

## Karenni

### Profile

Like many ethnic classifications in Burma, 'Karenni' is a collective term constructed during the colonial era that does not represent a single ethnic group. Karenni, sometimes also known as the Red Karen (so-called because it was a favoured colour in traditional clothing) or Kayah, actually refers to a Karen grouping which includes a number of ethnic groups that speak related Tibeto-Burman languages such as Kekhu, Bre, Kayah, Yangtalai, Geba, Zayein and Paku.

Their exact numbers are difficult to assert because of the absence of reliable statistics: one plausible estimate is that they may number some 250,000 people. In Kayah State where many Karenni are concentrated, sandwiched between Shan State to the north-west and Karen State to the south-west, the Karenni represented some 56 per cent of the state population of about 259,000 in the official census of 1983 (which is deemed unreliable by many observers). There is also a sizeable Kayah-speaking population in Shan State. It is generally thought that most Karennis are Christians, though a large percentage of the population is Buddhist.

The Karenni live not only in Burma's smallest state, but also its least developed region and one of the most closed, since foreigners remained largely unable to visit this part of the country.

### Historical context

The ancestors of the Karenni are thought to have migrated into the region of Kayah State in the first millennium BCE after migrating to Tibet and China from their original homeland somewhere in Central Asia.

Partly because of their location between the Burman kingdom and the principality of Chiang Mai, Karenni traditional rulers, known as Saophyas or Sawbwas, were able in the nineteenth century to operate with a high level of independence. The British government concluded an agreement in 1875 that recognized the de facto existence of four western Karenni states separate from Ministerial Burma, while the eastern Karenni state of Kantarawaddy, dealt with as a tributary of the Burman kingdom, was annexed by the British in 1888 following a confrontation with its Saophya.

The Karenni states were thus continuously dealt with by British authorities as distinct from 'Burma proper', and were administered by the colonial government of India as part of the Frontier Area. Despite this differential treatment of Karenni areas, the colonial government of India started to give indications in the years leading up to Burmese independence that it favoured integrating the Karenni states with Burma.

Still, their semi-independent status outside of Ministerial Burma led to the Karenni being treated

differently from most other minorities in the Panglong Agreement, despite their relatively small numbers. Although Karenni representatives did not participate in formulating the document, or agree to it, it provided for a separate Kachin state within soon-to-be-independent Burma. Thus the Karenni States became part of Burma, though according to the 1947 Constitution, they were to be reconstituted into one state with a right of secession after 10 years.

The violent conflict in this part of Burma began soon after, due in part to tensions between pro- and anti-integration Karenni, as well as the murder by Burmese military police in August 1948 of a Karenni leader in favour of complete independence, U Bee Htu Re. Karenni resistance to Burmese authorities has been fierce, and so has the in-fighting between Karenni factions. A ceasefire agreement was concluded with two groups, the Karenni Nationalities People's Liberation Front (KNPLF) and the Kayan New Land Party, in 1994, and with the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) in 1995, though the latter has subsequently broken down due to logging and mining rights claims.

## **Current issues**

The situation of Karenni is far from having improved markedly since the conclusion of ceasefires in 1994 and 1995. As much as a third of the population in the state of Kayah has been displaced since 1996, especially after the breakdown of the ceasefire with the KNPP, with an estimated 20,000 of them fleeing to Thailand. There are some reports suggesting that more than 2,500 villages have been destroyed or their inhabitants forced to relocate by the Burmese military regime.

These displacements, and the presence of large numbers of Burmese military – with the accompanying claims of forced labour, land confiscation without compensation, involuntary relocation, torture, arbitrary executions, sexual violence and other violations of the rights of Karenni – have all contributed to the dire state of the small population of Kayah State: malnutrition, poor health and lack of education opportunities are more prevalent here than in most other parts of the country.

The development opportunities that were hoped for after 1995 have not overall helped most Karenni. On the contrary, benefits from the mineral reserves in the state's south, or logging, have by and large bypassed them. Logging of teak and other timbers is often either done illegally, or permitted by Burmese authorities in complete disregard of any pre-existing land or usage rights of the indigenous Karenni, and the same goes for most mining activities. This had led to serious environmental degradation and deforestation, seriously hampering many of the Karenni's traditional agricultural and economic activities.

The 2005 agreement with Thailand for the construction of a series of electricity-generating dams on the Salween River, with construction slated to begin sometime in late 2007, follows the same pattern. An estimated 640 sq. km of land, including some of Kayah State's prime farming land, will be submerged, and as many as 30,000 people relocated or affected, including all of the population of one minority group, the Yintalai. There is little likelihood that these people will receive proper compensation for the loss of their land or livelihood. One town that will be completely submerged is the historical Karenni capital, Bawlake. In return for the destruction of their agricultural land, grazing areas, forests, fish breeding and spawning sites, the disenfranchised Karenni will not even enjoy the benefits of the electricity produced, since the generated power is destined for the Thai (and possibly Chinese) domestic markets.

There have been offensives since 2002 by the Burmese military, ostensibly to clear out villagers in the Karenni–Karen border areas and relocate them in areas under military control. In addition to the destruction of property, violence and other human rights violations committed by the military on

Karenni and Karen, it appears that there may also be a State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) strategy to control some of the region's valuable natural resources – not least linked to the construction of dams on the Salween.