

## Karen

### Profile

The term 'Karen' actually refers to a number of ethnic groups with Tibetan-Central Asian origins who speak 12 related but mutually unintelligible languages ('Karenic languages') that are part of the Tibeto-Burman group of the Sino-Tibetan family. Around 85 per cent of Karen belong either to the S'ghaw language branch, and are mostly Christian and animist living in the hills, or the Pwo section and are mostly Buddhists. The vast majority of Karen are Buddhists (probably over two-thirds), although large numbers converted to Christianity during British rule and are thought to constitute about 30 per cent among the Karen. The group encompasses a great variety of ethnic groups, such as the Karenni, Padaung (also known by some as 'long-necks' because of the brass coils worn by women that appear to result in the elongation of their necks), Bghai, Brek, etc.

There are no reliable population figures available regarding their total numbers in Burma: a US State Department estimate for 2007 suggests there may be over 3.2 million living in the eastern border region of the country, especially in Karen State, Tenasserim Division, eastern Pegu Division, Mon State and the Irrawaddy Division.

### Historical context

While there is some uncertainty as to the origins of the various Karen peoples, it is thought that their migration may have occurred after the arrival of the Mon – who are thought to have established themselves in the region before the start of the first millennium BCE – but before that of the Burmans sometime before the ninth century. Some Karen authors refer to the arrival of their people as far back as 2,500 years ago, after migrating to Tibet and China from their original homeland somewhere in Central Asia.

Whatever their origins, by the eighteenth century they were well established in the hills of central and eastern Burma, for the most part of their history variously subjugated to the rule of Mon, Shan or Burman kingdoms, though some, like the Red Karen, or Kayah, did maintain a form of autonomous existence until the early nineteenth century. The arrival of the British and the eventual incorporation of the existing political entities of the region as part of the British Empire by 1886, after a series of wars, led in a sense to greater autonomy for many Karen groups. British colonial authorities allowed the continued existence of local rulers, such as the Karenni sawbwa, seen as less of a threat than members of the Burman majority.

Christian missionary efforts from the nineteenth century resulted in the conversion of a significant proportion of the Karen, and the presence of this minority in the fields of education and colonial institutions increased significantly during the period leading to the Second World War. In addition, whereas the ethnic Burman were almost excluded from military service under British colonial rule, the Karen were highly prominent, and had even been active as guides for the British during the Anglo-Burmese Wars. Karen troops indeed were to play a significant role in buttressing British authority in

suppressing subsequent rebellions in Lower Burma in 1886 and 1930–32.

Burman opposition to British rule however was to persist, leading to the emergence of national liberation movements, such as Thakin movement, of which Aung San was a leader, and their training by and cooperation with the Japanese after the latter invaded Burma in 1941. This included the establishment of the Burma Independence Army (BIA), units of which were involved in attacks on minority populations, particularly the Karen.

Some Karen, for their part, retreated to India with British forces, later returning to Burma to help in the resistance against Japanese occupation. While Karen units, among others, were seen as instrumental in 1944–45 in helping the Allies recapture Burma, by that time Aung San and the BIA had already switched sides and were also fighting the retreating Japanese. While many Karen had hoped they would be rewarded for their loyalty to the British after the war, even the ensuing political arrangement under the Panglong Agreement – promising an eventual federal Burma – was concluded without Karen approval.

While accounts differ as to what exactly occurred after independence in January 1948, it is thought that Karen and other non-Burman units in the former colonial army remained largely loyal to newly elected Prime Minister U Nu, who faced a Communist rebellion. However, mistrust on both the Karen and Burman sides apparently led Prime Minister U Nu to use elements from the BIA to raise a more ethnically Burmese army which, some claim, turned against the Karen. By 1949, Karen units openly went into armed rebellion, as their demands for independence, or at least federalism, from organizations such as the Karen National Union (the KNU) and its armed branch, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), appeared increasingly futile.

