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A Burmese family's story of multiple arrests, weekly bribes

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In June, the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee Report blacklisted Malaysia for trafficking refugees into Thailand.

Karen Zusman, an independent journalist, was one of few Westerners inside Myanmar in the immediate aftermath of the monk-led protests in 2007. She interviewed Burmese refugees and produced the audio documentary [Please Don't Say My Name: Burmese refugees at risk in Malaysia](#) over the course of five months in Kuala Lumpur.

I met Jack in Kuala Lumpur after the protests in 2007. Jack was imprisoned and tortured for teaching human rights in his country. When he was released from jail, he fled to Malaysia.

I learned that he and nearly 100,000 Burmese who had fled persecution were now held hostage in a country that offered no protection from vigilante groups, police and immigration officials. It was routine to hear refugee stories of mistreatment and physical and sexual abuse.

In January of this year, I returned to Kuala Lumpur but things did not go as planned. I intended to document Jack's story — his English was good, he was articulate, passionate and street smart. He was working in a restaurant in Kuala Lumpur with several other Burmese refugees.

Shortly after beginning to record, Jack's Burmese girlfriend was arrested at the Thai-Malaysian border. She had fled Myanmar to be with Jack in Malaysia because her parents had engaged her to a Burmese soldier knowing the family would benefit greatly from the marriage. The girl was caught at the Thai-Malaysian border and imprisoned in Malaysia. Jack arranged for a friend, John, another Burmese refugee, to meet with the immigration officials at the border who were known to accept payment in exchange for releasing refugees. Malaysian officials took the money. And then arrested John.

Jack lost his girlfriend and his best friend in the same night.

Back in Myanmar, a Burmese soldier arrested Jack's father, an elderly man with a heart condition, who now faced charges for "trafficking" the girl. Jack's brother was arrested trying to leave Malaysia (also a refugee, he had a work permit but no travel documents).

I tried to console Jack the best I could. I tried — in vain — to get John released from prison by repeatedly reporting his arrest to the [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees](#) (UNHCR). John had been registered with the UN and so it was part of their task to release him from prison. But after he completed his sentence he was subsequently transferred to detention camp.

While all this was happening, there were rumors that a U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee Report would soon be published bringing the Malaysian "deportation" (a.k.a. trafficking practices) under extreme scrutiny.

Jack and his friends were afraid that this would mean the trafficking would stop, and they would no longer have the option to purchase back their "freedom" should they be arrested. This was particularly distressing for Jack who felt purchasing his girlfriend from traffickers once she was sold to them by Malaysian immigration was his only hope of saving her from a life as a Burmese junta-wife.

The report, which confirmed the allegations that the Malaysian government had been complicit in the sale of refugees to human traffickers at the Thai-Malaysian border, was made public in early April. Since then, as the refugees predicted, the incidents of trafficking have significantly decreased.

But because the raids by [Rela](#) (Malaysia's citizen volunteer corps) and arrests have not decreased, the detention camps are severely over-crowded. Two Burmese refugees have died as a result of water contaminated with rat urine in a camp in Penang. John called while I was still in Malaysia and told me there were 47 people in one tiny cell with no water supply.

Jack's brother called from a camp in another part of the country and told us that though the monsoon rains had begun they were kept outside with no shelter and were given food to eat off of the mud floor.

Every week for five months, Jack wired money to each camp to pay for provisions such as toothpaste. Jack said the money was also for them to give money to their jailors so they would not be beaten. When Jack took time off from the restaurant to try and visit them, he was fired. Now it's July and Jack's girlfriend has been deported to Myanmar, his friend was released last week and his brother is being hospitalized for a heart condition exacerbated by his time in the camp — he is still in the custody of his Malaysian jailors.

- Karen Zusman

Karen Zusman, an independent journalist, writes about one family caught up in human trafficking of Burmese refugees on the Thai-Malaysian border.
http://worldfocus.org/files/2009/07/th_burma_zusman.jpg

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Karen Zusman (left) with a Burmese refugee
Photo courtesy of Karen Zusman.