

A New Beginning: Karen Refugees from Burma

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■ "I would like [the west] to see us not as a country rather far away whose sufferings do not matter, but as fellow human beings in need of human rights and who could do so much for the world, if we were allowed."

■ - Daw Aung San Suu Kyi

Burma or Myanmar?



Quick Facts

- **Official name: Union of Myanmar**
- **Population: 50.7 million (UN, 2005)**
- **Area: 261,218 sq miles (slightly smaller than Texas)**
- **Climate: Tropical Monsoon**
- **Major languages: Burmese, indigenous ethnic languages**
- **Religion: 90% Buddhist, 4% Christian, 4% Muslim**
- **Life expectancy: 57 years (men), 63 years (women) (UN)**
- **Monetary unit: 1 kyat = 100 pyas**
- **Main exports: Teak, prawns, fish, rice, opiates**

A Political Timeline

- **1057 AD-** Burma is founded
- **1885-1942-** British colonization
- **1942-1945-** Japanese occupation
- **1948-** Burma becomes independent Federalist state
- **1962-** Military coup ousts federal government, Military dictatorship takes over
- **1988-** Last major public uprising against the government; thousands of protesters killed
- **1990-** Democratic elections held, Aung San Suu Kyi wins landslide victory, is placed under house arrest
- **2005-** Capital is suddenly moved from Rangoon to remote jungle town near Pyinmana
- **2007-** Thousands of monks are marching in the first large-scale anti-government protest since 1988

Ethnic Groups

- Burman 68%
- Shan 9%
- Karen 7%
- Rakhine 4%
- Chinese 3%
- Indian 2%
- Mon 2%
- other 5%



Ethnic Cleansing

- Thousands of people in Burma are internally displaced
- Many thousands more await relocation from refugee camps in Thailand
- This summer 172 refugees arrived in Rochester
- 150 more expected later this year



An Oppressive Regime



Burma has been under harsh military rule for 45 years.

A once-prosperous nation, it is now a failed state with one of the most oppressive and corrupt governments in the world.





An Increasingly Desperate Situation

- An estimated 1/3 of children in Burma are malnourished
- Many families have been reduced to one meal per day
- The regime spends 40% of the national budget on the military
- National healthcare spending per person is \$0.50 per year
- Some 330,000 people in Burma are HIV positive
- Forced labor, ethnic cleansing, and violent attacks on citizens by the military are all realities in Burma today

Resistance Efforts



Nobel Prize winner, Aung San Suu Kyi



Buddhist monks march in protest



Student Protesters



Karen National Liberation Army

The Karen People



- Three groups
 - Sgaw (70%) (Southern)
 - Pwo (7%) (also Southern)
 - Karinni (13%) (Central)
 - Pa-o (?) (Northern)
- Share many cultural traits and traditions, but NOT language
- Some cultural tips and trends

Daily Life in Burma



Life in the Refugee Camps

- The refugees themselves take charge of running the camp
- Education is high priority
- Lack of employment
- Morale



Belief Systems and Values



- 70% - Buddhist, Buddhist-animist, Animist
- 30% - Christian
- Retain elements of original animist beliefs
- Value consensus and cooperation
- Respect elders

Rites of Passage

■ Birth

- Everyone stops working for the day to welcome the child
- A string is tied around the child's wrist to keep its *kla* from being enticed away

■ Marriage

- Mainly marry within their own cultural group
- March and April are favorite months
- Lively, boisterous affairs

■ Death

- Christian Karen bury their dead
- Buddhist and Animist's cremate



Education and Literacy



- After the military takeover in 1962, schools have been unable to provide a high standard of education
- Typical syllabus:
 - Karen, English, Burmese
 - Math and General Science
 - Geography and world history including Burmese and Karen History
 - Hygiene and civics
 - Gardening, cooking, and needlework

Karen Language

- Member of the Sino-Tibetan language group
- Sgaw Karen – 70% of all residents of the Thai refugee camps
- Dialects differ little in structure and word root, but sound different due to pronunciation
- Tonal – pitch changes meaning