



**EDUCATION FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MARGINALIZED**

**KAREN IN BURMA**

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# **EDUCATION FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MARGINALIZED KAREN IN BURMA**

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## Acknowledgments

This report was written in April of 1977 as part of a course at Eastern Mennonite University. The purpose of the report was to identify the educational needs of the marginalized Karen and suggest changes in the present educational system which could help these marginalized people have better access to the kind of education they need and want. In early 1996, four hundred survey forms were distributed among Karen refugees along the Thai/Burma border. More than 200 responded. Interviews were also conducted with a large number of internally displaced Karen during the years 1990 to 1997. The report is based on information collected from these sources as well as on discussions with a number of Karen leaders and NGO workers.

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I hope that this report will assist in discussions about the future development of education for the marginalized Karen and other ethnic groups in Burma so that they will have a better chance to participate fully in the development of a peaceful and just future society for our country.

Saw Moe K. Tun  
Bangkok, Thailand  
April 6, 1998

## Table of Contents

Introduction .....	1
Western Education and Elitism .....	1
The Karen Revolution and a New Education System .....	2
Mismatched Curriculum and Impacts .....	3
Beginning of Foreign Scholarship Programs .....	5
The Karen Privilege .....	6
Karen Privilege and Scholarships .....	8
Risks in Applying for Refugee Status .....	9
The Marginalized Karen .....	11
The Burmese Military's Relocation Program .....	11
Living Situation in the Civil War Areas .....	12
Living Situation in Refugee Camps .....	14
Current Needs of the Marginalized Karen .....	15
The Marginalized Karen and Education .....	17
International Organizations and Education .....	18
Alternatives for Marginalized Karen .....	20
Educational Development .....	20
Selection Procedure .....	21
Conclusion .....	22
Bibliography .....	22

# Education for the Development of the Marginalized Karen in Burma

*This paper focuses on the educational development among the marginalized people of the Karen ethnic group living in the war-torn area of Burma and in refugee camps in Thailand. Not only the ethnic Karen but also other ethnic groups are suffering tremendously from the civil war. Educational development is also necessary for these ethnic groups.*

## Introduction

The current educational system of the Karen National Union (KNU) has a strong urban bias which is not practical for the majority of the Karen living in agricultural settings. Likewise, scholarship programs currently offered by foreign organizations, primarily benefit a small portion of elite Karen; they do not help the majority. Because educational development and overall development are interrelated, any new educational development efforts should be based on overall development needs for a group. Before implementing any new educational development program for the marginalized Karen, a broad and thorough survey should be done to discover the needs of the people. Providing equal opportunities for marginalized Karen and other groups must be a primary goal of educational development.

## Western Education and Elitism

Before the British colonial period, Buddhist monasteries played a key role in the traditional educational system in Burma. Buddhist monks were the primary educators in the Buddhist system. After British occupation of Burma in 1885, western education was widely introduced. The British were in desperate need of civil servants for the colonial administration. Because of the shortage of locally qualified people, a British goal in imposing western education in Burma was to produce trained civil servants to assist in colonial rule. As the British colonial government was able to offer jobs to these western-educated persons, traditional education lost popularity among the Burmese people. The coming of Christian missionaries to Burma also stimulated changes from traditional education to a western education system. Missionaries offered both Christianity and western education (Martin Smith p. 45). Several Christian denominations erected missionary schools. Because the Karen hold traditional beliefs similar to Christianity, a large number of Karen became Christians. However, the majority of Karens remained Buddhist and therefore as a group, had less access

to western education. Many Christian Karen took advantage of the opportunity to receive a western education and consequently served as subordinate officers in the British colonial administration (Martin Smith p. 46).

Both the British administration and western education affected social changes among the Karen. A large number of Karen moved from rural to urban areas and a ruling elite rose to the top of the structure. The western-educated Karen who worked in the British administration also became a privileged class in Karen society. Possession of a white-collar job and western education were symbols of higher social status — status which was a change in the traditional leadership system.

Traditionally, age and seniority were important qualifications for leadership. Older people with a reputation for being sincere were patrons of the society and important participants in decision-making. However, during the British colonial period, those Karen who worked in the colonial administration, regardless of age, were included in the decision making process and became leaders of the society. The Karen working in higher levels of British administration or having higher education levels became the elite. Thus, both colonial administration and western education were factors in the appearance of a new elite status in the Karen society.

## **The Karen Revolution and a New Education System**

In 1949, two years after Burma gained independence from the British, the Karen revolution broke out. The central government's refusal to grant autonomy was a primary cause of the Karen revolution. Many of the western-educated Karen held leadership positions in the KNU because of their respected status or former leading role in the British administration. The Karen controlled a large area of state territory and claimed self-government. The power remained in the hands of educated Karen, and bureaucratic practices inherited from the British stayed the same under their administration.<sup>1</sup>

In the meantime, the educated leaders were interested in setting up Karen schools to enhance education levels and Karen nationalism. In the Irrawaddy Delta, the Karen set up a number of new schools. Most of the Karen teachers

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<sup>1</sup>This information is based on an interview with Mahn Nyein Maung, a member of the Central Executive of KNU, on October 6, 1996 on the Thai-Burma border.

