

# Myanmar

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## Profile of Myanmar

### Burma or (Union of) Myanmar?

Behind the latter lies more than 16 years of unlawful ruling by the brutal military regime of SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council) and its successor, SPDC (State Peace

and Development Council).

We will mostly use Myanmar or Burma/Myanmar appellations, not because we endorse the cause of the junta. On the contrary, we condemn it and we know that burying the harsh reality behind a name is of no use, and the fight for democracy is way beyond naming.

We also know that the plight of the people do not change whether you call them Burmese or People of the Union of Myanmar.



The fact is at present they live in Myanmar, i.e. a country rigged of democratic powers, where people have no freedom of expression and the opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, has spent most of her life under house arrest since winning the elections of 1990.

As a result of the oppressive regime, many 'Western' nations imposed economic sanctions and a trade embargo that sent the country further into isolation and stagnation. In 2006, the ruling generals were still drawing a ghost constitution promising to put a civil face on military rule. The reality is that its implication would most probably not have any positive repercussion in the daily life of Burmese. However, even an ounce of change would have been welcome.

In late September 2007, Buddhist monks conducted peaceful demonstrations in Yangon to protest against the degradation of their living conditions. These soon gathered momentum among civilians, and demonstrations spread. The ruling generals responded with brutality and troops cracked down on protesters.

With media censure, it was difficult to assess the number of fatalities and the whereabouts of those "taken away in trucks" but reports and images that were leaked to the world spoke of the sheer contempt of a ruling regime for its people.

In early October 2007, the UN finally sent an envoy, Ibrahim Gambari, to initiate talks with the junta, stop the violence as well as foster a renewed dialogue between the ruling generals and the opposition movement leader, San Suu Kyi.

It was hoped that the courage of the men in orange robe would finally trigger concrete change in a country in dire need of human rights and economic development but this has not yet materialized.

## A Country in Crisis

An article by Seth Mydans from the International Herald Tribune dated October 10, 2006 quoted a recent United Nations report to sum up Burma/Myanmar's perilous situation: "[...] 1,147 political prisoners were being held, that 240 villages of minorities had been destroyed in the past four years, that AIDS cases and drug trafficking were widespread and that United Nations agencies were assisting 140,000 refugees along the border with Thailand".



The truth is that despite its wealth of natural resources and being one of the largest nations in South East Asia, Burma/Myanmar is one of the poorest countries in the world with an estimated population of 50.51 million people <sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: UNDESA, 2005. Please note that this figure varies according to sources from an estimated 47 to 52 million people. In terms of demographics, it is impossible to provide accurate figures as no reliable census has been conducted since the 1930s.

It is also the second largest producer of illicit opium in the world and nowadays a major purveyor of methamphetamines.

Another threat to the present and future of the Burmese people is the spread of H.I.V. in Myanmar. The military regime denies that the H.I.V./AIDS problem is as bad as portrayed by the international organisations. However, under pressure, it set up a surveillance system in 1985 and implemented a series of measures to control and prevent the spread of the virus through the NAC (National Aids Committee: a body drawn from governmental agencies and NGOs) since 1989.

It was high time as the UNAIDS Global Aids Report 2006 shows an estimated 360,000 HIV cases (Adults and children) and an estimated 37,000 deaths due to AIDS in Myanmar. Prevention efforts are still too scarce and the authorities' spending on health and education are shockingly low, leaving the Burmese population at risk.

Burma is a country where human rights abuses are rife and the authorities notorious for recruiting child soldiers and using slave labour.

As for religious practice, the authorities have promoted Theravada Buddhism and discriminated against other religions since taking power.

As a result, there are palpable tensions between the Buddhist majority and Christian and Muslim minorities.

In terms of ethnic minorities, Burma/Myanmar is one of the most diverse country in the world<sup>2</sup>. It has also been the theatre of violence between the authorities and minorities as the junta views some ethnic groups' claim for autonomy as a threat to its rule.

As a result, more than 151,000 refugees have amassed in refugee camps along the Thai-Burmese border<sup>3</sup>. 62% of these refugees are of Karen origins and 13% Karenni (Karenni nation includes Kayah, Kayan, Kayaw and Paku), etc.

