



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

World Refugee Day

20 June 2017

Today is World Refugee Day, around the world the strength, courage and perseverance of millions of refugees is commemorated. According to the UN, this year, World Refugee Day also marks a key moment for the public to show support for families forced to flee through the #WithRefugees petition. According to the UNHCR, in the beginning of 2017, there were still around 100,000 refugees from Myanmar living in camps in Thailand along the Thai-Myanmar border of whom around 83% are Karen, 10% Karenni, 4% Burmese, 1% Mon and 2% of other ethnicities. Also, the UNHCR reported that between 2005 and 2017, around 100,000 refugees have been resettled from these camps to third countries, mostly the United States, Australia and Canada.

As KHRG mostly reports on the situation inside southeast Myanmar and not inside the refugee camps, KHRG's information mainly covers the plight of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). The exact number of IDPs in southeast Myanmar is unclear but January 2015 estimates by the Norwegian Refugee Council's Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre puts the number as high as 398,000.

IDPs' and refugees' main concerns to return to their places of origin in southeast Myanmar are their safety, access to land, and how their return is decided. IDPs and refugees currently perceive that their safety cannot be guaranteed if they return. They still fear their safety is threatened due to continued fighting in southeast Myanmar, landmine contamination, ongoing militarisation, political instability, and the risk of abuse by Tatmadaw, Border Guard Forces (BGFs) and some Ethnic Armed Groups.

The Myanmar Government, countries of asylum, UNHCR and other humanitarian actors must ensure that IDP and refugee return is genuinely voluntary, without direct or indirect coercion, safe, sustainable, and with full respect for the dignity of the returnees. It should also be a participatory process in which IDPs, refugees and host communities are involved in monitoring the safety and conditions of their potential voluntary return.

On the next page, see some quotes from interviews with IDPs in southeast Myanmar.

#WithRefugees

“So now if the time comes for us to leave [the IDP camp], it will be depressing for us since we will have to leave our [current] place, [and] will have to start a new life; it is just like restarting a life.”

Saw A--- (male, 41), B--- village, Htantabin Township, Toungoo District/
northern Kayin State (interviewed in October 2016)

“I mean we were afraid of the fighting; therefore, we fled to escape from the fighting. As you know, if two buffalos fight against each other the grass is trampled [a Karen saying meaning when two strong forces fight, it is the bystanders that suffer].”

Saw A--- and Saw B--- (males, 41, 34), E---, F--- village, Meh Proo village tract,
Hlaingbwe Township, Hpa-an District/central Kayin State
(interviewed in October 2016)

“Since Tatmadaw will not withdraw their military and if we return and fighting breaks out like it did in Kachin State, we will all have to suffer again. To be honest, living in the IDP camp now is not too safe from oppression [military attack], and there is only a little relief from oppression [attack due to proximity]. However, if we have to go back, and the fighting breaks out again, I probably would not make it here [Ei Tu Hta IDP camp] again.”

Saw B--- (male, 42), C--- village, Lu Thaw Township, Hpapun District/
northeastern Kayin State (interviewed in October 2016)

“It is better to stay in your own [original] place but currently the [political] situation is not stable or guaranteed.”

“We want all of them [services] such as healthcare, education and work.”

Naw Ka--- (female, 41), Ei Tu Hta camp, Hpapun District, Kayin State
(interviewed in October 2016)

#WithRefugees