home at such time as it is safe to return; 2). permanent resettlement in the country of first asylum; and 3). resettlement to a third country. Because of the ongoing situation in Burma, which has lasted for over twenty years, it is highly unlikely that a large scale repatriation will occur in the near future. For political and economic reasons, the Thai government, as well as the governments of other neighboring countries, has been unwilling to permanently accept the Burmese refugee population. The only real solution to the plight of many of the Burmese refugees is resettlement to a third country, such as the United States. This option would provide them an opportunity to start their lives and the lives of their families anew.

We are grateful to PRM for expanding processing dramatically over the past year by offering resettlement to those refugees in the Tham Hin and Mae La camps in Thailand and accepting larger numbers of Burmese refugees from Malaysia. We encourage PRM to continue this effort with continued processing in these camps and others in Thailand and accepting even greater numbers from Malaysia.

The Department of State exercised its discretionary authority to determine that the material support bar is inapplicable to many of the Burmese minorities during the last fiscal year. Unfortunately the current legislation does not allow the extension of this benefit to actual members of the resistance groups. As a result many families have been divided or have decided not to come forward for resettlement. We are still not reaching many vulnerable, worthy refugees. We encourage all parties to continue to advocate for a comprehensive solution to the problem.

We remain concerned for the situation of large numbers of unaccompanied minors in Thailand and smaller but very vulnerable numbers in Malaysia. We urge the US government to continue working with UNHCR and NGOs to pursue Best Interest Determinations for these children, which should not be done only in the context of resettlement, but should include that option when appropriate:

### **Resettlement Recommendations:**

We support the expansion of resettlement of Burmese refugees in FY08. Some possible groups for consideration include:

- Thailand – Continued expansion of resettlement to other camps
- Malaysia – Continued expansion of resettlement including inclusion of the Rohingya.

- India – Designation of Chin in New Dehli for group processing and continued work with the government of India, UNHCR and NGOs to explore the possibility of extended processing of Chin in Mizoram state.
- Bangladesh – Resettlement of vulnerable Rohingya should begin as soon as possible, with possible consideration of a group processing referral for the future.

Lastly let me mention that we continue to be concerned for the situation of the Hmong in Thailand and the Montagnards in Cambodia. In Cambodia we were discouraged by PRM's decision to no longer extend consideration to those Montagnards who do not meet the strict UNHCR refugee designation. We believe that many refugees who would otherwise have met the US standards will now be returned to Vietnam. There have already been reported instances of double flight.

The situation of the Hmong in Thailand continues to be problematic. We understand that the Thai government continues to pursue the policy of returning Hmong refugees to Laos. There is no system in place to monitor the situation of these returnees. We urge the US government to continue advocating with the Thai government and UNHCR for a comprehensive solution to the situation of the Hmong in Thailand.