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2 The authorities recognize 135 distinct ethnic groups, which it groups into eight "major national ethnic race[s]". Some groups such as the Chinese, Indian, and Rohingya, etc. are left unrecognised.

3 Source: Crisis Group. 2006 Figures.

# Ethnic Groups in Myanmar (Burma)

## Ethnic Tensions and Persecution



Since Burma became independent from British rule in 1948, it has been the theatre of ethnic wars and fighting between the central authority and ethnic minorities.

These can partly be explained by the fact that most ethnic groups joined the Union of Burma in 1947 with a guarantee of autonomy and self-ruling as outlined in the Panglong Agreement <sup>4</sup>.

This agreement specifically defined the Shan and Karenni's right for secession from the Union in the 10 years following independence. However, this promise was never fully realised. Shortly after the independence, internal conflicts resumed as some ethnic minorities took arms to demand further autonomy and a say in the affairs of the country.

Since taking power, the junta has compelled most armed ethnic opposition groups into uneasy cease-fires while assaulting other groups.

In 1991, south western Myanmar was the theatre of persecution and reprisal against

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<sup>4</sup> Today's Myanmar is divided in seven states (Chin State, Kachin State, Kayin State, Kayah State, Mon State, Rakhine State and Shan State) and seven divisions (divisions are predominantly Bamar: Ayeyarwady Division, Bago Division, Magway Division, Mandalay Division, Sagaing Division, Tanintharyi Division and Yangon Division).

Please note that the names of the states are often arbitrary. For instance, the Kayah State is actually home to the Karenni nation not only to Kayah people. Some other minorities' group, such as the Palaung, have no state.

Muslim Rohingyas, which led to a wave of up to one-fourth of a million refugees fleeing to Bangladesh.

The SLORC, and its successor SPDC, is also infamously renowned for crushing the Karen ethnic minority –among others, and provoking mass influxes of refugees into the neighbouring countries of China and Thailand.

As a result, the Burma-Thai border is dotted with refugee camps, where the living conditions are difficult.

It is tricky to get an objective view of the ethnic components of Myanmar's population. The SDPC and its predecessor seems to exaggerate the Burman component of the population, also called *Bamar*, so that it totals approximately 68% of the country's population (i.e. ~ 32 million people).

The remaining ethnic groups would then account for an estimated 14 to 18 million people (depending on which statistics the count is based on!). However, some suggest that many non-Bamar people took on Bamar names to avoid discrimination and also that the authorities would list anyone Buddhist as a Bamar.

Therefore, the reality is most likely that Bamar people represent no more than half the population of Myanmar, whereas the remaining half is made up of minority ethnic groups.

The minority groups mainly inhabit the rural areas and mountainous region along the Thai-Burmese border, and make up the bulk of ISPs (Internally Displaced Persons: estimated at 600,000 by the UNHCR in 2005).

## Beyond the Ethnic “Races”, a Myriad of Groups

The military junta recognizes 135 ethnic groups. However, the actual number of minorities seems to be much lower <sup>5</sup>.

Some groups, such as the Rohingya, Chinese and Indian minorities, are discriminated upon and being denied rights.

The authorities classify the 135 different ethnic groups into eight “major national ethnic

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5 The 'official' ethnic minorities as presented by the authorities in Myanmar are listed below in alphabetical order. Please note that this list is not accurate in many aspects. For instance, the “Karenni” group actually encompasses the subgroups of Kayah, Kayaw, Kayah and Paku.

