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Burmese Refugees Find New Home in Fort Wayne, Texas

Thousands of refugees from Burma have fled to Austria, Canada, and Sweden. And quite a few others have turned up in a most unlikely place right here in the United States.

We get the story from Michael Puente of Chicago Public Radio.

MICHAEL PUENTE: Their message is loud and clear.

(Soundbite of protesters)

PUENTE: We'll never surrender is the chant being yelled but not in the streets of Yangon but from the lawn of the stately Allen County in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Fort Wayne is Indiana's second largest city, roughly equal distant from Chicago and Indianapolis. It's now home to about 3,500 Burmese refugees, the largest such community in the U.S. It includes Buddhist monks, Christians, and Muslims - all of whom fled Burma over the past 20 years.

Some 200 of Fort Wayne's Burmese refugees, including many who are imprisoned and tortured for years in Burma, gathered for a candle light vigil and prayer service urging the international community to pressure the Southeast Asian nation for much needed reforms.

Mr. MONG MONG SUU(ph) (Burmese Refugee; Resident, Fort Wayne): The people, monk, student, will to continue their struggle until they got their achievement.

PUENTE: That's Mong Mong Suu who fled Burma in the wake of a pro-democracy uprising in 1988. Like many Burmese refugees, Suu's first stop was neighboring Thailand where he was considered an illegal immigrant.

Groups like Catholic charities arranged to bring Burmese refugees here to Fort Wayne because of the city's relatively low housing cost, low crime rate and unskilled jobs that didn't require workers to know much English. Once here, many refugees lead unassuming lives, attending services at a Buddhist temple, and mingling mostly with other refugees.

Before fleeing Burma, Suu was a middle-school teacher. For the past 10 years, he's called Fort Wayne home.

Mr. SUU: We're different. Our previous life in Burma is terrible.

PUENTE: Here, refugee families are provided with government assistance like food stamps and health care provided by the state of Indiana. Suu is married and has three sons, including one born in the U.S. He worked in a local auto plant until being laid off last year. He's not studying electrical engineering and hope so landing another job. While Suu says he enjoys his life here, he wants to return to a democratic Burma one day, a notion shared by many of his compatriots here.

MR. SUU: I went back to Burma to fully support our country.

PUENTE: Thursday's vigil at Fort Wayne included a number of refugees with connections to Diana Sowards. Sowards helped to bring the very first Burmese refugee to Fort Wayne in 1990.

Ms. DIANA SOWARDS (Co-founder, Friends of Burma): I knew what was going on in Burma at the time and I wrote to Church World Service. I did what is called a letter of intent, and I said I would like to sponsor somebody and I will be responsible for this and this, and this, and this. And they were the ones that furnished the first name.

PUENTE: With a hundred Burmese refugees arriving each month, the community in Fort Wayne continues to grow.

Ms. SOWARDS: These people are not here for economic reasons. They are true, political people or non-political, just village people who have been cast out of their homes.

PUENTE: These days, Sowards tries to tend to the needs of Burmese new comers. In her blue mini van, she'll drive mothers and children to doctor's appointments, school and a local grocery store called Little Burma.

Here, refugees can find products like skin creams and food that are native to their country. Store owner Rosemarie Parmang(ph) says Fort Wayne works for refugees because of the store support system that now exist here.

Ms. ROSEMARIE PARMANG (Store owner, Fort Wayne): Fort Wayne is for Burmese refugees. It's a haven for them. Because we have a lot of community. We are helping each other as best as we can, so that's why we got so many population than any other state because there's a lot of help that are available for them.

PUENTE: About a hundred refugees from Fort Wayne travel to Chicago Friday to demonstrate outside the Chinese consulate, while activists back in Fort Wayne continue to rally in support of what they say are much needed democratic changes in their homeland.

For NPR News I'm Michael Puente.