

State violence, state building



Militarized borderlands come into being through a plethora of social, political, and economic processes. We see the borders of Europe, Australia and the US being militarized in response to the perceived threat of illegal immigrants. In Asia, too, we find a wealth of examples of militarized borders, yet these often emerge through different processes. In many cases the borderlands between two or more Asian countries become militarized where borderlines are highly contested such as the India-Pakistan border, the Korean peninsula or the sea border between China and Taiwan. In other instances, through the expansionist ambitions of the state and the suppression of ethnic minorities at its fringes, certain groups are caught in an Agambian state of exception.¹ This is the case of the Karen and Karenni in southeastern Burma.

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MILITARIZATION regularly follows violent armed conflict, which is exactly what occurred at Burma's southeastern border when some elements of the Karen nationalist movement, the largest minority group residing here, took up arms in reaction to growing tensions with the emerging Burmese state. The state retaliated through a series of brutal massacres of the civil Karen population in 1948. The subsequent civil war turned southeastern Burma into a war zone and transformed the nationalist movement into a non-state armed movement, which at one time controlled large tracts of land adjacent to the Thai border that it calls 'liberated zones'. After a decade of instability the state of Burma came under a military regime in 1962 after a coup led by influential military general Ne Win. The new junta invested heavily in the military leaving little in state coffers to spend on health, education and infrastructure. Indeed, by 2012 Qatar was the only country in the world that spent less on healthcare than Burma.² The small trickle of funds that remained would inevitably run dry long before reaching the borderlands, leaving the Karen and the many other minorities residing here (e.g., Karenni, the Pa-O and the Shan), with practically little or no access to healthcare and education. A corollary of this exponential growth of military spending was an increased militarization of the borderlands, indexed by the high presence and visibility of the state military, the Tatmadaw.

In the 1970s, the military regime redoubled the militarization of these borderlands and launched its 'four-cuts' counter-insurgency strategy. This involved the forceful relocation of huge numbers of Karen villages (effectively camps) into areas under the sphere of Tatmadaw control, known as 'white zones'. The intention was to cut off support from the villagers to the largest non-government armed group, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). This mass relocation was conducted by serving villagers with relocation notices, before bombarding their villages with mortars, then burning down their homes and fields and littering the ground with landmines to prohibit their return. Those relocated to white zones, already greatly weakened by being unable to return to their farmlands to grow food, were subjected to heavy taxing and conscription for infrastructural services and recruited as porters to carry arms and to guide Tatmadaw troops safely through areas with high concentrations of KNLA troops and mines. Such coercive measures increased the suffering of the villagers to an unendurable degree. These offensives were, however, launched solely in the dry season, with the Tatmadaw troops retreating again every wet season.

The villagers reacted to this arbitrary violence by escaping into the forests and higher altitudes, hiding rice-barns or fleeing over the border to Thailand. Many of the villagers

and community leaders either fought on the KNLA side or organized themselves into NGOs and benefitted from Western donors who had established themselves on the Thai border. Villagers also regularly participated in the emerging community based organizations that crossed the border illegally to provide assistance to the wounded and displaced. Their humanitarian engagement was impressive, organizing emergency healthcare and mobile schools for displaced Karen. As civil society organizations came under Tatmadaw surveillance and harassment, it was mainly Karen Buddhist monasteries that provided sanctuary for displaced villagers. Local missionaries also risked their lives by staying in villages as local development volunteers, engaging in teaching, medical assistance and rural development.

This perpetuating war slowly worked its way into people's everyday lives, spurring a parallel process of militarization in Karen society. The KNLA regularly extracted taxes and food from the villagers residing in areas under their control, so called 'black zones', and levied one male child from every family to serve as a soldier in the army, much like their counterparts in the *Tatmadaw*.

In the 1980s, the Burmese state mobilized the army en masse and began to continue its offensives throughout the wet season, pushing the KNLA ever closer to the border and the elite from its political wing, the Karen National Union (KNU), into Thailand. Moreover, as is often the fate of militarized and violent borderlands, the population became squeezed between different armies. These factors, along with strong internal conflicts and tensions, led many Buddhist soldiers and monks to feel alienated from the predominantly Christian KNU/KNLA and thus they began to form a splinter group, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA). The emerging DKBA quickly allied with the Tatmadaw, sounding the death knell for the already greatly weakened KNLA. From this point on, the civil population of the borderlands was forced to feed and provide taxes and free labor to an ever-growing multitude of armed factions and Karen militias in addition to the Tatmadaw. The increasing militarization and violence, together with the heavy taxations levied on villagers, caused a humanitarian and food crisis. It pushed people away from their homes and across the border into the Thai refugee camps.

