

6

Burma: Displaced Karens. Like Water on the *Khu* Leaf

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War disrupts the normal relationship between people and place. Displaced by war, people must adapt to survive, both physically and socially. When people are displaced for a long time, these adaptations become normal; thus displacement starts as an aberration but becomes a constant way of life. In eastern Burma, 'normal' displacement has led to significant changes in the political, cultural and economic relationships between Karen people and their 'place' - both the physical space they occupy and their position in society. Those changes, and particularly the Karens' own revised perceptions of their place in the world, provide insights into how they, and others in Burma, cope with displacement.

In Burma,¹ population displacement is widespread, though little understood. Armed conflict, disputes over land and natural resources, and poverty drive people from their homes; but there has been little research on displacement's effect on people's lives.² Many internally displaced persons live in remote areas that are also theatres of war; and the government of Burma denies permission to researchers or aid workers hoping to visit these contested regions. Furthermore, until a few years ago, Burma's displaced population attracted little international attention. Few, apart from a handful of Thailand-based aid organisations, knew about conditions in the war zones. By the late 1990s, however, the world became more aware of conditions inside Burma, thanks to reports of displacement, increasing numbers of would-be refugees seeking asylum in Thailand, the controversial repatriation of Burmese refugees from Bangladesh, deteriorating tolerance for refugees in Thailand, and the burgeoning influence of Burma's democracy movement.

The portrait of displaced Karens presented here is a composite drawn from dozens of documents, interviews, conversations, and observations culled by the author, who worked with Karen refugees in Thailand for seven years in the 1990s, and by his colleagues and friends, many of whom are displaced Karens. Almost all the



Map by Andras Berezny

Map 6 Burma

statements reported here were originally recorded for other purposes, mostly for documentation of human rights abuses, and are credited to their original sources. Though only relatively few people around the world are involved with human rights in Burma, a large body of documentation exists detailing the plight of displaced Karens and other peoples of Burma. Yet there have been few attempts to understand what displacement means to the people who live it: what effects it has on their economic, political, cultural and moral life. This chapter examines how Karens in eastern Burma respond when displaced by the ongoing war between the Burmese government and the Karen National Union (KNU).

The war in Burma has caused three main kinds of internal displacement:

- *jungle displacement*, in which people in remote rural areas flee their homes and hide in the hills and forests
- *forced relocation*, in which rural villagers are evicted then moved to sites under close state supervision
- *social dislocation*, in which persons leave their homes and try to survive on the social and economic fringes of existing communities.³

These three categories do not represent all varieties of displacement in Burma; they are simply a handy way to compare the circumstances in which one ethnic and social group finds itself. Forced relocation and social dislocation are omitted from this chapter with the caveat that various displacement experiences, such as hiding in the jungle, fleeing to a refugee camp, migrating to the city, or finding a job abroad, are not always distinct routes, but steps along a single path.

BACKGROUND

Karen Diversity and Distribution

'Karen' is a blanket term that covers several peoples inhabiting a large area of mainland South-east Asia between Burma's Irrawaddy river and Thailand's Chao Phraya. Today, Karens live around the Irrawaddy river delta and along the Sittang, Salween and Tennasserim rivers in Burma, and along the Moei, Ping and Kwae Noi rivers in Thailand. Karens inhabit much of the Burma-Thailand border area, from the northern boundary between Kayah state and Mae Hong Son province to the southern tip of the border at Burma's

Victoria Point and Thailand's Ranong province. Many Karens live in major Burmese cities, including the capital, Yangon (Rangoon), and the Irrawaddy delta towns of Bassein and Myaungmya, and on the outskirts of major Thai cities, such as Chiang Mai, Lampang, Tak and Kanchanaburi.

No one knows how many Karens live in Burma. A 1931 census, considered by some to be Burma's last proper population count, recorded 1.3 million Karens; a 1947 census counted 5 million; in 1971, the government counted 3.2 million Karens; and a 1983 census counted 2.12 million (BERG 1998:7-8). The disparity could be the result of a failure to include remote villages, of problems of classification (who, exactly, is Karen?), or of a political intention to reduce the official number of Karens, and thereby emphasise their minority status. Using fertility rates to project population, the government, in 1992, estimated that there were 6.2 million Karens. The Karen National Union, which has not taken a census, claims 7 million Karens throughout Burma. If there were 6 million Karens in Burma today, they would comprise about 12 per cent of the total population. Approximately half of them live in eastern Burma, including Karen state, parts of Mon state, Tennasserim division and the eastern extreme of Pegu division.

As this broad distribution suggests, there is no single homogeneous Karen cultural group. Significant cultural, economic, linguistic and religious differences exist among people who call themselves Karen, and significant similarities exist between Karens and non-Karens.⁴ The degree to which Karens absorb Burmese national culture also varies. Nevertheless, a rough description of major sociological differences helps define who displaced Karens are. Although it is customary to divide Karens into Pwo and S'gaw sub-groups, this division is only relevant as a way of noting that Karens usually speak either a Pwo or S'gaw dialect, and that eastern Pwo Karens tend to be Buddhists and S'gaw Karens tend to be Christians or animists.

There are important distinctions between highland and lowland Karens. Living in the mountains, highland Karens are largely removed from the national culture. They often speak their native Karen dialect only, not Burmese (Walker 1981:89); and their lives are less influenced by popular culture as conveyed in print, radio, and television. In contrast, lowland Karens are more likely to interact with other non-Karen peoples, and may share more characteristics with the majority culture. They may have attended Burmese schools and speak Burmese anywhere from 'market-level' proficiency to

native fluency. Some may not speak Karen at all. They may adopt Burmese or western dress, or mix these with Karen costume.

Highland Karens are chiefly involved in subsistence agriculture. Like other mountain peoples, they practice shifting cultivation of 'dry rice', meaning rice not grown in flooded paddies, and they grow vegetables and raise livestock. Exceptions to the subsistence-only economy include training and hiring out elephants for logging, and trading livestock, highland crops or forest products with the lowland populations. Lowland Karens grow 'wet rice' in paddies, and are more likely to sell or trade their surplus produce and participate in a cash economy. They often hold non-agricultural jobs, including owning small businesses, working as teachers and civil servants, serving in the military, or being employed in any of the myriad occupations cosmopolitan life has to offer.

Religion also differs among Karens. While followers of traditional animism almost always live in mountains or deep forests, the highland/lowland description is less useful in identifying the territories of Buddhists and Christians. Both Buddhists and Christians live in the Irrawaddy delta. American and British Protestant missionaries began converting Karens in Burma from the first half of the nineteenth century, and today Christianity is practised by perhaps one-third of the Karen population. Missionaries were active in the mountains as well, and many Christians can be found throughout the eastern highlands. With Protestantism came education, and many mountain Karens were taught in local mission schools.

Differences among Karens may also arise depending on whether or not they are affiliated with the KNU. The KNU considers itself the single valid national political organisation representing all Karens. From this point of view, all Karens are affiliated with the organisation. In reality, however, some choose to participate in the KNU, some choose not to, and others participate nominally by paying taxes, accommodating Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) soldiers, and not running afoul of the organisation. Many families have proud traditions of voluntary service in KNU. As soldiers, teachers, medics, administrators or representatives of the KNU bureaucracy, Karens in this category tend to benefit from whatever perquisites and exemptions KNU might offer. Decidedly non-aligned Karens and nominal participants may enjoy few such benefits. For example, KNU often requires households under its administration to contribute one member to 'the revolution'. Houses that do not or cannot provide members may be taxed more heavily or conscripted

for porter duty, and are less likely to benefit from certain kinds of KNU activities.

