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Posted on Tue, Jul. 05, 2005

Burmese grow into new, foreign home

Refugees find place to be free from fear

By Masaaki Harada
The Journal Gazette

In the past decade, political refugees from Myanmar, formerly called Burma, have made Fort Wayne their home.

Thousands of Burmese dissidents have settled in the Summit City, and it continues to be the destination for other Burmese who have escaped to refugee camps in Thailand.

Despite being thousands of miles away, Burmese in Fort Wayne and other U.S. cities have never given up their fight for democracy in their homeland while struggling for their own survival in a culture, language and tradition unfamiliar to them.

As Fort Wayne has become their home away from home, the Burmese community has established four Buddhist temples, started several businesses, created a social network to help each other and put 128 children in city schools.

How large is the local Burmese population?

Myanmar is a multi-ethnic country with more than 100 culturally distinct groups.

The Central Intelligence Agency estimates that of the country's 43 million people, 68 percent are Burman. Minorities include: Shan,



Cathie Rowand/The Journal Gazette

Ya Za Oo, 5, left, Thuya Aung, 8, Min Won, 8, and Wahida Ma, 8, sing "Happy Birthday" to a classmate on Saturday, at a class for Burmese children with the Indiana Reading Corp. at Centivire Village Apartments.



Tin Htway



Tin Aye



Tun Oo



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about 9 percent; Karen, 7 percent; Rakhine, 4 percent; Chinese, 3 percent; Indian, 2 percent; Mon, 2 percent.

The term "Burman" refers to a specific ethnic group. Burmese refers to all people living in the country, regardless of ethnicity.

In Fort Wayne, the Burmese population is mostly Burman, Mon and Karen.

Though larger cities, including Los Angeles and San Francisco, have more Burmese, Fort Wayne is known as a major destination for politically active expatriates. Pro-democracy activism by Burmese in Fort Wayne makes the city one of the most popular destinations for dissidents in the military-ruled country.

There is no official tally of Burmese in Fort Wayne, but Burmese leaders estimate it's reaching close to 3,000. Many Fort Wayne Burmese participated in the uprising against the military rule in 1988 as students, intellectuals, workers and farmers.

Fort Wayne continues to be a magnet for more Burmese because of sponsorships offered by local churches and other organizations as well as Burmese settlers.

Burmese Buddhists build places to worship

Most Burmese are Buddhist. Buddhist Burmese built four temples in Fort Wayne – Jetavan Vihara temple on Sylvia Street and Dhammarekkhita Monastery on Hartzell Road by Burmans, and Mon Vihara Temple on McCormick Avenue and Mon Buddhist Temple on Decatur Road by Mons.

The temples function not only as places for worship but for practicing monkhood. Buddhist



Burmese children head home after attending a summer class with the Indiana Reading Corps at Centlivre Village Apartments on Saturday. About 130 Burmese children attend Fort Wayne Community Schools and many face social and language barriers.



Chan Htaw, 11, left, and Willie Moe, 8, draw while attending a summer class for Burmese children with the Indiana Reading Corps at Centlivre Village Apartments Saturday.



Hti Mu Belloc



Maung Maung Soe



Samuel Hoffman/The Journal Gazette

Monks chant prayers during a service at the Mon Buddhist Temple Wednesday. Such temples help the Burmese adjust to their new home.

Burmese men are encouraged to stay in a temple and be trained as novice monks, even for a short period in their life.

Many minorities who largely live in Myanmar's mountainous area were converted to Christianity by missionaries during British rule.

New Life Lutheran Church, The First Baptist Church and Christ's Church at Georgetown offer services in Burmese.

A small number of local Burmese are Muslim.

Where is Myanmar?

Bordering Bangladesh, India, China, Laos, Thailand and the Bay of Bengal in southeast Asia, Burma regained independence in 1948 after more than a century of colonial rule by Great Britain and brief Japanese occupation during World War II.

