Information provided in this report is based on a USCR field visit to western Thailand in August 1986, interviews with Karen refugees and the Karen Refugee Committee, and materials supplied by the Committee to Coordinate Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand.
Since 1975, Thailand has provided temporary, even semipermanent, asylum to hundreds of thousands of "Indochinese" refugees from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. They have crossed the Mekong River, navigated the Gulf of Thailand risking debauchery by current-day pirates, and have fled both a holocaust and an internationally condemned occupation of their homeland. In doing so, they have properly received substantial media attention and a massive international humanitarian response.

The situation of Karen refugees in Thailand is different. Despite the continuation of the nearly four-decades-old military conflict in Burma that spawned them, their numbers are smaller, their dream of an autonomous state little understood, and their situation generally unknown to the rest of the world. They are Thailand's other refugees.

Background

When one visits the Karen refugees in Thailand today, the characteristics of many of the group's members immediately convey traces of their history. In many cases, their names are unusual for Southeast Asia--George, John, Julia. English is spoken fairly commonly--with a distinctly British flavor. Although most are Buddhists and a few are Muslims, Christianity is also very common, particularly among the leadership. Nationalism is strong--their focus is not on their own problems, but on the struggle back in Burma. They are "well organized" in a Western sense; the Karen Refugee Committee invites you to see a video tape about the Karen national movement before discussing how the
refugees came to be in Thailand.

Burma, a land of some 35 million people, has a most ethnically and culturally diverse population. Although dominated by ethnic Burmans, it also is home to a number of other groups, including Kachins, Chins, Mons, Karenni, Shans, Arakanese, Karens and others. In fact, the Karens, who number over three million in Burma, probably entered the area (including modern day Thailand) before the Burmans did, some 1,000 years ago. Friction between ethnic groups in the area has historically been common.

As Christian missionaries moved into Burma in the late 1800s, they found a receptive audience among the Karens. Perhaps a fifth are now Christian. The Karens aligned themselves with British colonialists to the point of engaging in battle on the side of the British from the early 1800s through World War II. At times, this inflamed their relations with other ethnic groups, particularly the Burmese. Thousands of Karens are thought to have been massacred resisting Burmese/Japanese collusion during World War II. As Burma approached independence in 1948, the Karens, who constitute the country's second largest ethnic group, sought British support for a separate Karen state; but neither the British support nor an acceptable separate state ever materialized.

After Burma became independent in January 1948, Prime Minister U Nu attempted to build a democratic society based on a foundation of Buddhism and socialism. Conflict between the Karens and the new government escalated rapidly, finally breaking out into the Karens' open rebellion against authority in Rangoon. Although the results have varied over time, a general trend is clear: for more than thirty years, the territory inside Burma controlled by the Karen national movement has been diminishing.

In 1954, U Nu did help establish a small Karen state of Kawthoolei in Burma, but its size, resources, and political functions were too limited to be
Location of Karen Refugee Camps in Thailand

THAILAND

* Mae Way Hta
* Htee Moo Hta
* Mae Sam Laeb
* Mae Tay Hta
* Pu Mya Lu
* Thoo Mweh Hta

THAILAND

* Ban Tha Song Yang
* Mae Ta Waw
* Mae Sa Rit
* Show Klo
* Kler Kho

BURMA

Maw Bo Kay
Shwe Gun
Htee Ger Nee
Paing Kyone

THAI RIVER

Mar Ra Mat
Noh Pa Doh

Kaw Moo Ra
Pa Loo

Naung Lone
Myawaddy
Mae Sot

Moulmein

* Towns, Settlements  ★ Refugee Camps
Adapted from the Karen Refugee Committee 1956
acceptable to the Karen leadership. In particular because the central
government in Rangoon retained approval of all Kawthoolei officials and
controlled all revenues, the Karens viewed the move as inadequate to support
and preserve their nationhood as a people.

After years of economic stagnation and unrest, particularly in minority
nationality (including Karen) areas, U Nu was overthrown by General Ne Win in
1962. In 1966, a Karen political leader and general named Bo Mya established
what has now become the Karen National Liberation Army in the eastern hills of
Burma. By 1976, all Karen resistance forces had been consolidated under Bo
Mya and the KNLA, now the military arm of the Karen National Union (KNU).