Taken together, these distinctions produce several rough portraits of Karens in Burma today. One portrait depicts Karens as highland living, subsistence farming, predominantly S'gaw speaking, animist or Christian, and culturally distinct from mainstream Burmese society. Many Karen civilians displaced by combat in the mountains of eastern Burma belong to this group. Another group of Karens can be described as lowland living, paddy farming, agriculturally diversified, Karen and Burmese speaking, Buddhist or Christian, and more integrated into Burmese society. Many Karens in this category also number among the displaced. In addition, there is an elite of Karen society: they are urban dwelling, middle class, educated, economically diverse, primarily Burmese speaking, possibly English speaking and often not Karen speaking, and usually Christian. Contrary to expectations, members of this group are also among the displaced people in eastern Burma.

Over the course of a 50-year civil war, these three population types have met and mixed, despite their geographical and cultural differences. Starting in the 1950s, the centre of KNU power gradually shifted from central Burma to the east. As the eastward retreat into the Dawna mountains and towards the Thai border hastened during the 1960s and 1970s, lowland and urban Karens from the Irrawaddy delta, Yangon and Insein began moving to the new 'liberated' areas. Serving the KNU's mountain strongholds, the lowland Karens married local highlanders, producing a generation of culturally, linguistically and religiously diverse Karens who personify the socio-demographic impact of the KNU's eastward migration. As war in the mountains intensified, the KNU recruited more of the traditionally insular highlanders, and the fate of migrant KNU insurgents and local Karen civilians became inextricably linked.

These dynamics created the great variety one sees among displaced Karens today: former Buddhist monks trained at Burmese monasteries; Baptist mission school graduates from the delta; and animists brought up with local spirit traditions. Among the displaced are teachers who followed the KNU east, college students who fled cities after the 1988 military coup, and indigenous farmers, hunters and healers. There are Karens who can hold a conversation more easily in English than in Karen, those to whom English and Burmese are foreign tongues, and eastern and western Karens for whom Burmese is the common language.

For many lowland migrants, displacement began 20 or 30 years ago when, voluntarily or not, they left their homes and moved eastward. Although war is responsible for their displacement today, the ultimate resolution to their problems will involve land, politics and economics far from where they started. Highland Karens, displaced from their villages, may also have migrated several times. Their original homes may have already been taken over by others, degraded by logging, or seriously altered by development projects. Karens affiliated with KNU recognise that displacement is only one of their problems. Unless some political settlement reduces conflict with the government, they will risk displacement no matter where they stay.

History of the Conflict

Nothing is more contentious than a fact. Even if history, in some simple, idealised sense, is merely a sequence of facts, then the history of civil war in Burma is, at best, a battleground of facts, opinions and interpretations. The facts are deceptively straightforward. Until the mid-nineteenth century, dozens of racial groups occupied the territory of mainland South-east Asia, now known as Burma (or Myanmar), without much in the way of distinct national boundaries. Various kingdoms, including the Siamese, Burman, Mon, Khmer and Rakhine, waxed and waned, while many peoples lived under smaller-scale polities. England fought two wars with the Burman dynasty, and towards the end of the nineteenth century annexed, or colonised, the traditional seats of Burman influence in Lower and Upper Burma. The colonial regime also set out to oversee nearby peoples remote from the traditional locus of political power. These became the 'ethnic minorities' in the new Burmese province of British India. Britain drew borders around Burma and maintained a semi-benevolent, semi-oppressive relationship with its subjects until 1948 when, in the wake of India's independence, it also handed over this newly constructed state to a shaky coalition of national leaders.

To some people at some moments, ethnic conflict in Burma is a colonial legacy: the many races of Burma co-existed peacefully until the British landed and used their infamous 'divide-and-rule' strategy to play formerly amicable peoples against one another. In this interpretation, having deposed the Burmese king and unceremoniously ended the dynasty, the British made enemies of the Burman people while extending favour to minorities such as Karens and Kachins. This unequal treatment lasted until Burmese independence, in 1948,

when hostility erupted between those who had been 'vanquished' and those who had been 'liberated' by colonial rule.

But to others, Karens and Burmans have been enemies since time immemorial. According to this interpretation, aggression by Burmans and retreat by Karens was constant throughout history. Burman kings dominated, abused and enslaved the Karens; while modern Burman rulers perpetrated genocide against the Karens. In response, modern Karen nationalists displayed indomitable political and military resistance.

Shortly after independence, Karen and Burman leaders began quarrelling over autonomy for the Karen people, and an armed rebellion broke out. Well-educated Karens who had served in the British colonial army and civilian administration quickly organised this revolt, built a national revolutionary organisation with military and administrative branches, and began pursuing national independence. Despite several attempts at negotiation, the war between the KNU and the Government of Burma continued throughout the 1950s. In 1962, a Burmese General, Ne Win, overthrew the government in a coup, introduced a socialist economy, and cut Burma off from most of the rest of the world. Inside the country the war intensified, and the KNU found itself steadily losing ground in south-central Burma, in the Irrawaddy river delta districts west of the capital city, Yangon. Karens began migrating eastward towards 'Kawthoolei', the new seat of KNU power named after the legendary Karen homeland, near Burma's mountainous, forested border with Thailand. After another military coup in 1988, the Burmese army committed itself and its resources to eliminating ethnic nationalist movements and insurgencies. Karens were one group among many that sought autonomy or independence.

INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT AND KAREN NATIONALISM

Displacement of Karens rarely surfaced in media coverage or debate on Burma until the KNU suffered substantial military losses in the mid-1990s. A strong KNU had once prevented the Burmese army from penetrating deeply or permanently into insurgent areas, so many Karens lived behind the KNU 'front line'. When the KNU held significant territory between the Thai border and the plains west of the Dawna mountains, Karens displaced or disturbed by military action could relocate deeper into the mountains, that is, deeper into KNU territory, and establish new villages or integrate with existing ones. KNU military centres, such as Kawmoora (lost in battle in

1984) and Kyon Doe (1997), and military-political centres like Three Pagodas Pass (1992), Manerplaw (1995) and Htee Kee (1997), offered sanctuary to Karens who relocated from precarious frontline areas. They survived either by participating in the local economy or by joining the KNU. While people suffered the immediate effects of displacement, such as insecurity, hunger and homelessness, these were likely to be temporary conditions that would change when the army retreated or when Karens fled to secure areas nearby. An aid worker whose organisation provides emergency assistance to displaced Karens observed, 'It's not that internal displacement has just begun happening. I think it's been going on for years, but [displaced people and Karen authorities] had their own mechanisms to deal with it' (AHRC 1999:80).

Shifts in the military strategies both of the KNU and the Burmese army have increased the incidence of internal displacement. Once, civilians were accidental victims of combat; or the Burmese army targeted persons with known links to the KNU or communities known to provide the KNU with supplies and recruits. While these standard anti-insurgency tactics undeniably caused much suffering, in theory they distinguished between civilians and combatants. But during the 1990s, the Burmese army seemed to have abandoned these distinctions in preference for a less discriminating strategy. 'The big issue,' the aid worker said, 'is that before, people were dislocated due to fighting between the Burmese army and the ethnic insurgencies, and the villagers were caught in the middle, so they had to flee. Now, it's not because of any offensives that they have to move; it's directly because of military activities against civilian villages. The Burmese army specifically orders civilians to clear out of areas they have lived in throughout their lives. The army marks off an area and sends the orders to clear it.'

Human rights investigators have found that Burmese army field commanders confirm this tactical shift. For example, the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) reports that in November 1999 a battalion commander explained to a meeting of village heads that the army views Karen civilians and insurgents as one:

In a pool, we can't leave some fish to catch, so we have to catch them all ... Right now, I do not fight [KNU]. I am fighting the civilians. If the people dare to shoot one bullet at me, it is enough. I will shoot into the village. I have no relatives there. (KHRG 2000:1)

One villager extended the officer's metaphor: 'They plan to make the resistance disappear. For example, they say the fish are in the pond, but there are a few fish they can't catch. So they drain the water to catch the fish.' A decade of human rights abuse reporting also testifies to the Burmese army's impatience with distinguishing between civilians and insurgents in the civil war zones.

