

## **Our Brothers and Sisters in Christ--the Karen**

**By Neil Sowards**

Throughout the world, a variety of people groups suffer at the hands of others because of a deep desire for religious and political freedom. One such group is the Karen, a tribal people living in Southeast Asia, primarily in Burma and Thailand. In Burma, life is particularly difficult for the Karen as the cruel and oppressive Burmese government lashes out with continual violence against a people yearning for freedoms we often take for granted. This has resulted in an intolerable situation characterized by death and suffering. For many Karen this has meant a life on the run, homelessness, and refugee status. Fort Wayne, Indianapolis, and Louisville have each received hundreds of Burmese Karen refugees. Across America are thirty thousand Karen who have come to 130 large and small cities and towns.

While the Karen are a separate ethnic group with their own language, culture, dress, and values, they are a people closely related to American Baptists. In 1813, Adoniram Judson began work in Burma. After a number of years, one of the earliest converts to the Christian faith was a Karen named Ko Tha Pyu. Following his conversion, Christianity spread rapidly among the Karen as more missionaries were sent to share the Gospel with these responsive people. Today there are over 400,000 Karen Christians.

Many Karen live in eastern Burma (Myanmar) in small villages. The Burmese army and the Karen have been at war for more than 50 years and many Karen have been displaced as the Army has ravaged the countryside and burned villages. Typically, the army will go into an unarmed Karen village, kill one or two leaders and rape any women they can catch. The rest of the Karens flee into the jungle. The soldiers then loot the village of its rice, water buffaloes,

cows, pigs, chickens, and then burn the village and will leave after planting landmines amongst the rubble and in the fields.

The villagers who flee into the jungle lead a precarious life, eating whatever they can find and hoping to stay one step ahead of the Burmese army. Many die during this experience. Over a million Karen are in concentration camps inside Burma and 160,000 live in nine camps just inside Thailand. The Thai government doesn't want refugees in their country and so, confines them in huge camps (the Mae La Camp is "home" to about 40,000 people) surrounded by barbed wire. They are not allowed to have gardens nor carry on business. Most of the children coming to the U.S. have been born in the camps, and many adults have spent five, ten and even twenty years in confinement.

Muslims, Buddhists, and Christians comprise the Karen refugees coming to America. In 2006, about 8,000 Karen were admitted into the U. S. In 2007, the number jumped to 20,000; about 18,000 are expected in 2008.

Because the Karen are very grateful to the American Baptist Churches for sending the missionaries who gave them their saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, they often seek out American Baptist churches. They have formed Karen churches in Indianapolis and Fort Wayne and worship with the Crescent Hill Baptist Church in Louisville. The same is true in other parts of our country.

Some Karen leaders are working to establish a Karen Baptist Convention as part of the American Baptist Churches, USA. Others are organizing the Karen women into a nationwide Baptist women's group.

Most Karen refugees do not speak English and, therefore, need a lot of help. Most sponsoring churches and other organizations work very hard to help resettle our Karen neighbors. For instance, transportation is often a major issue. In most places Karen need people to drive them to doctors, dentists and agency appointments. They also need patient friends to help them understand American culture.

There is great potential that many Karen will join local American Baptist churches and breathe new life into our congregations. It is hoped that they will be welcomed.

If you would like more information on how you might help the Karen people who have come to Indiana, contact:

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