

The Life of the Karen:  
Insight into Burmese Oppression of the Karen

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## ***Introduction***

For the past sixty years, the Karen have lived in an environment of war, deliberately targeted by the Burmese with brutal oppression and ruled by fear. The life of the Karen has changed and adapted to reality of war. Communities have been fragmented into different situations which alienate Karen from each other, from development as a nation and as human beings. Violent measures are taken to disrupt life by relocating of villages, creating Internally Displaced People (IDP), and by sending refugees and illegal workers into Thailand. It is the result of a struggle for the national survival against a military regime with a determined mandate to annihilate the Karen. In this war between the Burmese Military and Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), innocent Karen civilians are not only caught in the middle, but are targeted.

### ***1. Life in Karen State***

Every aspect of life within the Karen State is tightly controlled by the Burmese military. The military controls the Karen through use of fear; the soldiers kill, rape, torture and harass indiscriminately. They “target civilians at random and without an immediate military objective.”<sup>1</sup> Road blocks and army outpost regulate all aspects of life. Movement of persons and goods are restricted. Karen farmers are forced to sell the entirety of their crops to the government at a low rate and buy it back at an inflated price.<sup>2</sup> High schools have been shut by the government, and few can afford the fee for elementary school. It is not unusual for a student to have their education interrupted for a

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<sup>1</sup> Human Rights Watch “Human Right Abuses of the Karen” <http://hrw.org/reports/2005/burma0605/5.htm>

few years due to forced movement by the military. Still, the Karen are expected to pay taxes and provide a quota of labor for military projects. The personal abuse and harassment of family members from the Burmese Military often inspires children to join the Karen armed resistance.

## ***2. Life in Relocated Village***

The Burmese military seeks to control the Karen by burning existing villages and forcing the relocation of the people to a location near to a military camp. Their typical method is to enter a village with force. Mortars and gun fire surprise villagers as their houses are set on fire. The village is looted, women are raped, fleeing villagers are shot and rice paddies are burnt. The military also loots the livestock of the villagers, making the conditions for living even more difficult. Those Karen who remain in the village are forced to move into military-controlled camps. Within these camps curfews are set with free-fire zones outside their boundaries. Anyone seen outside the Military's relocated villages is assumed to be assisting the KNLA and is shot without question. For this reason, innocent people are shot for returning from the fields. As mentioned previously, the farmers are forced to give all their food to the military. The food is stored and rationed out by the military to prevent any provisions finding their way into the hands of Internally Displaced People (IDP) or KNLA. Anyone caught with extra food is accused of conspiring with the KNLA and are killed. The curfews, taxations, and burnt land make it impossible for farmers to provide enough food for the villagers and the military. Within months, the people living in these relocated villages must either starve or flee.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Heppner, Kevin. "A Village on Fire" Cultural Survivor Quarterly. Fall 2002, p.16

Those people under Burmese military control are ruthlessly used in the fight against the KNLA. Villages are placed around Burmese military outpost as shields to deter attacks from the KNLA. When the military advances, each village is forced to provide a quota of porters to carry ammunition and supplies for the Burmese. Men, women and children are used as both porters and minesweepers. Pregnant woman are especially recruited for this task. Carrying up to 60lbs each, they walk in the front of the convoy to set off landmines and to deter attacks from the KNLA. Porters rarely return home; instead, they are brought to the front lines. Female porters are often raped in the evenings. They are poorly fed and often die of starvation, fighting, or beatings when they are too exhausted to carry on.

### ***3. Life as an Internal Displaced Person (IDP)***

Those who are able to flee from the Burmese Military hide in the jungle as IDPs a way of life that has become so prevalent that the Karen have become very flexible under these conditions. IDPs prefer to stay close to their village and their farms, because, they are able to travel back to their land to collect food. However, if the military remain in the village, the villagers must move deeper into the jungle, since the military will search for the villagers in jungle and shoot them, unarmed though they are. Moving through the jungle is dangerous as IDPs can encounter patrols of Burmese soldiers or landmines. If a group is discovered, the military burns all food supplies and shoots anyone who runs. Those who are often captured are used as porters to transport military supplies. IDPs depend on the KNLA to protect them and provide them with information to help them avoid the Burmese Military.

The IDPs eat bamboo shoots and banana tree trunks, food which was fed to pigs on their farms. They sleep on the jungle floor and grow rice in hidden fields along systems of hidden paths. Religious services, education, and food supplies are secretly organized to maintain as much as possible the life that was had in their village.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, lack of proper food and shelter makes IDPs vulnerable to malnutrition, disease and illness. Yet many Karen prefer starvation as an IDP in their own land to the food, education and medicine available as refugees in a foreign country. Therefore, it is often extreme circumstances that cause Karen to enter Thailand as refugees.

