



IOM KARENNI PROFILE

The offer of U.S. resettlement in Thailand has gone from camp to camp; as the number of people in one camp interested in resettlement decreases, another camp is opened to resettlement. The resettlement option has now come to Ban Mai Nai Soi camp, which is home to a different group of people than those in the other eight camps. These are the Karenni, and some 10,000 of them have applied for resettlement to date. The first of the Karenni will begin arriving in the United States in late February.

A cultural profile of the Karenni can be found in the Center for Applied Linguistics' *Refugees from Burma: Their Backgrounds and Refugee Experiences* (available at <http://www.cal.org/co/publications/profiles.html>). We would like to add more detail to this profile as we anticipate that this group will offer different resettlement challenges than those of the Karen. Though the names of the two groups are similar, the Karenni have their own customs, languages, and resettlement needs

Ban Mai Nai Soi Camp

Ban Mai Nai Soi camp is located in Mae Hong Son Province, in the far northwest of Thailand, only 1 mile from the Burmese border. Some 94% of the camp population is Karenni (85% Kayah), with minorities of Burman, Bwe, Karen, Manaw, Pa-O, and Shan, among others.

As with most camps in Thailand, Ban Mai Nai Soi is quite isolated—one hour by vehicle, in the dry season, along a rutted road from Mae Hong Son town. The camp covers a large area in a mountainous region, and its population of refugees is around 20,700. The camp is divided into twenty sections and each section has its special characteristics. For example, some sections are populated mostly with people who still wear traditional clothing, others house people who are mostly Roman Catholic, and still others are made up of a particular ethnic group.

The camp is much like other Thai camps described in CAL's cultural profile. It is run by an elected Camp Committee and twenty section leaders, with the support of the Karenni Refugee Committee (KnRC). Various NGOs provide health, educational, food and infrastructure services. There are no Muslims, traditionally the business class, in the camp, so the market for outside goods is minimal.

Refugees are not allowed out of the camp. In the past, this regulation was not strongly enforced, with the result that some of the more educated refugees managed to work outside the camp, earn some money to buy TVs and motorcycles, and get some experience of life beyond the borders of the camp. In recent years, however, the rule against leaving camp has been more strictly

enforced. Except for those few who work for NGOs, there is generally little contact with the outside world. Some people have radios and mobile phones, though phone reception is limited.

Karenni People

The Karenni people call themselves *Kayah Lee* or *Kazah Lee*, meaning Red People. The Burmese call them *Kayin Nee*, a misnomer meaning Red Karen. The English corrupted the Burmese word *Kayin Nee* to come up with *Karenni*, leaving the misnomer in place.

The Karenni are made up of three main sub-groups, each with its own language, customs, and forms of dress.

Kayah: With 16,000 people, the Kayah make up the vast majority of the camp. Traditionally, the Kayah have been easy to distinguish from other groups by the heavy earrings that women wear and the stretched ear lobes that result from this practice. While most women over age 30 have stretched ears, many younger people no longer follow this tradition. Traditional dress also includes heavy cane rings wrapped around the legs. Most of the Kayah in camp, however, dress in ordinary Western clothes. A high percentage of them are still animists; those who have converted to Christianity have done so relatively recently, compared with the Karen. As they are the largest group in the camp, their language (known as the Eastern dialect) is the language most commonly used for communication in the camp.

Kayaw: There are only some 300 Kayaw in the camp. In the past, they could be distinguished by the large plugs placed in their ear lobes; today only some of the older generation wear the ear plugs. Almost all Kayaw are Roman Catholics. They have their own language, and a small percentage of them speak no other language. The rest understand the Eastern dialect of Kayah, and the more educated also speak Burmese.

Kayan: There are around 700 Kayan living in Ban Mai Nai Soi. They are also known as Padaung or “long-necked Karen,” though they are not Karen. Traditionally, the women would wear coils of rings on their necks which gave the effect of a long neck. Many of the women carry on with this custom, partly because they have become a tourist attraction in Thailand and can earn money by posing for photographs. The rings can be taken off, but after many years of wearing them, it is painful for a woman to be without them. Younger girls, however, are able to put them on and take them off without problem. The Kayan have their own language, but they can also speak Eastern Kayah, and those with an education can speak Burmese. Some are Christian and some are animist.

Language

There are two main Karenni languages, Eastern dialect and Western dialect. As noted earlier, Eastern dialect is spoken by the Kayah, and because they are the majority group in the camp, Eastern dialect is the main language of camp communication. Those speaking the Western dialect understand the Eastern dialect.

There is a standard Karenni language, considered the “proper,” formal Karenni, taught in the camp in spoken and written form. The standard language is close to the Eastern dialect, but there

are enough differences between everyday Eastern dialect and the formal standard that those without an education may not understand the standard.

The written language was developed relatively recently, in 1962, and has a unique script. As it is a newly developed written language, most older people cannot read it. Younger people, those 25 and under, who were educated in the camp, can read Karenni. The Karenni Education Department estimates that 90% of the camp can understand and speak Karenni, but only 20%-50% can read it.

Children and youth in school, no matter what their ethnic group is, will be able to understand standard Karenni, since their textbooks and instruction are in that standard, but up to Grade 10 only. After Grade 10, there are no Karenni language books and the texts are written in Burmese. For some schools, the language of instruction after Grade 10 is English.