- Anu, Anun, Asho (Plain), Atsi, Awa Khami
- Bamar (Burman), Beik, Bre (Ka-Yaw), Bwe
- Chin
- Dai (Yindu), Daingnet, Dalaung, Danaw (or Danau), Danu, Dawei, Dim, Duleng
- Eik-swair, Eng
- Ganan, Gheko, Guari, Gunte (or Lyente), Gwete
- Haulngo, Hkahku, Hkun (or Khün), Hpon
- Intha
- Kachin (or Jinghpaw, Jingpo), Kadu (Kado), KaLin-Kaw (or Lushay), Kamein, Kaung Saing Chin, Kaungso, Kaw (Akha- E-Kaw), Kayah (or Karenni), Kayin (or Karen), Ka- Yun (or Kayan, Padaung), Kebar, Khami Khamti Shan, Khmu (Khamu), Khawno, Kokang (or Kokant), Kwangli (or Sim), Kwelshin, Kwe Myi, Kwi
- Lahu, Lai (or Haka Shin), Laizao, Lashi (or La Chit) Lawhtu, Laymyo, Lhinbu, Lisu, Lushei (Lushay)
- Magun, Maingtha, Malin, Manu Manaw, Man Zi, Maramagyi, Maru (or Lawgore), Matu, Maw Shan, Meithei (Kathe), Mgan, Mi-er, Miram (or Mara), Moken (or Salon), Mon, Monnepwa, Monpwa, Mon Kayin (or Sarpyu), Mro
- Naga, Ngorn
- Oo-Pu
- Paku, Palaung, Pale, Pa-Le-Chi, Panun, Pa-O, Pyin
- Rakhine (or Arakanese), Rawang, Rongtu
- Saing Zan, Saline, Sentang, Sgaw, Shan, Shan Gale, Shan Gyi, Shu (or Pwo), Son
- Tai-Loi, Tai-Lem, Tai-Lon, Tai-Lay, Taishon, Ta-Lay-Pwa, Tangkul, Tapong, Taron, Taungyo, Tay- Zan, Thado, Thet, Tiddim (Hai-Dim), Torr (or Tawr)
- Wa (or Va), Wakim (or Mro)
- Yabein, Yao, Yaw, Yin Baw, Yin Kya, Yin Net, Yin Talai, Yun (or Lao)
- Za-How, Zahnyet (or Zanniet), Zayein, Zizan, Zo, Zo-Pe and Zotung

race[s]”.

- Kachin
- Kayah (also known, not quite rightly, as Karenni)
- Kayin (also known as Karen) represent 7% of the total population
- Chin
- Mon
- Bamar (i.e. Burman)
- Rakhine (also known as Arakhanese), 4% of the population
- Shan, 9% of the total population

### **A wealth of minorities and languages!**

An estimated 78% of the population speak Tibeto-Burman languages, 9.6% Daic languages, 6.7% Austro-Asiatic languages and less than 1% Hmong-Mien languages.

A total of 109 languages are listed in Myanmar, one of them (Pali) being extinct. It is a true linguistic mosaic!

There are fifteen major ethnic groups in Burma/Myanmar, many of which are divided into further sub-groups.

Karen and Shan groups form the biggest ethnic minorities.



The Akha, Chin, Chinese, Danu, Indian, Kachin, Karenni, Kokang, Lahu, Mon, Naga, Palaung, Pao (ethnolinguistically related to the Karen), Rakhine, Rohingya, Tavoyan and Wa (700,000 individuals in Myanmar) peoples make up each less than 5% of the total population.

We will not explore all the minorities but only a few of them at present.

## **The Rohingya**

### **Introduction**

The Rohingya are based in the northern Rakhine State, formerly known as Arakan, in Western Burma, along the border with Bangladesh and the Bay of Bengal.

The Rohingya are mostly concentrated in the plains of Naaf, May and Kaladan.

Their origins and the timing of their arrival in Burma are subject to much discussing, and indirectly to their present struggle.

According to the Rohingya, the first Muslim settlers arrived in Western Burma as early as the eighth century AD. They trace their ancestry back to Arab sea-farers and in the later centuries to Moors, Pathans, Moghuls, Bengali traders and to some extent Indo-Mongols; i.e. they are the true native of Arakan.

However, other historians and sections of the Burmese authorities argued that in fact, the Rohingya originated from Bangladesh and only migrated en masse to Burma during the

British rule in the nineteenth century.

This uncertainty resulted in the Rohingya not being included as an indigenous group under the Burmese constitution, hence not being granted citizenship.



It also seems that the status of Burma as a province of the British Indian Empire and the flows of migration from Bengal during British rule (1886-1942) led to increasing resentment from Burmese nationalists and subsequently no distinction being made between Indians or Muslims in general and the indigenous Muslims of then Arakan<sup>6</sup>.

## **Rohingya Language**

The Rohingya language is part of the Indo-European family of languages.