When the first wave of refugees came over to Thailand they succeeded in bringing their communities largely intact. The strong local security networks and a high degree of cohesion and social organization that characterized most Karen communities allowed for the smooth day-to-day administration of the refugee camps in Thailand, with little interference from Thai authorities. However, as the war wore on, the KNLA established a growing presence in these camps. While partnering with international humanitarian organizations that provided vital material support, the KNLA largely controlled the camp population and recruited widely from the refugee households. Young boys disappearing from the camps became a regular phenomena.

With greater state suppression of the Karen national movement inside Burma, the process of the militarization of the camps in Thailand was exacerbated; increasingly more KNLA offensives were staged from within Thailand. Largely in reaction to this, between 1995 and 1998, both Tatmadaw and DKBA forces periodically targeted the camps in Thailand, attacking refugees and burning down their shelters. This provoked the Royal Thai government to enact a process of camp consolidations, stationing large numbers of soldiers around these new camps, and placing considerable restriction on inhabitants' movement and livelihood activities (such as foraging in the surrounding jungle, farming and engaging in casual labor). The state effect was completed by encasing these areas in mile upon mile of barbed-wire fencing. The militarization of the camps and the borderlands on the Thai side was not so much curbed as steadily handed over to Thai paramilitary units.

The most visible indicator of the continued militarization of Karen land is the proliferation of prosthetic limbs that people have received from clinics supported by NGOs and CBOs in the refugee camps and on the border. In the camps alone, over 300 people are registered as disabled by landmines, whereas within Burma these numbers increase exponentially with 3450 recorded cases of either death or injury by landmines since 1999.³ This borderland is arguably the most landmine contaminated area in the world today.⁴ The responsibility for this immensely dense concentration of landmines falls not only on the Tatmadaw but also on the non-state armies and villagers themselves who stubbornly continue to use mines on the grounds of self-protection. Landmine contamination is a major hazard in these borderlands and contributes to the general sense of insecurity and fear. Landmines are often seen as cheap soldiers, the poor man's weapon; yet their victims are predominantly villagers and their livestock who regularly stumble on their 'own' landmines. The main objective of landmines is not so much to kill as to mutilate and cause disabilities; the idea is that an injured soldier is more of a burden for an army than a dead one. Moreover, whereas the improvised devices deployed by the KNLA rarely endure the wet season, the Chinese manufactured mines laid by the Tatmadaw and its allies can remain

Above:
Karen nationalism
in Southeastern
Myanmar, photo
taken by Alexander
Horstmann.

Civilian responses among the Karen of southeast Burma



active for up to 70 years and are exceedingly difficult to detect. In this light, the landmine contamination of the borderlands continues to cause untold hardships on the civilian population, crippling livelihoods by prohibiting people both physically and psychologically from working on their farms and in forests to make ends meet.

These techniques and technologies of militarization have served to compound the misery inflicted by the Tatmadaw who are also known to use humiliation, torture and arbitrary violence against civil populations. Moreover, mass rape has been wielded as a systematic weapon of war to humiliate the Karen and to show the men that they are not able to defend their women. For the women, the consequences of having to live with the trauma are often disastrous. Besides, the Tatmadaw is also known for human rights violations against their own kind, especially against child soldiers who are unable to perform as they are ordered.

In this manner, the militarization of the borderlands has forced huge swathes of the civilian population in the Karen lands to live, as they often phrase it: day-by-day, hand to mouth. Taking into account these factors, what we find most revealing in this case is how war is organized and what responses it evokes on the side of the civil population that is squeezed between different conflicting parties, trapped between militarized zones. It is to this we turn now.

Militarization of borders as state building

Despite a ceasefire being signed between all non-government armed groups (NGAG) and the Burmese state in 2012, a sustainable peace treaty has yet to be agreed upon at the time of writing. Conflict and/or the threat thereof continue to linger constantly on the horizon. As a consequence, militias persist, and thus, continue the need to feed their soldiers and provide them with some form of reimbursement in order to maintain their loyalty. Fighting in the Karen borderlands has become a mode of livelihood and the war is profitable for many, allowing for gains in status, power and money, placing many militias in fierce competition for the control of territory. Earlier the KNU/KNLA financed its war through the extraction of natural resources, especially teak logging, giving away large concessions to Thai logging companies, such that whole areas became deforested. Following this, one of the most important forest reserves in mainland Southeast Asia and greater Himalaya has become depleted. These deforested mountain strands have been replanted with rubber plantations that, while being of little help to the environment, are an important source of income for warlords. The Burmese state's strategy for appeasing the different military factions is giving them business concessions and turning a blind eye to their black market activities across different borders, such as their participating in the production and trafficking of drugs like amphetamines.

