

## Refugee Experiences: Stories from Bhutan, Burma, Eritrea, Iraq, and Somalia

The following pages contain stories told through the lens of individual refugees from Bhutan, Burma (Myanmar), Eritrea, Somalia, and Iraq. These examples of refugee experiences may raise awareness and increase knowledge among those new to the field of refugee health. Please note that these stories are not representative of all refugees from the specified country or ethnic group. For more information on the history and culture of resettled refugees, visit the Center for Applied Linguistics' Cultural Orientation Resource Center website at <http://www.cal.org/co/>.

Ask yourself the following questions while reading the Refugee Experience stories:

- What would you do if you were in the refugee's situation?
- How would the refugee's experience of fleeing his/her homeland, living in refugee camps, and resettling in the United States affect his/her:
  - physical health,
  - mental health, and
  - inter-personal relationships?
- How would past traumatic experiences affect a refugee's daily life?
- What would be your greatest hope if you were a refugee looking forward to a new start in the United States?
- What supports can help a resettled refugee adjust to life in America?

## A Somali Bantu Refugee Story

Maganey is a woman in her mid-twenties and a refugee originally from southern Somalia. She and her family are members of the Bantu ethnic minority group. After Somalia gained independence from colonial rule in 1960, the Somali government systematically treated the Bantu as second-class citizens by marginalizing them in politics, education, and professional fields. In the early 1980s, the Somali government forcibly took away the small farm Maganey and her family depended on for food and income, thereby reducing them to farm laborers.

Hostility and violence against the Bantu people worsened in 1991 when the government regime ended and clans competed for power. During the subsequent civil war, Maganey, like many others in the country, suffered from food shortages. Bandits, rogue militias, and warlords attacked her family and other farmers in the region to steal crops and engaged in a campaign of rape and murder. To escape these atrocities, Maganey and her family fled to the Dadaab refugee camps in northeastern Kenya.

Discrimination against the Bantu continued in the refugee camp. Somali refugees belonging to other ethnic groups looked down upon Maganey and her family. The Bantu were denied education in the refugee camp and given no choice but to reside on the outskirts of the camp where bandits would often attack during the night. In addition, women were vulnerable to rape while collecting firewood outside of the camp. Each time Maganey set out to collect wood, she did so with a fearful heart.

After more than ten years in the refugee camp, Maganey and her family were excited to hear that the U.S. government was interviewing Somali Bantu refugees for third country resettlement. For most of her life, Maganey had only known war and instability. Resettlement offered her new hope. Maganey dreamt about her life in the U.S. where she would finally be able to go to school. In 2005, Maganey and her family were resettled in Ohio.

## **An Iraqi Refugee Story**

Ali is an Iraqi refugee. He was a civil engineering graduate student attending a university in Baghdad when the Saddam Hussein regime fell in 2003. The political instability renewed historic tensions between the Sunnis and Shi'is, two Islamic sects, which led to fighting between the two groups. Innocent civilians on both sides were killed by suicide bombers and militias. University professors, students, and staff were afraid to leave their homes and come to campus because of the violence in the streets. Ali's studies were discontinued when the university suspended classes indefinitely due to the lack of security.

Ali and his family lived in a neighborhood that contained both Shi'i and Sunni residents. The two groups lived peacefully alongside each other for decades but mutual distrust took root when people were being kidnapped, murdered, and threatened. Ali saw that throughout Baghdad homes were burned and residents were forced to flee as neighborhoods became sectioned off into separate Sunni and Shi'i areas.

With no other job options and his family in dire financial straits, Ali joined the Iraqi police force. Their neighbors despised the police and viewed Ali as no longer on their side. One day, Ali's father found a note accompanied by a bullet on their doorstep that said they would be killed if they did not leave within three days. The family packed what they could carry and took a series of buses out of Iraq. During their escape, Ali feared militias would board the bus and kill the passengers.

In Syria, Ali and his family faced ongoing uncertainty. Applying for third country resettlement required multiple interviews with lawyers and government officials. After each step, there were long waiting periods of several months. Ali became disheartened when he heard that some Iraqi refugees had successfully passed the major steps in the resettlement application process but were still not accepted by a third country. In the meantime, he did what he could to support his family with little assistance. Ali and his family were constantly in fear of deportation by the host country. Thus, Ali could not go to Syrian authorities for help when a dishonest employer refused to pay him the wages he had earned.

After a year and a half of anticipation, Ali and his family received news that they would be resettled in the U.S. In 2009, they arrived in Massachusetts. Ali hoped to find work that would provide enough income to support his parents.

## **An Eritrean Refugee Story**

Takala is a 32 year old refugee who is a member of a majority ethnic group in Eritrea called the Tigrinya. Throughout his lifetime, the neighboring countries of Eritrea and Ethiopia have been at war. Peace did not come even after Eritrea gained independence from Ethiopia in 1991; the new Eritrean government suppressed freedom of speech, assembly, movement within the country, and religion. Those accused of questioning the government's actions were sent to prison without trial. Prisoners were subjected to inhumane treatment such as torture, beatings, rape, inadequate food, and years of captivity underground without sunlight.