Another major factor affecting Karen displacement over the past decade has been the Karen nationalist movement's split into two competing factions. In 1994, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Organisation (DKBO), known by its armed wing, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), challenged the KNU's exclusive claim to Karen nationalism. The group organised Buddhist Karens in the KNU rank and file and, with support from the Burmese army, drove the KNU from many of its strongholds along the Thai border. By cooperating with the Burmese army, the DKBA flouted the dominant mode of Karen nationalism, which was Christian-led, S'gaw speaking, partially westernised, and essentially separatist in its attitude towards the Burmese state. Posing the first powerful alternative to the KNU, the DKBA has enhanced the political status of Pwo-speaking Buddhist Karens of eastern Burma. Indeed, the DKBA has brought to light the complicated relations between Karen civilians and militant nationalists.

The advent of the DKBA changed several aspects of how Karens become displaced and cope with their displacement. Because the DKBA is composed of Karens from former KNU areas and, like the KNU, is sustained by Karen communities in eastern Burma, it is a powerful agent in depriving the KNU of civilian support. With intimate knowledge of local terrain, political history and economy, the DKBA has been able to pinpoint and challenge KNU bastions. For example, in Pa'an, Hlaingbwe, Kawkareik and Myawaddy townships, the DKBA has relocated villages, confiscated rice and controlled rice distribution. The DKBA controls several key transportation routes leading to the Thai border, and has the power to stop would-be refugees from reaching camps in Thailand. The DKBA controls many border villages that once provided personnel and succor to the KNU. The group tries to woo KNU members and sympathisers from refugee camps, promising a better deal under the DKBA if they return - and threatening retribution if they don't. By attacking KNU-controlled refugee camps in Thailand, DKBA has influenced displaced Karens' choices about where and how to flee.

It is difficult to count displaced Karens. Armed conflict only exacerbates the technical and political obstacles to conducting a census, and problems of classification blur the distinction between who is and is not displaced. The only known attempt to count displaced Karens, undertaken in 1997, subtracted the number of refugees registered in Thai camps from the total number of people believed to have been displaced, then estimated how many of the remainder may be internally displaced. Using this method, researchers suggested that approximately 30 per cent, or 480,000, of the rural Karen population of eastern Burma was displaced at that time. In addition to the 91,000 Karen in refugee camps in Thailand, 100,000-200,000 were displaced internally (BERG 1998:35). Since then, fighting and forced relocation have continued, and it has become more difficult to enter Thailand. It is likely that some 200,000 Karen men, women and children live displaced in the jungles of eastern Burma.

PHASES OF DISPLACEMENT

Some displaced Karen today trace the origins of their displacement to Burma's post-war land reform, particularly the nationalisation of agricultural land in the 1960s and 1970s. The failing socialist economy and what some perceive as the racially biased redistribution of farmland coincided with the KNU's eastward move. Karens moved east from the Irrawaddy delta looking for a better social, political and economic future, and were imbued with pioneer spirit as well as revolutionary spirit. They maintained contact with their homes and retained the wish to return. But in the ensuing years they moved farther eastward and gradually lost contact with their homes. In some cases, families and neighbours followed them east. The government, relatives or settlers may have claimed the land once held by the migrants. Throughout these years, eastern Karens also began to move. By the 1970s, Karen state and other areas of active rebellion were upheaved by displacement linked to the counter-insurgency. Anecdotal reports suggest that since then, eastern Karens have been hiding in the jungles, living in relocation centres, wandering in and out of cities and across borders in growing numbers.

Though people may ultimately flee in a sudden, violent moment, they probably anticipated that they would leave, but didn't know when. The Burmese army's counter-insurgency tactics usually follow a pattern: after targeting an area for depopulation, the army orders villagers to move by issuing a written notice, convening a meeting

of village headmen or visiting the village themselves. According to field reports, notification seldom results in quick and orderly compliance. Unless or until the army comes back to move or scatter the villagers, people assume a subtly defiant wait-and-see attitude. They may attempt to negotiate with the local military command but, more often, they will ignore the first notice and go about their business. The army sometimes reacts to uncooperative villages by sending a detachment of soldiers to emphasise the order. This may result in the first instance of serious human rights abuse, and may include detention, torture, summary execution, looting and destruction of homes, property and livestock. Knowing that farmers are reluctant to leave their land, the army may also burn or confiscate crops, food and farm implements. This is when jungle displacement begins.

However, the army does not always notify in advance. Areas with heavy insurgent activity (those in designated 'black zones'), remote villages that orders may not have reached, and villages that have flouted army demands for provisions and labour may suffer a rapid attack from which people also flee into the jungles. But even without prior notice, Karen villagers are aware of the army's movements and potential for violence, and of their community's standing in the political struggle among rival military powers. They choose to stay on their land until combat, human rights abuses or hunger finally force them off.

After fleeing, displaced Karens seek the first opportunity to return home. Though they lose their houses and possessions, they still manage to return to their fields. Temporary displacement may be a frequent, even routine, way of life in the war zones. For example, in 1998, villagers in Mone township reported:

This year we ran from the army four times, and three times in September they really reached our place. The first time they took all our possessions. The second time they destroyed all our crops. The third time, they pulled all the paddy stalks from the ground and burned down the field hut. (AHRC 1999:19)

At best, villagers may flee with ample warning, stay hidden in the jungle for only a few hours or overnight, and return to an intact village, perhaps because the soldiers changed course or, for other reasons, did not enter the village and moved off to a safe distance. More often, however, people flee with little warning and must wait

out the troops' stay and the inevitable looting of food and valuables. Soldiers may make the village a temporary base, or may stay until the villagers come out of hiding and return.

At worst, displaced people see no chance of returning home. Interviewed in 1998, this displaced Karen villager from Palaw township, in South-eastern Burma, had been living in the jungle for three years:

Twice the Burmese army ordered villagers to relocate to Palawgon, first during the harvest in 1996, again during the 1998 harvest.⁵ My family did not move; we fled to [a place] two hours' walk from our village. There were nine families ... 43 persons. So I left my village three years ago, even before the relocation began. I left my plantation, my house, all of my livestock. I could carry nothing. I left everything behind. Now I have no income. (Eh Na 1998:20)

Life in the jungle is harsh, and becomes even harsher the longer people stay. Not only is food in short supply, but so are medicines, clothing, blankets, clean water, pots and pans, knives and other essential instruments of survival. People often construct temporary shelters, perhaps with no floor or walls, only a roof made out of leaves. But if alerted to approaching danger, persons living displaced in the jungle may abandon these temporary homes at a moment's notice and move on in search of safer ground, usually staying along the banks of small streams and rivers.

To avert total destruction of the village, or to avoid having soldiers hunt for people in the forest, people sometimes choose to return and 'surrender' themselves to military rule. This was the decision made by Naw Ble and other residents of a village in Dawei in southern Burma:

After wandering in the jungle, we felt that there were no more places to go. Some people suggested that going back would be better than being caught in the jungle. So one day when there were no soldiers in the village, we re-entered. We saw all our possessions scattered, and no cock crowed, no dog barked, no cat cried and no cattle wandered about the place. Everything was quiet. The next day, [soldiers came and] started to dig trenches by our houses. They did not harm us, but would climb our trees and take fruit. They ordered us not to leave the village without

permission. To go out cost 15 kkyat per day, and we had to be back before dark. (AHRC 1999:31)

This sense of alienation from a familiar place demonstrates the cultural nature of displacement: it is a social and psychological state as well as a physical dislocation. Superficially, Naw Ble and her neighbours seem to have entered a 'resettlement' phase; but more accurately, displacement profoundly changed the relationship between her people and their place.

