

Bhutanese Refugees Begin New Life with Help from U.S. Bishops' Agency

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www.catholicnews.com

June 19, 2009

WASHINGTON (CNS) -- More than 42 million people worldwide have been forcibly uprooted from their country and forced to live in refugee camps indefinitely.

These camps do not provide the most basic essentials to which the average person is accustomed. Hygiene, safety and education are dire issues.

Yet, many refugees continuously find the strength, will and motivation to endure these conditions.

"Refugees are not only the most vulnerable people in the world, but also the most resilient," Angelina Jolie, goodwill ambassador for the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, said during an event in Washington on World Refugee Day June 18.

A paragon of this resiliency and determination are Khagendra and Ganga Baral, Bhutanese refugees who spoke at the refugee day event and also told their story at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops later that day. The USCCB's Migration and Refugee Services played a key role in helping the Barals resettle to Phoenix.

The theme of the this year's celebration was "Real People, Real Needs" and the Barals' testimony conveyed the issue of "statelessness." "As Bhutanese, we are concerned for the future generation," Khagendra told the audience, "because our generation has lost its true home."

For Khagendra, his earliest memories of Bhutan were of its beauty.

"I remember Bhutan as peaceful with its Buddhist temples and sweet, fresh food," he told Catholic News Service. But all this changed for him and more than 100,000 Bhutanese who were forced from their country of origin as a result of the monarchy's "One Nation, One People" policy.

Instituted in 1985, the national integration policy called for a homogenous culture, making it impossible for people with different traditions to coexist within the South Asian nation. Khagendra said, "The government wanted it to be 100 percent Buddhist."

"Everyone had to wear the same dress and speak the same language," his wife, Ganga, added. "If people spoke English or another language, they were fined."

The Barals belong to one of the three ethnic groups in Bhutan called the Lholshampa. The Lholshampa are of Nepalese origin and are generally Hindu, occupying the southern region of Bhutan.

The Bhutanese government refuses to recognize the ethnic groups of Bhutanese citizens because of their different appearance and traditions. Refugees cannot flee to nearby Nepal because the government denies them the basic prerequisites for local integration. "We belong to nowhere," Ganga said.

Protests began by the discriminated groups of Bhutanese in response to their citizenship being contested. Khagendra's father was a Lholshampa leader who was among the protesters. He, in addition to the mass of protesters, was imprisoned for protesting against the government. Khagendra was told his father was in jail and was given an ultimatum.

"I was told, 'Your father is anti-national,'" he said. "You can either leave the country or die in our custody."

At the age of 17, Khagendra left his homeland with his family. Ganga left at the age of 13 after her father was imprisoned for being suspected of donating money to support protests. Both entered a refugee camp in Nepal, which is where they first met, later married and had a daughter.

Refugees from all walks of life were in the camps. Educated professionals expelled from Bhutan included engineers and teachers. They initiated the idea to set up a school for the

children. The school, which Ganga attended, went to the 10th grade. She later became an assistant teacher at the school.

Ganga quickly learned that the will of one person is not enough to push for the issue of resettlement and repatriation.

"Our friends and elders, we all believe in the idea of 'united we stand, divided we fall,'" she told CNS. Their camp was also active in creating signature campaigns urging more education in the camps and repatriation.

After approaching the UNHCR, the Barals were resettled with the help of the USCCB from the Nepal refugee camp to Phoenix in March 2008. The USCCB began its Bhutan resettlement program in 2007 and of the 75,000 refugees currently in the U.S., it has helped resettle about 20,000. The USCCB places refugees in 32 dioceses in 25 states. The diocese is responsible for the refugee from the time he or she arrives in the state.

The Barals were also helped by the Catholic Charities agency in Phoenix which acted as their legal co-sponsor and was responsible for connecting them to a network of volunteers who helped them with obtaining housing, applying for welfare benefits and employment programs.

"The services we received were great," Ganga said. "I feel that we received more than the basic needs from Catholic Charities."

The Barals thanked the bishops' conference at the World Refugee Day event, saying: "Thank you, USCCB, for helping us rebuild the future and giving us hope in our time of need."

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