were volunteers. Karen nationalism was at a peak at that time.<sup>2</sup> Instead of English, Karen language was widely used in the school's curriculum. However, after the Burmese military took over state power in 1962, no language other than the Burmese language was permitted in teaching. The Karen schools were nationalized and prohibited from using Karen languages in teaching. The Karen perceived that using Burmese language as the only official language was part of the central government's attempt to culturally assimilate the ethnic groups. In order to resist the Burmese military's forced cultural assimilation, Karen enthusiasm for setting up schools in the Karen-controlled areas became stronger than ever. A number of Karen schools grew up rapidly in the Karen-controlled areas in the late 1960's. At that time, although the Karen were eager to set up university-level education, they were not able to follow through because of instability and shortage of qualified teachers for higher education. David Htaw, a Karen leader of the KNU, said that the 1963 surrender of the Karen Revolutionary Council (KRC), a faction of the KNU, to the Burmese military was a major setback to the plan to set up a university in the Karen-controlled areas. Because many educated Karen went along with the KRC, the KNU faced a shortage of qualified teachers to implement the plan. However, the KNU was able to expand to secondary education in its areas of control.

## **Mismatched Curriculum and Impacts**

When the Karen rebellion started 48 years ago, a majority of the Karen did not expect that the war would last as long as five decades. Thus, KNU did not have a long-term education plan for its people. Only in the 1960s, recognizing that a protracted war was underway, did the newly-founded Karen government formally establish an education department.<sup>3</sup> The KNU became enthusiastic about the development of a new curriculum for schools in the areas it controlled. A survey conducted by the Burma Border Consortium (BBC), stated that, in 1977, the KNU was able to draw up a more comprehensive curriculum for its schools, from primary to high school level, based on the Burmese government's curriculum and the old western education model. This new KNU

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<sup>2</sup>This information is based on an interview with David Htaw, a member of the Central Committee of the KNU, on August 3, 1996 in Bangkok.

<sup>3</sup>This information is based on an interview with Mahn Aung Htay, coordinator of Independent Karen Historical Research Association, on 13 August 1996, Bangkok.

urban-biased curriculum ran counter to the Karen's strong agricultural society. Both the Burmese government and the western education model tend to produce specific skills for management jobs and industrial development. Consequently, the KNU's educational model was not able to fulfill the needs for the development of the Karen farmers. It is difficult to get demographic information from the Karen community due to war-induced instability. However, according to KNU estimates, approximately ninety percent of Karen in both the Burmese government controlled areas and the KNU controlled areas are farmers. Rice production and animal breeding were major income-generating activities on subsistence farms. The main employment options for high school graduates from Karen high schools in the Karen-controlled area are working with the KNU's civil department or serving in the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA).

As a consequence, there are significant forces driving social change in the Karen society. Young men who are not interested in the two options available have only a few other choices, including working as a small timber merchant, as a laborer for Thai logging companies in KNU areas, or as unskilled labor at construction sites and industries in Thailand. The few opportunities for women include working as maids in Thai households and having light jobs in Thai industries. For the Karen maids, risk of sexual abuse by Thai men is quite high. The number of claims of sexual abuse by Thai men of Karen females has been increasing. Even though keeping virginity before marriage is a sacred tradition among the Karen, many Karen females end up working as prostitutes at brothels in Thailand. Thai women activist groups claim that the number of HIV-positive women among the prostitutes is high. Since those Karen women are illegal immigrants in Thailand, they are often arrested by Thai police. In addition, there have been cases where Thai employers have murdered Karen employees in order to avoid payment. The Thai police seldom investigate the death of Burmese Karen since they are illegal immigrants in Thailand.

Though potential for major problems is high, jobs in Thailand are still attractive to the Karen because of higher living standards and the higher buying power of the Thai baht. Though Thai employers pay Karen laborers about one-third of the minimum wage given Thai employees, Karen laborers are still able to save some extra money when they exchange their wages for Burmese currency. Therefore, relatively better job opportunities and a better standard of living in Thailand have become major attractions to many Karen.



## **Beginning of Foreign Scholarship Programs**

In 1984, the Burma Army's dry-season offensive drove the first wave of Karen refugees into Thailand. Though the Karen have long suffered from the Burmese military's counterinsurgency operations in the Karen State, there had not been much international media coverage of the civil war because of the Burmese government's closed-door economic policy, lack of superpower interest and the failure of the Karen groups to publicize the issues. However, the Burmese military's crackdown on peaceful demonstrations in Rangoon in 1988 exposed Burma to more international attention, though the western media mainly continued to focus attention on the increasing militarization of Burma's government. Following the 1988 uprising, the Burmese opposition formed a coalition with many ethnic groups, and the ethnic struggle in the countryside finally attracted the attention of the international community. Eventually, Aung San Suu Kyi, a prominent leader of the democratic opposition, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and won over international sympathy and support for the Burmese opposition movements.