PLACE, DISPLACEMENT AND KAREN IDENTITY

Displaced Karens are known for their tenacity. They can survive for years, even decades, without sufficient food or medicine. They endure the gravest human rights abuses. They resist the safety and sustenance found in towns, lowland villages and refugee camps. Why would people insist *on* staying where they can barely grow a crop, where they could be killed by landmines or shot on sight, and where fear and despair seem to rule their lives? The only way to understand what jungle displacement means to Karens, and how they respond to it, is to explore their beliefs and attitudes about land, displacement and cultural identity. Karens' understanding of their origins, their arrival in their current homes and their 'correct place' in the world colours their perception of history and helps explain their current political and economic hardship. Displacement, alienation and racial conflict are recurrent themes in Karen mythology, tradition and world view.⁶

Myth, History and Alienation

Displacement and dispossession are themes found in Karen creation and migration myths. Several slightly different versions of the migration story have been recorded since the nineteenth century, but they all agree on the main points. Karens recall that they came south from China or Mongolia under the leadership of the first Karen patriarch, Boar Tusk. The Karens were accidentally separated from their leader in the jungle, and had to complete the journey by themselves. Although a new leader found suitable land along the Ping river, by the time the Karens arrived Thais had already taken the land and the Karens were forced to settle in the surrounding mountains and jungles. Another story tells how, in even more ancient times, Karens were put at a social and intellectual disadvantage to other races by their own carelessness. When God handed out

sacred books to various races, the Karens accidentally burned theirs and lost the chance to become a sophisticated civilisation.

Almost all Karens know these stories and their themes of dislocation, loss and homelessness. According to one student of Karen history, Karens describes themselves as a disenfranchised people:

As the Thais and Caucasians grew robustly, the Karens were forced to endure a life of poverty, toil and adversity in the jungle ... Karens believe they lost the best valley land to other groups. Whether they lost it through carelessness or others' dishonesty, both stories conclude that they did forfeit land they once possessed. Karens believe that ... they lost a position of pre-eminence when these peoples forced the aboriginal Karens of Thailand and Burma into the uplands ... and the southernmost marshes of the Burma Delta. Both stories, above all, tell that Karens feel they are orphans who lost the chance to be an advanced, powerful people. (Renard 1980:2-3)

Displaced Karens explain their current status in similar terms. In one parable, they lived idyllically in the fertile plains of lower Burma. One day, a Karen returned to his favourite spot on the river to find a strange fishing pole, belonging to a Mon, planted in the ground next to his own. He returned another day to find yet another pole beside the second, this one belonging to a Burman. Sensing trouble, he went home, packed up his house and family, and fled lower Burma for the eastern mountain ranges.⁷ This story intimates the troubles Karens expect when what they perceive as racially incompatible peoples live too close together.

Racial incompatibility is an important element in Karens' views on displacement. Local histories describe how the encroachments of incompatible races inevitably drove Karens from their places. For example, a Karen village near Kyauk Kyi township lay just outside the Burmese army's operation zone, and therefore enjoyed a degree of stability that attracted settlers from the plains. As more Burmans arrived, communal tensions arose. The Burmans built fences around their houses and considered everything that wandered into their space, including neighbours' stray chickens, as their own property. They did not trim bamboo to allow new shoots to grow, so the village bamboo supplies dwindled. The Karens felt that the Burmans

were forcing them off their land by making it uninhabitable, and so they began moving into the remote mountains of the east.⁸

Karen accounts of losing land to foreign encroachers contain economic factors as well. In 1999, a local correspondent explained the history of a village tract in Pegu Division's Kyauk Kyi township:

Before World War II, the first village was Pawpeet'der, named after the founder Phu Pawpeet, who lit beacons at night along the roadside using coconut oil for fuel. The people set up plantations and gardens for growing tomato, eggplant, coconut, durian and mango. They hired Shan and Burman labourers who settled around the village. Burmans named the place Meetaingtaw, after the beacons, and called their own village Lower Meetaingtaw. Over time, these settlers bought up the Karens' land. After Karens built a church, Burmans called the original village by a new name, Kyaungsu. Lower Meetaingtaw became just plain Meetaingtaw within our current generation. This situation is reminiscent of the proverb told by our ancestors, 'The dog covers the pig's tracks.' Before World War II, these were all Karen places, but now other races outnumber the Karen. (Kweh Klo 1999:6)

Ultimately, this Karen quarter was known not for the founder or his landmarks, but for a church, which in Buddhist Burma is something of a foreign structure. According to this story, the Karens were transformed from indigenous people to strangers on their own land within 50 years. Such experiences, coupled with the Burmese army's indiscriminate counter-insurgency strategy, contribute to perceptions that the Burman race is waging a war of ethnic hatred against the Karen.

Place, Displacement and Karen Nationalism

The KNU also applies themes of place and displacement to its historical analyses and political programme. Displacement from traditional land is a fact of history that justifies KNU political ambitions. By raising the hope of reuniting Karens with Kawthoolei, their promised land, the KNU exhorts Karens to rally to its cause. Nationalists contend that Karens have proprietary land rights to much of Burma, since they were the country's first inhabitants and were forcefully evicted by 'foreign' settlers. The significant innovation of Karen nationalism is to propose that united, Karens can create or reclaim Kawthoolei, a pure Karen homeland. The KNU's

vow to establish Kawthoolei appeals to the dispossessed: through KNU, Karens can redress their separation with Boar Tusk, their squandering of the 'book of knowledge', and their subjugation by alien races.

Place, Identity and Subsistence Agriculture

Most Karens are farmers and, perhaps like all farmers, feel a close identification with the land they work. Two important features of traditional rural economy create this close connection between people and their place: free land and communal labour. Normally, highland Karen farmers do not buy, sell or own land. Because the land is sparsely populated and fertile, farmers simply appropriate what land they need. Communities or households do not own this land, but act as stewards responsible for both exploiting and protecting it.

Communal labour also fixes Karens' identity to their place. While a farmer is theoretically free to claim as much land as he wants, he relies on his neighbours' labour, and must likewise contribute time and energy to their farms. Agricultural labour benefits the entire community, not just the individual land-tending household. Therefore, survival depends not only on the availability of land, but also on the stability of the community workforce.

COPING WITH DISPLACEMENT

Displacement changes life so drastically that, in a sense, everything displaced people do is a response to their circumstances. I have sorted these responses into five categories: subsistence; protection; access to education; public participation; and religion, language and identity. Naturally, these categories overlap, forming an overall system of adaptation. For example, protection and subsistence are interdependent. The ways and means by which displaced people obtain food, shelter and health care are constantly subject to the need to maintain security. Conversely, security can never be total, because survival demands that people venture from their hiding places, and risk detection, to search for food.

Before considering each aspect of adaptation, it may be useful to get an overview of displacement and survival from a displaced Karen. At the time of this interview, in 1997, Saw Htoo K'baw was a 36-year-old teacher and father of five who had migrated to Karen state from the delta, and finally fled to a refugee camp in Thailand:

I arrived in Papun in 1981. I went to help, and as a high school graduate I was given a job teaching in the KNU high school. Before 1992, conditions weren't too tough. But in January 1992, the Burmese army began to battle the KNU. Our area had been pretty stable; people from other places fled there to escape the fighting. Population pressure increased over time. When I left earlier this year the village had more than 200 houses, compared to the typical village size of only 30. Originally, apart from growing rice, people had no problems - fishing, breeding livestock, growing and foraging for vegetables, cutting timber and trading. But over time it became harder to live by agriculture. Land should lie fallow for at least three or four years, but nowadays it's two years at most. The land is totally exhausted.

