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Displaced Karen Celebrate International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples along with their Local Solutions and Actions Contributing to Global Conservation Targets and Peace building in Burma/Myanmar

On August 9th (the 11th anniversary of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), the war-displaced Karen communities and their allied civil society organizations gather in Ei Tu Hta IDP Camp, Mutraw District, to celebrate the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples.

Generation after generation, indigenous Karen communities sustainably coexisted with the lands, waters, and forests around them. They have also suffered from decades of armed conflict, displacement by large-scale hydropower projects, and the destruction of their ancestral forests by illicit extractive and trafficking activities. Today, our indigenous Karen communities demand that the Burmese government honor the global consensus on the rights of indigenous peoples and a universal framework of minimum standards for their survival, dignity and well-being.

On this day for Indigenous Peoples, displaced Karen communities come together to celebrate their traditional ways of life, culture, and knowledge, which have kept their ancestral lands' biodiversity thriving. The August 9th event will present a new Karen language report "Studying Orchids, Enriching Lives." An all-women research team of indigenous Karen community members worked for more than four years to document the existence of endangered orchid species for the very first time in the Kheshorter and ThawthiPwawghaw Community Forests in Southeast Burma. The research team documented 121 species of wild orchids, some of which are threatened, rare and unknown species. Their findings demonstrate the valuable contribution that indigenous knowledge plays in the conservation of nature and biodiversity, and the key role that Karen women play as stewards of this knowledge. This event will include panel discussions, cultural and drama performances, a photo exhibition and a documentary screening.

These Karen community-led efforts are part of the Salween Peace Park (SPP), an initiative founded upon the principles of indigenous community-led conservation. Such areas are often referred to as "Indigenous Peoples' and Communities' Conserved Territories and Areas" (ICCAs). The SPP covers a 5,400 km² area, including Karen ancestral territories, wildlife sanctuaries, forest reserves, sacred sites, and community forests. Establishing the SPP involves the mapping and securing of customary land and natural resources rights, strengthening the voices and resilience of the displaced communities during the fragile peace process, and the promotion of cultural and environmental education.

The SPP works towards achieving "inclusive conservation" and cultural preservation, while building peace through recognition of indigenous Karen people's rights to self-determination over their ancestral territories in Mutraw District of Kawthoolei, Southeast Burma. The SPP is part of a broader international movement that advocates for state governments' inclusion of ICCAs as a protected area classification along with specific legal frameworks. This would support the legitimate ICCA custodian's authority to sustain biodiversity and environment-friendly livelihoods, as well as to prevent and respond to threats.

In this global climate crisis, it is imperative to protect the planet's biodiversity and natural environment – indigenous peoples play a key role in this collective effort to mitigate climate change. Indigenous peoples' conserved areas like the Salween Peace Park and other community-led conservation initiatives in Tanintharyi

Region are helping to achieve conservation targets set in the Burmese government's National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan.

Through celebrating Karen indigenous culture and knowledge on the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples,

- We encourage the Burmese government to embrace this bold bottom-up community-led conservation approach. In particular, we urge the government to reorientate the “Ridge to Reef Project” in the Tanintharyi Region to this approach. The Ridge to Reef is a 1.4 million hectare (3,459,475 acres) conservation project which, if implemented, would overlap with huge tracts of land and territories that are traditionally held and managed by indigenous and local communities in Tanintharyi Region.
- We call for the Burmese government to respect and honour indigenous Karen peoples' rights, enshrined in the UNDRIP, and to work towards mutual benefit by recognizing indigenous Karen people's governance and management rights over their ancestral territories and their efforts to protect Burma's environment and biodiversity.
- We call for recognition and support for indigenous women's' participation in conservation governance which will allow them to meaningfully contribute their unique knowledge and approach.
- We call on the international community to maintain their support for IDP communities and refugees, whose safe return to their homelands is not possible during the current political situation.

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