Above: Map of the Thai-Burmese Borderland with Karen Refugee Camps, Courtesy of Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG).

How then can we understand the continued militarization of the borderlands between Burma and Thailand three years on from the ceasefire? Decha Tangseefa has posited that the Karen national movement presented, and continues to present “a threat to the territorial integrity of both Thailand and Burma” as well as to their “imagined communities.”⁵ From here it follows that the militarization of these borderlands is a strategy enacted by these states to tame this threat by placing the people residing here in “states of exception”, placed “beyond the law” – repeatedly demonstrating this with acts of state terror and economic exploitation. As Giorgio Agamben argues, the ability to exclude certain lives from the sphere of law is the “hidden foundation of sovereignty”⁶ that substantiates the very power and territorial claims of the state. Moreover, as James C. Scott has argued, militarized zones often function as a “buffer zone” that mediate the relationship between two states. In this light, the Burmese government’s strategy of appeasing the different military factions and the Thai government’s strategy, until recently, of oblique support to the KNU, both politically and financially, which perpetuates the militarization of this area can be seen as a form of state building. The continued militarization of the southeastern Burmese border acts to simultaneously demonstrate the Burmese state’s ability as a sovereign to place certain lives in “states of exception” and to maintain a “buffer zone” that provides protection from Thai aggression. To this end, the Karen militias appear to have entered a kind of Faustian deal and impasse with the Burmese and Thai governments in which they are permitted a certain degree of self-governance on the grounds that they continue to figure as exceptions to state control, subject to state violence that substantiates its territorial claims.

Civilian responses and migrant imaginations in states of war

For the civilian women and men living in zones of chronic militarization and conflict, life has to go on. People somehow have to develop strategies to live with the war and to navigate therein. Those that can, continue to grow rice, while many others take up jobs as day laborers or forage the steadily depleting forests for bamboo and other jungle products to earn money to buy food and to rebuild their shelters. Many find it imperative to scrape enough money together to continue attending Buddhist rituals and preparing marriage ceremonies and funerals as a way of staying sane and holding the social fabric of society intact.

Migration has become a major strategy to access sources of income that can no longer be generated at home. This strategy is especially prevalent among young people who traverse the borderlands in search of jobs in factories and as maids in Bangkok and other towns of Thailand. Moreover, the zone adjacent to Thailand has become a Thai currency zone, where it is common to pay with Thai *baht* rather than with the Burmese *kyat*. This has led to parallel levels of internal migration, where droves of both disenfranchised young Karen and Burmese flock to the former outposts of the ethno-nationalist movement on the border in search of work that will earn them Thai *baht* and access to Thai goods they otherwise could neither obtain nor afford. Through these translocal entanglements young Karen have become used to Thai TV and are literate in the Thai language. Many leave their young children with their parents and other siblings in search of work in Thailand or in the booming Burmese towns in the Thai currency zone. For young migrants religion is an important resource, spiritually as much as materially, and plays a key role in their itinerary. Migrants and refugees often depend on religious networks to support them in their new places of residence to procure jobs, lodgings and a community.

Conclusion

In this piece, we have explored issues that look into the continuous presence of military forces, both from the Burmese governmental armed forces as well as the increasingly powerful Karen militia after the ceasefire. Our questions concern the slow recovery of the civil population and the role that translocal entanglements with the international community, humanitarian organizations, and diaspora play in the reconstruction process. Some of the most pertinent questions in relation to this include the repatriation in regard to the eventual closure of the eleven refugee camps along the Thai-Myanmar border and the vast numbers of Karen diaspora living around the world, the question of transitional justice, and crucially, the question of ownership of the peace process. The state-led peace-building initiative, the Myanmar Peace Center, supported by the Norwegian government, somewhat naively aims to integrate unarmed and powerless communities into the peace process, raising the question of how far the communities are able to put pressure on the different armed factions.

Alexander Horstmann's projects have focused so far on the navigation of the civil Karen populations in the militarized borderlands and the engagement of Karen in alternative forms of governance, social support and security networks. In recent publications, he has examined the effects of the humanitarian economy and the role of religious groups and networks in delivering crucial social services and resources to the populations. Together, the aim of our project is to explore to what extent, and through which modalities, local and translocal communities can put pressure on armed groups and shape peace-building. The authors hope to contribute to a design of the future for young Karen migrants and hope that repatriation can be carried out with a human face. De-militarization will be a long and painful process and the question is whether or not former human rights violations and impunity of the state in Myanmar can be discussed in public.

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Right: Baptism in Mae Ra Ma Luang Camp, New Year 2010, photo taken by Alexander Horstmann.