It is linguistically related to Chittagonian, the dialect of the southern region of Chittagong in Bangladesh. It is also related to Bengla, spoken in Bangladesh and India.

The influence of Urdu, Farsi, Hindi, Arabic, and to a lesser extent Burmese and English is also strong.

The Rohingya used to be written in Arabic scriptures. However, a modern writing system called *Rohingylish* – a combination of the words Rohingya and English- has been developed and uses Roman script instead.

## **Farmers and Traders**

The Rohingya traditionally live on agriculture, but some of them are also engaged in

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<sup>6</sup> After three successive Anglo-Burmese wars over a period of 60 years, the British completed the annexation of Burma in 1886, and Burma became immediately assimilated to British India.

fishing, trade and business and crafts.

As a result of segregation, the Rohingya have no right to own land or property and have been victims of land confiscation, house destruction and forced eviction. They are still forced into labour on roads and military camps.

Due to their precarious social and political situation, many live below the poverty line and face starvation.

## **Rohingya Religion**

Most of the Rohingya are followers of Islam.

Many Rohingyas elders grow beards and women wear the hijab. Each area and village has a mosque and Madrassah. The men congregate for praying at the mosque, whereas the women pray at home.

In a country where Theravada Buddhism is the norm and freedom of expression is an exception; Islam is not an easy religious choice. Throughout the twentieth century, and particularly since 1962, the Rohingya have been subjected to persecution and pressure into renouncing their religion.

The Rohingya, and Muslims in general, are told to discard Islamic names and adopt Burman ones. Hundreds of mosques have been demolished and people live in fear for their faith and ethnic background.

## **The Rohingya: the Forgotten People of Burma/Myanmar**

### **From Independence to the Early 1980s**

General Ne Win's military coup and the imposition of the "Burmese Way to Socialism" provoked the second major exodus of Muslims (the first one was after the Second World War when Burma gained independence from British rule).

The Arakan is originally home to both the Buddhist Rakhinese and Rohingya. Under the 1974 constitution, the central authorities recognized the ethnic Rakhine people as the real indigenous people of Arakan, and the state was granted the official name of Rakhine State.

Many Muslims felt it was the beginning of a long-term policy to erase their culture and exclude their people from Arakan. Unfortunately, they were proven right.

The third mass exodus of Rohingya occurred in 1978 as a result of a heavy-handed 'census operation', known as *Nagarnin* (i.e. Dragon King), in north Rakhine state where rape, murder and destruction of Muslim cults, drove more than 200,000 Muslims to seek refuge beyond the border into Bangladesh.

The Ne Win government spread false information about the "wild Muslim extremists" and distorted the nature of the emigration as that of "illegal Bengali immigrants" to receive acceptance from the population.

Following international pressure, many Rohingya were allowed to return. However, their 'return to grace' was short-lived.

The 1982 Citizenship Law further discriminated against the ethnic Rohingya Muslims- and Muslims in general- rendering them stateless and effectively forcing them to become second-class inhabitants.

Under the terms of this law, three categories of citizens replaced the previous one: "National", "Associate" and "Naturalised". Since then, only "National" ethnic groups, i.e. those recognized by the junta, have benefited from full citizenship.

A Muslim saying popular in the 1980s sums up their plea: "If the Burmese army sees a Muslim in the village he is an alien; if he is fishing on the river he is a smuggler; and if he is working in the forest he is an insurgent."

### **From 1988 to Now**

After Ne Win's long repressive rule, the current military regime, the SPDC, seized power in 1988. Under international pressure and internal demand, the regime briefly relaxed its iron fist and allowed political parties to form and even announced a general election in 1990.

It is around that time that not only the National League for Democracy (NLD) but also many other ethnic and local organisations emerged. For instance, in the Rakhine State, the National Democratic Party for Human Rights (NDPHR) was formed to stand for the Rohingya Muslim community interests and in a broader context supported the NLD.

In the general election of 1990, the NLD earned massive support from all ethnic backgrounds and the NDPHR won four seats. Instead of accepting the results of these elections, the regime tightened its repressive rule.

The Phi Thaya Operation of 1991-92 caused another major exodus of up to 268,000 Rohingyas into Bangladesh. On March 18, 1992, the SLORC banned the NDPHR, through its arbitrary order 8/92.

