

James, a 18 year old Myanmar refugee living in Thailand

James doesn't like being a nobody's child. He says that people in Umpian Refugee Camp look down on him and despise him.

He comes from a large family of seven children, but in international humanitarian terms, James is a separated child. For many years, he has been living in the refugee camp with a guardian family, while his younger sister lives with yet another guardian family. None of the older members of his family live in the camp.

James is a member of the Karen ethnic community in his home country, Myanmar. Hundreds of thousands of people from Myanmar live in neighboring countries, in refugee-like circumstances, including about a quarter-million in Thailand. Many of them have fled to escape from either forced labour, forced conscription, religious or political persecution, or from fighting between Myanmar military and ethnic insurgents.

James does not remember his mother. She died when he was just six years old. He doesn't remember much about his home in Myanmar but he does have vague memories of tranquil days when he used to play with his younger siblings and friends near their home in the jungle in Nor Pha Do. But that belonged to an earlier time, before his family went to live with an elder brother, who was a soldier, in a stronghold of the Karen National Union, the self-styled revolutionary government of the Karen people stronghold where the brother was a soldier.

James lived in the Karen National Union (KNU) stronghold until it was attacked and destroyed by Myanmar military troops. His soldier brother decided it was time to flee Myanmar and seek safety in Thailand. He took James with him and placed him in the Umpian Refugee Camp in the Tak district in Thailand. Some family members fled with them, others, including his father, chose to remain in Myanmar.

The silver lining to an existence in the Umpian Refugee Camp is the opportunity to be educated. When in Myanmar, James had never gone to school and only two of his elder siblings had received minimum schooling. Now, aged 18, James is in grade 10. He goes to school five days a week and is thinking about becoming a teacher in the refugee camp. He says that even if peace and stability returned to his home country, he would prefer to stay where he is in order to finish his education. Like many other young people, he dreams about becoming a doctor, about helping victims of war... he also thinks about becoming an army commander.