



RESETTLEMENT'S PROMISES, TRIALS: World Refugee Day a celebration of hope

June 20, 2009

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Section: News

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Taking a brief respite from trying times, hundreds of emigrants from across the world gathered in an Oakland park on Friday to celebrate World Refugee Day. Iraqi refugee Sarmad Buni was among several who had arrived to the United States just days before the annual picnic in Oakland's San Antonio Park.

"I hope I find a job, a good school for the children," Buni said as he walked around the park. "We want to live in peace."

Buni, his wife and their three young sons landed in the East Bay on Wednesday and are among at least 17,000 exiled Iraqis the U.S. State Department has pledged to resettle throughout the country this year. A former chauffeur for officials with the U.S. Agency for International Development, Buni decided to flee Baghdad in fall 2006 when life grew too dangerous.

The family was escorted around the park, past soccer games and an African music ensemble, by family member Wadih Badran, a San Ramon resident who has lived in the United States since 1996 and is now hosting the couple and their children at his home. "We don't even know where they're going to live yet," Badran said. "We'll see what kind of job he can get. Maybe San Ramon, maybe Walnut Creek, maybe Oakland."

Friday marked the ninth time that local refugee aid groups have staged the festive Refugee Forum Picnic, and, as usual, participants danced, ate a diverse mix of foods, learned about educational opportunities and played soccer together. But the occasion was also full of stressful conversations about surviving in a new country during a recession. Many of the newcomers are unemployed.

"Refugees coming here are so eager to work, so motivated to work," said Sister Elisabeth Lang, director of refugee services at Catholic Charities of the East Bay. "They come off the airplane saying, 'Can you get me a job?' I wish I could. They don't want welfare. They're accustomed to work all their lives and want to do so, but it's a challenge."

The plight of incoming Iraqis, in particular, has begun to attract concern from aid groups that contract with the U.S. State Department to help resettle refugees. The International Rescue Committee, one of those groups, released a report this week criticizing the nation's resettlement program for inadequately serving a flood of incoming Iraqi refugees.

"These are people who placed their lives in danger for the U.S.," said Bob Carey, a coauthor of the report and the organization's vice president of migration policy. "We do have an obligation to these people. ... Resettlement for many people is really a lifesaving measure."

After years of delay, Carey said, the bulk of Iraqi refugees began arriving just as the American economy dropped into a deep recession. The current refugee program works under the premise that refugees will find work in a month or so, but that is now more difficult than usual, even for Iraqis who commonly arrive with high levels of skill and college degrees, Carey said.

Carey said the nation should overhaul its current program, increasing emergency financial assistance beyond the eight-month minimum and teaching refugees more about what to expect before they get here. Typically, refugees do not get an orientation until after they decide to move to the United States.

Dozens of refugees arrive to the East Bay each month, with most in the past year coming from Bhutan, Myanmar, Iraq and Afghanistan, aid groups said. Rohit Nepal, 21, arrived to Oakland in April after living for most of his life in a refugee camp in eastern Nepal. His family of ethnic Nepalis was forced to leave his native Bhutan when he was a boy.

"It's totally different from what we expected," Nepal said of his first months in the country. "In Nepal, everybody thinks there are lots of job sources here. But it's very difficult."

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PHOTO 1: Roji Subba, 15, from front to back, Sangita Gurung, 18, Hema Bhadari, 17, and Jyoti Gurung, 17, all from Bhutan, do a traditional Nepali dance Friday at the World Refugee Day Celebration at San Antonio Park in Oakland.

PHOTO 2: Pelden Lepcha, 6, happily holding his balloon Friday in Oakland, was among hundreds invited to celebrate World Refugee Day at San Antonio Park.

PHOTO 3: Gilli Schley and Mya Khain, who have become good friends through a refugee mentor program, duck under a stick held by Rita Jones as participants did the limbo at the World Refugee Day celebration Friday. (All by Laura A. Oda/Staff)

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Record Number: 1146649