Following the uprising in 1988 the universities were closed for three years. A large number of student activists joined the guerrilla movements to fight and work alongside the ethnic rebels. While these Burmese students who joined the armed struggle and sacrificed educational opportunities won tremendous sympathy from the international community, ethnic minority students in insurgent areas did not get the same attention. The continuation of the educational careers for Burmese students became a major interest of many international organizations. Overseas Burmese in Western countries lobbied to provide scholarships to the Burmese students. Canadian, U.S., and Australian scholarship programs provided educational opportunities for the Burmese students, but Karen students were not initially eligible for the scholarships, since involvement in the 1988 uprising was a criteria. Many Karen complained about discrimination in the scholarship programs offered by Western countries.

The UNHCR (United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees) quickly granted refugee status to the Burmese participants in the 1988 democracy uprising. Since the UNHCR's recognition of refugee status is a major step toward application for the scholarship programs, many Karen misinformed the UNHCR about involvement in the 1988 uprising. Many of them changed their names and used forged Burmese identification to get refugee status. Burmese refugee applicants complained that the Karen were taking advantage of the

Burmese students' struggle.<sup>4</sup> About three years ago, the UNHCR recognized the refugee status of the Burmese Karen, so that they finally had legal access to foreign scholarships.<sup>5</sup>

In the past, only children from wealthy families and those students selected for scholarships by the Burmese government had had access to study abroad. Corruption in the Burmese government's selection system meant that those who could pay bribe money, or who had close connections with high-ranking officials, or who had family members in high ranks of the government or military, were given first priority in the selection system. However, there were a few ordinary people who were selected for the scholarship program. Those government-selected scholars were able to bring back luxury goods from western countries such as cars, televisions, and refrigerators. Thus, the Burmese scholarship was not only an opportunity for education, but also an opportunity to gain wealth and status in Burmese society. Because of the extremely limited availability of the Burmese government scholarships, overseas study was only a dream for many ordinary Burmese citizens. This is why the foreign scholarship programs were a great opportunity for the Burmese and Karen students.

## **The Karen Privilege**

During the British colonial period, education was key not only to a higher social status but also to authority if the educated person worked in the British colonial administration. These days, in KNU-controlled areas, leadership positions and wealth are the primary factors creating privilege in the Karen community. These factors are interrelated. Powerful leaders are able to control resources to increase their personal wealth. In contrast to the colonial era, education today does not necessarily provide a base for powerful positions in the Karen community, but education still grants a high social status.

The KNLA is supposed to be under the administration of the KNU. However, in reality the KNLA plays an important role in the KNU. Because of the war, leaders of the KNLA actually have access to more power than the leadership of the administrative departments of the KNU. Education is not a necessary

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<sup>4</sup>A Burmese who wants to keep his name confidential revealed the information on September 13, 1996 in Bangkok

<sup>5</sup>Naw Plahset, personal interview, 13 September 1996, Bangkok.

criteria for military leadership in the KNU. However, leaders from both the KNU's administrative department and the KNLA possess a certain authority within their controlled territory.

One of the major income sources for the KNU is log extraction from its territory. Other major financial sources include taxes on the people who live in its zones and tolls collected from traders passing through its territory. As log extraction in Thailand is restricted, Burma has become a place for Thai logging companies to extract logs. Many Thai government officials, politicians, and military officials own or invest in logging companies. A large number of concessions are operated under contract between the KNU and Thai companies. Some logging concessions belong to the local Karen in the area. Most Karen concession owners are leaders of the KNU and KNLA, or Karen who have close connections with the KNU and KNLA officials. Thus, the logging business is a major source of wealth for the Karen in the KNU areas. In some KNU areas, owning a large garden and rice fields is also a source of wealth.

Tension and conflict does exist within the KNU between Karen revolutionaries who are committed to the struggle and corrupt or wealthy leaders. A senior member of the KNU said that, "Since we Karen have been living in poverty-ridden areas for so long, Karen have enough resistance to poverty, but we do not have resistance to the temptation of wealth. We can not be demoralized by the Burmese military's attacks and starvation, but the wealth of some leaders can demoralize the rank and file members of the KNU. So wealth and corruption are threats to the revolution of the Karen."<sup>6</sup>

At present, there is an income gap between the privileged and ordinary farmers in the KNU areas. While an ordinary farmer makes an average of 25 Burmese kyats (about US\$0.25) per day, a timber merchant earns very roughly 12,000 kyats (US\$120) from selling a ton of wood within a day. It is hard to estimate the income of a Karen timber merchant. This growing income gap has become a threat to the KNU, costing it support of the masses in its territory. Moreover, because log sales are a quick way to make money, many Karen are more interested in logging than in food production for self-sufficiency. Food

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<sup>6</sup>This information is based on a discussion with a senior KNU official, whose name should not be mentioned, on October 5, 1996 in the headquarters of Mergui/Tavoy District in Karen State.

insufficiency is another threat to the stability of the KNU.<sup>7</sup>

## **Karen Privilege and Scholarships**

Through business relationships with Thai companies, many privileged Karen have informal relationships with local Thai authorities or influential persons in Thailand. A number of privileged Karen own houses and businesses in Thailand. Children of some KNU officials are also able to buy Thai citizenship through a Thai immigration “business”. Even though the KNU has its own schools, the privileged Karen are more eager to send their children to Thai schools or, better yet, western schools. In the past, a few children of some top KNU leaders were selected to study abroad with the goal of coming back and working with the KNU.<sup>8</sup>

