

Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal

Cultural Orientation for the U.S.-bound Bhutanese refugees in Nepal is provided by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Departures for the U.S. began in early 2008, for a total of over 5,300 refugees before the end of September; during that time frame, over 4,000 refugees attended CO classes. The IOM CO Coordinator in Nepal is a former resettlement director in the U.S. All nine trainers are Nepali nationals who have travelled and/or studied abroad, and six have an undergraduate degree and one a Masters degree from educational institutions in the U.S.

History of the Caseload

The Bhutanese refugee population is composed of some 108,000 people living in seven camps in Eastern Nepal, near the town of Damak. Ethnic Nepalis, the group is known in Bhutan as “Lhotsampas.” They speak Nepali, have their own customs and dress different from those of the ethnic Bhutanese, and generally practice Hinduism (60%), Buddhism (30%), Kirat (an indigenous religion), or Christianity.

The group has an unusual history of refugee persecution. Rather than experiencing a war or conflict in the traditional sense, they were stripped of their citizenship by the Bhutanese government, suffering cultural discrimination, marginalization, harassment, and denial of basic services, including access to education, jobs, and healthcare. Some Lhotsampas were also detained, tortured, or compelled to sign documents stating that they would leave the country. As a consequence, refugees flowed out of Bhutan, through India, and into Nepal in 1991. Over 40,000 of the refugees are children, so a substantial proportion of the refugees have lived in the camps their entire lives. While many refugees have shown interest in resettlement since the inception of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program in late 2007, others are vehemently opposed, feeling that the community’s continued presence in Nepal will facilitate an eventual return to Bhutan.

For more information on the population, please see the Center for Applied Linguistics’ Refugee Backgrounder, “Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal,” at http://www.cal.org/co/pdf/files/backgrounder_bhutanese.pdf

Environment in Exile

The refugees are strongly involved in the functioning of the camps, and receive excellent services through various international organizations, as well as World Food Programme food baskets containing rice, pulses (lentils and beans), vegetable oil, seasonal vegetables, sugar, salt, and a wheat/corn/soya blend. Accommodations consist of 12’ x 20’ bamboo huts that house 6 to 7 people on average. Toilets and showers are shared by two huts, while the wait for tap water runs between 30 to 60 minutes. Education is fully funded by the UNHCR through 8th grade and

by Caritas for 9th and 10th grades, while partial funding is available for 11th and 12th grades. Basic medical care is also available. In addition, Caritas runs service centers for disabled refugees in all seven camps, serving over 500 refugees through physical therapy, skills training, and sign language classes.

Refugees tend to be employed as teachers, small shop owners, restaurant workers, or manual laborers in town. Employment is helpful in terms of attaining additional income for clothes, shoes, meat, fish, butter, spices, soap, matches, bangles, and items used in marriages and funerals. The unofficial nature of many jobs, however, can lead to the exploitation of refugees.

CO Classes: Structure and Content

To participate in CO classes, refugees are bused to one of three facilities located in or near the various camps. Ideal class size is 20-25 students, and classes run approximately four hours a day for three days, using a very interactive instructional style to encourage active participation and engage refugees in the learning process. While the curriculum is undergoing refinement and adaptation from curricula used by IOM CO programs elsewhere, all essential topics in the Welcome Guide are covered. Shortly before departure, refugees also receive an additional two-hour pre-departure orientation course at the IOM Transit Center in Kathmandu, to reinforce information given about travel and reduce anxiety regarding the flight. Participants review and practice finding seats on the plane, the use of airplane toilets, general information about airports, etc.

Hopes, Fears, and Questions

Among the hopes expressed by the Bhutanese refugees in CO class are access to better education and health care, a brighter future for their children, to no longer be called refugees, to be able to get a job and be paid for work like other Americans, and to have their basic human rights acknowledged and respected. Fears mentioned include losing their culture and language, living far from friends and family, not being able to afford to visit family and friends resettled in other locations, not living near a Hindu temple, not being allowed to practice their religion and culture, threats to their daughters' security (crime, harassment), struggling with language and jobs, difficulty repaying the travel loan, losing their farming lifestyle, and never returning to Bhutan.

Refugees are eager to know what type of jobs they will be able to secure, information about likely wages and hours, and whether their certifications will be taken into account for employment or additional education. Class participants also frequently ask about the cost of housing, the cost of healthcare after their period of Refugee Medical Assistance ends, and the availability and cost of medical insurance, especially for the elderly. Other questions involve flexibility regarding repayment of the travel loan, and the ability to conduct Hindu funeral rituals and cremations.

Strengths and Challenges

The CO team has identified a number of strengths that the Bhutanese refugees will bring to their resettlement. First, they note that the refugees have exercised a strong voice in the process. The group adheres to a democratic system and recognizes the role of women. In addition, they have

benefited from good health and education services in the camps, access to vocational training, and, among the younger population, exposure to computers. Indeed, there are many recognized leaders in the camps with higher education and job skills. In addition, the group is oriented towards community and family. Challenges for the group, however, will include their seventeen years of dependency on aid organizations; a lack of English language skills, particularly among women and members of the older generation; and their anxiety regarding being separated from the community.

Considerations for Domestic Service Providers

The Bhutanese are strongly attached to community and family. Cases are generally small, but there is a large population of elderly and of single adult cases to consider when planning for resettlement and other services. In addition, while the group includes many English speakers, especially teachers, there are also many Bhutanese who do not have English language skills. It is very important to the Bhutanese to have access to Hindu temples and shops selling South Asian foods and goods, especially those used in weddings and funerals (*thika*).

Domestic service providers should also be aware of the caste system practiced by the Bhutanese (see CAL's "Supplement to Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal" at <http://www.cal.org/co/overseas/bhutanese/Bhutanese-supplement.pdf>); common dietary restrictions or considerations (see "List of Food Suggested for Bhutanese Arrivals," at http://www.cal.org/co/overseas/bhutanese/bhutanese_food_list.doc); and the common practice of arranged marriages, often at the age of 18 or so.

In addition, all Western appliances will be new to the refugees, including Western toilets. Children go to the bathroom outside or on the side of the road. Refugees are introduced to Western toilets and toilet paper in CO class, and while hygiene products are familiar to the refugees, they will need additional guidance with their use.

Additional resources:

- The Library of Congress' 1991 document, *Nepal: A Country Study*, at <http://countrystudies.us/Nepal/> (you must type this address in exactly as written)
- The Norwegian Refugee Council report *Bhutan: Land of Happiness for the Selected*, January 2008, available at http://www.nrc.no/arch_img/9243651.pdf.
- The 2007 Human Rights Watch Report on the Bhutanese Refugees, *Last Hope for Durable Solutions for Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal and India*, available at <http://hrw.org/reports/2007/bhutan0507/>

If you would like to share your agency's experience of resettling clients that received CO from IOM Nepal's CO program, please e-mail us at cor@cal.org.