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Why are the Karen refugees?

KarenKonnection.org

The Karen are being forced to flee their traditional homes due to what many call an ethnic cleansing program being carried out by the military government of Burma. Many Karen live in hiding for years within Burma, moving from place to place to keep ahead of army troops hunting them. When they run out of options, they flee into Thailand where some 155,000 are living in refugee camps.



Water collection, Tham Him Camp

More than 10,000 others live in refugee like situations in camps or villages on one side or the other of the Thai-Burma border. Millions of Burmese of a variety of ethnic groups are scattered throughout Thailand, southeast Asia and the world, eking out a living as they are able.

All of what is now Burma became a British colony in 1885. The borders of this colony included many ethnic groups other than Burmese. The country of Burma includes Shan, Wa, Chin, Kachin, Lisu, Lahu, Palaung, Akha, Mien, Karen, Karenni and many others. Each of these ethnic groups have their own language, culture, way of dress, etc. Ethnically, they are as different as the British are from the Germans and French. Many of these ethnic groups had their own governing systems and some even had royal families. In spite of the differences though, all wound up together in what is now Burma.

In colonial days the British would use minority groups to help keep control of larger ethnic groups. So the Karen (the minority) often saw the British in a more positive light than their Burmese neighbors. Of course, this policy did nothing to lessen pre-existing biases.

Burma remained a British colony until World War Two. The British forces were ill prepared to face the Japanese onslaught and were forced to make a hasty retreat to India. So Japan controlled Burma for much of the war. Gradually though, a combined force of American, British, and many ethnic groups from India and Burma was formed and Burma was retaken in a brutal campaign. Many now elderly Karen served with the Allied forces and can tell their share of war stories from WWII.

After the war, Britain's colonial empire unraveled with many former colonies fighting for and gaining independence. Burma was no exception. The Karen felt the British had promised them their own country upon independence so they were eager to join the push for freedom along with the many other ethnic groups in Burma. Indeed, most of the ethnic groups united to push the British out, but with the understanding that each ethnic group would have a say in whether they ultimately stayed in the country of Burma or not.

So it was with optimism and enthusiasm that the Karen became part of an independent Burma in 1948. A Burmese government was elected but it didn't last long. In an early cabinet meeting, the Prime Minister and virtually the whole cabinet was assassinated. Things went downhill rapidly. With the military leadership heavily influencing the government, it soon became apparent that the ethnic groups would have no say in their destiny and the Karen most certainly would not have a separate country. All pretenses of a civilian government were abolished in 1962 when a military coup was staged. Since then, Burma has been harshly controlled by a military dictatorship.

So in 1949, just one year after independence, the Karen and many other ethnic groups began an insurgency against the government of Burma. The Karen in particular, as the largest and most influential of the minority ethnic groups, have been the enemy of the Burmese government ever since.



Burma military outpost, Burma/Thai border

The Karen had some initial military success against the Burmese and in fact, was close to defeating them. But it was not to be and they were gradually forced east to the mountainous regions near the Thai border.

There, for many years the Karen virtually had their own country. They controlled quite wide areas, had their own government and army, charged duties on goods that passed through their territory and did generally what every government does. Their "country" though, was never recognized internationally. The Burmese would sometimes raid Karen areas during the dry season, but would always retreat during the rainy season as they could not support the troops in the difficult, mountain terrain.

This somewhat stalemated situation began to change in 1984. The first corridors to Thailand were forced through Karen territory and held for the whole year. For the first time in history, the Burmese had direct control of a portion of the Thai border. In following years, additional corridors were opened. Also for the first time in history, Karen refugees came into Thailand and could not return during the dry season.

From 1984 and through the mid-1990s, additional corridors were opened through Karen territory, with each advance creating additional refugees. The strategy of the Burmese military is low tech, but brutal and does not differentiate between civilians and troops. All people in the disputed areas are treated as military enemies. In fact, the "Four Cuts" policy employed since the early 1970s was aimed directly at the civilian population. The idea was to cut the supply of recruits, food, intelligence, and finances of the insurgents by basically eliminating the Karen. Many refer to the policy as ethnic cleansing.

In 1995, Manerplaw, the capitol of the Karen's virtual country was taken by the Burmese. Over the next couple years, the remaining bases of the Karen insurgents also fell. Though there remains a relatively small force of Karen soldiers today, in military terms, the war is largely over. Unfortunately, the violence has not lessened and perhaps has gotten worse. In fact, many view the period starting in November of 2005 until now as the worst since the mid-1990s.

As Manerplaw fell, a new phase of "village relocation" began which effectively continues the Four Cuts policy. Armed Burmese troops raid and destroy unarmed Karen villages, destroy food supplies, rape, torture and kill as before. Relocation sites are assigned for people to go to, but there is no land to farm, no materials for housing, no jobs, etc. Worse, in the relocation sites, the military knows where the people are and they are tapped for forced labor and made to pay arbitrary taxes more often than those that choose to live in hiding.



School while living in hiding

So, hundreds of thousands of Karen live on the run, moving from place to place to stay ahead of the government. When hiding places run out, they flee into Thailand. But this is not so easy either. The Thais have housed refugees first from Viet Nam, then Cambodia, then Laos and now Burma. The Thai government feels they have enough challenge taking

care of their own people, so they aren't eager to shelter Burmese. Further, the Thai do not want to make their precarious relationship with the Burmese any worse than it is.

So the Thai government does what it can to prevent refugees from coming into Thailand, though they stop short of making entry impossible. So when there is nowhere else to go the Karen come to Thailand. In the 1980s, refugees formed new villages just inside Thailand and just got absorbed into the landscape. But as the numbers fleeing Burma increased, so did the impact on the areas they occupied. So eventually, the refugees were rounded up and put into the nine camps that exist today. They are fed, clothed and housed by the international community and living conditions in the camps really aren't bad. The problem is that the people are largely confined to the camps and not permitted to make a living. Schools were built in the camps, but after graduation, there is nowhere for the graduates to go and nothing for them to do.

It is a difficult situation for the Karen. They have been rejected by Burma and most refugees do not have Burmese citizenship. They are rejected by Thailand and can't get citizenship there either. When a person has no citizenship, then they are generally rejected by the world and trapped where they are at. There is no change on the horizon for Burma. So governments around the world are beginning to accept the Karen for resettlement in their countries.

(Last updated 3/28/2007)