In interviews with some KNU officials, many said they did not know the criteria for the selection of the students and how the KNU paid the expensive tuition costs for the children. One senior Karen leader commented, “The children first got Thai citizenship and went abroad with Thai passports to study. There was no selection system. The children were hand-picked because of their fathers’ leadership status. Thai officials were also involved in the KNU, mainly the forestry department, supported the entire cost for the children to study abroad.”<sup>9</sup>

Those elites who were not able to send their children to foreign schools sent their children to KNU schools. A Karen teacher said that the majority of Karen students in high schools are from wealthy families because poor families are not able to provide food and school materials for their children at KNU high schools. As a majority of students are eager to get foreign scholarships, English has become an important subject for the students.

In interviews with thirty students from Karen high schools, the students revealed very little knowledge about the western educational system. They

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<sup>7</sup>This information is based on an interview with an ex-KNU official. His name is kept confidential. The interview was made on August 14, 1996 in Bangkok.

<sup>8</sup>This information is based on an interview with two young Karen who do not want their names mentioned. The interview was made on October 6, 1996 in Mae Sod of Thailand.

<sup>9</sup>A KNU official, (name withheld) on August 6, 1996 in Bangkok.

imagined that after studying in western countries, they could come back and work for the development of the Karen people. However, all students were uncertain about their interests. These students believe that western education is the best in the world. Their belief is primarily based on what they hear from the older, western-educated Karen leaders and what they learn from movies about the wealth and industrial development of western countries. During their interviews, many of them expressed their admiration for the tall buildings, large highways and higher living standards of western countries. Their enthusiasm is based on the dream of seeing western-style industrialized development in the Karen land. As Thailand is the neighboring country of the Karen state, its industrial development is a major attraction for them as well.<sup>10</sup>

Some people see the western scholarship program as an opportunity to gain wealth in addition to education. In an interview with a Karen holding a B.A. degree from a country in Asia, he said "I want to study more in the U.S.A. because it will make me a more respected person and I could also make a fortune there."<sup>11</sup>

The Karen believe that the United States has the best educational system and is the best place to make a fortune. A letter from one resettled Karen family mentioned buying a car. This was exciting news for the friends of the family in a refugee camp. Because of the opportunities, a large number of Karen are leaving their homeland. As a result, the KNU suffers a shortage of staff in many departments. A Karen leader complained that some skilled teachers are more interested in leaving to go abroad than in teaching in local schools.

## **Risks in Applying for Refugee Status**

The only way to apply for refugee status is by registering at the UNHCR office in Bangkok. The Karen who want to apply for refugee status need to take a 400 kilometer trip from the Thai-Burma border to Bangkok. Though the Thai government allows the Karen refugees to live in refugee camps along the Thai-

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<sup>10</sup>Questionnaires were distributed to the Karen students in Karen State and refugee camps. The information is based on the answers of the Karen students.

<sup>11</sup>This information is based on a young Karen in Bangkok in September 20, 1996. He was planning to apply for political asylum in a western country though he was not involved in any anti-government activities.

Burma border, traveling further inside Thai territory is restricted. The Thai government considers all Karen found further inside Thai territory as illegal immigrants unless they have official permission. The standard punishment for Karen immigrants found in Thailand is three months imprisonment in immigration jail and then deportation back to the Karen refugee camps.

There are a number of illegal ways for the Karen refugees from the Thai-Burma border to get to Bangkok. Some pay money to gangs who might hide the Karen in trucks, take them to Bangkok and pay bribes to the Thai police or immigration officials so they turn a blind eye. Some Karen try to get special passage permits from Thai Intelligence. Those who try to get passage from Thai Intelligence are asked in return to provide information about Burmese Army movements to Thai Intelligence. Some Karen who look Thai just take their chances on the buses to Bangkok. However, it is easier for some KNU officials who have close connections to Thai officials to find ways to send the Karen to Bangkok. For the last four years, a Karen official who has close connections with Thai officials has been sending Karen students to apply for refugee status in Bangkok.

After submitting applications to the UNHCR, the Karen applicants must wait for a couple of months for an interview. Following UNHCR recognition, an adult Karen gets financial support of 3,000 Thai baht per month to stay in Thailand. Financial support from the UNHCR is available for children, too. Then the Karen try to get either scholarships or sponsorships through contacts with non-governmental organizations, church organizations or individuals. In Bangkok, cheap apartments downtown are preferred places by the Karen refugees. In order to save money on rental fees and food, most Karen refugees form small groups and live together. However, the UNHCR is unable to protect the refugees living outside of designated refugee areas from arrest and persecution by the Thai police. In 1992, the Thai government set up a refugee camp, known as the "safe camp" in Ratchaburi province which is not far from Bangkok. Burmese refugees who register at the Thai Ministry of Interior are permitted to live in the safe camp. Though the Karen refugees are aware of the potential for arrest in Bangkok by the Thai police and immigration officials, many Karen refugees prefer to risk staying in Bangkok due to the work opportunities there. Many of them work as unskilled laborers at construction sites or in factories.

