

August 28, 2006

No quarter for refugees
Alleged terror ties keep asylum seekers out of Everett

By Krista J. Kapralos
Herald Writer

EVERETT - People who would have become some of Everett's newest residents have been turned away because they are considered terrorists under the Patriot Act.

Last week, residents of Everett's most visible refugee enclave celebrated their different cultures with a party at the Grandview Community Center.

Meanwhile, thousands of ethnic Karen refugees from Burma, also known as Myanmar, languished in squalid refugee camps in Thailand.

Some of those refugees were to have made Everett their new home this summer.

More than 10,000 Karen have been granted status as refugees because of the oppression they've endured for more than 50 years under a military government. But now, U.S. immigration officials allege they're connected to terrorist organizations.

Some of those refugees were to be resettled in Everett, said Jan Stephens, director of Lutheran Community Services NW, an organization that resettles refugees in Western Washington.

They've run afoul of the Patriot Act of 2001 and the REAL ID Act of 2005, which further tightened asylum laws.

The Karen are not alone. Many people trying to escape Cuba, Liberia, Colombia and other troubled countries are classified as having provided "material support" to terrorists. In reality, many were forced to aid violent soldiers who passed through their villages.

Women in Liberia who were raped by soldiers have been told that they offered aid to rebel groups, experts say. Cubans who resisted Fidel Castro's communist regime have been denied entry here because of supposed affiliation with clandestine terrorist groups.

Many Karen refugees, who make up the largest group affected by the legislation, may have aided the Karen National Liberation Army, a militia that fights the country's military junta.

The Karen were granted refugee status because they fled from the Burmese government, but because they may have helped the rebel soldiers who fight against that government, they aren't admitted into the U.S., said Thaug Htun.

Htun is a member of a democratic government that operates in exile on behalf of Burmese.

"Their resettlement in the United States should not be delayed because of the confusion," Htun said.

Htun spent five years in a Thai refugee camp.

"There is no electricity and no communication," he said. "These are makeshift bamboo tents, and they are very crowded."

The refugees aren't allowed to attend school or seek work. Until they are resettled in the U.S., they will spend their days waiting.

U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has granted a waiver to a small number of refugees.

Joe Pitts, a Republican congressman from Pennsylvania, recently introduced a bill that would alter the language of current laws to exempt refugees who have helped groups that have been mistakenly labeled as terrorist organizations and would protect those who were forced to help those groups.

"This would be a statutory fix," Gave Neville, Pitts' chief of staff, said. "People who are not really terrorists would not be arbitrarily categorized as such just because of the place they live or the things they've been forced to do."

Neville said Pitts will reintroduce the bill at the next congressional session in January if it is not addressed before the end of the current session in September.

In the 25 years before the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the U.S. accepted an average of 90,000 refugees each year, according to Human Rights First, a refugee advocacy group. Since the attacks, the annual quota of 70,000 has yet to be met.

Van Dinh Kuno, director of the Snohomish County Refugee and Immigrant Forum, is hopeful that Burma's most desperate refugees will soon arrive in the United States. When that happens, Snohomish County could receive anywhere from several dozen to several hundred people.

"These decisions often change at the last minute, even when they are in the airplane coming to the United States," she said.

What she does know is that Everett should have been home to the Burmese families by now.

Grandview Community Center, the social hub of a cluster of government-owned duplexes and triplexes in north Everett, was abuzz Thursday at a party held to celebrate the many cultures in the neighborhood.

Clamoring children converged on a table covered with sweets. They shouted at one another in Russian, Arabic and MaiMai, an African dialect.

More than two-thirds of the families in the neighborhood are refugees from Iraq, the former Soviet Union, Africa and other places, said Teena Ellison, family services coordinator for the Everett Housing Authority. The demographics change constantly, as families move away from subsidized housing and new refugees arrive.

"This year, that neighborhood will change yet again," Kuno said. "We will have more African refugees, there will be the Burmese, and some Iranians. The picture in Everett will change once again."