

## Who are the Muslim Karen?

There is evidence that Muslims moved into Burma prior to the first Burmese Empire founded in 1055 AD. But the main influx was from the eighteenth century onwards. British colonial rule opened the door for the migration of Indian Muslims from Bengal to come to Burma to work as laborers and in business. Even in northern Thailand, it is said that the source of the beads that the Karen wear were from Indian traders. Groups such as the Akha and Lahu used to decorate their clothing (and thus carry their “savings account”) with the silver Indian Rupees.

Generally, the Muslims living in Karen areas make up a small percentage of the total population. But in the Mae La camp, they comprise 10 – 15% of the people with many now coming to the U.S. for resettlement. Often, they are referred to as Black Karen but ethnically are not Karen. However, they are linked to the Karen from having lived among them prior to fleeing to Thailand. Some speak only Burmese, some only Karen, some both and some can speak some English.

Often, the Muslims are involved in business to a much higher degree than the Karen which gives the Muslims some economic “power”. In the Mae La camp, most shops are owned and operated by Muslims. While relations between the Karen and Muslim Karen are generally good, there have been occasional flare-ups.

In an IOM report on cultural orientation provided to the Karen prior to resettlement, it said that one lesson is given on what attitude one should have in dealing with a resettlement agency. The Karen will generally adopt a very passive attitude while the Muslims will take an aggressive stance. As traders, the Muslims will be good negotiators and they are generally friendly and outgoing.

The Muslim men tend to be very dominant and make the decisions. Family roles are strictly defined and parenting methods are strict and physical.

As the Karen come to the U.S. for resettlement, we are hearing that the Karen and Muslim Karen generally see themselves as different groups, and don't seek each other out. This should not be surprising in that they are quite different culturally.

The government of Burma is largely Buddhist, so Muslims don't get any better treatment than Christians. Muslims living in Karen areas are seen as the enemy and are attacked, raped, killed, and used for forced labor as are the Karen and other ethnic minority groups. So as the army approaches Muslim villages, those that are able flee just as the Karen have done.

For further information see the International Organization for Migration (IOM), [www.asiaanalysis.org](http://www.asiaanalysis.org) and [www.albalagh.net](http://www.albalagh.net).