In 1962, the Burmese army led by General Ne Win gained power and declared the country a socialist republic, but the economy stalled.

Amid anti-government sentiments following demonetization that made most currency worthless, Ne Win stepped down in 1988 and a group of military generals took over power. In August of that year, the military greeted mass demonstrations in Rangoon and elsewhere with brutal force, killing thousands of people.

Military establishments formed the State Law and Order Restoration Council. The junta promised to have a general election, but continued oppressing dissidents.

In 1989, the State Law and Order Restoration Council changed the nation's name to Myanmar. The junta explained that the name "Burma" belonged to the colonial past.

The opposition has rejected the new name, arguing the illegitimate government does not have authority to rename the country.

Though the name Myanmar is recognized by the United Nations, some governments including the United States continue referring to the nation as Burma.

Burmese leaders in Fort Wayne

The Burmese democratic movement is a collection of groups with diverse visions and ethnicities. Efforts to unify the movement under one umbrella organization have not been successful.

Leaders of some key local organizations are:

Hti Mu Belloc, 60, president of the Burmese Christian Fellowship who presides over the Burmese congregation at First Baptist Church. Belloc, a Karen, also leads the Karens' New Year's festival and helps Fort Wayne Community Schools and the Burmese Community Center as a translator and social worker.

Maung Maung Soe, 40, president of the Burmese Democratic Society. He formed the group after the first international conference on Burmese democracy at Indiana



University-Purdue University Fort Wayne in 1999. He is an extrusion team leader at Nishikawa Standard Co.

Mon Jid, 40, secretary of Monland Restoration Council, spearheads Mons' social and political actions. The council also began Mon language classes for children in Fort Wayne. Mon Jid works as a machine operator at Kautex Textron in Avilla.

Nyein Chan Oo, 40, Catholic Charities refugee resettlement director who has been helping Burmese newcomers establish new lives.

Tin Aye, 53, chairman of the Burmese Community Center. He launched the center at the Centlivre Village Apartments to promote social and educational activism. Tin Aye is a molder at Nishikawa Standard Co.

Tin Htway, 42, general secretary of the Confederation of National Youth for Burma, who organized the boycott of Myanmar products locally and lobbied Chinese, Japanese and other foreign consulates in Chicago to object to trading with Myanmar. He is a teller at a local branch of Wells Fargo Bank.

Tun Oo, 48, chairman of the Fort Wayne branch of the National League for Democracy, was elected to the parliament in the 1990 general election from Kyauk Kyee Township in southern Myanmar. The military junta voided the election in which the National League for Democracy won. Tun Oo is employed at Parker Hannifin Corp. in New Haven.

'They have to run out of the country'

Thein Tun, 70, is one of the first Burmese to settle in Fort Wayne.

He came to study in New York City on a government scholarship in 1957 and was later transferred to Indiana Institute of Technology majoring in engineering.

He decided to stay in the United States when he married an American before the coup by General Ne Win. Thein Tun believed the government would never let him leave the country if he returned.

Thein Tun's daughter, Robin Thompson, may be the most publicly known Burmese descendent.

As a Fort Wayne Police Department public information officer, Thompson frequently speaks to the media.

Though she cannot speak Burmese, Thompson helps the community by serving as the police department's liaison.

"I'm happy in a sense that my dad has connections with the country through the migration of Burmese here. I'm also happy for me, too, because I get to experience a little bit of my dad's culture as well," she said. "In the other sense, I'm sad because a lot of these people are here because they have to run out of the country."

How do refugees get to Fort Wayne?

More than 100,000 Burmese are in refugee camps opened in Thailand along the Myanmar border. Many more are in Thailand illegally.

Those who seek resettlement in the United States have to prove they have been persecuted or are in fear of persecution because of their political opinions. They also need affidavits from acquaintances or organizations in the United States that guarantee their support.

The process, depending on urgency, takes six months and sometimes years.