Thai immigration jails are notorious. As the number of refugees in Thailand increases, Thai officials are not able to provide enough places for them. Inmates are extremely crowded in small cells. A former inmate said, "I did not have even enough space to lie down. Often the Thai police beat the inmates for no reason. Because of limited bathing, body odor lingered in the whole room. A small amount of rice was all we got for a daily meal. The Thai police forced some pretty women to have sex in order to get better living conditions in the jail. Living in the immigration jail is such a hell."<sup>12</sup>

A few years ago, a policy was made that any refugees who are planning to leave the country must stay in the safe camp until they leave. It is not clear who made the regulation. Some say that foreign governments, who provide the scholarships, made it while others believe the regulation came from the UNHCR. Regardless, many refugees stay in the camp only a few weeks before they leave for other countries.

## **The Marginalized Karen**

### **The Burmese Military's Relocation Program**

The marginalized Karen are the large group of Karen people who are living well below the poverty line and who have many fewer opportunities than the small number of privileged Karen. Geographically, these are the Karen living in KNU-controlled zones, the civil war zones, and the refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border. The majority of Karen in the Karen State are still living a primitive life. They suffer not only from poverty, but also from the civil war. They live a distance from the KNU's well-entrenched areas. For them, death from starvation, disease, or Burmese military activity is an everyday reality. Many people suffer from endemic malaria. Children and older people, who have less resistance to disease, often die helplessly in the jungle. Karen households in these areas live on rice from their own upland cultivation. The Karen still use traditional slash-and-burn methods for rice cultivation. The rice crop is primarily for subsistence, and these people rarely produce a surplus. However, many households suffer from starvation due to the Burmese military's 'four-cuts' operation, a military strategy in use by the Burmese

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<sup>12</sup>The information is based on an interview with a Burmese exile-student in August 1997 in Bangkok.

military since the 1950s, which aims to cut rebel groups off from access to information, food, new recruits, and financial support.

To cut food supply to the Karen rebels, the Burmese military destroys all rice stores and burns rice fields in the active rebel areas. In order to isolate civilians from the rebels, the Burma Army carries out massive relocation campaigns in the war zone, generally moving people from the mountainous rebel zones to lowland government-controlled areas. The relocation camps are fenced and guarded by Burmese soldiers. There are no medical, sanitation, or educational programs in these camps. In addition, the Burmese government does not provide food, so the people have to carry rice from their homes to the camps during the relocation period. Often, people have only a few days to prepare to move to relocation camps. Sometimes the Burmese military carries out the relocation within a night. Because of a lack of sanitation and medical programs, many inmates in the camp suffer from disease. Malaria, cholera, and dysentery are chronic diseases of the inmates. Children and older people seriously suffer from these diseases. Even though their suffering is great, the Burma Army often forces them to work as porters, carrying heavy loads of food and ammunition for military columns during military operations. Sometimes the people are used by the army as human shields and human mine sweepers in combat zones. Often when these people are unable to carry loads, they are executed in order to prevent them from providing information to the rebels about the military column's movements.

### **Living Situation in the Civil War Areas**

Karen who do not want to live in the relocation camps provided by the Burma Army have three options. One option is living in the refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border. Another option is living in KNU-controlled areas which are near the KNLA headquarters. Because the KNLA recently switched from conventional warfare to guerrilla warfare, most of the headquarters are now operating as mobile offices, and only a couple of KNLA bases, out of a total of seven, are permanently fixed. For this reason, only a small number of marginalized people are able to live in KNU-controlled areas, primarily family members of KNU or KNLA personnel. However, the current Burmese military offensive threatens the stability of these headquarter areas. Since the option of living in the KNU-controlled areas is very limited, most people live in the battle zone; their third option. The Burmese military has already declared some battle zones "free-fire zones," where whoever is seen will be shot on sight.



Battle zones and free-fire zones need to be differentiated because not all are free-fire zones. Only those militarily strategic areas, where rebels can penetrate to major cities, towns, and important economic sites, are declared as free-fire zones. In the battle zones, people are allowed to stay, but the areas are unsafe because KNLA and the Burma Army are always in and out.

A large number of innocent Karen people in both battle zones and free-fire zones have been executed by the Burmese military. Men are often accused of being Karen rebels or sympathizers and are tortured by the Burmese military to get information about the rebels' movements. Because the Burma Army lacks motorized transport in the battle zones, Karen men are often forced to carry food and ammunition for months on long military operations against the Karen rebels. Many men try to avoid the Burmese soldiers. When the soldiers do not find men in the villages, women are used as porters. Raping women is a common practice by the Burmese soldiers, and after being raped, women are often executed. To avoid being porters, people pay bribe money, known as a "porter fee," to the soldiers. The amount of the porter fee is based on the personal needs of the soldiers and the number of porters needed. A household commonly pays fifty kyats (about US\$0.50), per month. Though 50 cents is almost nothing in the United States, in Burma it is enough to feed an average poor family in the area four meals of rice over two days.

