

Local

Maryland Burmese refugee arrivals shrinking

By Eleanor Mueller | AP October 19

ANNAPOLIS, Md. — Enamullah Hashim has spent most of his life afraid.

Afraid of the Burmese soldiers in his home village of Kyaukkyi, where he grew up with his parents and siblings.

Afraid of the Malaysian police in Sungai Buloh, where he moved with his wife in 2008. And afraid, after applying for refugee status with the United Nations in 2009, that the process — which would span almost six years — could eventually prove futile.

But after arriving in Frederick, Maryland, on Aug. 5, 2015, those feelings of fear were finally lifted. Hashim, who now lives in Halethorpe, Maryland, with his wife and daughter, says life in America makes him “feel full” for the first time in his life.

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“I feel like a human being here,” Hashim, 38, said through an interpreter. “If I’m not doing anything wrong, there’s nothing to be afraid of.”

Hashim is Muslim, making him a persecuted minority in predominantly Buddhist Myanmar (formerly known as Burma).

From 2009 to this week, 71 percent of Burmese refugees entering the United States were Christian, 15 percent were Buddhist, 10 percent were Muslim and 4 percent were some other religion, no religion or it was unknown, according to data from the U.S. State Department’s Refugee Processing Center. (Statewide data was unavailable.)

Like many of the 531 Burmese refugees who arrived in the state during the last calendar year, he chose Maryland as

his safehaven because he had friends already living here — a community waiting to welcome him.

However, that network is poised to shrink in the coming years.

Once Maryland's largest incoming refugee population, the Burmese are arriving in smaller and smaller numbers; a trend likely to continue given President Barack Obama's lifting of sanctions against Myanmar last month.

"Quite frankly, if you look at it over the last seven years, the Burmese have steadily been the largest nationality we've resettled," said Ruben Chandrasekar, executive director of refugee resettlement agency International Rescue Committee Baltimore, which helped aid Hashim and his family.

"This year is the first time they are not in the No. 1 spot," Chandrasekar told Capital News Service.

For most of the past decade, the Burmese have been the largest group of refugees resettled across Maryland. Of the 9,915 refugees the state has welcomed since Jan. 1, 2009, 2,676 — about 27 percent, the biggest share of arrivals — have been from Myanmar, according to the Refugee Processing Center.

Since January 2009, 126,163 Burmese refugees have come to the United States, according to the Refugee Processing Center.

The state's attractiveness to Burmese newcomers likely stems from its well-established refugee community, Chandrasekar said.

Not only is Maryland politically welcoming and economically prosperous, but it boasts a supportive and robust population of refugees — Burmese and otherwise — that's welcoming to new arrivals.

“They’re coming into existing communities,” Chandrasekar said. “They have churches that support them, they’re networked, they help each other.”

Baltimore boasts the largest Burmese refugee population in the state, with 1,258 arrivals since Jan. 1, 2009. Close behind are Silver Spring, with 351, and Frederick, with 207.

When Hashim was resettled in Frederick, he was over an hour’s drive from the nearest International Rescue Center office in Baltimore. Thus, many of the services he needed — English lessons, job searches, medical assistance — were originally provided by members of the refugee community, he said.

“The community was very, very helpful to me,” Hashim said.

However, this network may soon stop growing.

The stream of incoming Burmese is poised to trickle out; as of Sept. 20, the state had seen just 178 new arrivals so far this year, a mere fraction of last year’s 531.

The decrease is so significant that it likely precludes a complete halt in arrivals, Chandrasekar said.

“I anticipate in the next couple of years, the Burmese will stop arriving,” Chandrasekar said.

The slowing is due to the fact that most Burmese living in Malaysian and Thai refugee camps have already been resettled, Chandrasekar said.

In Myanmar, decades of conflict between various armed ethnic groups have resulted in the deprivation of human rights for millions of its citizens. However, the nation’s recent transformation from a military government into a primarily

Democratic one has meant relative peace and thus, a less pressing need to flee.

While some human rights advocates still critique its slow pace of change (the military still controls some parliamentary seats and various ministries), most populations are now able to survive there without fear of persecution. This progress was highlighted last month with President Obama's decision to lift long-standing economic sanctions against the country in his first meeting with the nation's de facto leader, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

"In part because of the progress that we've seen over the last several months, the United States is now prepared to lift sanctions that we have imposed on Burma for quite some time," Obama said when he announced the move.

The move left some Burmese advocacy groups dismayed.

Some said that without sanctions in place, the Burmese government will not be dissuaded from resorting once more to violence; a likely cause of concern for Maryland refugees with family still back home.

"Refugees here for a long time will certainly be dismayed," said Jennifer Sawicz, a spokeswoman for non-profit Burma Task Force USA. "If they have family left in Burma, I'm sure their fear for their families will increase."

If violence does result, it's possibly the U.S. could once more welcome greater numbers of Burmese refugees, said Simon Billenness, executive director of non-profit U.S. Campaign for Burma.

"If the situation takes a turn for the worst, we could see refugees fleeing from Burma again and taking to the seas again," Billenness said. "We're very concerned."

But with members of the military still wielding significant power, it's doubtful the sanctions will have any impact, Hashim said.

"The sanctions might change, but the people who were in power -- nothing's changed for them," Hashim said. "So it's nothing different for me and my family."

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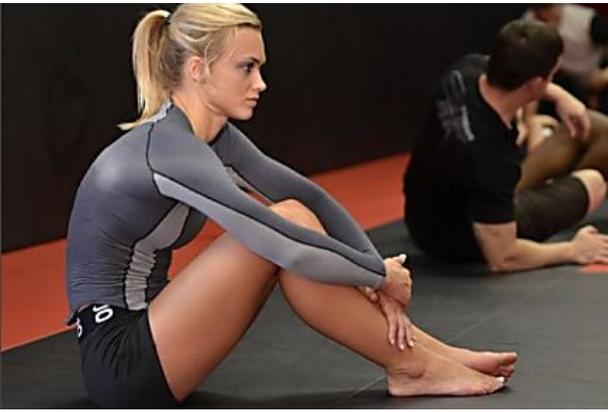
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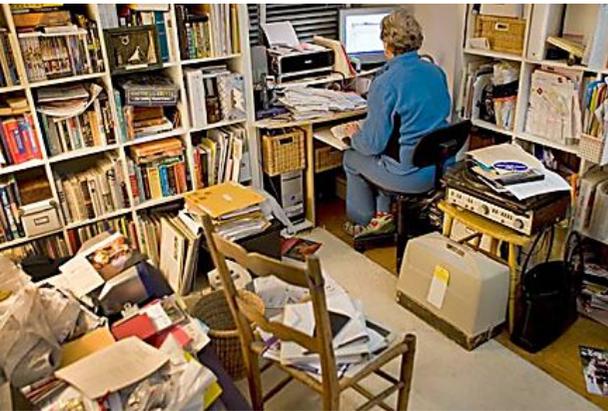
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