While some will view the Karen struggle as an insurrection, the Karen
leadership view their situation as that of a separate nation, never having
agreed to incorporation into the modern nation state of Burma in 1948. With
their army, their government (with Bo Mya as president), and people, they feel
they are resisting an invasion from Burma and the abuses that this invading
army perpetrates against Karen civilians. Though there are differing
perspectives among Karens, they generally agree that their resistance is
intended to permit them to set up an independent republic, or to be
incorporated into Burma on their own terms, as a self-governing, autonomous
territory. They look to a negotiated political settlement rather than a
military victory as their goal. In pursuit of this hoped for state of
Kawthoolei, as they envision it, they have joined eight other minority ethnic
groups, who are also resisting the authority of the Rangoon government and
seeking a degree of autonomy, in a National Democratic Front (NDF). By some
estimates, the NDF member groups "represent" up to 20 percent of Burma's
population.
Refugees in Thailand

Almost four decades of fighting inside Burma seldom forced Karen noncombatants to seek refuge in Thailand for other than brief periods; they usually returned to Burma when fighting subsided. Thailand, concerned over maintaining good relations with the government in Rangoon, hoped the situation would remain that way. However, the Burmese government had wished for years to disrupt black market and other trading relations conducted outside of their control between Thailand and Burma--trade which constituted the major source of revenue for the Karen political and military structure. In early 1984, the Burmese military struck Karen trading centers and tried to establish their authority along the Salween and Moei rivers which make up the border between Burma and Thailand. This fighting triggered a refugee influx that has continued to the present because of persistent Burmese military pressure. The refugee population has grown steadily to over 18,000, primarily farming people from the nearby border areas of Burma, supplemented by an intelligentsia gathered from throughout Karen areas and Rangoon.

The Karen leadership, in discussing the motivations for refugee flight to Thailand, cite the military conflict, but they make special reference to persecution of Karen civilians by the Burmese government and military. They report that because of age-old hostilities, as well as actual or perceived support by Karen civilians of "the Karen revolution," the Burmese soldiers kill and destroy the property of Karen civilians and place many into forced labor to support the Burmese military effort.

There is not a great deal of documentation of these charges by other than the Karens themselves. Two outside sources do exist, however. One source is a November 1985 report by Michel Pitron based on his August 1985 visit to Karen territories inside Burma, as well as interviews of refugees in
These Karen children need a future to look forward to--better than the limited existence of a refugee camp.

There is no road leading to the Wan Kha refugee settlement. Supplies are carried in by hand.

Photos in this report by Roger Winter/U.S. Committee for Refugees
Thailand. Pitron concludes that "the Karens are persecuted in Burma simply because of their nationality, which is indicated on their identity cards.... The teaching of their language and history is prohibited. They have difficulties obtaining jobs, as well as promotions or attaining positions involving responsibility.... Many Karens are sent to jail without a trial or are tortured for having tried to express or spread their ideas. Marriages between Karens and other ethnic groups are openly encouraged." The report also contains numerous "personal testimonies" that recount incidences of persecution. Additional similar material has been prepared by Harold E. Klein based on interviews with refugees during the summer of 1986. The U.S. Committee for Refugees is not directly in a position to confirm or deny these reports. However, it is the case, that refugees we interviewed in Thailand reported, in general terms, that such forms of persecution exist inside Burma.

The attached map, based on one supplied by the Karen Refugee Committee, shows the location of the dozen refugee settlements spread for approximately 150 kilometers along the border in Thailand north of Mae Sot. The largest settlement is Show Klo, with some 6,500 residents.

Karen refugees have been received rather well in Thailand, in part because there is a substantial ethnic Karen population of Thai nationality there. However, the Royal Thai Government does not formally recognize the Karens from Burma as refugees. In addition, the Thai have not allowed the UN High Commissioner for Refugees or the International Committee of the Red Cross to fulfill their normal roles on the behalf of the refugees; nor do they allow external aid other than to meet "essential needs." Nothing of a developmental nature that might encourage the refugees to stay in Thailand or draw others, or that would antagonize the authorities in Rangoon, is permitted. The Karens manage their own assistance affairs, as much as possible, and rely on private voluntary agencies to meet many of their assistance and medical needs.
Voluntary agency assistance is coordinated through the Committee to Coordinate Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand (CCSDPT), which has had a subcommittee on Karen refugees since April 1984. The bulk of the medical needs of the refugees are met by French agencies, including Médecins Sans Frontières and Médecins Du Monde. Operation Handicap operates a prosthetics workshop at Mae Sot for amputees and other handicapped refugees.

