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World Refugee Day, June 20th: Reflecting on the Plight of Burmese Refugees in Malaysia

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June 19th and June 20th in my mind are related. The former is the birthday of imprisoned Nobel Peace Laureate and Burma's rightful democratic leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, and the latter is World Refugee Day. On the 19th, Daw Suu Kyi's birthday will be celebrated around the world and used as a way to keep Burma alive in the minds and hearts of the global community through a host of protests and events. The 20th will most likely be marked with less fanfare; and yet, to me, it's an equally appropriate day to actively call to mind the sufferings of the people as we recognize how the tragedy of Burma bleeds well beyond its borders.

*Refugee*

from Burma afraid to go outside in Kuala Lumpur for fear of arrest. Credit: Karen Zusman, 2009

In 2007, in the immediate aftermath of the brutal crackdown on the monk-led protests, I went to Burma to bear witness. I was one of few Westerners able to obtain the visa. As a result I was watched everywhere I went and I was painfully aware that my presence was endangering those who I associated with. Therefore I decided to go to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia to interview recent refugees in order to document what life was like for the ordinary citizens inside Burma. But soon I discovered that the life these refugees have found waiting for them in Malaysia is nearly as tragic as the ones they left behind.

Most of the refugees I spoke with had received official recognition from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. However, Malaysia is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Geneva Convention, which protects the fundamental rights of refugees. As a result, refugees in Malaysia are considered “illegals” with no distinction being made between them and undocumented economic migrants.

These refugees, 90% of whom are from Burma according to the latest UN figures, are denied the right to seek livelihood and safe, appropriate shelter, access health care, or receive education. Children, women, men and the elderly, including those who may be disabled, pregnant or ill, have been arrested, detained, sentenced, abused and trafficked inside Malaysia by government officials.



Refugees

wait outside of UNHCR in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Credit: Karen Zusman 2009



Refugees

recording their stories for "Please Don't Say My Name." Credit: Karen Zusman, 2009

[Please Don't Say My Name](#), a one hour multi-media documentary, focuses around one small group of refugees whom I befriended and who all worked together in a downtown restaurant in Kuala Lumpur.

All of them had frightful stories about life in Burma and why they had to flee: "Kline" lost her father when she was sixteen; he was beaten to death by junta soldiers who accused him of supporting the Karen rebel army and her mother was taken away as a forced laborer for the army. "Sin Yi" fled when the soldiers began kidnapping his friends and taking them away to army training camp. "Htut Kuang" was a ferryboat driver helping people escape into Thailand. He was also forced to flee when Burmese soldiers opened fire on his boat, killing two ethnic Chin who were his passengers. "Aye Aye Cho" told me how the junta came and seized her family farm, and then demanded that she 'entertain' them on a weekly basis. "Jack," who was the refugee I had originally come to record, had been imprisoned and tortured in Burma for educating villagers about HIV and human rights.

After I recorded what happened to each in Burma, I found out what had happened to each in Kuala Lumpur.

Htut Kuang had had the worst experience. Even though held an official UNHCR card, which is supposed to offer protection, he was arrested by the Malaysian police, sent to prison, and then taken to the border for alleged deportation. In actuality, the immigration official who took him there sold him to traffickers at the Thai border. The traffickers sold him again to a fishing boat where he worked as a slave for three years before escaping one night during a terrible storm.

Sin Yi told me that immigration officials had also sold him to traffickers in an incident that occurred just a few months before I interviewed him. He had been arrested at home in the middle of the night in a raid conducted by an officially sanctioned vigilante group called the Malaysian RELA. The RELA are used as an extension of the Immigration Department; as such, they have been given the authority to arrest and detain with seeming impunity, often breaking down doors and cutting gates with chain saws, exhorting money from the refugees, and in some cases, physically abusing and raping them.



Refugees

who have just been arrested in a raid conducted by the RELA. Credit: Karen Zusman, 2009

The RELA raids are the first step in a process that includes prison sentences, caning, and indefinite periods of detention in dangerously unhygienic camps where the refugees report that they are denied medical care and even clean drinking water at times, and they are routinely humiliated and beaten by the guards. These abuses have been well documented by Human Rights Watch and as well as local NGOs, such as [Tenaganita](#) and [Suaram](#).

I recorded numerous accounts from refugees who told me that after serving a period of time in detention they were taken to the Thai-Malaysia border and then handed over to heavily armed traffickers, like Htut Kuang and Sin Yi. Sin Yi told me, “The traffickers say to me, ‘You belong to us. We bought you from Malaysia Immigration for 500 ringgit [about 145 USD]. Now we need to make our money back, plus profit.’” And so it went for the others as well. Those who had family and friends to raise the money were released; those who could not pay the ransom, like Htut Kuang, were sold: the girls and women to prostitution rings and the boys and men to factories and fishing boats.

After a year long investigation into the trafficking allegations, last year the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations published a report confirming that the Malaysian government had been complicit in the selling of refugees and migrants from Burma to traffickers at the Thai-Malaysia border. Shortly after the report was published, the US State Department gave Malaysia the worst ranking, “Tier 3,” in their 2009 Annual Human Trafficking Report, placing Malaysia in the same company as Burma itself, as well as Zimbabwe, North Korea and Sudan.



Refugees from Burma at risk in Malaysia. Credit: Anonymous, 2009

However, the 2010 Annual Human Trafficking Report, which was published just this week, not only elevated Malaysia’s status to “Tier 2,” the report praised Malaysia for their recent efforts in combating the trafficking. Yet, the abuses both by the RELA and by members of the Immigration Department widely continue, according to numerous reports, [the latest was published this week by Amnesty International](#).

There seems to be little sign that the official corruption that leads to the abuse of the refugees has abated, rather, it appears to have taken on different forms. Just last week I received a frantic email that five members from one of the Burmese ethnic community groups I worked with while last there had been arrested and immigration officials had demanded that they each pay 1800 Malaysian Ringgit, or about 600 USD, to the officials or they would be deported back to Burma, the very country from which they had fled to save their lives.

I will be returning to Malaysia later this summer to continue my coverage of the situation for Burmese refugees for the Pulitzer Center. My intention is to focus on the experience of refugee children, many of whom are locked inside rooms while

their parents look for work, or are orphaned and living in their respective ethnic community centers afraid to go outside for fear of arrest by RELA and police, and with no hope to ever attend school or prepare for future employment. I will also continue to cover the injustices of RELA and the conditions in the detention camps.

To learn more about the refugees in this blog post and hear excerpts from the documentary, [Please Don't Say My Name: The Plight of Burmese Refugees Living in Malaysia](#).

For further reference, Amnesty International's report published for World Refugee Day: ["Refugees in Malaysia, Arrested, Abused and Denied Right to Work"](#).



"Kline" recounts why she had to flee from Burma. Credit: Karen Zusman, 2009

In response to my documentary, an independent, responsible travel site, ethicaltraveler.org, has launched a letter writing campaign targeted at the Malaysian Department of Home Affairs. You can take action on their site by [adding your name](#) to their letter.

Stay tuned for more on this story.

Watch the documentary trailer:

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