

Karen Refugees from Burma in the US: an Overview for Torture Treatment Programs

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Caveat

- “Karen people are very diverse. Among the Karen people there are different languages, different cultures, different religions, and different political groups. No one can claim to speak on behalf of all Karen people, or represent all Karen people.”

- Venerable Ashin Moonieinda

From “The Karen people: Culture, Faith and History.”
(http://www.karen.org.au/docs/karen_people.pdf)

Introduction to Burma

- January 4th, 1948 –independence

- Government type = Military Junta. A brutal military regime has been in power since 1962.

- The junta allowed “elections” to be held in Burma in 1990.

- The National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi won over 80% of the vote. The list of party candidates became the hit list of the junta. The NLD was never allowed to claim their rightful seats.



Burma or Myanmar?



- The military dictatorship changed the name of Burma to Myanmar in 1989.
- Parties who do not accept the authority of the unelected military regime to change the official name of the country still call it Burma (minority ethnic groups, the U.S. and the UK).
- The UN, France, and Japan recognize it as Myanmar.

Who Lives in Burma?

There are eight main ethnic groups and
130 distinct sub-groups

Total Population = ~55 Million

Includes:

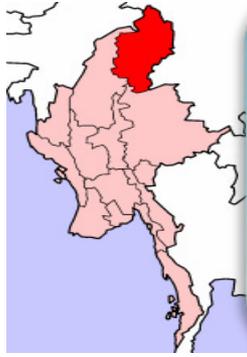
- Burmans = 37.4 Million (68%)
- Karen in Burma = 7 to 9 Million
- Karen in Thailand = 400,000
- Karen in Thai refugee camps =
~150,000

Source: <http://www.cal.org/co/pdf/files/refugeesfromburma.pdf>

Map courtesy of Free Burma Rangers



Kachin



Karenni



Chin



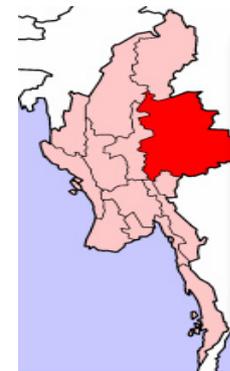
Mon



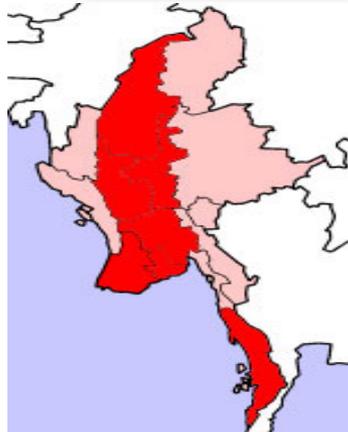
Rakhine (Arakanese)



Shan



Burman



Karen



Map of the Karen State



Karen Districts



How to Refer to Refugees from Burma

- **There is no single national identity.** Ethnic minorities identify themselves with their cultural group (Karen, Chin, Karenni, etc). Each is distinct from the Burman/Burmese and most do not want to be called “Burmese.”
- When referring to multiple ethnic groups, use “refugees from Burma” rather than “Burmese refugees.”

History of the Karen

- Under British colonial rule (before 1948), the British favored Karen and other ethnic minorities.
- During World War II, Karen and Burmans fought against each other - Karen supporting British forces and Burmans supporting the Japanese.
- When Burma achieved independence from Britain in 1948, the Karen felt abandoned and betrayed by the British, and persecution by the ruling Burmans began.
- Karen rose up against Burmese rule in a push for self-determination, now known as the Karen insurgency, which began on January 31, 1949.



The Burmese Military has committed horrific human rights abuses against Karen and other ethnic groups.

Source: <http://www.cal.org/co/pdf/files/refugeesfromburma.pdf>

The Karen Insurgency

- Karen National Union (**KNU**) – Democratically elected governing body that administers all the functions of government in areas under its control.
 - Website: www.karennationalunion.net
- Karen National Liberation Army (**KNLA**) – armed wing of the KNU.
- Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (**DKBA**) – splinter group of the KNU, aligned with the Burmese army in 1994, which led to the fall of the Karen capital, Manerplaw. In 2010, part of the DKBA re-aligned with the KNLA after suffering abuses by the Burmese military.

Burmese Military Strategy

- **“Four Cuts” policy** – rather than targeting guerrillas, targets civilians who support them – cutting off access to food, funds, information and recruits
- **“No Man's Land” policy** - execute anyone, including children, found in areas of military operations
- **“Sweeping”** – relocation, burning villages, landmines
- In 1997 Burmese Army General Shwe Maung walked on a Karen flag and announced that “in twenty years you will only be able to find Karen people in a museum”.

Torture/Abuse

- Forced porters (carrying weaponry through jungle)
- Forced labor/ labor camps
- Beatings
- Systematic rape
- Human shields
- Forced relocations
- Burning of villages and laying landmines
- Summary executions
- Recruitment of child soldiers
- Land mine sweepers



Refugee Camps

- 9 camps along the Thai-Burma border
- Restricted movement from the camps
- Run by refugees themselves: Refugee Committees oversee activities of all the camps through camp committees, coordinate assistance provided by NGOs and liaise with UNHCR, the RTG and security personnel.



