

Refugees from Burma, served by IRC RSC East Asia
Prepared in collaboration with IRC RSC East Asia

The International Rescue Committee's (IRC) Resettlement Support Center (RSC) East Asia Cultural Orientation (CO) program provides cultural orientation to refugees in Thailand, Malaysia, and East Asia. CO participants in East Asia are predominantly from Burma. The majority of CO participants in Thailand are of Karen ethnicity, with large numbers of Karenni and smaller numbers of other ethnic groups also represented. In Malaysia, participants are primarily of Chin ethnicity. The following document profiles each site and includes detailed information about the populations and their environments, as well as an overview of CO classroom activities.

Refugees from Burma: Malaysia

Population and Living Conditions

CO participants in Malaysia are largely Chin, though other ethnic minorities are represented. Recent changes to the resettlement program profile in Malaysia have led to a more diversified caseload.

There are no refugee camps in Malaysia: the country is not a signatory of the United Nations Refugee Convention and does not have an asylum system regulating the status and rights of refugees. As such, refugees from Burma residing in Malaysia are generally considered economic migrants by the government and general populace. The Burmese refugee population is concentrated in and around the capital, Kuala Lumpur (though some live in other Malaysian states and travel to Kuala Lumpur for resettlement processing and CO), and commonly live in overcrowded communal flats in the city, or in jungle shelters. While increasingly less common because of UNHCR outreach, there are still reports of raids on refugee communities by authorities or government sanctioned vigilante groups. More commonly however, refugees in Malaysia are subject to harassment and are arrested on occasion. When arrests or other issues are brought to the attention of CO staff in Kuala Lumpur, UNHCR is quickly notified to rectify the situation.

Financial and other forms of assistance from UNHCR and grassroots community based organizations are limited, making it necessary for refugees to support themselves through

employment. Burmese refugees in Malaysia are employed in various sectors including construction, manual labor, retail, and restaurant work. Due to the illegality of their employment, there is no recourse for justice if they face discrimination or harassment in the workplace.

Cultural Orientation

CO is offered for adults (aged 18 and above), youth (aged 13 to 17), and children (aged 8 to 12). A specialized curriculum is tailored for each group, which takes into account possible low levels of literacy and education. CO classes incorporate critical thinking and active participation. Childcare is provided for children below the age of 8 by highly trained child care providers.

Highly trained and experienced interpreters are on site to provide classes in three languages: Burmese, Tedim, and Lai. CO receives additional support from the UNHCR roster for other required languages. Generally, CO Trainers in Kuala Lumpur conduct training in English, though they are also capable of conducting sessions in Malay.

CO is conducted over a period of four days (a total of at least 24 hours). For many participants, taking this many days off from work can be problematic because of the loss in income and risk of being fired. Dated certificates of CO completion are sometimes enough to satisfy an employer's concerns. CO generally occurs within weeks of departure, both encouraging information retention, and limiting continued employment concerns. Even with employment difficulties and other concerns, CO attendance rates in Malaysia are consistently high; 99% of those scheduled for CO attend class.

CO facilities in Kuala Lumpur occupy four floors of a commercial building, and are easily accessed by several forms of public transportation. The building is equipped with eight modern classrooms, onsite child care facilities, CO Trainer office space, a conference room, an interpreter work space, and mock Western-style kitchen and bathroom facilities. These facilities are used for hands-on lessons on the use, cleaning and maintenance, and safety concerns of kitchens and bathrooms in the United States. The CO site is secure with 24-hour security guard presence. Also, local authorities have been notified of CO activities taking place.

Daily meals and snacks are offered to all CO attendees, as well as daily transportation stipends. Those traveling from out of state receive reimbursement for bus tickets.

Questions, Concerns, and Hopes

Common questions, concerns, and hopes expressed by refugees in Cultural Orientation include:

- *Questions:* Will I be able to move freely from state to state? How can I send for relatives to come to the U.S. when I resettled? What are the opportunities for adults to continue their education? What kind of assistance will I receive and how long will it last? [If] I have experience working, what kind of jobs will be available for me? Can I work the same type of job?
- *Concerns:* Concerns mainly revolve around the well-being of children and their education. Youth are often concerned about working to help support their families. Many are concerned about healthcare.
- *Hopes:* CO Participants have expressed hopes of being free and not having to be afraid of discrimination or abuse from authorities (such as law enforcement or immigration officials). Many participants look forward to education opportunities for themselves and their children.

