

From Burma to Buffalo: Revolution, Refugees, and Renewal

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<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:BuffaloSkyline.jpg>

Abstract:

Burma is the second-largest country in Southeast Asia, with over 58.8 million people. Since a military take-over in 1962 it has suffered from poverty and human rights abuses. As a result of these hardships, over 3 million Burmese refugees have immigrated to the United States. Every year about 4,000 arrive in New York, 1,000 of whom are sent to Buffalo. Today they comprise nearly 1 percent of Buffalo's overall population. Burmese refugees receive assistance from several organizations, including The International Institute of Buffalo, Journey's End, Catholic Charities, and Jewish Family Services. Our group is acculturating three recently arrived young Burmese refugees through The International Institute's new "Friends and Mentors Program." Each week we travel to Buffalo's Riverside neighborhood to introduce these young men to features of everyday American life like shopping, food preparation, public transit, finances, and services and recreation. In the process, we learn about them and their culture. As the capstone to our two-month effort we will also be helping Buffalo's CEPA gallery mount its spring show of the photography of Law Eh Soe, an older Burmese refugee who documented the 2007 "Saffron Revolution," pioneered by Buddhist monks, which has produced various promising governmental reforms.

Statistics:

- There are 50,000-100,000 Burmese refugees living in camps in Thailand and elsewhere.
- Total population of Buffalo: 260,000; Burmese refugees in Buffalo: 2,000 and rising.
- About 1,400 refugees resettle here every year; Burmese are the largest group.
- In 2010 the International Institute of Buffalo helped 10,652 people.
- A majority of the population helped were Burmese, Iraqi, Bhutanese, Iranian, Eritrean, Congolese, and Somali.
- "Buffalo really has become a destination city ... for refugees living in other states" --Denise Beehag, Director of Refugee Resettlement, International Institute of Buffalo.

Our Work:

- We participated in the Friends and Mentors Program through the International Institute of Buffalo, aimed at easing refugees into American life.
- We will be helping mount photos of the Burmese photographer and refugee Law Eh Soe for his May 11th, 5:30 to 8:00pm exhibit at the CEPA gallery.

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Further Reading:

<http://www.iibuff.org/>
<http://fromburmatonewyork.com/>
<http://uscampaignforburma.org/>