#### ***4. Life in Thai Refugee Camps***

There are over 120,000 Karen refugees in Thailand in camps along the border. These camps are not large in size, a few square kilometers at most, yet tens of thousands of Karen have been confined to these camps for 10-20 years. The Thai authorities strictly forbid Karen to move in and out of the camps. As a result, there is a generation of Karen who have no knowledge of life outside the gates of the camp. Life skills, such as hunting, planting, harvesting, etc, that are necessary to the Karen way of life have not been passed on. Karen children born in these camps are not granted citizenship to either Burma or Thailand, which makes working or traveling especially difficult. Houses in these camps are built close together. Refugees are responsible for paying for and building their own houses. Their rice, cooking oil and fish paste is given to them. The psychological stress of not being able to work or travel is compounded by the threat of attack. Troops sponsored by the Burmese Military regularly cross the Moei River, which

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<sup>4</sup> Free Burma Rangers. "Flight and Displacement", October 23, 2005  
<http://www.ibiblio.org/freeburma/humanrights/khrg/archive/photoreports/2005photos/set2005a/section10.html>

divides Burma from Thailand, and attack the refugee camps in Thailand. They enter, shooting refugees and burning houses in the camp as punishment for their political beliefs.

### ***5. Life as Illegal Worker***

Most Karen families are dependant upon a working family member for money, but working outside the camps is very dangerous. The Karen refugees do not have the proper papers to travel. In order to protect economic alliances, the Thai authority turns over all Karen refugees captured outside the camps to the Burmese Military. Because Karen can only work illegally in Thailand, they have no rights and employers often take advantage of them. A refugee will work for much less than a Thai, causing resentment from the Thai's who jobs are being replaced. Within the past five years, there have been many bodies of illegal Karen workers found brutally murdered. Young Karen girls within the camps are susceptible to being lured into prostitution under the guise of making money through housecleaning.

### ***6. History of Burmese-Karen Relations***

Per capita, Burma has the largest army in the world. With over 400,000 soldiers in the military, Burma spends 40% of its budget on artillery and less than 1% on education and health care combined.<sup>5</sup> Funds are raised for the military through trade of oil and illicit trade of drugs, teak wood and precious stones. It is thought that the black market

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<sup>5</sup> Burma Ethic Research Group "Forgotten Victims of War: IDP of Karen in Burma", April 1998.

doubles the amount of money that Burma's official economy.<sup>6</sup> At one point, Burma was one of the richest countries in South East Asia, but now it is one of the poorest.

Some people join the Burmese military because they need to provide for their family; others join, because they are threatened, bribed, arrested. Most Burmese soldiers have no idea of their government's policies in the ethnic regions. Drugs are often given to soldiers before offensive action so that they will fight and fight aggressively. To ensure ruthlessness, the Military intentionally gives its soldiers insufficient food and pay. This encourages soldiers to loot from the ethnic villagers. Moreover, soldiers are commanded to rape Karen and other ethnic minorities for the purpose of thinning out Karen ethnicity.

The Burmese government held national elections 15 years ago to which National League for Democracy (NLD) won by a landslide. Political power was never transferred and the political leaders of NLD were arrested. Many remain jailed to this day; Leader Aung San Suu Kyi has been in and out of house arrest and even mentioning her name can be cause for arrest. State billboards declared anyone against the Military as against the Union of Burma, and anyone who wanted to destroy the country must be crushed.

Causes for this present conflict are rooted in the events surrounding Independence. The Karen are still fighting for political promises made to them by the British during the war. In 1947, when the Union of Burma achieved independence from the British, the Karen were highly organized politically and were prepared for a sovereign Karen National Union within the Union of Burma. However, the Burmese government denied, and continues to deny the political status of the Karen National Union, portrays

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<sup>6</sup> USA Government, "World Fact Book" <http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/bm.html>.

them as terrorists.<sup>7</sup> As a response to the Karen call for independence, the Burmese government has escalated its military campaign against the Karen within the periphery of genocide.

Between 1998 and 2003 the Burmese Military destroyed 2,500 villages and displaced nearly 700,000 people with an average of 3,500 people a month seeking refugee status in Thailand.<sup>8</sup> Termed as the “Four Cuts”, the Burmese government has a policy which would “liquidate the [ethnic] insurgents”.<sup>9</sup> The Four Cuts policy cuts off food, funds, intelligence and recruits of the Karen. A public pledge came from the Military that it would not end the war until all Karen, including children and babies, were dead. An analogy was made comparing the Karen problem to bamboo; just as you dig up the roots to get rid of bamboo, so it will be with the Karen. It was added that if anyone wants to see a Karen after Burmese Military is finished, they will have to go to a museum.

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<sup>7</sup> Smith, Martin. Burma: Ethnicity and Insurgency. 1990, p.256

<sup>8</sup> Martin, Veronika and Betsy Apple. “Burma’s Internally Displaced” Refugees International. October 10, 2002.

<sup>9</sup> Smith, Martin. Burma: Ethnicity and Insurgency. 1990, p.256

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