Monthly Food Rations

- Rice
- Fortified Flour
- Fish Paste
- Iodized Salt
- Mung beans
- Cooking Oil
- Dried Chilies
- Sugar



Karen Culture



Importance of Religion

- “Religion is far more important for most Karen than it is for most Westerners. Religion is not just a matter of belief: religion may determine, or be determined by, who somebody marries, the school they go to, or whether they are resettled or whether they remain in a refugee camp.” (Karen Buddhist Dhamma Dhutta Foundation, 2010, p. 25)



Photo by Tonya
Cook

Christianity

- While Christians make up only 20-30% of Karen, the vast majority of those who have resettled to the US.
- Majority are Baptist, also Seventh Day Adventists
- Targeted as suspected supporters of the KNU
- Pastors targeted;
churches burned.



Photo by Free Burma Rangers, from the Global Day of Prayer for Burma, 2009

Buddhism

- Official religion of Burma and the military regime
- At the village level, Buddhist and Christian Karen get along well



Islam

- Karen Muslims are of Indian decent
- Badly oppressed in all of Burma
- They call themselves “Knyaw Thoo” or “Black Karen,” but often identify their ethnicity as “Muslim.”



Photo by Tonya Cook

Karen Cultural Values

- Humility
- Harmony
- Community
- Long-Suffering
- Cheerfulness
- Respect for
elders and parents.



Karen Cultural Values

- Self-promotion is considered shameful – will downplay their skills.
- Taught not to ask questions in school and by elders – it is considered rude and disrespectful
- Consensus, cooperation, and harmony are more valuable than individualism or assertiveness
- Avoid confrontation
- “The bigger crime/issue, make it smaller, the smaller crime/issue, make it disappear.”
- “Silence is golden.”

Why do you think you
are the best person for
this position?

What?! I didn't say that!
Who said that? I *don't*
think that!

Cross Cultural Tips

- Do not be upset if someone answers a question with “No” when an affirmative answer might seem more appropriate. Saying “no” is often a way to be modest.
- If a Karen is offered something, he or she may be reluctant to take it, even if the item is needed. Persevere gently.

Do you have any questions?

No.

Do you need anything?

No.

Cross Cultural Tips

- Try anticipating the need and rephrasing your question, e.g. how many days of rice do you have left? Or, have you ever used a stove before?

Karen Cultural Values

- High value for education
 - Teachers are highly respected (thara, tharan)
 - Many are literate in their home language
- Hospitality is important
- Communication is indirect
- Democratic – elected village headman
- Fierce fighters, policy of no surrender
- Lifelong marriages



Photo by Free Burma Rangers

Karen Names

- No family names (no last names)
- Named based on what was happening at the time child was born or when mother was pregnant (Pee Mee = grandmother was away)
- Given names are often not used or known:
 - Nicknames are common
 - Karen normally address others not by name but by terms denoting a kinship relation
- For the refugee application, people may add “Saw” or “Naw” to their name (Mr./Ms.) or may split the syllables of their name (Kawlahay = Kaw Lah Hay)

Meanings of Some Common Karen Names

- Naw – Miss/Mrs.
- Saw – Mr.
- Paw – flower
- Mu - woman
- Htoo – gold
- Hsar - Star
- Eh – Love
- Eh Taw – True Love
- K'nyaw - Karen
- Gay – Good/Nice
- K'paw - light
- Lah – moon
- Bah Soe Gay – blessing
- Pee Bi - “Bi's grandmother”

Expression of Trauma

- “When one has been threatened with a great injustice, one accepts a small one as a favor”. ~ Jane Welsh Carlyle
- Survival as a way of life has become “normal.”
- Suffering is relative (leaders try to encourage by saying, “at least you’re not in the camp, in the IDP area, etc.)



Expression of Trauma

- “Thinking about it reminds you, so try to forget.”
- “No one can take care of your problems when it comes to your feelings. Deal with it on your own.”
- Not familiar with mental health services other than the “crazy jail”

- *Tha Hsi* – small heart = worthless (bottom of hierarchy, no education, etc.)
- *Tha Ba Pwoa* – heart in trouble – “broken heart,” sadness, depression