In 1998, a border dispute between Eritrea and Ethiopia caused open war to erupt once again. Young men were forcibly conscripted into the military for an indefinite amount of time. Takala did not want to be part of the unending war between Eritrea and Ethiopia. He had seen firsthand his classmates, male family members, and friends forced to become soldiers and then never return home. Caught between forced military service and imprisonment for not complying with government policies, Takala fled to northeastern Ethiopia for safety. He was 18 years old.

Takala made the dangerous journey to Ethiopia alone and arrived in a refugee camp without any family or friends. In the camp, he faced crowded living conditions in an environment with little water, food, or medicine. Takala and the other refugees from Eritrea lived in fear of deportation back to the conditions from which they had fled. With no way of communicating with his family, Takala often worried about their well being. The Ethiopian government restricted refugees to the confines of the camp and prohibited them from working for wages. Thus, Takala sometimes had to sell part of his food rations and go hungry in order to pay for necessary items. With no opportunities to work, receive a higher education, or obtain job training, Takala saw his life being wasted away.

Takala's hope was renewed when he learned in 2007 that Eritrean refugees would be resettled in the U.S. Takala looked forward to resettlement and the opportunities it would offer. After waiting two years, Takala was approved for resettlement and moved to northern California.

## **A Burmese Karen Refugee Story**

Nuang Mari is a wife and mother in her early forties. She is a refugee from southern Burma who belongs to the Sgaw Karen ethnic minority group. For as long as she can remember, armed conflicts have devastated her country. For the past six decades, Nuang Mari's village and other farming communities have been caught in a continuous war between the Burmese military and ethnic minorities. Many Karen wanted self-determination and independence from the Burmese government. The Karen army and Burmese military fought for control of territory with civilians caught in the crossfire. Nuang Mari witnessed Burmese soldiers burning her village, kidnapping men for forced labor, and raping women. To escape the violence, Nuang Mari and her family walked for days through jungles to reach Thailand.

Nuang Mari and her husband did their best to raise their three children, two of whom were born in the refugee camp. For several years, Nuang Mari's husband worked as a day laborer in rice fields outside the camp. Then, the Thai government began strictly enforcing its prohibition against refugees leaving the camp. Nuang Mari's husband feared arrest by Thai police and deportation back to Burma if found outside the camp without permission. Lacking his income, the family was unable to purchase meat or fresh vegetables to supplement their food rations of rice and beans.

In 2006, Nuang Mari learned that refugees from Burma could apply for third country resettlement. By this time, she and her family had lived in the refugee camp for 18 years and some family members were uneasy about moving to another country. They discussed the possibility of resettlement and decided everyone in the extended family would apply to come to America. Nuang Mari waited anxiously and hoped the U.S. would find their need for resettlement compelling. Fortunately, Nuang Mari and her family were accepted for resettlement. A year later they were resettled in Texas.

## A Bhutanese Nepali Refugee Story

Shekhar is a refugee from Bhutan and a widower in his early fifties. Like his ancestors who emigrated from Nepal to Bhutan in the late 1800s, Shekhar was a farmer in southern Bhutan. He and his family have always considered Bhutan their home. But in the 1980s, the Bhutanese government began to target Bhutanese people of Nepali ethnicity through policies called Bhutanization, which were designed to impose the ethnic majority's culture, religion, and language on all of the country's people. Shekhar's daughters were no longer allowed to speak Nepali at school and the government was depriving those of Nepali ancestry their Bhutanese citizenship.

Shekhar hoped the government would make an exception for him and his family because his brother had served in the Bhutanese military, but this did not come to pass. Shekhar joined protests against Bhutanization and appealed for democracy. In 1990, these protests were met with violent oppression from Bhutan's government forces. Shekhar witnessed troops arresting people who were suspected of being democracy activists or sympathetic to the democracy movement. After arrest, these individuals were imprisoned and often tortured. Fearing for their safety, Shekhar fled with his two daughters to a refugee camp in Nepal.

Shekhar and his daughters spent 16 years in a refugee camp where they lacked educational opportunities, faced food shortages, and feared the possibility of deportation back to Bhutan. They were eager to learn about resettlement when the U.S. government announced plans to resettle at least 60,000 Bhutanese refugees. By this time, both of his daughters were married and had children of their own. The younger generation was enthusiastic about resettlement. Shekhar's older daughter spoke of how her children would receive a better education in the U.S. compared to the refugee camp's school. Shekhar, on the other hand, was reluctant to leave Nepal because he longed to return to Bhutan and worried he would have a hard time adjusting to life in America.

Shekhar's family wanted him to apply for resettlement at the same time in the hope of keeping the family together. After much thought, he decided to leave Nepal with his family for the sake of his grandchildren. The year-long process included assembling the family's paperwork, verifying their identities, establishing their claim of refugee status, and interviews with U.S. immigration authorities. In 2008, Shekhar and his family were resettled in Washington.