

78 Burmese refugees to be resettled in Ireland

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SEVENTY EIGHT Burmese refugees are due to arrive in Ireland next month after being selected for resettlement here under a United Nations scheme.

The group of 16 families, who belong to Burma's Rohingya minority, left their country in 1992 and have been living in camps on the Bangladesh/Burmese border since then. They will spend six weeks at an orientation centre in Ballyhaunis, Co Mayo to prepare them for permanent resettlement in other towns.

The plight of Burma's estimated 800,000 Rohingya, a Muslim minority based in the northwest of the country, attracted international attention in recent weeks following reports that hundreds who fled to Thailand were mistreated by the Thai military.

According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 230,000 Rohingya now live a precarious, stateless existence in Bangladesh, having fled decades of abuse and harassment at the hands of Burma's military rulers.

Indonesia recently detained 198 Rohingyas after finding them floating in a boat off the coast of Aceh. They had been at sea for 21 days.

The 78 refugees – 28 adults and 50 children – who are due to travel to Ireland are currently living in camps in the Cox's Bazar region of Bangladesh and were identified by the UNHCR as a priority group for resettlement.

"The refugees selected for resettlement left Burma in 1992 at a very young age and have lived in camps on the Bangladesh/Burmese border since then," a spokeswoman for the Department of Justice said.

Ireland is one of 19 states, and one of only nine EU member states, that participates in the UNHCR-led resettlement programme.

Each year it accepts up to 200 refugees, and among those selected in recent years were groups of Sudanese, Iranian Kurds and Burmese Karen, the latter members of another ethnic group who fled persecution by Burma's military junta.

A further 84 refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo are expected to arrive in Ireland in May. The department said that those selected fled the Congo's South Kivu region between 1996 and 1998 and have been living in refugee camps in Kigoma in northern Tanzania since then. Of the 57 children in the group, 32 were born and raised in the camps.

All refugees who are admitted to the State under the UN programme spend six weeks at the National Refugee Orientation Centre in Ballyhaunis, Co Mayo, where they take language lessons and are taught how to go about essential tasks such as opening a bank account and enrolling their children in school.

The Burmese Karen who came to Ireland last year were eventually resettled in Castlebar and Ballina, while 180 Iranian Kurds who arrived the previous year settled in Sligo, Carrick-on-Shannon and Mullingar.

The department said that discussions were continuing with various communities in relation to long-term resettlement arrangements for those who arrive in the coming months.