The junta has since been accused of practical de-Islamisation through its brutal and discriminatory methods by turning the Muslim north Rakhine State into a Bamar Buddhist region and also instating the cultural assimilation of Muslims living in other parts of Myanmar.

Human Rights Watch reported in July 2002 “Violence against Rohingya Muslims in Arakan is a way of life [...]”

In March 2005, the leader of the NDPHR was arrested and condemned to 47 years in prison on no reasonable grounds. His wife and children were also arrested, and sentenced to 17 years imprisonment.

### **A Gloomy Present and Uncertain Future**

It is estimated that 1.3 million Rohingyas still live in Myanmar.

1.5 million Rohingyas have left Myanmar under threat of persecution since 1948.

On 20 July 2006, Refugees International (RI) reported that up to 28,000 Rohingyas are still living in horrendous conditions in refugee camps in the southern Cox’s Bazaar district of Bangladesh.

Many are denied basic rights, and victims of abuse. RI estimated the Rohingya population living outside these camps at between 100,000-200,000 –the government of Bangladesh denies entry to the camps to the Rohingya who have come to Bangladesh after the exodus of 1991-1992.

Even though their living conditions are bad, many Rohingyas fear going back home to Myanmar is worse. To date up to 240,000 Rohingyas have returned, with the help of UNHCR or less fortunately, as a result of coercive repatriation by the Bangladeshi

authorities, to Rakhine State from Bangladesh.

In an excerpt from BBC News published on 11 March 2006, reporter Mike Thompson interviewed two Rohingya men who came to meet him in Bangladesh from across the Burmese border. The youngest of them told him “I have a ray of hope in my heart that one day there will be peace in Burma and my people will get back all their lives”.

## **The Karenni**

### **Introduction**

The Karenni is the name given to the ethnic groups living in the Karenni State - arbitrarily renamed Kayah State under the Investigation Act in October 1951.

The Karenni State is the smallest of Myanmar’s states, situated east of the country, bordered to the north by the Shan State, to the south and west by the Kayin State and to the east by Thailand’s Mae Hong Son Province.



We will stick to the appellation “Karenni State” as it is more relevant and less confusing from an ethnographer’s point of view than the present appellation “Kayah State”.

Historically speaking, the Kayah State is the name given to the amalgamation of the former Shan State of Mon Pai with the Karenni State. This was possibly done with the intent of fracturing the Karen and Karenni in their fight for independence.

Some Karennis also migrated to other parts of Burma: in Taungoo and Pyinmana areas in Central Burma, in the southern part of Shan State and in Thailand .

## Origins and Ethnic Mix

Karenni State is home to a complex mix of ethnic groups dominated by the Kayah majority.

This ethnic diversity is made even more difficult to grasp due to the displacement of minorities as a result of ongoing-armed conflicts and also to the many political factions active at one time or another in this area.

The ethnic groups in Karenni State have been classified as belonging to the Karen language group (a subdivision of the Tibeto-Burman family of languages).

Many of the sub-groups speak related dialects, most only have spoken form, and – increasingly- Burmese.

According to F.K. Leman, there are seven main sub-groups living in Karenni State. Please note that this is only one type of classification of Karenni sub-groups, other classifications might differ, and each sub-group has different names according to who is naming it! Not an easy ride for the novice!

- The Kayah (Red Karen) <sup>7</sup>
- The Kekhu

This group can be further sub-divided as:

- a. The Great Padaung
- b. The Lesser Padaung (known as Yinbaw by the Burmese)
- c. The Kheku

- The Bre

This group can be further sub-divided as:

- a. The Northern Bre
- b. The Southern Bre
- c. The Mano

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<sup>7</sup> Also known as Karenni (being the largest sub-group), or Yang Daeng by the Thai, Bwe by the Sgaw Karen and Eastern Bwe by Karens. They refer to themselves as Kaya Liy Phuw.

- The Yangtalai <sup>8</sup>
- The Geba (White Karen) <sup>9</sup>
- The Zayein <sup>10</sup>
- The Paku <sup>11</sup>

The Paku, as well as the Kayan (also known as Padaung, or Karen-Padaung and – for the tourists- Long Necks in Thailand) and Kayaw (commonly called 'Big Ears' by Thai tour operators) are Karen-related.

