



October 29, 2017

The Right of *Safe Return*

As Burma's Civil Wars Drag On, Displaced Karen Villagers Face Cuts in Humanitarian Assistance

As the Karen Community of Canada (KCC), an organization representing ethnic Karen refugees from Burma/Myanmar, we have watched with horror as over 600,000 Rohingya refugees have fled Burmese military atrocities over the past two months. We express our deep concern for victims of this violence, including about 30,000 ethnic Rakhine who were also forced to flee. This is indeed a crisis of epic proportions.

For Karen people, Burmese military violence is all too familiar. As the Karen National Union (KNU) expressed in a statement on October 15, Burmese military actions against the Rohingya remind us of decades of similar atrocities against Karen civilians: rape, torture, extrajudicial killing, forced relocations, and shoot-on-sight policies that led to over 150,000 Karen becoming refugees, with another 200,000 internally-displaced persons (IDPs) within Burma. Thousands of our people died.

Thus, the Rohingya crisis is not an isolated situation, but part of an ongoing pattern of military violence in Burma. In June 2017, Amnesty International issued a report alleging war crimes including extrajudicial killings and torture of villagers in Shan and Kachin States. The Burmese military has never changed – it is the same corrupt and violent institution of oppression it has always been.

In Karen State, despite signing a ceasefire in 2012, Burmese military occupation of villagers' homes and lands continues, preventing any possibility of safe return for tens of thousands of Karen refugees and IDPs. In Mutraw District alone, Burmese military outposts have increased from 65 to at least 81 since the beginning of the ceasefire. Local villagers live in constant fear of return to armed conflict. Indeed, sporadic fighting continues near the Salween River, where Burmese government forces launched offensives in 2014 and 2016 that displaced over 2,000 and 5,000 villagers, respectively.

Meanwhile, humanitarian support for the remaining 100,000 Karen, Karenni, and Shan refugees in Thailand, as well as thousands of IDPs along the Thai-Burma border, continues to decline. At Ei Tu Hta IDP camp, international assistance provided by The Border Consortium (TBC) to over 2,000 residents stopped in September 2017, and food stores there will run out in November. Assistance has also been cut to about 6,000 displaced Shan. Changing international perceptions of Burma as a reforming country are putting increased pressure on refugees to return home before it is safe for them to do so.

Article 33 of the UN *Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees* stipulates that refugees must not be forced to return to situations from which they have fled, and where they are still in danger. Ongoing Burmese military occupation of Karen villagers' homes and lands, combined with the military's actions in Rakhine, Shan, and Kachin States, should make it obvious why most Karen refugees do not yet feel safe to return.

Therefore, we call on the international community, including Canada, to continue providing humanitarian support to vulnerable refugee and IDP populations on the Thai-Burma border. In addition, we urge international actors to apply much greater pressure on the Burmese military and government to respect the political rights, civil rights, and citizenship rights of all ethnic nationalities of Burma instead of using violent military campaigns and intimidation. Only when basic human rights principles are honoured, and the Burmese military has withdrawn from areas near villagers' homes and farms, only then can refugees safely return home.

Recommendations to the Canadian government to promote peace and uphold internationally-recognized rights of vulnerable refugee and IDP populations in Burma:

- 1. Continue supporting ethnic civil society in Burma.** Ethnic civil society is best positioned to service vulnerable displaced communities. We gratefully acknowledge the Canadian government's ongoing support of Inter Pares, which in turn supports numerous ethnic civil society organizations providing humanitarian and development assistance to displaced and conflict-affected communities.
- 2. Insist on demilitarization BEFORE refugee repatriation.** We call on Canada to use diplomatic channels to support continued relief to refugees and IDPs until a safe and voluntary return can be guaranteed, and to put pressure on Thailand and Burma to uphold the rights of refugees to safe and voluntary return.
- 3. Avoid investing in resource development or infrastructure projects in Burma, until stable peace is achieved.** We remind Canada that many resource extraction projects in Burma are in fragile ceasefire zones and are directly controlled by the Burmese military or other armed groups, intensifying conflict and human rights violations. We urge Canada not to join or support this conflict economy.
- 4. Maintain sanctions on military leaders and military-connected companies in Burma.** We urge the Canadian government to retain key sanctions in the Special Economic Measures (Burma) Regulations, and to consider more comprehensive economic sanctions against the Burmese military and military-affiliated companies such as UMEHL and MEC. Engaging with these companies and sectors of Burma's economy will only further enrich the generals who continue to terrorize ethnic communities and hinder true democratic change.
- 5. Support international action against Burma's military.** Burma's military is guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity in their violent campaigns against Karen, Kachin, Shan, Rohingya, and other ethnic peoples. Yet Burma's generals have never been held to account for their crimes. We ask Canada to use diplomatic channels to isolate Burma's military internationally, lobby for implementation of a UN-sponsored arms embargo, and demand prosecution of Burma's war criminals at the International Criminal Court.

The Karen Community of Canada (KCC), founded in 1998, is an umbrella organization that represents Karen people across Canada. It promotes Karen culture, human rights and democracy.

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