

# Chapter 1: Burma History and Immigration to the United States

## Burma Geography, People, and History

### Geography

Burma is one of the largest countries in Southeast Asia and is approximately the size of the state of Texas (Central Intelligence Agency, 2010). Bordered by China and Laos to the east, Thailand to the south, Bangladesh to west, and India to the northwest (Figure 1), Burma has a vibrant and ethnically diverse population. Burma is estimated to have a population of 48.8 million (Central Intelligence Agency, 2010), although there has been no official census since 1983 (U. S. Department of State, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 2010). The largest cities in Burma are the former capital city of Rangoon, now known as Yangon, with a population of 5.5 million, and Mandalay, with a population of 1.2 million. The capital city was moved by the military junta in 1996 to the city of Nay Pyi Taw, 400 kilometers to the north of Yangon (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2008) and has a population of 200,000 (U.S. Department of State, 2010).



Figure 1. Map of Burma (Myanmar)

### People

Burma's location and fertile lands has made it a crossroads in Asia, as groups have migrated across the country, contributing to its cultural diversity (Smith, 1999). There are seven main ethnic groups that include the Burmans, Shan, Karen, Rakhine, Chinese, Indian, Mon, and other smaller ethnic groups (Central Intelligence Agency, 2010). There are also over 130 unique subgroups within the eight main ethnic groups (Barron et al., 2007). The largest ethnic group, the Burmans, represents 68% of the population. The two second largest ethnic groups, the Shan and the Karen, make up 9% and 7% respectively. The remaining ethnic groups together represent 16% of the population (U.S. Department of State, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 2010).

Burma is divided into states that reflect ethnic divisions. Burmans inhabit seven ethnic divisions and dwell in urban areas in Burma's lowlands. The remaining states in Burma include Chin (bordered by Bangladesh and India in the west), the northernmost Kachin, Kayin (Karen), Kayah (Karenni), Mon, Rakhine (Arakan), and Shan (in the northeastern plains).

This *Guide* focuses on Karen people who are a distinct ethno-linguistic group. It is believed that the Karen people migrated to Burma from the Tibetan region and from Yunnan in China centuries ago. There are approximately seven million Karen living in southeast Burma and approximately 400,000 living in Thailand (Barron et al., 2007). About 140,000 currently live in refugee camps in Thailand right along the border with Burma. Many have recently resettled in the United States from these camps and from Malaysia.

## History

The ethnic groups that are part of modern Burma have lived in the region for centuries or millennia. Burma's history as a unified kingdom dates back to the early 8th and 9th centuries when the Burmans migrated south from the eastern Himalayas and occupied the central plains of Burma and established a dynasty that ruled for almost 500 years (Barron et al., 2007). Over the past 1,000 years, different ethnic groups established kingdoms that controlled what is now Burma at different times until the late 19th Century (U.S. Department of State, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 2010). The British then conquered Burma over a period of 62 years (1824-1886) and incorporated it into their Indian Empire in 1886 with the capital at Rangoon (Central Intelligence Agency, 2010). During this period, the British government practiced a policy of "divide and rule" in Burma by drawing clear lines that established the modern ethnic states, between the Burmans in the plains and the other ethnic minorities in the hills, a practice that exacerbated the historical ethnic rivalries (Barron et al., 2007). Eventually, the ethnic minorities, including Karen persons, became semi-autonomous in their villages with the help of Aung Sang, a Burman, who unified the modern country of Burma and helped to forge the path to independence. In 1948, Burma gained independence from the British (Office of Global Health Affairs, 2009), but General Aung San was assassinated before the new constitution could take effect (U.S. Department of State, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 2010).

During the weak constitutional period from 1948 to 1962, Burma suffered widespread political and ethnic conflict and internal struggle. In 1962, the democratic government of Burma was overthrown by the army and became entrenched in civil conflict and political unrest (Office of Global Health Affairs, 2009). The military led a coup abolishing the constitution and took control of the government. Ethnic minority insurgent and political groups, such as the Karen National Union and the Karen National Liberation Army, were formed which fought to regain democratic participation for ethnic minorities in Burma (Office of Global Health Affairs, 2009).

