



Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services

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Bhutanese Resettlement to the United States

By UNHCR

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1-888-572-6500/ info@brycs.org/ www.brycs.org

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What is Resettlement?

- Resettlement is the movement of refugees from a country where they have sought protection to another country which has agreed to admit them as refugees. The resettlement country guarantees the protection and rights of the refugees, offers them permanent status, and provides an opportunity to become a citizen of that country.

- Resettlement is used to protect those refugees who are most vulnerable in countries of first asylum, such as refugees continuing to face serious protection problems, those with serious medical conditions, survivors of violence and torture, and women who are at heightened risk. Resettlement is also used as a means of sharing the responsibility and easing the burden on countries hosting large refugee populations.



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- An estimated 2.68 million refugees have come to the U.S. since 1975. Over the past 10 years the U.S. has resettled on average 58,000 refugees each year.

Background on Bhutanese refugees:

- There are more than 100,000 Bhutanese refugees living in seven UNHCR camps in eastern Nepal.
- The majority of the refugees are descendents of people who began immigrating to southern Bhutan from Nepal in the late nineteenth century in search of farmland. The region where they settled – a malaria-infested lowland - had been shunned by the majority, Buddhist Druk community and the new residents soon became known as *Lhotsampas*, or people of the south. Contact between the two communities was minimal and the *Lhotsampas* retained their Nepali language and culture.
- In the 1980's, relations between the Druk and the *Lhotsampas* became strained. Concerned that the growing *Lhotsampa* population would create a demographic shift and threaten the traditional Buddhist culture of the Druk, Bhutanese authorities adopted a series of policies known as Bhutanization, aimed at unifying the country under Druk culture, religion, and language.
- Opposition to the policies among the *Lhotsampas* grew and in 1990 culminated in large scale protest and violent clashes with the police and army. In December of 1990, government authorities announced that *Lhotsampas* who were unable to prove that they had been residents of Bhutan in 1958 – when the country's nationality law came into effect - had to leave. Tens of thousands of people fled to Nepal and the Indian state of West Bengal.

UNHCR's Role

- Many Bhutanese refugees have expressed a desire to return home. Despite this – and the numerous meetings between Bhutan, Nepal and UNHCR to resolve the refugee crisis – not one refugee has been allowed to return home.
- Unable to return home or to integrate permanently into Nepal, thousands of Bhutanese refugees are being referred for resettlement to countries such as the United States, Canada and Australia. The United States has agreed to resettle up to 60,000 refugees, with the first arrivals due in the spring of 2008 and continuing over a number of years.
- The resettlement program has become a divisive issue in the camps pitting those who believe repatriation to Bhutan is the only acceptable solution against those who welcome the chance to begin new lives in another country.

For further information:
Tim Irwin
Senior Media Officer
Tel: (202) 243-7623
Mobile: (202) 413-7916
irwint@unhcr.org
www.unhcr.org

- In the U.S., resettlement ceilings and prioritization of groups and nationalities are determined annually by the Administration in consultation with both houses of Congress. This process culminates with a Presidential Determination which establishes the total US refugee ceiling for the year.
- Various US government agencies are involved in resettlement, including: the Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration; Department of Homeland Security, US Citizen and Immigration Services; Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement; as well as eight national non-governmental resettlement organizations (NGOs).

Resettlement Preparations

Refugees approved for resettlement undergo a 3-day orientation course to prepare them for their first few months in the United States. The Cultural Orientation (CO) sessions cover topics such as: the role of the resettlement agency; housing; employment; transportation; education; money management; rights and responsibilities, cultural adjustment and travel.

For many refugees, especially those who have lived in the camps for many years, English language training will be important. Some refugees, particularly younger ones, will have completed secondary school and will have aspirations for higher education.



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