

## *Karen Refugees*

The Karen (kä-rĕn) people are indigenous to southeastern Burma (Myanmar) and western Thailand. Due to political violence and instability, however, many Karens have sought asylum and refugee protection in Thailand. When Burma gained independence in 1948 from Great Britain, civil war ensued and isolated many warring ethnic groups. The Karen, in present-day Karen State, formed the Karen National Union (KNU) and have fought almost continuously for their political, social, and cultural freedom from the ruling Burmese regime.<sup>1</sup>

Many ethnic groups, including the Karen, united with Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy in the 1990 democratic elections. Their hope of democratic representation has dwindled, as Suu Kyi remains under house arrest by the Burmese government.<sup>2, 3</sup> While much of Burma has struggled in its political and economic isolation, the totalitarian government of Burma, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), identified the Karen and other Burmese ethnic groups as specific threats to their rule.<sup>2</sup> The military infrastructure created by the SPDC forces families into extreme poverty and unpaid labor through physical domination and torture. Since the mid-nineties, the SPDC army has relocated and demolished Karen villages, actively limiting access to food, housing, education, and health care, created forced labor camps, recruited child soldiers, and arbitrarily arrested and violated villagers.<sup>3</sup> An estimated 350,000 Karens have fled to Thailand to escape the active SPDC militias and seek asylum.



The U.S. State Department has now identified Karen refugees for resettlement in the United States.

<sup>1</sup> Bowles, Edith. "Human Rights, Forgotten Wars, and Survival: Burma's Indigenous Peoples." *Cultural Survival Quarterly*. Fall 2000: 8-10.

<sup>2</sup> Heppner, Kevin. "A Village on Fire: The Destruction of Rural Life in Southeastern Burma." *Cultural Survival Quarterly*. Fall 2000: 15-18.

<sup>3</sup> "'They Came and Destroyed Our Village Again': The Plight of Internally Displaced Persons in Karen State." *Human Rights Watch*. 17(4). June 2005.

Although there are twelve different dialects of Karen language, over 80% speak either Saga (skǎw) or Pwo (pᵒ) Karen.<sup>3,4</sup> Due to the cultural domination of the Burmese government, some Karen speak and write Burmese, but Karen is taught nearly exclusively in the Thai refugee camps. Many who live in the Thai refugee camps have some exposure to English and primary education. In Burma, only one in four students continues their education past primary school.<sup>1</sup> About 36.9% of the Karen refugees are of school-going age (ages 5-17) and 15.4% under the age of four. Nearly 44% of the refugees are adults, ages 18 to 59.

The Karen are about 88.6% Christian and 11% Buddhist. Traditional animist beliefs are often incorporated in their understanding of organized religions.<sup>3,4</sup> The Karen families tend to be small, averaging around two to three children. Children outside of wedlock are highly discouraged in this community and the families are quite tight knit. Karen pride themselves on their moral, “simple, quiet, unassuming and peace loving<sup>4</sup>” nature and vibrant clothing, dance and music.

Health care is limited within Karen state and many practice traditional medicine. Burmese- and Karen-run clinics from within Thailand have established satellite clinics and “backpack medic” teams to assist people in the Karen and surrounding states in their basic health care needs. Clinics sponsored by several international non-governmental organizations are located within the Thai refugee camps and seek to address primary health concerns. Many Karen people have been trained in basic nursing and medic care to treat their own communities.

*Adapted by Church World Service from a backgrounder written by Kentucky Refugee Ministries, Inc., Lauren K. Graber, June 2006.*

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<sup>4</sup> “Karen Website.” [www.karen.org](http://www.karen.org). Accessed 28 June 2006.

Map Source: Belak, Brenda. Gathering Strength: Women From Burma on their Rights. January 2002. Accessed online at [http://www.ibiblio.org/obl/docs/Gathering\\_Strength.htm](http://www.ibiblio.org/obl/docs/Gathering_Strength.htm) on 28 June 2006.