After 1992, I, too, grew my own rice. I planted three to four baskets of seed the first year. Because the soldiers were patrolling and the soil was poor I didn't harvest enough to feed my family, only five baskets. After school closed in January, I planned to trade in biscuits, *Ajinomoto* [a powdered seasoning], and clothing. But the soldiers were patrolling and would stop people on the road or shoot at them. I tried it once, in 1992. As I was going home in a group of five people, soldiers beside the path saw us and shot. We dropped our stuff and ran for our lives. So, I lost all my valuables and was discouraged from trading.

By 1994, more villagers had come, the village was getting crowded and dirty, and people were getting sick. Most young children were ill. One illness was 'yellow eyes'. Apart from yellow eyes and face, children's livers were swollen. One-fifth of the children under five died. At first, people didn't think too much of it and used traditional medicines. When that didn't work, the people tried to get help from outside, but it was too late.

My neighbour lost a two-month-old baby. He went for a KNU medic, but the child had already been sick for three or four days. Anyway, the medic had nothing, only paracetamol and quinine. Pu Ta Thoo had no money; intravenous drips from Thailand cost a lot, and medicine from Burma is unreliable. So the child died. The mother was also ill, weak with fever and headache. My family got sick, too, and what's more, we had to flee the army and stay at the bottom of a river valley. We didn't have spare clothing or mosquito nets, so the children suffered chills.

Work became harder. The soil was becoming barren. Soldiers patrolled at harvest time, crops were destroyed and went bad.

Starting from September 1994, my family had to eat rice porridge. Sometimes I had to go without food to feed my family. Sometimes all we had to eat were boiled bamboo shoots and roots.

In 1995, because of constant Burmese army movement, we had to be ready all the time. In the hot season I worked odd jobs. The school committee couldn't take care of teachers anymore. We couldn't buy clothes, and had only one set each. Some newer arrivals risked their lives and returned to their old villages. My children were coughing terribly, but I had no money for medicine. I searched far and wide for money, but couldn't earn enough. I just made certain that I boiled the drinking water.

In September, I planted two baskets of rice seed. It was almost harvest time when we fled to where there was no food. Since we had not brought much, we ate porridge. For two or three months we hid, and our fields were trampled by livestock and destroyed by the soldiers. I would forego food so my children could eat. I would go around and beg for rice. Some people would take pity and give me a cup or two - mostly hill people who were coping better than the rest of us. People suffered differently. Recent migrants who had been farming or fishing were doing badly. Traders and the traditional hill people were better. We only cooked one small pot of rice per meal. We had one pot, but no plates, bowls or cutlery, so we ate from bamboo. In 1996, things became so tough that we couldn't even get salt, which used to come in from Papun. All roads had been cut. No one dared travel, afraid to be shot along the way.

Villages on the other side of the river received little warning when the soldiers came. They suffered constant harassment, and they never had enough food. In spite of all this they didn't want to move. From June to August of 1996 they ate porridge and bamboo shoots, and from September to November they ate roots. My family ate like this until the December harvest. That year, I planted three baskets and reaped 15.

In early November 1996, my uncle was killed. He was about 47 years old and had four children. The troops approached as he prepared to flee, but he didn't know how close they were. His wife left and he followed, but he took the wrong path. His wife heard gunfire. After a couple of days, she understood what happened. Everyone was terrified, and for over a week none of them went back.

Around April, it rained very heavily for about a week. Our house collapsed into the river and was totally destroyed. We were left with nothing, no food and no place to stay, so we fled and hid. The children were sick, and a KNU administrator gave me some grain. I thought about the situation, and thought that as we had lost our house and possessions we wouldn't stay there anymore, and so we came to this refugee camp step by step. By 1997, it was easy to flee; we had nothing left anyway. We had lost, sold or exchanged all our meagre possessions over time in order to get food. We never had much, but before 1992-93, we had four or five items of clothing each, enough blankets, mosquito nets, plates and spoons to go around. By 1997, my wife, our three oldest children and I had exactly one set of clothes each, and our youngest two children we simply wrapped in rags, and carried them on our backs when we fled. A machete, a pot and a bamboo bowl, some rice, two blankets and one mosquito net were the sum total of our possessions. Under such conditions, money is not spent on clothes and such; you only think about getting food. (AHRC 1999:88).

SUBSISTENCE STRATEGIES

Hiding Rice

The most common subsistence strategy for people displaced in the jungle is hiding rice, other foods and personal belongings. Since it is impractical to run carrying a large basket of rice, and because rice left unattended in villages is in danger of being destroyed or confiscated, Karens often stash rice in well-concealed locations in the jungle. Each harvest season, which usually coincides with an increase in military activity, farmers rush to get their rice from the fields and begin stashing it away. This strategy is not without its problems. According to a 1996 report from the war zones of Mone township:

When the army columns come into the mountains, they destroy any house they find, shoot whomever they see, and take or burn all possessions. If they come to a village they don't see any people because everyone has run into the forest already. If they find rice stored in the jungle, they take or burn it, or sometimes lay mines around it. Many villagers have been killed, maimed and blinded by this tactic. We always look for a safe place in the jungle to hide

our food. These hiding places may be safe from soldiers, but not from the wildlife. Bears, rats and insects can find and eat the food we hide. Bears sometimes eat the food, sometimes destroy it and sometimes carry it away. The bears are very clever and can sort through the food to pick what they like. But the rats are really terrible: they not only eat the rice but they nest in it. If we use an old metal locker, only the insects can get in, but if we only have a basket wrapped in leaves or plastic, there's a good chance the other animals will get to it. The wildlife is just as destructive as the enemy. If there were no military activity, we wouldn't have to hide our food in the jungle; we could build food stores in the village and take care of our rice. (Kweh Say 1996:7)

With experience comes greater caution. When people have the time and inclination to prepare themselves for long stays in the jungle, they divide their rice and belongings into smaller stashes to hide in several locations. This way, the people don't risk losing everything at once.

Hunting, Foraging and Sharing

In addition to hiding rice, displaced people survive by foraging for food in the jungle. In fact, this is a normal part of life for rural people; Karens are used to searching for fruit, plants, roots and animals to supplement their diet. However, displacement makes this foraging more crucial and more difficult. The displaced must always be alert to the location and movement of soldiers. Many executions, rapes and beatings occur during chance encounters between people looking for food and small military units on patrol. In addition, it is often too dangerous to hunt with rifles, as Karens normally do, because the sound of gunshots may draw attention and lead the army to a jungle hideout. While all displaced people confront these difficulties, new settlers to the highlands may have more problems because they are less familiar with local plants, animals and survival skills than are natives. Lowland settlers who are unaccustomed to the rigours of jungle displacement are more likely to cross the border into Thailand and live either as refugees or migrant workers.

Another important coping strategy is rationing and sharing food. There is no organised system for food rationing; it just seems to be a natural part of communal life. People displaced in the jungle also commonly report that they feed as much available food as possible to children, while the adults fast, eat only what they can forage, or

consume reduced rations. Nevertheless, not everyone benefits from sharing. According to one man whose village was displaced into the jungle three times in 1996:

Each time we had no food. In the forest, relationships varied. Some shared food with others then left to look for roots together; others did not. I saw one family close to utter starvation, the two small children crying from hunger. The mother pitifully fed them roots which hadn't been boiled long enough; she probably didn't know what else to do. After that they suffered nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea. They had absolutely no possessions whatsoever, other than one pot, a machete and a small blanket. (AHRC 1999:24)

Covert Agriculture and Trade

Producing food is another tactic. Displaced people may either surreptitiously return to their fields or attempt to cultivate small plots of land hidden in dense jungle. People report that this covert farming is dangerous and not terribly productive, though necessary *to* provide at least some food. The same wildlife that threatens hidden rice stores also menaces untended crops; wild boar are particularly destructive. Since jungle farms are usually not protected by bamboo fences, which might be spotted from afar, displaced farmers have little chance of keeping animals away from their plants. Migrants from the lowlands, if they farmed before, are accustomed to wet rice cultivation, and find it difficult to learn a new technique under the pressures of displacement.