Resettled refugees' immediate family members left in Myanmar can be admitted to the United States as refugees or be granted asylum. However, the Myanmar government often prevents them from leaving by not issuing passports. Many of them choose to escape to Thailand to get to the American Embassy.

Children face social, language challenges

About 130 Burmese children attend Fort Wayne Community Schools. Many of them were born either in Myanmar or Thailand after their parents were exiled. Others were born in the United States.

Like other immigrant children, Burmese children face difficulties acquiring English proficiency. FWCS has English as a Second Language courses to help them learn the language and keep up with regular classes.

Kyaw Soe, program coordinator of Indiana Reading Corps based at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne, said the environment in which Burmese children have grown up greatly affects their educational achievement.

He became a refugee after joining the 1988 uprising and organizes volunteer tutors for Burmese children.

"Many of them have little or no educational background before coming here. In refuge camps, there is very little education given by the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) or Christian organizations," he said. "They were lost in the system."

Even after settling down in Fort Wayne, most Burmese children do not have much of a chance to speak English before going to school because parents tend to limit their interactions to other Burmese immigrants and they watch satellite TV programs in Burmese, Soe said.

Many children have to repeat grades. The high repeat rate stems from not only language problems, Kyaw Soe said, but also the lack of parents' support for studying because of their poor English proficiency.

Hospitals say they're prepared

Hospitals and emergency responders began preparing for non-English-speaking clients because of the rapid growth in Spanish-speaking residents.

Burmese refugees benefited from some of the multilingual services already in place.

Lutheran Health Network has a telephone interpretation service called Interpretphone. The system links all three hospitals under the Lutheran Network in Fort Wayne to medically trained interpreters around the clock.

At the St. Joseph Hospital emergency room, Burmese who speak little English are given information cards that explain the process they are going through written in Burmese.

Parkview Hospital has interpreters, including those who speak Burmese, as well as a telephone interpretation service similar to the one at the Lutheran group.

The hospital used 17 to 20 hours of live interpretation services for Burmese patients in May alone, spokeswoman Karen Belcher said.

Paramedics at American Medical Response, which provides ambulance services in Fort Wayne, carry a picture card that shows an anatomically correct body. Patients or their families can point to the picture to explain where they are suffering, spokeswoman Lisa Christen said.

Burmese traditions continue in new home

New Year's Day is the most important holiday for most Burmese. The calendar of Theravada School of Buddhism, which is predominant in Myanmar, starts a year in April in the Gregorian calendar.

The Burman New Year's celebration is known as the Water Festival, in which people throw water – a symbol of cleanliness – at each other.

Fort Wayne Burmese celebrate New Year's during in a daylong gathering with traditional music and dances. Many men wear Longyi – a sheet of cloth, running from waist to feet. Back in Myanmar, the celebration lasts three to five days.

Clearing obstacles in employment

The majority of local Burmese work in the manufacturing sector as line workers. Major employers include Nishikawa Standard Co. and BHAR Inc., both auto-parts makers in New Haven.

Both husbands and wives in many Burmese households, including those with small children, work to make ends meet.

The Rev. James Keller, assistant pastor of New Life Lutheran Church, said employment is the biggest challenge for the Burmese.

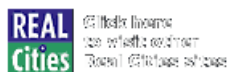
“They cannot use their educational degree from Burma,” he said. “Skills and training are different in Burma.”

Language barriers hinder many Burmese from obtaining jobs other than working in factories. Some Burmese began businesses, but they are largely retail catering to Burmese and other Asian customers.

Little Burma on South Lafayette Street at Rudisill Boulevard sells Oriental groceries and food products. Lucky Burma Gift & Variety Shop at Southgate Plaza is also a Burmese business.

Another grocery store, Asian Market, at 2615 S. Calhoun St. is partly owned by Burmese. A group of Burmese purchased the Japanese restaurant, Yokohama, 5320 Coldwater Road, from the previous owner.

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