Strength and Challenges

CO program strengths and challenges

The largest challenge for trainers is managing expectations of resettlement. Young adults often want to continue their education in the U.S., though they realize they may need to work to support their families. Another challenge is trying to balance the expectation of freedom of movement with caution about secondary migration after resettlement. The challenges of working with multiple language groups and interpreters is met with a highly trained and flexible training staff, coupled with a targeted and evolving curriculum designed to be culturally relevant and highly participatory.

An additional strength of the IRC RSC East Asia CO program is a robust monitoring and evaluation system, which includes a CO Monitoring Officer (who has domestic resettlement experience and is rotated annually to ensure a relevant understanding of current resettlement realities), that helps to identify weaknesses in the curriculum and to recognize the training needs of CO Trainers.

Participants' strengths and challenges

Many refugees departing from Malaysia have some familiarity with Western amenities and living standards due to their urban setting in Kuala Lumpur. Because they receive no support from the government, and only limited support from NGOs and community based organizations, refugees have an understanding of the importance of work and self-sufficiency. Many have developed an awareness of the challenges of cultural adjustment having spent time in the general Malaysian population. These strengths are emphasized in the CO classroom.

The urban environment provides refugees access to a variety of resources (the internet, newspapers and periodicals, phone contact with resettled friends and relatives) that allows them to obtain information about the U.S. However, relying on anecdotal accounts for information about the U.S. can sometimes be harmful, as everyone has a different resettlement experience. Therefore, managing expectations is a large component of CO in Malaysia. The refugee population in Malaysia has a strong sense of community, and while this allows them to access various forms of assistance (translation, etc.), they can also become dependent on their communities.

While many have acquired local language skills (such as Malay and Cantonese), some refugees still have little to no command of English. Additionally, education for their children is informal, lacking a fixed or standardized curriculum, and is usually administered by community based organizations and volunteer teachers. Schools are not necessarily accessible to all children. As refugees are deemed illegal immigrants in Malaysia, many may feel threatened and have a negative perception of uniformed security personnel and authorities. Bribing government officials and police has become accepted as a means of protection.”

Refugees from Burma: Thailand

Population and Living Conditions

CO participants in Thailand reside in nine refugee camps, or “Temporary Shelters,” currently housing over 130,000 people, along the Thai-Burma border. Most of these camps have been in place for decades. Eight of these camps are predominantly Karen and are located on the border near Burma’s Karen State. One of the northernmost camps is primarily Karenni and borders Karenni State in Burma. However, many other ethnicities are represented in all camps.

Traditionally most Karen and Karenni are farmers, growing rice, corn, and other crops to support their families. As refugees they are not legally allowed to work outside of the camps, and lack adequate space for large-scale farming in the camps. For this reason, most refugees have been forced to trade their livelihoods for the relative safety and security of the camps. Those who do work within their communities operate small shops or businesses, work in the health or education sectors (which are organized by the refugees with support from NGOs), or with community based organizations and non-governmental organizations operating in the camps.

Due to the protracted nature of the conflict in Burma, and the resulting prolonged refugee situation in Thailand, the camps strive to provide a stable education environment. Most children receive at least a primary education and many continue on to secondary levels. While education opportunities have improved, young people often feel a sense of hopelessness about their future

and long for the freedoms denied by their current situation. There is an entire generation who has now known nothing other than life as a refugee.

Camp houses, simply constructed of bamboo and thatch, are packed closely together. People use charcoal for cooking, collect water from community wells, and generally do not have electricity, unless they have access to a generator. Food rations and other basic necessities are provided by supporting NGOs.