Although the Karenni and Karen groups are viewed as separate groups, it is often difficult to establish the ethnic relationship between both groups. This separation is even more blurred by the common political stand of these minorities.

Despite these intricacies and related fights, the Karenni strongly wish to keep their different ethnic traditions, celebrations, cultures and languages.

In addition to the Karenni, there are also a significant population of Shan, Burman and Karen inhabiting the Karenni State.

Burman migration into Karenni seems to be a relatively recent phenomenon, partly related to the land redistribution projects undertaken by the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP), the party created by the dictator General Ne Win who controlled the country from 1963 to 1988.

## **Armed Struggle: from Unity to Division**

### **Outbreak of the Resistance**

Under British colonial rule, in the nineteenth century, the Karenni States were considered as feudal entities and benefited from varying levels of independence.

However, shortly before Burma's independence and breakaway from the British empire,

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8 Known as Talya by the Kayah, Yangtalai by the Shan and Yintale by the Burmese.

9 Known as Paku Da Ne by the Kayah, Bwe by the Paku Sgaw, Kayin Byu by the Burmese. They refer to themselves as Ke Pa.

10 Also referred at times as Sawngtung.

11 Paku is the Kayah name for the Karen. They refer to themselves as Pakenyo.

the colonial policy shifted in favour of the Karenni States being integrated into Burma.

Both the British and the major pro-independence party in then Burman, the Anti Fascist Peoples' Freedom League (AFPFL), disapproved the efforts of Pan Karen towards an independent state.

As a consequence, the Karenni States were integrated into newly independent Burma. The 1947 constitution was to amalgamate the three Karenni States into one and grant it with a right of succession after a ten-year period.

Fighting broke out among two factions and their conflictual ideas about the future of the Karenni State in independent Burma.

One faction, led by Sao Wunna, supported the integration of the Karenni State with Burma, together with the right to secession after the ten-year period.

The other faction, known as the Karenni National Organisation led by U Bee Tu Re, was in favour of separation and formed a parallel government, the Karenni National Resistance Government.

In 1957, the separatists formed a new political organisation, the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), with its own army, the Karenni Army (KA).

### **Split into Factions**

In 1978, a faction, to be called the Karenni National People's Liberation Front (KNPLF) broke away from the KNPP on an ideological conflict –whether to approach the Communist Party of Burma for assistance.

After its split from the KNPP, the Kayan New Land Party (KNLP), a group closed to the Communist Party of Burma, formed close link with the KNPLF.

The split much weakened opposition in Karenni State. In 1994, the NKPLF and NKLP agreed to a cease-fire with the military junta.

Apart from a brief ceasefire in 1995, the KA has been fighting the Tatmadaw (the Burmese army) and its allies on an ongoing basis.

## **Splinter Groups: Opportunistic Allegiances**

The 1990s were the theatre of further splits within the KNPP, most of which have signed cease-fires with the junta.

In some cases, splinter groups have become “hired-guns” and switch allegiances according to circumstances.

These groups also seem to rely on illegal activities (violence, smuggling, etc) to strengthen their position.

As a result of these successive splits, and the less than transparent objectives of some newly formed groups, the Karenni cause for independence has been weakened.

Although the SPDC (the junta) has encouraged the fractioning of its opponents to defeat the Karenni pro-independence movement, it seems that ruling by dividing has had the opposite effect; it has further intensified the ethnic tensions among the sub-groups and pushed the region deeper into civil war with no peaceful resolution in view.

## **The Victims of an Ongoing Conflict**

Loss of central control has always been intolerable to the military junta.

In 1976, the regime increased its efforts to crush the Karenni pro-independence movement by orchestrating a population transfer program: removing villagers by force and imposing a reign of terror in the Karenni State.

People live under constant fear for their lives, and are subject to arbitrary violence (rape, beatings, arbitrary arrest and execution) and looting. There are also reports of villagers being forcibly enrolled as slave labour for the Tatmadaw (Burmese army) and women used for sex.

There are an estimated 50,000 Karenni IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons) and thousands have taken refuge in camps on the Thai-Burmese border or in Thailand.