In the free-fire zones, people move constantly for fear of Burmese military persecution. Some villages are only about a two hour walking distance from Burma Army outposts. A few men from the displaced group always alternate keeping an eye on the outposts. Usually Burmese soldiers are reluctant to leave of their outposts because they fear land mines and ambush attacks by the KNLA and the KNU militia. When the village scouts see Burmese soldiers leaving their outposts, the men send messages by foot, or radio provided by the KNLA, to their village. Then these displaced people run into their hiding places scattered through the forest. The people store rice at hidden storage sites. During their run, this stored rice prevents them from starvation. Starvation happens when Burmese soldiers find these hidden rice stores and destroy them or when there is no time to plant rice because of the Burmese Army's lengthy operations in the free-fire zones. A sixty-year-old displaced man said "In my group, there are over one hundred people. During this year, we have already

moved fifty times.”<sup>13</sup>

A few years ago some humanitarian non-governmental organizations started carrying cross-border aid to the people in the war zone, primarily rice and medicine. A local volunteer and a medical group in Thailand formed a medical team and provided education to the people. Though the aid program was limited, it was quite helpful to those people living in the area. The program helped reduce the number of Karen refugees going to Thailand to get food aid from humanitarian organizations. However, the cross-border aid could not reach the majority of the people in the area, nor could it prevent Karen from fleeing to Thailand for safety reasons.

### **Living Situation in Refugee Camps**

Marginalized Karen in the refugee camps are the poor people who have fled from persecution by the Burmese government and army. A number of families of high-ranking KNU members and merchants live in the refugee camps, but the majority of the people in the camps are marginalized families who are not KNU leaders. The marginalized Karen living in the refugee camps are relatively better off than those living in the war zones. However, poverty still remains in the camps. Small thatch roof and bamboo houses are common for the majority of the refugees. The people live on the rice and fish paste provided by humanitarian organizations in Thailand. A few foreign medical organizations provide health care programs for them. A refugee, a mother of four children, said “We get basic food from these foreign organizations, but we still need some money to spend for general things such as good diets for sick children, a few clothes, and school fees. So we need small jobs for a small income.” For this ‘small income,’ many refugees sell their labor to Thai employers. A large number of refugees work as laborers in Thai rice plantations. Daily wages are fifty to sixty Thai baht (US\$2.00) per day. Some suffer from skin diseases and sickness because they lack awareness about the use of chemical pesticides. In some households, even children work to supplement family income.

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<sup>13</sup>This information is based on my experiences in staying with displaced Karen in free-fire zones in 1993.

A 34 year old Karen woman, mother of four children, living in a refugee camp, expressed her feelings. She recalled her peaceful days living together with her parents and working on their own farm. She said, "I would like to have a small land for farming. On the farm land, I can grow rice and raise animals for my family. But now I am dependent on the aid from humanitarian organizations. I feel like my life in the refugee camp is worthless. If I were not devoted to God, I would have committed suicide. Nothing matters to me anymore. But I am concerned about my children's future. I want my children to be educated persons and work for the Karen people."<sup>14</sup>

Many of the refugees still dream of the day of liberation and going back to their home-land. Because of this hope, these people still live in the refugee camps and wait for the day when the dream becomes reality.

## **Current Needs of the Marginalized Karen**

During my interviews with marginalized Karen in the battle zones, free-fire zones, and refugee camps, the people expressed concern about their current needs. Because of limited time I was unable to explore the broader, more long-term needs of the people. However, many people strongly expressed two major needs: agricultural development efforts and better medical programs, as the people are suffering from hunger and disease, on top of the Burmese military's counter-insurgency operations.

The needs of people living in the battle zones and free-fire zones are slightly different. For example, larger development projects can be carried out on a longer time frame for people living in the battle zones because of their relatively stable situation, while people in the free-fire zones need smaller, mobile and short-term projects adapted to unstable conditions.

Since a majority of the people in these areas are farmers, they are strongly tied to the land. Many farmers still use the traditional slash-and-burn practice for rice cultivation. The people are very interested in increasing rice production.

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<sup>14</sup>Naw Htoo Htee Hser, 47, mother of one child in Wankha Refugee Camp, shared her feelings in December 1996.

Many people are interested in making use of appropriate or sustainable technologies for agricultural development. A former member of the KNU Department of Agriculture shared his opinion on development which will help the people confront the problems of lower prices and fewer resources within the area. He talked about small-scale irrigation, organic farming, and natural pesticides, as projects helpful for agricultural improvement. Some young members of the KNU who are enthusiastic about the development of the people revealed that a lack of long-term planning by the KNU is a problem for implementing improved development programs.

The other major need is health care development. Since people often lose family members to sickness and disease, people are interested in improvement of medical resources. Some are thinking about substituting herbal medicine for western medicine. One KNLA officer said that the cost of western medicine is too high. Since most western medicines are imported from Thailand, they are very expensive for local people. However, people can get necessary plants for herbal medicine from their own area, and there are still some traditional Karen medics who know about the use of these plants. There should be an educational program about growing and using herbal medicines. The officer said we cannot totally deny all the benefits of western medicine, because western medicine is useful for serious medical problems such as surgical operations and treating gunshot wounds. However, the prevailing use of herbal medicine could reduce health problems to some degree, and it is affordable for most marginalized people in these areas.