Through the 1950s and 1960s, more ethnic groups joined the Karen and others in armed opposition to the Burmese government until almost a third of the country was controlled by about a dozen rebel groups by the 1970s. The tide turned, however, after the 1988 popular uprisings and the subsequent takeover by the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which responded with a massive build-up of the armed forces (tatmadaw) and the gradual whittling away of the territorial gains of the KNLA. By 1994, the KNA saw its main headquarters in Manerplaw, near the Thai border, fall to the tatmadaw. It was also in that year that a group of Buddhist soldiers in the KNLA (now known as the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, or DKBA) went over to the side of the Burmese regime, alleging among other things Christian domination and anti-Buddhist discrimination in the KNU. Since then, while the KNU and KNLA are still involved in armed resistance against the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC, the successor to SLORC), they have mainly conducted low-level guerrilla activities from temporary jungle camps on the Thai–Burma border. It appears clear, however, that since 1988 the KNU has lost control of its once extensive ‘liberated zones’ in Burma.

After 1988 the KNU, along with a number of other ethnic organizations, entered into a coalition with Aung San Suu Kyi’s party, the National League for Democracy, supporting a federal, democratic state. While a tentative verbal ceasefire was reached in December 2003, this soon fell by the wayside as the Burmese army continued to attack Karen bases and to commit gross violations of human rights against the Karen. Nevertheless, a number of Karen civil society networks have sought to promote Karen community development in government-controlled areas.

## **Current issues**

In 2006 and 2007 the Karen continue to suffer the brunt of forced labour, forced relocation and confiscation of land, the burning of villages, rape and other forms of sexual violence, as well as

discrimination by state authorities in areas such as language use and education. Karen armed opposition to the SPDC contributes to an ever-increasing number of Karen internally displaced people and refugees to Thailand. Reports indicate that, in 2006 alone, violence had displaced an additional 27,000 people in eastern Burma. Increased Burmese army troop deployment in offensives against the Karen in 2006 led to the continued use of forced labour by thousands of Karen civilians in 2006, as well as by thousands of prisoners used for portering and – according to some reports – subsequently executed by the army. Karen civilians, in addition to convicts, appear to have been used by the military in 2005 and 2006 to clear landmines in Karen State. Forced relocation in some cases appeared to be taking the form of ethnic cleansing: with the tatmadaw replacing Karen villagers with ethnic Burman, though in some cases ethnic Karen were forced to relocate to areas controlled by the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army.

The Karen people did not organize pro-democracy protests in Yangon (Rangoon) and other cities in September 2007, but welcomed them and expressed solidarity with the protesters. In an October 2007 Associated Press article, Karen National Union secretary-general Mahn Sha said: ‘We need to work together with the Mon, other groups, the students, to fight the (junta). We have a common enemy and common goals.’

The tatmadaw appears to be able to violate the Karen’s most basic human rights with impunity. There were no reports of government prosecution of previous incidents of rape of Karen women, nor obvious steps by the government to address widespread reports of security forces burning Karen villages in 2006.

While international health and relief organizations had begun to operate in recent years in Karen areas under the control of government forces, this trend has been reversed in 2005 and 2006. In 2005, the Global Fund for AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria pulled out of Burma, mainly because of restrictions imposed by the SPDC, followed in the following year by Médecins Sans Frontières, which had been operating in some parts of Karen and Mon States, and the closure by the International Committee for the Red Cross of four of its regional offices.

The right to property and use of their own land by the Karen continued to be disregarded by Burmese authorities in its efforts to quash armed opposition or through a number of development projects. One of these is the Hat Gyi hydroelectric dam. Construction started in 2007 and already it is reported to have created some 10,000 refugees – mainly Karen – to Thailand because of the settlement of Burmese troops near the site of the proposed reservoir. Karen forced labour is reported to have been used to clear the area near the dam and to build access roads to military and other government camps nearby.

Discrimination against the Karen remains deeply entrenched in the institutions of the state. State schools in Karen areas, even where they are the majority of the population, is exclusively provided in the Burmese language and government offices provide no access to services in Karen languages. Numerous reports continue to point out that government jobs in Karen areas appear to be increasingly the reserved domain of ethnic Burman.

A ceasefire agreement in February 2007 was signed by the SPDC with a breakaway group – the Karen National Union/Karen National Liberation Army Peace Council (KNU/KNLAPC).

Meanwhile that same month, the Secretary General of the KNU, Pad Mahn Shar, was shot to death on the veranda of his home on the Thai border. Observers suspected that the assassins were either rival Karens or dispatched by the Burmese government.

In the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis, which struck Burma in May 2008, there were reports that the government was systematically excluding the Karen from all forms of assistance. Karen make up perhaps half of the population of the hardest-hit region, the Irrawaddy Delta. Tens of thousands in the region were reported dead, with many more survivors in urgent need of aid in order to stave off death.