

Lam Thuy Vo
BURMESE REFUGEES HELP NETWORK

On a recent Saturday, Taw Ko, a 33-year-old Myanmar refugee, and his family were sitting in front of the television, watching the adventure drama *The Man in the Iron Mask*. As always, the closed captioning feature was switched on: white letters flickered on black background, spelling out the words that a masked Leonardo Dicaprio was spouting at his fictional opponent in the heat of an argument. Ko's eyes were following the words as they trickled onto the screen. This is how Ko and his family are trying to learn English, perhaps the most important of the many tasks they have had to master since coming to the U.S. as political refugees from Myanmar more than one year ago.

Ko, who has a pregnant wife and three sons, is part of a small group of Burmese refugees that have been resettled in at least three all-Burmese apartment building in Sunset Park since 2005. Zaw Win, the manager of Burmese refugee cases at the International Rescue Committee which resettles refugees in the U.S. and abroad, said he is trying to use these buildings as help networks where long-term Burmese immigrants can assist newly arrived refugees.

The Ko family live on the ground floor of a three-story building in a Latino neighborhood, within four blocks from the Chinese enclave in Sunset Park. They occupy two rooms of about 250 square feet each.

The decoration is sparse. A few family pictures printed on paper adorn the walls, along with a yellowed sheet of grammatical rules in English. The landlord's phone number is scribbled on the wall in red ink.

The Ko's came to New York fleeing persecution by the military government because they were Karen, an ethnic minority that has been fighting for its independence from Myanmar since 1949. When they arrived, they received three months of federal assistance: paid-for accommodation, ESL classes, job trainings and \$800 each month for living costs.

After this period, the Ko's were no longer eligible to receive these services. The couple that had not learned English before arriving in New York, suddenly had to come up with \$850 of rent and living costs for a family of five in a city that with its towering cement houses was nothing like their previous tropical home, a refugee camp in Maesod, Thailand.

Establishing a network is particularly important now because the number of Burmese refugees coming to the U.S. has soared in the past fiscal year. According to information on the U.S. Department of State Web site, about 9,300 Burmese Karen refugees became eligible for resettlement in May 2006.

Karen refugees, many of which have lived in the refugee camps at the Thai-Myanmar border for more than 20 years, had previously been denied refugee status in the U.S. because many of them had been associated with the Karen National Union, political rebels considered terrorists under the Patriot Act.

The Thai government welcomed this change in policy because more than 140,000 Burmese Karen refugees are currently living in camps in Thailand, straining the country's resources, according to the U.S. Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration.

More than a year after adopting this policy, the numbers of Burmese refugees coming to the U.S. have shot up radically. In the past fiscal year, the Bush administration allowed for 15,339 refugees from Asia to enter the U.S.; 13,896 of them were from Myanmar, according to the Refugee Processing Center, a government-operated computer system that tracks the resettlement of refugees in the U.S. This is more than eight times the number from the previous fiscal year when only 1,612 Burmese refugees were admitted to the U.S.

In New York City, 107 of the 160 refugees who arrived in the fiscal year of 2007 were from Myanmar, said Win.

The statistics are daunting because Burmese refugees have an untold number of needs. Not only do they need food, homes and jobs, but they also need help with little, everyday things that most Americans take for granted: like buying shoes or learning how to turn a key.

Taw Ko, for example, has not been able to find work in the past year because he has only one arm. He lost his left arm to cancer in a refugee camp. He also never went to school past the second grade.

His wife, now five months pregnant, found part-time work in a food packing factory in Queens three months ago – a job that requires no English skills and is taken up by many refugees.

At first Taw Ko was worried about how to survive, he said through his neighbor Hla Thein, 57, who translated from Burmese. When he first arrived he was afraid of everything, he said. He had no money and no friends.

But he lives in a building with nine other Myanmar people. Two are newly arrived refugees, but the other seven have been in the country for at least five years and help him with daily tasks, such as riding the subway, using one of the five rice cookers that are aligned in their kitchen or buying food in the nearby Asian supermarkets.

Kyaw Maung, 35, a Myanmar medical doctor from California, lived in the house for three months. He said it was essential for the Ko family to live in the same house as other Burmese people and not just the same neighborhood. He had accompanied the couple to a bank to open an account a couple of weeks ago and said that he could not have helped them had he not known their schedule.

“If you live in the same house you see each other every day,” he said. “You know when they have time and they know when you have time.”

Because governmental assistance to refugees is cut off after three to six months, resettlement organizations have to conceive new ways of assisting their clients beyond that period. Ko’s apartment building is one of at least three all-Myanmar buildings where

Win, the case manager, has been able to resettle Myanmar refugees among other well-established landmen.

Finding such arrangements, however, is very time-consuming.

“It is a lot of work to resettle refugees,” Win said. “I have to convince home owners to take on Burmese refugees.”

Many landlords shy away from taking on refugees because they are worried about getting late rental payments, he said. Win writes dozens of recommendation letters to landlords, employers and other institutions for his clients every week. In some cases, Win only has a few days to find accommodation, beds, mattresses, rice cookers and other items for the refugees.

Recently he began searching for Myanmar landlords to facilitate communication between the refugee tenants and the building owners. He said he hopes that the Myanmar landlords will be more lenient with tenants from their home country.

The Ko family’s landlord, Eric Aung Kay, 45, has been renting out the building in which the Ko family lives to Myanmar tenants since he bought it in 2001. All 12 of the apartments are occupied by Myanmar people, who share three kitchens and four bathrooms.

Though Kay knows that refugees struggle to become financially stable when they first come to the U.S. he has been taking them in since 2005. Having struggled in his early days, he feels the need to help them because they are from his country. He accepts

late rental payments and sometimes lets the newly arrived refugees live in the apartment for up to four months without paying rent. He said he believes that the refugees will pay him once they have the money.

"Because I see that America is an opportunity for people to work, they can work," he said. "So I think their future will be OK."

Living proof of Kay's theory is Refugee Kyaw Htet, 29. Htet came to New York in 2005 and is now working as a chef in the sushi bar Zeytuna near Fulton Street Station in Manhattan. The former student works five days a week from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. and has been able to buy a computer, a television set and pay for his rent.

Htet said he was persecuted for his political activities with the National League for Democracy, Myanmar's most popular democratic party led by Aung San Suu Kyi. Though he is active in the Burmese democratic movement in New York and Washington D.C., he said he does not intend to go back to Myanmar.

"It is my dream," he said about being in the U.S. "Now I have freedom to do what I want."

In the house, several of the occupants said they feel a special kinship because until there is a change of government they all cannot go back to their home country.

The upheavals in August and September 2007 have only strengthened solidarity in the Burmese community of New York, said Heather Marciniak, 31, from the Burma Project of the Open Society Institute, an organization that funds and promotes democratic organizations world-wide.

And this solidarity is essential for the Ko's survival in New York.