Bhutanese Nepalese Refugees are Bhutanese citizens of Nepali origin, who were evicted from Bhutan in the 1980s and early 1990s. They are descendants of people who in the late 1800s began immigrating to southern Bhutan in search of farmland. Often referred to as the Lhotsampas or “People of the South,” this group of people enjoyed their Bhutanese citizenship, under Bhutan’s Nationality Law of 1958 and owned property and held government jobs. They also retained their Nepali language, culture and religion.

However, in the 1980s, situation began to drastically change as Bhutan’s king and the ruling elite became increasingly weary of the rapidly growing Lhotsampa. Like any other South Asian country, Bhutan is multi-ethnic and multi-lingual. But the government imposed a policy called “Bhutanization,” “One Nation, One People” policy, thereby suppressing the culture and language of Nepali-origin Bhutanese. As the state unleashed a series of suppression in southern Bhutan, pro-democracy protests erupted

Ethnic Nepalese were targeted by the Bhutanese authorities. Properties were seized and many were arrested and tortured. Individuals were forced to sign so-called “voluntary migration certificates” before being expelled from the country. In December 1990, the authorities announced that Lhotsampas who could not prove they had been residents of Bhutan in 1958 had to leave. The crackdown led to the expulsion of one sixth of Bhutan’s population. The refugees left Bhutan and moved to India. But instead of giving them refuge, India transported them to eastern Nepal.

Ultimately 107,000 refugees were sheltered in makeshift camps in Jhapa and Morang districts of Nepal. After languishing in the camps with limited rations provided by UN agencies for seventeen years, without the prospects of going back to Bhutan, starting early this year, they have been resettled to Western countries like United States of America, Australia, and New Zealand etc. Around five thousand Bhutanese Nepalese Refugees are expected to be resettled in the Bay Area in next five years. A few families have already arrived in the East Bay area.

Madan Gurung, a 30 year old man, along with his wife and daughter, finds himself in the Bay Area as part of the United States resettlement program. Madan’s family, like thousands of families— was exiled from Bhutan and was forced to flee to Garganda, India, where he worked in teagardens, until he moved to a camp in Jhapa, Nepal.

“I came to this earth naked and when I came to America I was naked again as I lost everything during a fire at my Goldop camp,” says Madan, who was living happily in Bhutan, enjoying his childhood and going to school, until the situation warranted his family to flee the country.
The situation in Jhapa campsites was dire. Each family, regardless of their size, got rice in “khaini ko batta,” approximately an ounce of rice and 19/18ft land (approximately a size of a standard room) to live in. Madan was able to get some vocational training and work temporarily, but was never able to finish school and had to live in constant fear for his life and worry for his next meal. To add further to his miserable life in the refugee camp site, his camp along with 14,000 other campsites caught fire and burned to the ground in front of his eyes. The refugees, along with Madan, lost all their life’s possession. Madan recalls finding shelter under trees with plastic over his head as rain poured for days. “I lost everything,” he says. [But] “I was one of the few lucky ones who got to get out of there and head to America with my family and a pair of clothes for each of us,” laments Madan.

HOW YOU CAN HELP?
Sahayeta.Org’s mission is to help Nepalese Refugees such as Madan by facilitating their life in the Bay Area. Sahayeta.Org has been collecting clothes, utensils, blankets and any other household items and distributing them to the refugees. There will be hundreds of refugees such as Madan arriving in the Bay Area looking for a new home and with hopes of creating new lives. We are accepting donations and appreciate your generosity to help us in this effort. In order to avoid duplication and meet the needs, we have created an inventory list. Please view the inventory list and donate any items that you wish and help them.