In many places, people in the jungle maintain some trade with villages, relocation centres or mobile traders inside government-controlled areas. In Tennasserim, for example, forced relocation split communities into those who fled to the jungle and those who complied and remained. Despite the dangers, necessity compelled them to maintain contact:

Other food such as salt and fish paste, which they cannot produce themselves and is part of their main diet, is another problem for the IDPs. They try to sneak into the nearest relocated village to buy these foods. Many die along the way when they get caught in the middle of ambushes. There are no easy routes, because these areas have been declared free-fire zones, and the relocation sites

are fenced in and watched by the People's Militia or Burma army. Villagers at the relocation sites have their movements severely restricted. However, the IDPs and villagers at relocation sites have secret deals for selling and buying food. Villagers at relocation sites sneak out and bring things to sell to the IDPs. This business is very dangerous, and they cannot do it every time. (Eh Na 1998:7)

People in the relocation centres will take advantage of what little freedom they enjoy to return to their fields and, perhaps, arrange secret rendezvous with their displaced neighbours. In northern Karen state, and probably throughout eastern Burma, some traders specialise in sneaking rice and provisions into the mountains.

Seeking Aid

The final strategy is to seek support from international aid organisations, either by relocating to refugee camps in Thailand or by trying to have aid delivered *in situ*. Most displaced people consider the Thai refugee camps to be a poor and unhappy alternative, and try to survive close to their homes for as long as possible. Throughout the 1990s, crossing the Thailand-Burma border became increasingly difficult, with the Burmese army attempting to seal the border on one side, and a growing unwillingness from Thai officials to allow entry on the other. In partnership with two KNU-related welfare organisations, the Karen Organisation for Relief and Development (KORD) and the Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP), aid agencies have managed to supply rice, or cash to buy rice from lowland Burma, to displaced communities deep inside Burma's civil war zones. Such aid, however, is only available in some situations, depending on the people's location, condition and ability to communicate their needs to the intermediate organisation. Furthermore, to send either significant quantities of rice or money through the mountains from Thailand is a complicated and dangerous logistical feat.

Karens use the same techniques - foraging, trading with the lowlands, and seeking aid - to obtain health care. Malaria, diarrhoea, malnutrition, respiratory infections, obstetric emergencies, and injuries are the major health problems of displaced persons (Beyrer 1999:4). Karen healers apply their knowledge of herbal medicine and Burmese traditional medicine with varying success; though by all accounts there is a dearth of adequate health care, and modern medicine is expensive and hard to find. While the KNU once

maintained clinics in its territory, by the end of the 1990s, mobile medical teams supported by aid agencies in Thailand had become a more practical alternative.

Although people living in relocation sites fall outside the category of jungle displacement, they also struggle with basic subsistence. Describing their predicament here may help shed light on why Karens might choose to stay in the jungle rather than accept relocation. The army chooses relocation sites for strategic advantage in government population control. Access to arable land, good water and work do not seem to be major concerns. Relatively little is known about conditions inside relocation camps; most information comes from those who have left the camps and come to the Thailand-Burma border. One priority for relocated people is to maintain contact with their former land, often complying with a system by which they pay to leave the camp each morning, walk up to 10 kilometres to reach their fields, work for the day, then walk back to the camp before nightfall. This arrangement is only available when villages have been relocated or consolidated within a reasonable distance from their homes. Even so, rice farming is labour-intensive work for which, even in stable villages, people often choose to sleep in small, temporary field huts. Many farmers consider it nearly impossible to work this way, and either flee the relocation centre to live displaced in the countryside close to their fields, or abandon farming altogether.

Relocation centres seem to offer few occupations apart from farming. Although the concentration of many people into a small space should create good opportunities for commerce, often by the time people reach relocation sites they have little disposable income. In some cases, a black market economy exists. Western medicines, for example, are in great demand, but may be considered contraband by local authorities, who fear they will be smuggled to rebels in the jungle. Batteries for portable radios and cassette players may be banned for the same reasons, since they could power the rebels' walkie-talkies. The dangerous business of supplying such items does not make people rich, but it does circulate cash.

PROTECTION STRATEGIES

Flight and Evasion

The main evasion tactics, fleeing and hiding, sound less like coping strategies than simply reactions to danger. But displaced people

determined to stay near their land have evaded danger for so many years that fleeing and hiding have become well-known routines. The key to successful flight is preparation. Displaced persons in the highlands of Mone township, says one resident, prepare to run every day:

When we wake up in the morning, we fold up our blankets, cook, eat and put everything back in our carrying baskets so we will be ready to run if the soldiers come. If we don't do this, we risk losing our possessions. (Kweh Say 1996:7)

One sure sign of a village accustomed to jungle displacement is the prevalence of carrying baskets, rucksacks and plastic bags packed and ready to go, and usually kept under the house or close to the door. While a bamboo house is a temporary shelter that must be modified and rebuilt every few years, durable goods such as enamelled plates, teapots, warm clothes, blankets, knives, books and radios are not easily replaced. Karens consider such possessions to be more valuable than a bamboo house; that is why, if they anticipate displacement, they keep their valuables bundled and ready to move at a moment's notice.

Under such conditions the simplest of materials attain importance: a good backpack or an intact plastic tarpaulin can make the difference between saving or sacrificing one's food and possessions. The same is true for certain valuables that cannot be easily transported, including livestock. When possible, people will trade for more portable currency, especially small amounts of gold and silver jewellery or Thai currency.

There is little documentation of how individuals flee when the time comes. If given ample warning and enough time to prepare, for example, if approaching soldiers are more than an hour's walk away, villagers may discuss how to divide into groups and plan their rendezvous. If there is little or no warning, that is, when gunshots signal the army's arrival, planning may be impossible. But people know which routes to follow and where in the forest they might hide. Apart from the material hardships of hiding - finding food, staying dry, coping with disease - displaced persons are always at risk of being discovered. One account relates the problems of hiding:

The villagers of Nwar Lay Khoh knew that troops were approaching, so they began to evacuate their houses. They fled

into the scrub, dangerously close. They had to kill roosters and geese, because their cries travel far and might reveal the hideout. For security, dogs too were beaten to death: there is a lot in the jungle to bark at. (AHRC 1999:19)

Once in the jungle, however, Karens disperse into small groups. It is safer to live in many small enclaves scattered through the mountains than in one large group. In 1998, in South-eastern Burma's Palaw township, Karen villagers resisted a relocation effort:

Many villagers fled the relocation programme and are hiding in the jungle watershed. They are hiding at a distance from each other, not like when they stayed together in the village. Two or three families hide together by one stream, and a few others hide by the next. They grow crops at the hiding places in order to survive. They have built small huts to hide their paddy, food supplies and other materials. They hide in heavily forested valleys, where it is harder to find them. They do not make clear footpaths to their hiding places, and they are careful whom they show their places to. According to the KNU, there are 660 households currently displaced. (Eh Na 1998:6)

Accommodating the Army

In and out of the jungle, one way Karen displaced protect themselves is to submit to the demands placed on them. To provide the required food, money, labour, information and other services required is neither easy nor pleasant; nor does it guarantee safety. Nevertheless, it is often the best response available, a tactic for negotiating survival based on the calculation that complying is less dangerous than resisting or avoiding the army altogether.