The needs of the people in the refugee camps are different. The marginalized people in the refugee camps have an agricultural background, but they can not farm because of Thai government prohibitions. Many young Karen who have grown up in the refugee camps have little experience in agriculture. Because it is possible to set up small cottage industries, both in the refugee camps and KNU controlled areas, some Karen prefer vocational training.

Though the people know their current needs, the lack of funds, programs, and resource persons, is the major implementation problem. Some people have expressed their concern about the possibility of increased crime due to poverty among the Karen in refugee camps and in the battle zones. Because of the wide distribution of arms among the Karen, the arms could be used for criminal activity to solve food and supply problems.

## The Marginalized Karen and Education

Both the education department of the KNU and the Karen Refugee Committee (KRC) work on the educational programs currently available to many Karen. While the education department of the KNU is responsible for the schools in the KNU areas, the KRC runs the Karen schools in the refugee camps. Most committee members of the KRC are also members of the KNU. The KRC was formed as a coordinating organization between aid organizations and Karen refugees to distribute aid.

The KNU has set up schools in the villages, even in the battle zones and free-fire zones. Middle schools are set up close to the KNU headquarters. All the Karen high schools are around the KNU headquarters. Though there are some primary schools in the battle zones, illiteracy rates are high because of instability resulting from the war. Some adults who can read and write in the Karen language try to help others learn to read Karen during their free time. They write on bamboo with charcoal chalk.

A large number of parents are not interested in sending their children to schools because the KNU curriculum is not appropriate for the development of agricultural communities. Many Karen folk have a saying, "Knives can be used to chop down trees to make rice fields, but education can not fill our empty stomachs." These Karen folk prefer that their children learn only basic Karen reading and writing for communication, and mathematics to calculate basic rice production and control trade among each other. Apparently, they see only these two subjects as practical in their situation. This is one of the reasons for the high dropout rate after primary school as children can learn the two basic subjects at the primary level. Some families do not even want to send their children to primary schools because they need labor on their farms. The KNU tries to enforce compulsory education by fining parents who fail to send their children to primary level schools. However, the regulation seems ineffective in the areas that are distant from the KNU administrative center.

The education department of the KNU also claims a high dropout rate during the transition between primary and middle school, and between middle and high school. Currently, the education department of the KNU does not have detailed statistics about the dropout rates in the Karen schools due to instability near the district offices in the civil war areas. However, according to a BBC

survey, at Karen schools in refugee camps, the dropout rate dramatically falls from 72.5% of children at primary schools to 43.5% at middle school. Only slightly over 35% of children living in the refugee camps enroll in high school. These statistics may be similar to those for children enrolled at Karen schools in the KNU areas. The survey shows that the dropout rate for Buddhist Karen children is significantly higher than for Karen children of other religions. Some assert that the Christian-oriented education system of the KNU is one reason for the high dropout rate among the Buddhist children, yet there is no explicit proof for this. Further study is necessary to verify the conclusion.

Lack of parental interest is not the only cause of the high drop out rate in the Karen schools. Extreme poverty is another primary reason. Many people conclude that the war is the only cause of poverty, but lack of development by the Burmese government and the KNU also contributes to poverty. Since many people in the battle zone are poor, parents are unable to support their children in school. As many middle and high schools are near the KNU headquarters on the Thai-Burma border or in refugee camps in Thailand, children from the civil war areas need to travel a considerable distance to stay in school dormitories. The parents of these students must provide clothing, food (mainly rice and fish paste), and school supplies such as books and pens. Poor families are unable to provide for all these needs of their children.

Aside from these two primary reasons, other reasons for high drop out rates are sickness and interest in serving in the KNLA. As dietary intake is poor, many children have less resistance to malaria and are often sick. Secondly, revenge is an aspiration stimulating young men to join to the KNLA. Acceptance in the KNLA is dependent on the individual officers of the KNLA. In many cases, children enrolled in the KNLA are sent by their officers to school. Then the KNLA takes responsibility for the needs of the children in school.

## **International Organizations and Education**

The current media coverage of the suffering of the people in civil war zones has inspired many international organizations to increase involvement in Burmese issues. Various educational organizations have become involved with strong expectations of educating the Karen. Those organizations offer two different types of educational programs: foreign scholarships and curriculum development. They assert that educational development and development in

other areas are related.

The foreign scholarships are offered by both government and non-governmental organizations, primarily from the United States, Canada, and Australia. As having a certain Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) score is important for enrollment in foreign universities, improving the Karen students' English is becoming a major focus of these organizations, rather than curriculum development. Some organizations have set up special English courses in the refugee camps. However, some students who received scholarships to study in Canada said that though English proficiency is still a problem in foreign universities, it is not a major problem for many students. The main problem for the students is a lack of connection between subjects in Karen schools and subjects in foreign universities. Educational standards of the two systems are significantly different. A young Karen woman was informed that her friends in foreign universities are hardly making it. A lot of them rarely understand the subject. Some students even want to drop out of their programs. A Karen man in Australia said that many Karen students end up only studying English. The same man said, "Though some students under the scholarship program are no longer interested in studying, they choose to remain in the schools because of the scarcity of jobs outside. Many students think that studying at school for free is better than getting odd jobs."

