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New wave from Bhutan settles in

After 17 stateless years, they're starting over

WINOOSKI — Every refugee who resettles in Vermont brings a story of hardship, but those from the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan, dozens of whom have been arriving during the past two years, have endured one of the longest, strangest ordeals of all.

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Westerners for years have romanticized their homeland as a version of Shangri-La, lauding it as the only country in the world where promoting happiness is a formal goal of public policy.

Yet this is also a country that reportedly expelled a large share of its own population — about one-sixth, by some estimates, more than 100,000 people — and refused to let them return. They were confined largely to squalid camps in nearby Nepal for 17 years. The Bhutanese government has characterized the exodus as voluntary. Refugees here have a different account.

Phul Pokhrel, 24, came of age in the camp known as Beldangi One, where 14,000 people lived in makeshift bamboo huts topped with plastic sheeting. She went to school, grew up, married, gave birth to her first child — all in the camp — and retains little memory of life in her family's Bhutan village.

She does, however, remember soldiers knocking on the door and saying, "Either leave the country or we will kill your father." Her father, a middle-school teacher who taught in the Nepali language, fled in 1991, and the family followed.

Her husband, Chandra Pokhrel, 29, was 12 when police showed up at the village grocery his mother ran, locked them out of their office, and gave them a date to leave the country. He wound up in Beldangi Two, population 22,000.

Bishnu and Mon Rai were driven off the 5-acre farm they tended, as was Khadananda Luitel. Luitel said he was jailed and beaten, then was released and hobbled three days to reach the border.

Like most other Bhutanese who fled in the early 1990s, they're members of the Lhotshampa minority group — Nepali-speakers and predominantly Hindu in a country where the dominant majority, and the ruling elite, are Buddhist and speakers of Djongkha, Bhutan's national language.

Now the Rais and Pokhrels are all living in Winooski, where they're facing an entirely new environment. For example, after years subsisting on rice rations in the camps, they find themselves puzzling over unit pricing during their regular pilgrimages to Shaw's supermarket.

The happiness paradox

Three years ago, after repeated Nepal-Bhutan negotiations failed to arrange the refugees' r

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return, the United States agreed to accept 60,000 for resettlement. They began arriving last year. About 250 have come to Vermont. The Rai and Pokhrel families, who share a three-bedroom apartment, arrived in December and February, with some family members still to come. Phul Pokhrel's father and three brothers were resettled in Lancaster, Pa.

Various reasons are given for Bhutan's massive dislocation over the past 20 years. According to some accounts, the government began stripping citizenship from Nepali-speaking Lhotsampas in the 1980s, apparently because their population in southern Bhutan was burgeoning and they were deemed politically or culturally threatening to the dominant ethnic group.

"The government didn't like Nepali language speaking," Chandra Pokhrel recalled. "They banned Nepali books. They forced Hindus to marry Buddhists."

Ancestors of the Lhotsampas had been brought from Nepal as laborers in the late 19th century to open southern Bhutan for agriculture and commerce. They were granted citizenship in 1958, but decades later, according to an account by the U.S.-government-funded Freedom House, the government abandoned "its long-standing tolerance of cultural diversity" and "began imposing restrictions on Nepali speakers."

Under a government crackdown that followed events the Winooski refugees termed "a revolution," Lhotsampas began fleeing en masse. The Bhutanese authorities have spent years fending off insurgencies, some of them stoked by disaffected refugees in the camps.

"Although the government officially does not use formal exile, there were over 100,000 ethnic Nepalese Bhutanese living in refugee camps in Nepal and India after a government campaign in the 1980s forced them out of the country," states the 2008 Human Rights Report on Bhutan by the U.S. State Department.

"The Bhutanese refugee situation has become

one of the most protracted and neglected refugee crises in the world," Amnesty International USA declared.

While much of the world remained oblivious, Bhutan enjoyed years of favorable press. The country was portrayed variously as an exotic-but-unspoiled tourist destination and as a poor nation pursuing an enlightened brand of development that aims to preserve the environment (plastic bags are banned, a BBC report said) and optimize popular well-being (ditto tobacco). The index of gross national happiness, promoted by Bhutanese rulers since the 1970s, appealed to some U.S. and European observers as a more humane benchmark of progress than the gross national product.

The Bhutanese government was asked how it reconciles its happiness policy with its treatment of the Lhotsampas. E-mail queries to two government agencies — the permanent mission at the United Nations and the Ministry of Information — were not answered. (Bhutan does not have diplomatic relations with the United States.)

What did the Bhutanese in Winooski think of the happiness policy?

"We were not happy when we left Bhutan," Chandra Pokhrel said simply.

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“We cannot describe our sadness when we lived there” in the camps, Phul Pokhrel said.

The happiness policy seemed to apply only, they supposed, to the Bhutanese who remained in the country.

Coping and hoping

Like all refugees who wind up in Vermont, the Bhutanese face the challenges of getting by, making a living and perhaps even getting ahead — all in a thoroughly unfamiliar society. Before they arrived, what they knew of the United States came mostly from word of mouth. They hadn't even glimpsed America through TV shows or movies, since the camps in Nepal had no electricity.

They tend to know more English than refugees from some other countries, because English was the medium of instruction in the camp schools. The Pokhrels both went through high school in the camps and then attended several years of college on the outside, as day students.

Chandra Pokhrel hopes eventually to resume his college career here. Meanwhile, he's working at Twincraft, a soap maker in Winooski. Phul Pokhrel is studying nursing and aspires to become a registered nurse. Mon Rai, 43, takes care of the Pokhrels' 14-month-old son when Phul Pokhrel is in class. On weekends, Mon Rai has a housekeeping job in a Colchester motel.

The former farmers — Bishnu Rai, 53, and his friend, Khadananda Luitel, 55 — grew vegetables in the Intervale this past summer: potatoes, spinach, cauliflower. Farming is easier here than in Bhutan, Luitel said.

Jerrilyn Miller of Richmond, one of about 250 active volunteers with the Vermont Refugee Resettlement Program, has been visiting the families weekly since June. She helps them with paperwork and budgeting. She takes them to Shaw's to buy groceries.

“They really feel like family to me,” Miller said. “I feel very honored to be invited into their home.”

She said she's impressed with their “wonderful sense of humor” in the face of all the difficulties. Moreover, she said, “they're really hard workers. They're risk-takers.”

She said members of the growing Bhutanese community are making a point of watching out for each other.

“They have so much compassion and empathy,” she said. “It's amazing.”

Leaving the camps was apparently a bittersweet experience. Life there was “painful,” explained Supriya Serchan, a Nepali-speaking case worker for Vermont Resettlement who served as interpreter during an extended interview, yet they recall some aspects of their life there with some affection. The camps were home for 17 years, after all.

Nevertheless, Phul Pokhrel said: “We had no future. To be here is good for us.”

Contact Tim Johnson at 660-1808 or tjohnson@bfp.burlingtonfreepress.com

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