While some demands are dangerous, many others are simply onerous. The latter type includes providing food, cash, wood and bamboo for construction, and some forms of routine labour. When there is little threat of violence, the real drawback to helping the army is that the time and expense involved make it even more difficult for displaced people to survive. Villagers must decide whether the advantages of staying on their land outweigh the poverty they endure.

The army's most dangerous demands include carrying loads for combat troops, guarding and maintaining strategic roads, which

may be mined, and, for women, the added chores of working as servants and masseuses in army barracks, which may result in sexual abuse.

Apart from poverty and the threat of physical harm, accommodating the army creates political pressure. While the Burmese army does not normally conscript soldiers from among displaced Karens, the KNU and DKBA do. Displaced people must negotiate the conflicting demands of different military powers:

The DKBA are intimidating villagers to provide recruits. If we don't, they said they'd ring our village with one thousand landmines until we wouldn't dare to set foot on our own land. We were going to get the recruits, but the KNU didn't like it, so we were caught in the middle, neither here nor there, and we have had to flee to other places. We don't know what will happen in the future. (Htoh Lwi War 1999:15)

Accommodation, however, does not always mean submission. Appearing to comply, villagers find subtle ways to resist military control. For example, a villager in Thaton interviewed in 1999 reported:

Each day, three women must go to the army camp for 'patrol'. The patrol women have to report to the camp commander about whether or not any KNLA have come to the village. Most of the time the women lie. Sometimes the KNLA comes but the women say they didn't come. If only two or three KNLA come it is no problem, the patrol women don't tell them; but if 70 or 80 come then the women must inform them about where they're headed. If the KNLA are headed to L— they tell him that they are headed to T—, and if they are headed to P— the villagers tell him they were headed to H—. If the Burmese say that they didn't see them there, the women say, 'We can't help it if you didn't see them. We saw them pass our village and watched them until they disappeared, but we dared not follow them so we can't say exactly where they went.' Sometimes they tell him that the KNLA have come and headed someplace and that there are 200 or 300 of them, when really there were only none to 80 of them. Sometimes people tell them but they don't give chase, they just say to the women, 'Let them go, let them go.' Most of the time he says, 'It's enough to inform us about it, as long as we know, it's no

problem.' The camp commander is kind, but still his heart is crooked because he is a Burman. (KHRG 1999)

Joining the Armed Struggle

People in civil war zones almost always have the chance to join an armed faction if they so choose. After displacement, unaffiliated civilians who try to align themselves with the KNU, the DKBA or some other faction are clearly trying to cope with their new circumstances. While they may be radicalised by the trauma of displacement and may resent the Burmese army, often they are simply hoping to obtain a weapon or receive warnings to defend themselves and others from further harassment.

Yet in some places there is barely a distinction between protecting the interests of civilians and those of the rebels. They do not necessarily share a political ideology, but they need each other to survive. Especially in the highlands of northern Karen state, local rebels may be protecting their own home villages and displaced families. Where the KNU has lost substantial ground, communication and supply routes, its soldiers are just as displaced as civilians and the two groups often band together for survival. Explained one native of Mone township, when the Burmese approach, every Karen man becomes a soldier simply to stay alive.

Among the displaced, affiliation with an armed group is ultimately a pragmatic reaction to desperate circumstances. A farmer from T'Nay Char township in Pa'an explained:

I am ordinarily able to grow 100 baskets of paddy every year, but this year, as there was no rain, I have only been able to get more than 20 baskets. So I have had to sell all my livestock, and the rice grain I gave some to Burmese soldiers, some to the DKBA and the rest I sold to pay off debts. I have nothing left. Therefore, to avoid being taken as a porter, I have been fleeing into the scrub every night. When they came to collect porter fees I had nothing left. So I plan to join the KNLA, and if that's not possible, then the DKBA. (Htoh Lwi War 1999:13)

Religious Affiliation

Another example of pragmatism in the face of desperation is when male villagers become Buddhist monks. In some communities facing continual military harassment, Buddhist monasteries are

comparatively stable environments where the danger of being levied, conscripted or forced to serve the army are greatly reduced. Monks may enjoy greater freedom of movement and more respectful treatment by soldiers, but they are not necessarily above suspicion. There is no evidence that women cope with displacement by becoming Buddhist nuns.

Some displaced Christian Karens have missionary contacts that might help them obtain schooling in Burma or in refugee camps. One Baptist family that had lived displaced on and off since the mid-1970s sent the daughters to mission schools in Yangon and the sons to refugee camp schools in Thailand.

Political Negotiation

Villagers may promise the Burmese army that they will have no contact with the rebels, will supply materials and labour as asked, and will not flee when the army approaches. In return, the army vows not to burn down or punish the entire village, but keeps a close eye on suspected rebel sympathisers and may punish them individually.

Some villages may reach temporary agreements with local army units that wish to avoid battles with the rebels. The army won't enter the village or harass the people there, even when there is evidence of rebel activity. But these arrangements are less common today than they were in the mid-1990s, and they rely on the army's unwillingness to pursue Karen insurgents.

EDUCATION

Many Karens value education highly. Displaced Karens regard formal schooling as a refuge from the hardships of the jungle and as the foundation for a better life. As war gradually permeated the Karen state, many local schools under KNU administration suffered. Education for displaced children is now available only in schools in more stable areas of Burma or in refugee camps in Thailand. Christian Karens with missionary contacts may attend religious schools inside Burma, and boys from Buddhist families may seek to study at monasteries in towns or stable villages. Despite the hazards of travel, it is common for displaced families to send their children across the border to study at refugee camp schools. While camp schools provide basic education, they also introduce rural Karens to a more urban, modern setting, albeit on the outskirts of Thai society. The prospect of further education, the hope of earning cash, and the appeal of modern technology combine to draw children from

displaced families out of the jungle into the lowest strata of Thai society and, with luck, to international refugee status, third-country resettlement and western education (Tun 1998:9).

When displaced communities enjoy a degree of stability, they may try to set up schools, either independently or supported by the KNU (the DKBA is not yet known to have sponsored schools). Teachers may be educated members of the community or, fairly often, Karen missionaries or KNU sympathisers who migrated from the lowlands. KNU schools offer a nationalist curriculum, which, along with basic literacy and numeracy, inculcates traditional views of Karen identity, including all the themes of loss, displacement and racial incompatibility between Karens and Burmans.

One controversial issue in education is the extent to which Karens should study Burmese. Because Karen nationalism adamantly distinguishes between Burman and Karen culture⁹ and fears that the Karen language will disappear, leaders and educators emphasize S'gaw Karen as the primary language of education. Many Karens feel that accepting Burmese as the national language puts non-native speakers at a disadvantage and fails to recognise the cultural rights of linguistic minorities. This is a politically sensitive issue: to point out the practical advantage of Burmese language education - that it equips people to integrate and cope in Burmese society - is to suggest that Karen nationalism will not succeed.

RELIGION, COMMUNITY, LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

Religious Movements

Displaced Karens sometimes adapt their religious beliefs to explain and rationalise their plight. Millenarian movements or apocalyptic trends can be found in Christian, Buddhist and traditional beliefs among displaced Karens in eastern Burma. Throughout the 1990s, evangelical Baptists expressed concern, and relief, that the world would end in the year 2000. Missionary efforts accelerated, including a Year 2000 campaign to baptise as many Karens in eastern Burma as possible.¹⁰ In the late 1990s, Christian refugees asked to comment on their political problems declined to speculate, saying that Judgement Day was just a few years away and that all would be resolved by God. While less is known about the DKBA, its militant nationalism is also believed to include messianic elements related to the popular belief that a powerful Buddhist political figure will arrive to prepare the world for the advent of Maitreya, the future Buddha.¹¹

Most recently, God's Army, a nationalist-messianic movement in southern Burma, has posited divine intercession in displaced Karens' opposition to Burma army offensives. As responses to displacement, all such beliefs sustain the hope that powerful moral intercession will alleviate Karens' suffering.

