

Indiana diocese strained by upsurge in Burmese refugees

FORT WAYNE, Ind. - The country of Myanmar - formerly called Burma - is attracting international attention as the military government there has used violent means to disperse peaceful pro-democracy demonstrators.

Burmese people are in the news in Fort Wayne, too. About 3,000 Burmese refugees now live in the city.

The upsurge in the local Burmese population prompted Allen County Health Commissioner Dr. Deborah McMahan to declare that her department will have to start charging for previously free services because of the unusually large number of Burmese refugees this year.

Catholic Charities settled about 200 Burmese refugees in Fort Wayne in 2006, according to Debbie Schmidt, executive director of the agency of the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend. The agency was told to expect another 200 in 2007, and by June had received 35.

After June, however, the numbers increased quickly and dramatically, with an additional 524 refugees arriving by the end of September. Another 130 are expected before the end of the year, bringing the projected 2007 total to nearly 700 - close to the total of 768 Burmese refugees settled by Catholic Charities in 1991-2006. Another 600-800 Burmese are expected in 2008.

"It's wonderful that the United States is doing this, but it's not wonderful to the local communities because they're absorbing all the burden. I think we're really highlighting a problem here that needs to be addressed at the federal level," McMahan said.

The large number of people arriving in such a short time also has strained Catholic Charities, which must provide staff support, obtain financial assistance, locate housing and gather donated items to help the refugees set up housekeeping. Catholic Charities is notified by fax and given a 10-day notice that a refugee will be

arriving.

The number of refugees assigned to a community is controlled by the U.S. Department of State, not Catholic Charities.

Schmidt has written U.S. Rep. Mark Souder, R-Ind., asking him to help get the State Department to slow down the refugee flow to a more manageable number. Souder spokesman Mark Green told Today's Catholic, newspaper of the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend, that Souder shares Schmidt's concerns and has written three Cabinet agencies on the issue.

"I'm talking to everyone in Washington that I can think of - and talking to them about pacing the amount of arrivals so that the community can absorb (them) and find services ... in a more organized fashion," Schmidt said.

The State Department works with 10 voluntary agencies to settle refugees. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops is one of those agencies, and through its local affiliates, like Catholic Charities, the USCCB settles between one-fourth and one-third of all refugees entering this country.

Charles Evans, coordinator for program development and information resources for the U.S. bishops' Migration and Refugee Services, told Today's Catholic that his department is aware of the strain on the Fort Wayne community because of the sudden increase in refugees.

Evans said sometimes the State Department cannot spread out the flow of refugees because a "bulge" of refugees may be released all at once. News reports indicate that refugee camps in Thailand hold more than 140,000 Burmese refugees, and severe overcrowding has prompted the United States to start accepting larger numbers.

All the Burmese being settled in Fort Wayne this year already have family in the community, Evans said, explaining that when a refugee has family in a community he or she has the right to be assigned there.

"It's a tough case because these are family reunifications," Evans said.

McMahan told Today's Catholic that the community wants to be welcoming, but the large numbers have overextended the capacity of community resources.

She said she does not have the staff or funding to address all the health needs of the local community plus the Burmese refugees, about half of whom have latent tuberculosis that must be treated with antibiotics. Additionally, many arriving refugees do not have any immunizations, which the health department needs to administer.

Taking care of 200 refugees a year was manageable, she said, but taking care of 180 in three weeks is greatly different in terms of staff and funding.

Refugees are eligible for federal medical assistance funding and for Medicaid for the first eight months they are in the country, but these sources often don't cover all their needs.

So, McMahan said her agency will have to start charging everyone, though she worries this may be a disincentive for people to seek treatment, which could be dangerous for the community when infectious diseases are involved. She plans to institute a sliding-scale fee.

At a community meeting at the Archbishop Noll Catholic Center Sept. 24, Schmidt reported that the State Department and the USCCB expect that the largest number of refugees to resettle in the United States in 2008 will be Burmese.

Contributing to this story was Tim Johnson.