

Community News

The Refugee's Road to Asylum

By Karen Brodsky

One of the questions we at HIAS NC often hear is, "How do the refugees get to Charlotte?" It is a good question and one that is complicated to answer. The process is anxiety-producing for the refugee families and takes them through a maze of government and non-government agencies.

To begin, a refugee is a person who has been forced to flee his or her homeland due to persecution or fear of persecution, war, or civil conflict. An individual's or group's race, religion, ethnicity, or nationality might face suppression or attack, forcing entire communities to evacuate a country, without time to prepare.

Currently, HIAS NC is settling ethnic minorities from Burma, including Chin and Karen; Montagnards from the Central Highlands of Vietnam; Bhutanese from Nepal; Somalis; Iraqis; and religious minorities from Iran, including Baha'is, Jews, Zoroastrians and Christians. All are oppressed in their countries and fear for their lives.

Often, refugees flee into neighboring countries, where they have no legal status and are forced to remain in refugee camps or like the Chin from Burma, go to Malaysia or Somalis who go to Kenya. The fortunate ones take underpaid, and un-regulated jobs in urban settings; many can't obtain any work. Some refugees have lived in camps for more than 20 years.

According to the HIAS website, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), whose main purpose is to protect the rights and well-being of refugees, works to ensure that all refugees have the opportunity to find a safe haven in another country with the option to return home voluntarily, resettle locally, or resettle in a third country. Resettlement is seen as the best option for individuals or groups who would face continued persecution in their home countries and cannot permanently live



Artwork: ZVI MALNOVITZER (b. Israel 1945), "Refugees with Little Girl in Red," 2007. Courtesy of Mayanot Gallery, Jerusalem. www.mayanotgallery.com.

in the country to which they fled.

Fourteen countries currently resettle refugees. The U.S. resettles more than all the other countries combined. The decision of how many refugees the U.S. will accept is made annually by the President, working in concert with the Department of State.

Through a complicated process involving a surfeit of government and non-government agencies, refugees apply for formal refugee status. In addition, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security carefully screens all applicants. Once approved, the applicant has a medical exam and attends cultural orientation classes. HIAS Inc. is one of nine voluntary agencies and one governmental (VOLAGS) that make up the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. HIAS asks for an assurance from one of its many affiliate offices across the U.S. that it will resettle the refugee according to Department of State guidelines.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) makes transportation arrangements, and the costs are borne in the form of a loan the refugee must begin repaying at six months in the U.S. The payments on the no-interest loan are very small but help refugees establish a credit history.

Refugee cases are allocated between the VOLAGS based upon a preset quota system and factors including family and community ties, availability of medical/mental health services, labor markets and cost of living.

Once in the U.S., refugees are eligible for benefits funded by the U.S. Department of State and the Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). Traditionally Charlotte has been an excellent place to resettle refugees owing to the availability of relatively low-cost housing and abundant jobs. Of course, this has changed with the

downturn of the economy. It is taking longer to find refugees employment, much like the general population. Government funds are limited and they run out quickly. HIAS NC relies on donations to fill in the gaps, the generosity of those who supply furniture and housewares, and the time commitment from volunteers. To donate or volunteer, contact Ellen Dubin at 704-535-8803. ☆

Information for this article comes from HIAS.org, website of HIAS Inc., the oldest resettlement agency in the U.S., and from *The Immigration and Nationality Law Handbook*, in the chapter, "The U.S. Refugee Admissions Program: Facts and Fiction, Setting the Record Straight on a Widely Misunderstood Humanitarian Migration Program," by Elissa Mittman of the International Rescue Committee, Mark Hetfield of HIAS Inc., and Amy Bliss Tenney, of World Relief, published by the American Immigration Lawyers Assn., 2009-10 edition.

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Debra van Glish, Tonya Meltsner, Harriet Perlin at Debra's Butterfly Birthday party. If interested in having a birthday party to help the Butterfly Project reach the goal of 2000 butterflies please call Jodi Valenstein at 704-944-6730.

Please join us Thursday, September 17th in welcoming Israeli Author Dan Ariely to City Art Works.

Dr. Ariely will be signing copies of his NY Times bestselling book

"Predictably Irrational: The Hidden Forces That Shape Our Decisions"
which presents humorous and profound insights into human behavior.

Dr. Ariely is the James B. Duke Professor of Behavioral Economics at Duke University. His work has been featured in the New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post, The New Yorker and on CNN and NPR.

We look forward to seeing you from
6:30pm until 9:00pm
September 17th, 2009

cocktails and hors d'oeuvres will be served
Copies of the book will be available at City Art Works
prior to and during the event.

Any questions contact Susan or Alan at 704.527.1300

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