The camps are composed of complex social, economic, and political structures, and are managed by the refugees themselves. The Karen Refugee Committee (KRC) and Karenni Refugee Committee (KnRC), community-based organizations within the camps, are responsible for the overall internal management of the camps. Supporting NGOs coordinate services through a body called the Committee for Coordination of Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand (CCSDPT). The UNHCR's primary role is protection. The Royal Thai Army is responsible for ensuring security around the camp, while the Ministry of Interior (MOI) controls security within camp perimeters.

Cultural Orientation

CO is offered for all ages eight and older, with curricula tailored to meet the particular needs of various populations. Lesson plans take into account possible low levels of literacy and education and incorporate critical thinking and active participation. When necessary, trained interpreters are used in the CO classroom, though many CO Trainers are able to deliver the training in the participants' first language. Trained childcare staff supervises young children to allow parents and older children to focus on CO.

With the exception of two remote border camps, CO is provided in classrooms constructed in the camps. As with other buildings in the camps, the classrooms are made of bamboo and thatch and require a generator to supply electricity. All sites include fully equipped classrooms, a child care room, and toilet facilities. Three sites, including two in camp sites, have a mock kitchen and bathroom; most CO participants have had little or no exposure to Western-style facilities. As in Malaysia, these facilities are used for hands-on lessons.

Refugees departing from the two remote camps receive classroom CO instruction at a transit center near the town of Mae Sot, just prior to their departure. The transit center houses CO facilities that include several modern classrooms, child care space, and a mock kitchen and bathroom.

In camp, CO is generally conducted over a period of five days (for a total of at least 25 hours). At the transit center, CO is facilitated in three days (for a total of at least 20 hours). Daily snacks are offered to CO attendees at all locations.

Refugees are scheduled for CO classes a few weeks ahead of their departure in order to encourage attendance and information retention. Schedule lists are posted a week in advance at CO facilities and on message boards throughout the camps. In addition to posting the lists, people called “Runners” visit individual houses to ensure that those unable to read are aware of their upcoming CO class dates. CO attendance rates in refugee camps are consistently high; 97% of those scheduled for CO come to class.

Questions, Concerns, and Hopes

The refugees’ general lack of freedom and limited exposure to the outside world are reflected in their questions, concerns, and hopes. Common questions, concerns, and hopes include:

- *Questions/Concerns:* How long will assistance last? If I don’t speak English will I be able to find a job? Can I go to school (for older youth)? Can I return to Thailand or Burma someday? What does an American house look like?
- *Hopes:* A better education (and future) for children or self. A chance to work and be self-reliant. Freedom. Citizenship. The ability to speak English.

These common questions, concerns and hopes are targeted throughout CO; hopes are validated, questions are answered, and participants are shown that fears can be addressed through their own actions.

Strengths and Challenges

CO program’s strengths and challenges

CO is facilitated at nine locations in Thailand. The challenge this presents is met by an effective system of scheduling and travel, as well as a robust monitoring and evaluation system that ensures CO curriculum content accuracy and consistency across all classroom locations. Aside from long days, frequent travel and multiple languages, low levels of literacy and education often present a challenge for CO Thailand.

Even more challenging is participants’ unfamiliarity (and sometimes discomfort) with self-expression. Participants are often unaccustomed to the participatory training techniques used in class, and are surprised when their class requires not only sitting quietly and listening, but also talking, sharing, and answering questions. CO Trainers are persistent, however; by the end of the CO session a change has taken place.

Participants' strengths and challenges

Most refugees from Thailand have been through a great deal more than anyone would guess from looking at their smiling faces. They are practiced at the art of patience and hide difficulties well. These are attributes that may have served them well as refugees in the camps, but can be a detriment once resettled.

During CO lessons about how to work with the Resettlement Agency, trainers focus on a few key behaviors: patience, being pro-active, persistence, and being polite. When asked which of these four will be most challenging, participants inevitably list being pro-active. Speaking up or calling attention to oneself is not common or considered impolite for Karen and Karenni, and therefore much of CO is spent on this message. Refugees from Thailand are generally very cooperative and friendly, but can have difficulty communicating their needs or taking actions to meet those needs, which can create challenges for both the refugees and those working with them.