On August 8, 1988, military forces killed more than 1,000 demonstrators calling for a change in regime. At a rally following this massacre, Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of General Aung Sang, assumed the role of the opposition leader (U.S. Department of State, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 2010). In September 1988, a new military coup established a new ruling junta called the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). In an effort to "restore order," the SLORC sent the army into the streets to suppress the ongoing public demonstrations. An estimated additional 3,000 were killed, and more than 10,000 students fled into the hills and border areas (Office of Global Health Affairs, 2009; U.S. Department of State, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 2010).

In 1989, a cease-fire agreement was made between the SLORC and the armed ethnic groups. Burma gradually began preparing for its first national elections in almost 30 years (Office of Global Health Affairs, 2009). In 1990, Aung San Suu Kyi overwhelmingly won in the elections and assumed the role of leader of National League for Democracy (NLD), the principal opposition party, during this period (Office of Global Health Affairs, 2009). However, the military junta refused to accept the result of the elections and arrested Aung San Suu Kyi to prevent her from assuming power. Since 1990, Aung San Suu Kyi remained under almost continuous house arrest until her release on November 13, 2010 (U.S. Department of State, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 2010). In 1997, the SLORC was abolished and reconstituted as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), but did not cease the control and repression of the democratic opposition (U.S. Department of State, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 2010).

The fight for autonomy and control over their own territories continues today for Karen people. The international community has accused the current regime of committing gross human rights violations, which include execution, destruction of property, forced labor, rape, and torture (Stover et



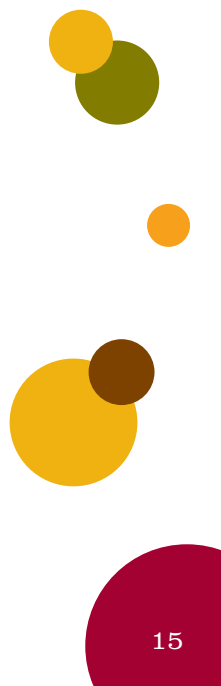
A young boy from Karenni State, Burma, at a refugee camp in Thailand. The Karenni have been living in camps on the Thai-Burma border for years, receiving food and non-food assistance from the international community.  
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al., 2007). These conditions have forced many ethnic minorities, especially Karen, to seek refuge in neighboring countries including Thailand, Bangladesh, and even Malaysia. As early as 1984, Karen refugees began arriving in Thailand. In 2006, there were nearly 110,000 Karen in the Mae Sot area of Thailand (UNHCR, 2006), and 140,000 refugees in camps along the Burma border.


### **Immigration and Resettlement to the United States**

Refugees from Burma have resettled in the United States in waves, with the first group of approximately 1,400 arriving in June 2004 (Office of Global Health Affairs, 2009). Data from the U.S. State Department indicate that half of these early Burmese refugees were Karen, 25% ethnic Burmese, 15% Mon, and the rest were a mix of other ethnic groups (Office of Global Health Affairs, 2009). In 2006, the U.S. government waived restrictions that would allow approximately 9,000 Karen refugees from the Tham Hin refugee camp in Thailand to resettle into the United States (Krause, 2006). Since 2005, the top three states for Burmese immigrant resettlement were Texas, New York, and Indiana.

As demonstrated in Table 1, refugees from Burma have been entering the United States in increasing numbers since this waiver in 2006 was authorized. These data show the states that have the greatest number of refugees from Burma during that time period. Appendix F details the TB screening procedures that are administered to these refugees.



**Table 1**



<b>Fiscal Year Refugee Arrivals from Burma (Top 10 States)*</b>						
<b>State</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>Total</b>
Arizona	67	63	381	542	900	1953
California	93	36	424	519	450	1522
Georgia	16	23	401	574	875	1889
Illinois	20	31	434	639	596	1720
Indiana	185	193	1,066	1,150	1,147	3741
Minnesota	157	121	488	367	370	1503
New York	251	217	1,100	1,321	1,696	4585
North Carolina	86	57	544	837	885	2409
Texas	163	155	1,163	1,457	3,086	6024
Washington	15	13	181	460	655	1324
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,053</b>	<b>909</b>	<b>6,182</b>	<b>7,866</b>	<b>10,660</b>	<b>26,670</b>

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Administration of Children and Families, Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) 2005-2009

\* This includes the states with the largest number of Burmese resettlement during the past five years.