As a 'host' country, Thailand's record is mixed.

The Thai government has been very slow in granting Thai nationality to the children born on Thai soil from Burmese refugees.

In its efforts to develop trade over the Thai-Burmese border, Thailand seems increasingly exacerbated by the conflicts between ethnic minorities from Eastern Myanmar (namely Karenni, Karen, Shan and Mon) and the military junta.

Forced returns, rejection at the frontier and attacks on refugee camps have frequently occurred as the flow of refugees has intensified in the last two decades.

## The Karenni Culture Survives

Karennis still celebrate their festivals such as *Diy-kuw*, celebrate their history and diversity, worship their gods (many are Christians).

Although women increasingly turn to more conventional Burmese attire for economic reasons (traditional material is more expensive) and fear of persecution, they still wear the traditional dress.

It is this fear for their survival which is compromising the present and future of the Karenni and menacing their cultures of extinctions.

## The Palaung

### Introduction

Palaung people are mainly based in the Shan and Kachin States in Eastern Myanmar.



The Palaung are one of Myanmar's oldest indigenous peoples and are divided into three main sub-groups:

- The Pale, also known as Silver Palaung.

Many of them fled Myanmar under the oppression of the military regime and took

refuge into northern Thailand.

- The Shwe, also known as Golden Palaung.
- The Rumai.

Among themselves, Palaungs distinguish a further twelve different sub-groups.

It is estimated that one million Palaungs still live in Myanmar.

## **Palaung History**

In the nineteenth century, the British colonial rule recognized the Palaung-controlled kingdom of Tawnpeng, and the Palaung enjoyed far more freedom and power in terms of land ownership and political influence in then Burma than of recent.

The Palaung armed themselves against the military junta in 1963 with the creation of the Palaung State Liberation Army (PSLA), the military arm of the political liberation movement, to demand more autonomy.

In 1991, under intense pressure from the military regime and its brutal methods, and with a growing number of other ethnic opposition groups rendering arms, the SPLA signed a ceasefire with the SLORC <sup>12</sup>.

As a result, some diverging Palaung factions formed the Palaung State Liberation Front (PSLF) in 1992 to continue their armed opposition and demand self-determination, democracy and human rights for Palaung people.

They are cooperating with the pro-democracy movement of Aung San Suu Kyi and other ethnic opposition groups to secure peace talks with the junta.

However, the majority of Palaungs laid down arms. Although many of those living around Namhsan and Mantong areas live in peace, some other areas do not protect this minority from relocation, forced labour and other human rights' abuse.

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12 State Law and Order Restoration Council



Over the last 24 years, several thousands Palaungs fled central and southern Shan state to escape fighting and forced recruitment and took refuge into Thailand.

### **Palaung Language and Culture**

The Palaung language is part of the Mon-Khmer branch of the Austro-Asiatic language group.

To mention a single language is to shortcut the number of dialects spoken among the different Palaung factions: ethnologists count no less than fifteen different Palaung dialects in Myanmar!

### **Pankan: a Palaung Village**

We learnt a lot about daily life in a Palaung village in our repeated visits to the village of Pankan in the Shan state, Eastern Myanmar.



Pankan is a peaceful Silver Palaung village counting fifty houses built on stilts, sheltered in the higher altitudes, on mountain slopes, of the northwestern Shan state.

When arriving at the village gates, the flag of the Palaung 'nation' greets visitors. Its three colours are blue, yellow and green.

Blue stands for the sky as Palaungs live close to the sky, high in the mountains.

Yellow represents the Sun, which Palaungs consider to be their original father [their mother ancestor is a dragon].

Green stands for tea, which is like green gold for Palaungs. It is their main income resource and tea plantations surround Palaung villages. As a result, Palaungs are famed for their high-quality tea.

### **The Village Houses**

Palaung houses are traditionally made of wood (foundations), bamboo (house structure, walls and floor), and thatch (roofing).

Because of the village location at higher altitudes, roofing must be changed every two to three years to preserve its protective quality. Bamboo-plaited walls also have a limited usage span and must be replaced every five to ten years depending on weather conditions.



As a result, Palaung villagers are increasingly adopting corrugated iron for their roofs. Bricks also start making an appearance. However, most Palaung cannot afford such materials.

