A Focus On the Karen Refugees From Burma

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Introduction to Burma

- January 4th, 1948
- Union of Burma
- Burma
- Pyidaungzu Myanmar
- Naingngandaw (translated by the US Government as Union of Myanmar and by the Burmese as Union of Myanmar)
- Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma
Why are people fleeing as refugees from my country?
Burma or Myanmar

- Government type, Military Junta Burma has been under military rule since 1962.
- The military government allowed elections to be held in Burma in 1990.
  - The National League for Democracy (NLD) lead by Aung San Su Kyi won over 80% of the vote.
- The name of Burma was changed to Myanmar and the country remained a military dictatorship.
  - The name Myanmar has ethnic overtones implying Burmese superiority.
  - Most ethnic groups do not call their country Myanmar.

Who Lives in Burma?

Ethnic mosaic
- Eight main ethnic groups
- 130 distinct sub-groups

Population estimated at 55 Million
- Burmans = 37.4 Million (68%)
- Karen in Burma = 3-6 Million
- Karen in Thai Refugee camps = estimates as high as 150,000
Ethnic Groups of Burma
History of the Karen

- Karen insurgency
  - Began in 1947
- Under British colonial rule, the Karen became more involved in wider affairs.
  - Provided support to British forces against the Japanese during World War II.
- Burma achieved independence in 1948.
- Karen felt abandoned and betrayed by their former allies, the British.

- Rose up against Burmese rule in a push for self-determination.
- The Burmese Military has committed horrific human rights abuses against Karen and other ethnic groups.
- The Karen call their homeland in Burma "Kaw Thoo Lei," which can be translated as "Land of Light" or "Land Without Evil."
Traditionally, the Karen were animists.

Spirits were worshiped to try and keep them from creating problems in their lives.

Traditional Karen beliefs streams and rivers are the protection of natural resources.

- **Buddhists-Karen** that have been living in close proximity to the Thai and Burmese.

- **Christian** - The Karen were some of the earliest converts to Christianity in Southeast Asia.

  - One of the fastest-growing churches after American Baptist missionary efforts began in Burma in 1813.

- Estimates vary, about 20-30% of the Karen are Christian, 60-70% are Buddhist and Animists. But 95% of the Karen Refugees in the US are Christian.
Traditionally, Karen do not have family names.

- Seen as individuals.
- One name has no relationship to the others in the family.
- A man named Htoo Gay might have a wife named Eh Paw and two children named Hla Ku and Hser Hte.

The absence of surnames creates great confusion and often significant problems in Western countries.

People with names of more than one syllable usually put the last syllable in the surname box and the remainder in the given name box.

The Karen normally address others not by name but by terms denoting a kinship relation.

- Brother or Sister
- Aunt or Uncle
- Grandfather or Grandmother
Family and Gender Roles

- Village
  - Each village is presided over by an elected headman (not headwomen).
  - Recognized by the local villagers and local authority as the political leader of the village.

- Family Unit
  - Karen families are cross-generational, often with grandparents, parents and children living together under the same roof.
  - The average number of children per family is three.

- Gender Roles
  - High Degree of equality between men and women.
  - In farming communities, husband and wife often work as close partners.
  - Within the family, the eldest child (son or daughter), is responsible for the parents until their death.
  - Women usually control the family budget.
  - Female children are prized as much as male.
  - A Karen family’s goal is to have a balance between the sexes, to have an equal number of boys and girls.
Karen Language

Karen Language
- Sino-Tibetan language group.
- Two main Karen language groups
  - Sgaw Karen, Pwo Karen
  - Difference is due to pronunciation.

In Thailand, the Sgaw and the Pwo tend to speak in Thai.
In Burma, the Sgaw and the Pwo tend to speak Burmese when they meet.
- English words that end in final consonants will be problematic for the Karen because the sounds do not exist in their language.
- Sentences include a word or expression to specify the time of the action.
Cultural tips and trends

- There are no secrets among the community, especially within a village.

