



The Karen Women's Organization Calls for Solidarity and Durable Solutions on World Refugee Day

20 June 2020 – Today on World Refugee Day, the Karen Women's Organization (KWO) calls for sustainable solutions that uphold the dignity of refugees living along the Thai-Burma border. Refugees have been fleeing persecution for over 30-years. There are over 90 000 refugees on the border who have been resilient in their struggle, despite the many hardships they face. KWO condemns the human rights violations which continue systematically in Karen State and other ethnic areas in Burma.

In line with UNHCR's international standards, three durable solutions are proposed for refugees: resettlement, repatriation and integration into host communities. With resettlement halted, repatriation to Burma has been a viable option for some, although a slow-moving process with just over 1000 refugees officially and voluntarily going back to Burma over the last three years. The low numbers and interest in repatriation speak to the majority preferring the safety and security of the refugee camps over, the uncertainty and danger that awaits them in Karen State. Now is the time to look to the integration of refugees into host communities, in our case, in Thailand. It is the only remaining option.

KWO appreciates the generosity by the Royal Thai Government for allowing refugees to reside safely on the Thai side of the border. In many countries of the world, refugees have been resettled and contribute to the host country's economic development. Upholding and maintaining the dignity of refugees is possible if we are given an opportunity to be independent and self-sufficient. Refugees want to be able to work legally to have income for our families. Looking to the future, the skills refugees possess are beneficial to the development of Thailand. We are hopeful that refugees, if allowed to work legally outside of the camps, will contribute to the country and be able to support our families.

KWO General Secretary, Naw K'nyaw Paw says, "Thailand granted work permits to millions of migrant workers allowing them to work legally, refugees living along the border could and should be granted the same opportunity. This effort requires the will of the Thai government to open their hearts even further and show compassion for our human and refugee rights and ability to live with dignity."

Funding cuts to refugee services on the Thai-Burma border began in 2012 and have continued each year. The reductions have put additional strain on our community. We are

resilient in our struggle and our community-based organizations are working tirelessly to fill gaps in services. Concerns and fears of COVID-19 only exposed the fragility of the refugee situation here. Stay-at-home measures and social distancing recommendations were not applicable to those of us forced to live in crowded, confined spaces. The additional restrictions on our movement, food and livelihood showed how desperately funding is needed to uphold the dignity of refugees.

KWO calls on donors, UN agencies and INGOs to advocate for the Thai government to make integration a durable solution for refugees living along the Thai-Burma border. KWO also calls for aid to be reallocated to the border, especially if a durable solution is not found. We are human beings. We deserve the opportunity to live without fear and discrimination.

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