TO ASIAN REFUGEES, U.S. IS STILL LAND OF HOPE

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Body

Khounphom Sone expects to be living in Brooklyn by the Fourth of July.

"I can't know in my mind what Brooklyn will be like, but I have been told it is a very big city, with houses 50 or 60 levels high," said Mr. Khounphom Sone, a 36-year-old ***refugee*** from Laos.

"But I want to go to Brooklyn very much," he said. "Because there is my brother."

Mr. Khounphom Sone, his 33-year-old wife, Pratsany, and their five children - waiting here in a crowded processing center with papers that say, "Destination: La Guardia" - symbolize in a number of ways the ***Asian*** newcomer to America in 1986, a year of special significance as America celebrates its immigrant heritage with the centennial of the Statue of Liberty.

Reuniting a Family

They are ***refugees***. From the Middle East to the South China Sea there are almost seven million ***refugees*** in Asia, about half of them Afghans who have fled to Pakistan. Others include Vietnamese boat people, exiled Sri Lankan Tamils, Cambodians and ethnic Melanesian Indonesians.

Mr. Khounphom Sone, whose father was a village leader and who bears a Lao tattoo on his arm that translates "Son of a Warlord," is seeking to reunite a family torn apart by war and revolution.

"***Asian*** immigration is increasing in a geometric pattern because of family reunions and migrations," a ***United States*** consular official said. "A family chain develops; a community grows." Under current immigration law, close relatives of ***United States*** residents receive preference in immigration proceedings and are not counted as part of the quota for people from their country who are allowed to immigrate.

Mr. Khounphom Sone'***s*** family is poor and has had little education; Mr. Khounphom Sone (pronounced koon-POM so-NAY) had four years of primary schooling and is a mechanic; his wife was a noodle-shop waitress. Increasingly, ***refugee*** and immigration officials say, people with limited skills, facing hard times in the developing world, want a chance to be American.

From China to Indonesia, from Manila to Bombay, people tell interviewers that they want to go "for a job and so my children can get an education."

Consular and ***refugee*** officials who meet hundreds of thousands of would-be ***Asian*** emigrants to the ***United States*** say little has changed in the basic reasons ***refugees*** want to live in America.

Following the Children

"The pull factor is ***still*** there," an American official said. "They see the same gold sidewalks."

In most of the developing nations in Asia, there remains a belief that life is better in America - economically and politically, but above all in terms of education.

Though many ***refugees*** have seen ample evidence of American shortcomings in films and television, most profess a belief that Americans are on the whole "fair people," as one Southeast ***Asian*** put it, and that they will give anyone who works hard a chance.

In Asia, there are other motivating factors for emigration, according to consular officials.

An American diplomat here pointed to the elderly Asians, living comfortably in their own societies, who go to Los Angeles or New York only because the time has come for the younger generation to look after them, and the younger generation is no longer in Asia.

"We as Americans, with our looser family ties, don't always understand this," this consular official said. "A grandmother or grandfather who probably speaks no English may not really want to go. But that's where all the kids are."

The line frequently blurs between political asylum and economic migration. Boat people from Vietnam tell reporters regularly that they are leaving because, as one recent arrival in Thailand said, "Communism doesn't give us rice or work."

Mr. Khounphom Sone is also representative of the hundreds of thousands of Laotians, Cambodians and Vietnamese who have suffered suspicion and retribution because of their association with the American side in the wars that brought Communist governments to those countries in the 1970's.

Tens of thousands of Indochinese remain in political prison camps; others are languishing in Thailand as displaced people, asking any American who comes along why they have been forgotten.

Mr. Khounphom Sone's case has an ironic twist. A welder in the defeated Lao army, he was able to escape from seven years of political detention in October 1983 when the truck taking his work gang to a forced-labor project near Pakse, in southern Laos, hit what was probably an unexploded American bomb.

Crossing the Mekong River

Wounded from the blast, he crept from his hospital bed and fled to Vientiane, 375 miles away.

There his wife, who had been able to visit him regularly in detention, joined him four days later with their children. When night fell, he put his wife and three little girls on a bamboo raft. He and his son, Soutchay, then 11, swam and pushed the family across the Mekong River to Thailand.

More than 300,000 people, almost a tenth of the population of Laos, have fled the country since the Communist takeover in 1975. Many of them, though not Mr. Khounphom Sone's family, come from the Hmong and other hill tribes in remote mountain areas of this landlocked and undeveloped country.

Because the Laotian ***refugee*** population in Thailand has soared to almost 90,000, the Thai Government has recently opened the camps to interviewers from the ***United States*** Immigration and Naturalization Service. ***Refugee*** officials say that Laotians will probably form the largest Southeast ***Asian*** ethnic group accepted for American resettlement this year.

A Brother in Texas

It was in a Thai ***refugee*** camp that Mr. Khounphom Sone found his father-in-law and learned from him that Mr. Khounphom Sone'***s*** two brothers, who had fled Laos earlier, were in the ***United States***.

One brother, Siritham Korakahn, 40, had become a welder in Texas. The other, Souvanh Vilayvanh, 23, of Brooklyn, has had a succession of jobs and intermittent illnesses that kept him out of work, Mr. Khouphom Sone said. But Mr. Souvanh Vilayvanh had married an American, had an apartment and was able to act as the family'***s*** sponsor.

And so the family - Sone and Pratsany, along with Soutchay, who is now 14, and four daughters: Khanthadokmay, 10; Kasapa, 8; Chanthida, 5, and Thaithouna, who is 8 months old - wait for the bus to Bangkok airport, and a life they cannot even imagine.

Drawn from some of the most isolated villages in Asia, the Laotians often face unexpected trauma in the West, ***refugee*** officials say. Learning About the ***U.S.*** Amornpan Nimanan, the Thai commander of the ***refugee*** processing center where Mr. Khounphom Sone'***s*** family has been staying, said he had seen Lao ***refugees*** weep with fear in a bus on the Oakland Bay Bridge as they rode to a new life.

Laotians have met harassment and violence in several American cities, as have Cambodians. ***Refugee*** officials say that on the whole the Vietnamese, more urbanized and more aggressive, have fared better, along with ethnic Chinese and Korean migrants.

At Phanat Nikhom and other camps throughout Asia an effort is made to teach the ***refugees*** English, with special ''high school English'' courses for teen-agers. Occasionally, videotapes made in American communities are shown.

While many Asians now trying to come to the ***United States*** are poor, there are indications that a wave of more highly skilled immigrants may be imminent. As Hong Kong'***s*** assimilation by China approaches, an unknown number of Hong Kong residents is expected to leave the colony, some with considerable fortunes.

Graphic

Photo of Khouphom Sone and his family at ***refugee*** center in Thailand (NYT/Barbara Crossette)

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