All the other ethnic groups in the camp speak their own languages. Altogether, there are eleven languages spoken in the camp on a daily basis. Almost all camp residents will be able to communicate in the Eastern Karenni dialect, but not necessarily in standard Karenni. Some will be able to understand Karenni or Burmese but will be too shy to speak it. Many of those who can speak a language may not necessarily be able to read it.

Because of the complicated language situation in the camp, Burmese has been designated as the official language in the camp. Official written communications are in Burmese. Estimates of percentages of camp residents who understand Burmese vary widely, from 50% to 90%. Not all of these who understand Burmese can speak it. Many of those who speak Burmese are also able to read it as they may have studied in Burma. Students in the higher grades in camp will also be able to speak and read in Burmese, but not to a very high level.

A small percentage of the camp population, mostly the elderly, and those from deep in the mountains, are able to speak only their own language, and will be unable to read and write in any language. Many of these have not registered for resettlement as they are afraid of the great challenges they would face in the United States without being able to read and write.

When preparing our own training materials, we were advised to use both Karenni and Burmese languages (with more Burmese than Karenni), since Karenni speakers who were educated in Burma may not be able to read Karenni. We were also advised to emphasize non-written forms of communication, given the widespread lack of literacy.

English is taught as one of the subjects in school but with a methodology emphasizing rote learning, grammar, and translation. As a result few students learn to actually speak the language. While the number of people in camp able to speak English is low, it is expected that most of those who do will want to resettle.

Education

In a camp population of about 20,000, there are more than 6,000 students. The vast majority of students are in primary and middle schools. There are six primary schools, with 3,400 children;

four middle schools (Grades 7 and 8), with 2100 students; and one high school (Grades 9 and 10), with some 700 students.

There are also four schools that offer Grades 11 and 12. Each has from 20 to 50 students and covers a different subject area: teacher training, arts and science, social development, and leadership and management. The medium of instruction in some of the coursework is English. There is also one vocational school providing training in agriculture, charcoal making, motorcycle repair, making charcoal-burning cook stoves, and other skills of use in the camp.

Employment and Skills

As in all camps along the Burma border, there is very little employment. There is a core of somewhat more highly educated refugees who work on the camp committee, as teachers, medics, and interpreters for various NGOs. In the general population, the skills most in evidence are basket weaving, weaving leaves for roofing, making bamboo walls for houses, and making cloth for clothes. There are also some blacksmiths and jewelry makers. Older women like to make the bead necklaces they wear. There are a number of other income-generation programs in the camp, but all of these involve skills that are useful only in the immediate environment.

Religion

About 46% of registered refugees in Ban Mai Nai Soi are animists; 42% are Christians (30% Roman Catholic, 12% Baptist); 9% are Buddhists; and 3% are “mixed.”

Meetings with Focus Groups

To gain a better understanding of the concerns and needs of the camp population, we conducted two focus groups, one with the Karenni Education Department and a Karenni journalist, and one with IOM’s CO interpreters. Below are their comments:

- Education: Among many longtime adult residents, there appears to be low interest in education. In 2001, for example, the camp introduced a literacy campaign called Parents’ Education Program. The program lasted only 3 years for lack of interest. This lack of interest can be seen as a result of many years in a camp where education offers little practical benefit.

Traditionally, parents are not used to being involved in their children’s education. As a result, there is concern among Karenni informants that without parental support, there may be a high drop-out rate among Karenni youth.

- Self-Sufficiency: Camp residents enjoy few opportunities to work, earn money, and support themselves. All basic needs in food, housing, and medicine are provided to the refugees. Our informants expressed concern about the ability of residents to achieve self-sufficiency and independence in the United States.

- Housing: Camp residents are used to living communally and will need to learn American attitudes toward private property. Camp children commonly walk through other people’s gardens and play in others’ yards without permission. Neighbors consider one another relatives, and will enter each other’s homes without knocking. Most residents will not be familiar with US-style landlord-tenant roles.

- **Elderly:** Informants expressed particular concern for the elderly. There is a gap in knowledge and experience between the young and the elderly in all cultures and societies. Among camp residents, the gap appears especially great, and in the United States the gap will only increase. Once young people have their own nuclear families, will they still take care of the elderly, as they traditionally have done?
- **Traditional Culture:** Camp residents worry about their ability to practice their traditional culture in the United States. For example, the Kayah have a yearly festival--the E-lu festival--celebrating the goodness of creation. It requires putting up a pole (see photos) each year or cleaning up the old pole. Celebrants need a certain kind of tree, and they are concerned that they will be unable to find it in the United States. There needs to be a trained shaman to carry out the ceremony, so Karenni newcomers will need to be in a place where there is a shaman.
- **Karenni Differences:** U.S. communities that have resettled Karen may expect the Karenni to be just like the Karen, but in fact the Karenni are quite different. One difference between the two, noted by several informants, is the Karenni reserve. Whereas the Karen tend to be friendly, smiling often and quickly breaking down barriers, the Karenni may appear more aloof. They are not accustomed to saying "Thank you" or saying right away what is on their mind. Caseworkers will need to ask their Karenni clients many times if they have a problem. Informants urged caseworkers to be patient.
- **Resettlement Interest:** There appears to be a self-selection process among Karenni that favors those who are more adaptable: Karenni from extremely remote places with less exposure to modern urban culture may be less likely to apply for resettlement in the United States.