Food supplies, mostly rice, fish-paste, salt, and garlic, are provided—though not in abundance—by a variety of voluntary agencies from the United States, Thailand, the Netherlands, and Germany. The U.S.-connected agencies include World Vision, the Presiding Bishop's Fund, the Adventist Development and Relief Agency, and others. Food supplies are tight, and in some categories—such as supplemental food for the undernourished—inadequate. Donated supplies are stretched by use of leaves, fruits, and vegetables gathered from the forest. The refugees are generally not allowed to garden, and they have no access to land for that purpose. Educational programs conducted by Karen teachers for refugee children at Wan Kha were observed to be disciplined, animated, and operating at a high academic level, in English, Karen, and Burmese.

The spirit in the camps is a strange mix of hopefulness with vibrations of a fading dream. Although life in these refugee settlements—as in all others—is not desirable, it could be much worse. The settlements are neither fenced in nor tightly controlled by the Thai military or paramilitary authorities. Yet, the preoccupation of most Karen refugees is not with their own circumstances, but rather with events on the other side of the border. Battlefield reports and other news from home are eagerly consumed by the refugees, even compiled into a monthly magazine by the KNU for external consumption.
These boys are receiving instruction from the monks at this Buddhist temple at Wan Kha.

The typical home in the Karen refugee settlements is made of readily available local materials.
Prospects

In a political sense, the Karen refugees in Thailand are a very small side show. The real story is inside Burma, where KRC officials estimate that the government controls half of the Karen population, and KNU, the other. But, as the land controlled by the KNU contracts, causing food production to do likewise; as the KNU suffers the loss of revenues from Burmese military activity; and as KNLA military capacity dwindles (as it has over the last ten years), the refugees could be a harbinger. In the immediate area south of Mae Sot, people talked of areas within site, just on the other side of the border, where Burmese/Karen fighting was anticipated, come the 1986-87 dry season. If the KNLA loses, there is a potential for additional refugee flight to Thailand.

The Karens represent a significant political problem for Thai authorities, even without a change in the refugee situation. In late October 1986, the commerce minister in the two-month-old coalition government of Thailand was forced to resign for permitting the illegal import of logs allegedly felled by Karen rebels in Burma. The development threatened to undermine the Thai policy of never appearing to support—even surreptitiously—the Karen national movement inside Burma.

Should there be substantial additional movement of Karen refugees into Thailand, it is possible—even likely—that Thai government attitudes toward them will harden. Beset on virtually every border with refugee influxes, and with genuine security threats on several, the Thai can be expected to look with disfavor on major growth in the population of Karen refugees. In the case of Indochinese refugees, Thailand has consistently preconditioned the availability of first asylum on a commitment by other governments to resettle refugees who are unable or unwilling to return home. Unlike the Indochinese, however, major traditional resettlement countries, such as the United States and France, have not had an historical involvement with the Karen, making
substantial third-country resettlement most unlikely, should this option be raised by Thailand. In the short run, third-country resettlement is neither needed nor desirable, nor is it sought by the Karen.

What is desirable from a refugee protection and support perspective, however, is for the Royal Thai Government to invite UNHCR and the ICRC to carry out their internationally accepted roles with respect to protection and assistance of Karen refugees. There is no question the Karen refugees in Thailand fall within the High Commissioner's mandate, despite official Thai reluctance in this regard. It is important this role be established now, rather than in the aftermath of some future refugee tragedy.

Even more desirable, but not likely in the near future, is for the Burmese authorities and Burma's historically and tenaciously independent minorities to resolve their persistent disputes, to achieve a form of government with which responsible elements of all the ethnic groups can identify. A political rapprochement is needed to achieve the peace and, as a byproduct, to avoid what could otherwise become a very substantial refugee tragedy.

UN and private human rights organizations, as well as the media, have an important role to play in this drama. Further investigation and documentation of reports of persecution of Karens inside Burma will help determine what kind of diplomatic leverage the international community should bring to bear on this interminable conflict. Avoiding a future refugee emergency in Thailand involving Karens should be a matter of special international humanitarian concern.