- Karens avoid confrontation.

- Karen don't like talking about themselves even to the point of not really wanting to say their name.

- Making and sticking to strict schedules is a difficult adjustment for many.

- Do not refer to the Karen as Burmese. Ethnically, they are completely different.

- Karens do not come straight to the point. Many other subjects might be discussed first.

- The Karen don't engage in public displays of affection. Male to female physical contact rare outside the home.
Education

- Valued by the Karen people.
- Karen nationalists were able to keep their own school system functioning until the mid-1980’s.
  - Burmese army took control of large portions of Karen territory. Since then, organizations such as the Karen Teachers Working Group have struggled at great risk to run teacher training and classroom programs among displaced communities hiding from Burmese troops.
Economy

Agriculture is at the center of the Karen economy.
- Rice cultivation

Those living in the hills are hunters.
- Animals, birds, insects, and fish for food.
  - Knowledge of forest animals and plants is extensive.
  - Strong beliefs and taboos regarding their appropriate uses.

Those who have spent years in camps are eager to find work after many years of feeling useless.

In the United states, Karen refugees have little understanding of the job application and interview process.
- Reluctant to talk about themselves
- Will downplay their skills

Women have had little work experience outside of the home
- Most are not comfortable leaving small children in daycare settings and prefer to work different shifts from their husbands.
Traditional Health Care

- [Animists] To cure sickness, a traditional healer may make offerings of chicken or larger animals to propitiate or drive away the spirits causing the illness.

- Certain herbs, plants, and concoctions may also be used as cures by traditional healers, but the main emphasis is on banishing the spirits.

- Many Karen men have elaborate, extensive tattoos that are a mark of character and protection against harm.
Did you know?

- Some Karen people think that Tuberculosis (TB) is caused by smoking?
- That the word for malaria has another meaning in Karen?
Western Medicine

The Karen are very accepting of Western medicine

- Christian missionaries
- Western practices in the refugee camps by traveling medical staff
  - IV fluids
  - Birth control

For the most part, the Karen are trusting of US physicians and follow through with recommended treatments

The Karen seek out educational opportunities to make themselves healthier.
Initial Refugee Health Assessment

- Coordinated by MN Dept of Health in collaboration with LPH.
- Karen refugee health status at refugee screening:
  - Latent tuberculosis (~20-30%)
  - Parasitic infections (~20%)
  - Hepatitis B infection (5-7 %)
  - Children under 6 with increased blood lead levels
  - decreased hemoglobin/ anemia (~15-20%)
  - Up to date on immunizations (over 90%)
- Dental care is of concern.
  - Beetle nut chewing
- Mental Health concerns: PTSD (past traumatic stress disorder)
- Substance abuse/family violence
Tips for Healthcare Providers

- Karen are trusting partners, but hesitant to talk about themselves.
- A ‘Medical history’ is unfamiliar concept.

- Devote time to health education
  - Explaining with pictures or images are helpful [example: TB].
  - Spend time explaining how to take medicine and why.

- Ask about traditional medicines and individual or spiritual beliefs.

- Always have an interpreter who speaks Karen present.
Karen Community Partners

- Karen Organization of MN
- Vietnamese Social Services
- Karen support project
- Catholic Charities
- International Institute of Minnesota
- Lutheran Social Services
- Minnesota Council of Churches
- Council on Asian-Pacific Minnesotans
- Hmong American Partnership
- World Relief Minnesota
- Lao Family Community of Minnesota
- Local Public Health
- Local Public Schools
- Local Churches

- **KCM and MAKS** were formed to assist the resettlement of the Karen refugees coming to Minnesota. There are now nearly 8000+ Karen and other arrivals from Burma that have resettled in and around St Paul, Worthington, Albert Lea and Austin, MN.

- Although the Karen community still has issues, concerns and needs; the overall resettlement efforts have been successful but only with the help of our community partners.
Dabluet (Thank you)!

Questions?