When a house must be built or re-built, or other sizeable work needs taken care of, everybody in the village gives a hand: the spirit of community and solidarity is one of the strong assets of village life.

Houses are usually built on posts. The uphill side of the house is where the family works and lives, whereas the downhill side, sheltered from the outside, is an area of rest and sleep.

The horses, pigs and other domesticated animals can take shelter under the elevated house flooring.

The fireplace lies at the centre of the main section of the house on a concrete or other hard material square topped by shelves.

Herbs and other condiments are kept on top of the shelves. Shelves also have the use of collecting soot, which is used in concoction as a remedy for stomach-ache!

In the past, houses were more like long houses and accommodated extended families of up to 50 people.

Nowadays, a typical house shelters fewer people and young married Palaung leave the family nest when the woman is about to give birth.

### **The Headman**

Every Palaung village has a headman who is responsible for taking decisions for the village and ruling disputes.

Villagers are highly respectful of the authority of the headman. He is usually selected by the elders and is always a popular figure in the village.





Every day, after the day's work (villagers usually work between 7 am to 4/5 pm), the headman stands in front of his house. He holds a circular wooden instrument with a hole in the middle, which he hits in its centre. The sound echoes throughout the village. It is actually a signal that the headman is ready to discuss any village matters with villagers, and anyone is free to come and talk to him.

A very simple but ingenious system!

### **Rhythm of the Village**

Palaung people are hard workers.

Both men and women take equal part in outdoor work.

They live mainly from tea plantations and the luxurious forests around their villages. They collect wood for cooking and heating, leaves for cooking, etc.

They also work in groups to maintain the area around the village and counter the damage of the rainy season on muddy roads and mountain slopes.



Many Palaung villages do not have electricity or only limited supply. As a result, villagers make the most of natural daylight by waking up early (as early as 4 am).

The Palaung follow the moon calendars for festivals and days of rest.

Typically, villagers rest on the days of the new and full moon (twice a month). Young men take the opportunity to indulge in drinking, playing cards and chat with their friends.

It is also a moment to pray and make offerings at the temple.

### **Palaung Religion**

Palaung's native religion is animism. They believe that spirits –also called *Nats*- may inhabit all inanimate things, such as rocks, mountains and rivers, and as a result pay great respect to nature.

Offerings are made on various ceremonial occasions or to appease the spirits, when someone falls mysteriously ill or the harvest has been poor.

Palaungs also revere the spirits of their ancestors.



Nowadays, most Palaungs are Theravada Buddhists and every village of a reasonable size has its own monastery.

It is indeed tradition for one of the sons in the family to spend some time to serve Buddha by becoming a novice monk for a couple of years.

### **Palaung Dress**

#### **Palaung Women**

The Shwe and the Pale's common names, respectively Golden Palaung and Silver Palaung, refer directly to their slight differences in dress.

Palaung women tie their hair in a bun under a small cap, and cover it in a towel or turban. They are beautifully clothed with above-the waist long-sleeved colourful top open in the front, and a skirt called *longyji*, tied up like a sarong.

The most distinctive feature of their dress is the heavy belt around their waists.



According to Palaung legend, the original mother of Palaungs was a Dragon. The belt and colours of the Palaung dress are actually aimed at giving women the appearance of a dragon.

On a daily basis, the belt is made out of black and white plastic rings but on special occasions, women will wear their silver or gold belts (according to their affiliation to either the Pale or Shwe sub-groups).

Palaung women are gifted weavers and when walking around a Palaung village, women bent over their weaving machines or installations are a common sight.

They often carry a colourful shoulder bag, which they weave themselves, adorned with cotton teasels.

### **Palaung Men**

On a daily basis, the Palaung men dress wear the traditional Shan trousers and plain tee shirt.

On special occasions, men wear a Mao-style long-sleeved cotton jacket with cotton Shan-style trousers and adorn their heads with a turban.



They are also often seen carrying a Shan-style shoulder bag. Palaung men used to tattoo their bodies from neck to toe (literally!) as a show of bravery.

Although young men still adorn their arms and legs with tattoos, the all-over-body-tattooed tradition is somehow lost and only elder men will display them.