Some religious organizations have set up mission schools on the Thai-Burma border, and some overseas based religious organizations offer scholarships to the Karen students. Because of the Christian orientation in those schools, Buddhist students feel ostracized. A Buddhist high school graduate said that many Buddhists feel that they are left out because of the bias of Christian organizations. Some say that even different Christian denominations are divisive in educational arrangements. A Christian organization gives first priority to the Karen students within their denomination. Because of better educational opportunities, many Karen students prefer to study at mission schools rather than KNU schools.

Curriculum development has recently become an interest for some organizations. One religious organization is planning to develop curriculum after conducting an initial survey in the Karen refugee camps. The primary focus of the organization is to integrate vocational training (sewing, knitting, guitar, furniture and electrical maintenance) into the existing curriculum of

Karen schools in the refugee camps. Unfortunately, there is rarely cooperation among the organizations that are working for the educational development of Karen students. The educational department of the KNU is also interested in diversifying the curriculum in Karen schools in KNU areas and refugee camps. In late November 1996, the KNU called a meeting to discuss the formation of standard educational programs for all Karen schools.

## **Alternatives for Marginalized Karen**

### **Educational Development**

Educational developments can enhance the development in other areas if the design of the education program is based on the needs of the people. If the aim of educational development programs is to benefit the majority of marginalized Karen, careful consideration must be made about the needs of the people.

The participation of marginalized Karen is key to developing needs based education for the majority. A thorough and broad-based survey should be done to discover the needs of marginalized people before the educational programs are implemented. The urban-biased educational system is inapplicable to the marginalized Karen. To be beneficial to these people, the education system must be applicable in their environment.

Equal access to educational opportunities is very important. There should be alternative plans to provide educational opportunities for the children from poor families. Agricultural development programs can help people in poverty, and with such programs available, poor families would have more reason to send their children to schools. In addition, financial aid for children from poor families to study at Karen schools will enhance their educational opportunities. Financial aid for children to go to Karen schools is much less expensive than foreign scholarship programs.

Foreign scholarship programs can still support education and development in other areas, but there should be a clear consideration of how scholarships will be helpful to the development of the marginalized people either directly or indirectly. Scholarship programs which offer selected subjects applicable to the development of the homeland might be a way to improve the life of the marginalized people. However, because of the high cost of study abroad, the



scholarship programs are an opportunity for only a limited number of the Karen. There should be an alternative for larger numbers of Karen to receive an appropriate education. Setting up a college in the KNU area is one option. Offering scholarships in less expensive programs in other countries, but at the same educational level that western countries offer, is another way to cut costs and to allow a larger number of Karen students to study.

In summary, educational programs should be applicable to the marginalized people. There should be equal opportunities to study for all Karen children regardless of their social status, family background, and religion. Needs of marginalized children should be the first priority. Furthermore, if the high cost in western countries is a reason to limit the number of students, there should be an alternative which offers scholarships to a larger number of marginalized students.

### **Selection Procedure**

Fair standards are necessary in selection of students for further study and to benefit children from marginalized families. Though the current selection practice is unfair, it has become an acceptable norm for many people in the area. Some people say that children from the elite groups should have these opportunities because of their fathers' prestigious positions in a revolutionary organization. On the other hand, others feel that the elite groups should not have better educational opportunities, but they do not openly criticize the unfair practice.

Additionally, communication difficulties in remote areas are an excuse for selecting only people living near the headquarters for educational opportunities. Recently, an educational organization based in Thailand set up an English class program in Thailand. The program was designed to provide an English course for local teachers to improve teaching skills for the students who want to study abroad. Foreign teachers were hired to teach in the language program. There were no standard criteria in selection. Only teachers and some other people near political centers were picked to attend the language course. Apparently the goals of the trainees in the English class are varied. Some of the trainees are preparing to get foreign scholarships for themselves rather than wanting to be English teachers. Some trainees want to work at a foreign department of a rebel organization based in Bangkok because of the opportunity to work

internationally. The person responsible for selection said that he was unable to select many teachers distant from the headquarters because of communication difficulties. However, the person knew the plan for the course a year before the program was started. Those teachers who worked far from the headquarters were left out. Eventually, the program collapsed because of the language deficiency of the trainees. Later, donor agencies funding the program cut off the financial support. Later the funding agency itself initiated its own English study program in one of the refugee camps. The failure of this program shows the importance of a careful selection process.

## **Conclusion**

The British brought western education to Burma because of their need for colonial administration. Those western-educated Karen possessed not only higher social status, but also gained authority working in cooperation with the British administrators. Those with western education were the elite in their society, and western education became a symbol of elite status. Even today, chances for higher western education still attract the Karen of Burma. However, marginalized Karen are always left out of the educational process. Higher education currently only benefits a small portion of the privileged Karen.

Educational development and development in other areas are related. If education is to benefit the marginalized Karen, the educational programs should be developed according to the needs of the marginalized Karen. In addition, the current educational system of the KNU needs to be changed because of the programs' urban bias within an agricultural society. All Karen children should benefit equally from educational development.

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