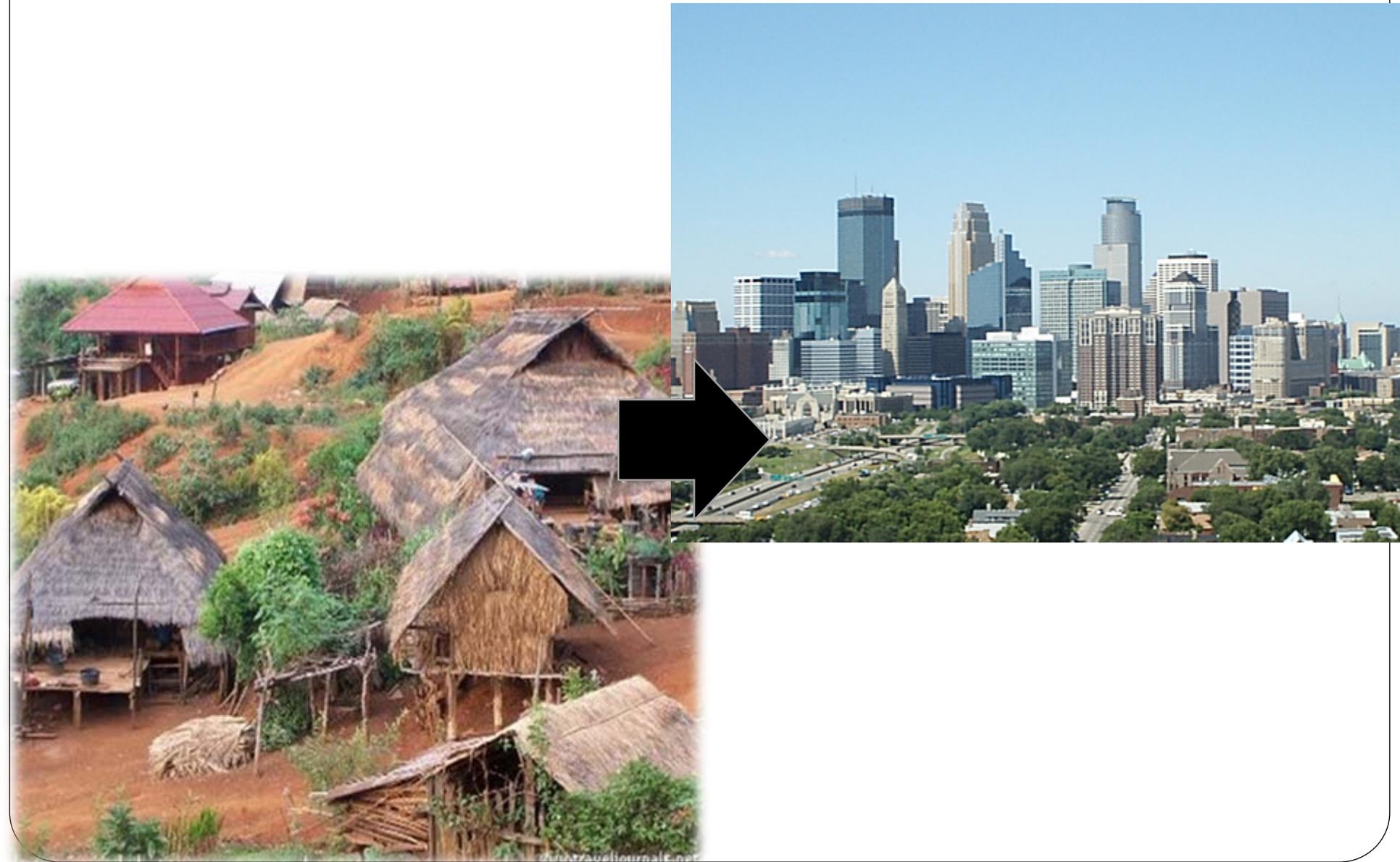
Building Rapport

- Friendly greeting
- Quiet, soft voice and reassuring smiles
- Ask about their religion, culture
- Explain that what you are doing can benefit the family and that your place is not to judge.
- Explain confidentiality!
- Offer encouragement by complimenting their willingness to learn
- Do not approach issues too directly. You may have to re-ask questions in a different way if you don't receive an answer

Use of Interpreters

- Karen has 3 main dialects: S'gaw, East Pwo and West Pwo. Each are mutually unintelligible.
- S'gaw is the most common and is taught in the refugee camps
- Pwo may also speak S'gaw
- Burmese could be the common language between a S'gaw and Pwo speaker
- While a Karen client may be comfortable speaking Burmese with a Karen interpreter, they may be very uncomfortable with an interpreter who is culturally Burmese.
- Train interpreters on confidentiality.

Resettlement Issues



Home in a Karen Village

What a pleasant place to live

No Electricity (no bill)

No Telephone (no bill- personal visits)

No Door to lock (no treasure to steal)

No Mortgage payment

No Alarm clock (the
rooster is the clock)

Washing, bathing
drinking water from
stream or river.

Hand made clothing.



How Many Refugees from Burma
are in the US?

Total in US to date: 30,000+
(over 6,000 in MN)

Did you know the
Karen live in
41 States?

Resettlement Challenges

- Unfamiliar with English, Western culture, urban life
- Stress of paperwork
- Mistrust of police
- Unfamiliar with laws on driving, hunting/fishing
- Alcohol abuse
- Domestic abuse
- Organizing self, schedule, setting goals, budget management
- Challenges of community organizing (re-creating villages from scattered communities)
- Transportation & Interpreting

Resettlement Strengths

- Realistic expectations that life in the US will be hard
 - “The first generation plants the seeds, the second generation gets the shade, the third generation gets the fruit”
- Motivations to resettle: children’s education, safety
- Grateful, eager to work, willing to sacrifice to help community members
- Strong relationships with churches: offer support, opportunities to socialize, networking, community organizing
- Karen are trusting partners, and very willing to work with you

Ta Blut Doe Mah!
(Thank you very much!)