Isolation

Traditional distrust of outsiders becomes an important response to displacement. Scattering into small groups and keeping a distance from others has already been described as a protection tactic, but it is an act of defining and preserving cultural identity as well. Although the war between Burma's government and the KNU is sometimes described as a national struggle, many displaced Karens are not interested in either side's claim to political legitimacy. Speaking their own dialect, managing their own affairs, surviving in their own domain, highlanders and forest-dwelling Karens wish, above all, to preserve their independence and stay on their land. If they were traditionally taciturn and distrustful of 'foreigners', then the rigours of war have made them militant in resisting outsiders, including other Karens.

Language

One way Karens respond to displacement is by talking about it, and in their descriptions one recognises efforts to cope with the problems they face. Displaced people compare their experiences to their natural environment and agrarian way of life. They say they are like 'drops of water on the *khu* leaf, never settling down and always in danger of being shaken off; or like 'chickens sleeping at night, never resting and always on edge'; or their predicament makes them like fish: 'swimming upstream, we are caught in a trap; swimming downstream we are caught in a net'.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Given the dismal state of civil and political rights for all people in Burma, it is no surprise that displaced Karens enjoy little or no representation or participation in public affairs. Within their own villages, people might have a say in decisions that affect the whole group, although the degree of participation depends on the structure of the village. In small, isolated communities consensus is an important element of village politics; but in larger lowland villages that interact with outside political forces, more power accrues to the

village headman as the community's representative. He is saddled with the burden of fulfilling the armies' demand for supplies, labour and recruits. Village heads who represent displaced communities often suffer the twin pressures of defending the people's best interests and satisfying soldiers' needs; they risk detention, beatings or worse if the village fails to comply. One way of coping with this burden has been to transform the office of village head from a permanent post to a rotating one, so several villagers will take turns negotiating with the army.

Another response to the changing role of Karen village leaders has been an increase in women holding the post. Perhaps because few men want the job, or maybe because women have been more successful in managing the twin burdens of leadership, there has been a trend towards middle-aged Karen women negotiating with the army on behalf of displaced rural communities. It is difficult to determine why this is occurring. One theory is that young Burmese army field officers, raised in a culture where sons show respect and devotion to their mothers, perceive women leaders as surrogate mother figures and are reluctant to harm them. Officers may feel that women leaders are less duplicitous, less inclined to support the KNU behind the army's back. Perhaps because older displaced Karen women have endured for years under the harshest conditions, they have developed the shrewd skills needed to survive. Women sometimes even scold soldiers for their rude and violent behaviour, cautioning that their mothers would not be proud of them.

CONCLUSION

For thousands of Karens in eastern Burma, displacement has a profound impact on survival, culture and identity. To some, displacement heightens a sense of loss over their stable and prosperous past and contributes to a belief in racial incompatibility. For them, displacement is the inevitable result of innate antagonism between the Karen and his chief foe, the Burman. Karen nationalism recalls better days and advocates that Karens reclaim their birthright by establishing a racially and morally pure homeland, Kawthoolei. Despite nationalist dreams of an autonomous Kawthoolei, it appears that most displaced Karens simply wish to be left alone.

Displaced Karen civilians cope with their plight by surviving on or near their land, appeasing the nearest military force or, if necessary, affiliating themselves with it. How people survive, protect themselves, and otherwise adapt to displacement are all closely

related to the relationship between people and place. Hiding in the forest, foraging for food, and defining community ties are all adaptations that evolve from the close relationship between Karens and their land. There is little evidence that displaced Karens cope better by migrating to cities or becoming entrepreneurs.

Observers agree that the only sustainable solution to the plight of displaced persons is ending Burma's civil war. But achieving peace will require cultural, as well as political, accommodations. Karens must build relationships with the peoples and polities around them; they must forge new identities as members of a pluralistic society, and acquire the skills and confidence needed to thrive among other cultures. Until political and legal reforms make this possible, the need for emergency relief, such as protection, food and health care, is obvious - as are the political obstacles that now block this aid.

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NOTES

1. This text uses both the old style translation of Burmese place names, such as *Burma* rather than *Myanmar*, and the new, as in the use of *Yangon* rather than *Rangoon*.
2. BERG's 1998 report on Karen internally displaced persons attempted to quantify and describe international displacement; its 2000 report treats displacement among another Burmese minority group, the Karenni.
3. BERG's recent study of displacement also defines three types of internal displacement: involuntary relocation and consolidation of villages; transient displacement, relocation, landlessness and movement in and out of relocation sites and concealed villages; voluntary migration, temporary or permanent, for work or trade (2000:48).
4. See Renard (1980) and Keyes (1979) for discussions on the anthropological problems of defining Karen ethnicity.

5. Military activity, including relocation programmes, usually increase during the cool months of October-February, coinciding with the rice harvest.
6. To speak of a dominant Karen culture is to commit a broad and loose generalisation. Here, I mean those social and economic practices that Karens describe as unique to traditional Karen rural life.
7. As told to me by a delta Karen in Mae Sot, Thailand, in 1996.
8. Comments by a Karen highlander made in Mae Sot, September 1996.
9. According to *Karen History in the KNU Narrative*: 'The Karens are much more than a national minority. We are a nation with a population of 7 million, having all the essential qualities of a nation. We have our own history, our own language, our own culture, our own land of settlement and our own economic system to live.'
10. The importance of millenarian beliefs should be neither exaggerated nor dismissed; such beliefs are features of a broader religious landscape. For example, one Baptist missionary who participated in the campaign told me that he didn't really expect the world to end, but the year 2000 was a good slogan for evangelical work and was a target date by which to measure the campaign's success.
11. For a description of chiliastic Karen Buddhism, see Stern (1968); for a description of millenarian Buddhism in Burma, see Spiro (1967; 1982:162-86).

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Contents

<i>List of Tables, Maps and Photos</i>	vii
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xii
<i>Foreword</i>	xiii

Introduction and Background	1
<i>Marc Vincent</i>	

Africa

1 Angola: <i>Deslocados</i> in the Province of Huambo	17
<i>Nina M. Birkeland and Alberta Umbo Gomes</i>	
2 Burundi: Developing Strategies for Self-Reliance. A Study of Displacement in Four Provinces	48
<i>Genevieve Boutin and Salvatore Nkurunziza</i>	
3 The Sudan: The Unique Challenges of Displacement in Khartoum	78
<i>Karen Jacobsen, Sue Lautze and Abdal Monim Kheider Osman</i>	
4 Uganda: The Resilience of Tradition. Displaced Acholi in Kitgum	99
<i>Ambrose Olaa</i>	

Asia

5 Afghanistan: Displaced in a Devastated Country	117
<i>Grant Fan</i>	
6 Burma: Displaced Karens. Like Water on the <i>Khu</i> Leaf	138
<i>Chris Cusano</i>	
7 Sri Lanka: Developing New Livelihoods in the Shadow of War. Displaced, Relocated and Resettled Muslims	172
<i>Birgitte Refslund Sorensen</i>	

Latin America

- 8 Colombia: Creating Peace Amid the Violence.
The Church, NGOs and the Displaced 205
Esperanza Hernandez Delgado and Turid Laegreid

Europe

- Georgia: Coping by Organising.
Displaced Georgians from Abkhazia 227
Julia Kharashvili
- 10 Yugoslavia: Displacement from Kosovo.
From Patronage to Self-Help 250
Vladimir Ilic
- 11 Conclusion 266
Birgitte Refslund Sorensen and Marc Vincent
- Contributors* 283
- Bibliography* 285
- Annex 1: Burundi - Matrix of Coping Strategies (Ruyigi)* 301
- Annex 2: Burundi - Conflict and Population Displacements* 302
- Index* 305