



Building a new society for Karenni

# KSDC NEWSLETTER

May 2016

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“The vision of the Social Development Center is to promote the lives of the people who have suffered human rights abuses, to teach non-violent skills to build up a new society, to develop the rule of law, to value human dignity and to protect the environment”



## About SDC

by **Aung Sun Myint**

SDC is located in Karenni Refugee Camp 1 on the Thai - Myanmar border. It was founded in 2002 by three alumni of EarthRights School Burma (ERSB).

The ERSB Alumni had learnt about Democracy, Law and the Environment. They wanted young people in their community to be able to study these subjects, so they founded SDC.

SDC has produced over 200 human rights and environmental activists since its formation. Our coordinator and co-founder Aung Sun Myint continues to work with our team to realize the vision he set out with his fellow ERSB alumni in 2002.

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## This month at SDC



by **Principal Myar Reh**

May has been a busy month at SDC. We held an intensive summer course from 2<sup>nd</sup> May – 25<sup>th</sup> May for a group of 42 students, who had completed the Basic Course. The students used this opportunity to improve their English skills, so that they could progress to the Advanced Course, or pursue other work or study opportunities.

Our 7<sup>th</sup> Advanced Community Management Course began on 30<sup>th</sup> May. We have 20 enthusiastic students (10 female, 10 male) who will not only be developing their English, but also studying subjects including Office Management, Community Management, Project Planning, and Sustainable Development. We look forward to having them with us for the next six months and look forward to seeing their progress.

On 22<sup>nd</sup> May, we held a farewell party for volunteer teachers Severi Raja-aho and Saara Loukola, who had been with us in Nai Soi for the previous six months. Saara had been teaching English for the Basic Course and Severi had been assisting me and the other staff. We are very grateful for their time and contribution and wish them all the best in the future.

We also welcomed three new volunteers: Emma De Vynck from Canada, Ciara Dowd from Ireland, and Darja Markek from the UK. They will be teaching on the Advanced Course and helping implement the projects we have planned in the coming months. We hope they will enjoy their time with us!



*New volunteers Ciara Dowd from Ireland and Darja Markek from the UK.*



*The content of summer course included English grammar as well as reading exercises.*



*New volunteer Emma De Vynck from Canada.*



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# Karenni Kings and Leaders

by **Khoon Lap Pleh & Dar Reh Lin**

Karenni clans came from Mongolia in AC 739. Kayan, Kayaw, Kayah, Gaypah, Gay koe, Yin baw, Yin ta le ,Ma nu, and Ma naw tribes are called Karenni. A long the time ago monarchy was formed in Karenni state. In AC 739 the Karenni people arrived in Karenni state in Demosow. When the Karenni people arrived in this area, they did not have literature. Karenni people did not have a recognized literacy, so their history was passed down orally as stories and legends.



*The Karen and Karenni people came through Gobi Desert to fertile lands surrounding Irrawaddy a long time ago.*

There was a young girl named Ka Nyar Maw Moe and she was said to possess magical abilities. In the Karenni state there is an area also called Ka Nyar Maw Moe state. When she was an adult many people respected her. The Burmese also acknowledged her as “Dew Meh Naw”. She became a leader of Karenni state. When Ka Nyar Maw Moe ruled, people didn't have problems, she was considered as a good leader. When she became older she had to pass on the leadership of

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Karenni state. She could not rule the Karenni. She gave her power to Tyar Htoo Peh with a long magic knife. When Tyar Htoo Peh ruled Karenni state he intimidated the people with his magic knife. He was not a popular leader and he wasn't careful so people fought and dethroned him.



*Western Karenni leadership under Poe Byar Dah.*

When Tyar Htoo Peh died, Poe Byar Dah became the leader. He was born in Bawlake. During his rule, there was peace and prosperity. He divided the Karenni state into two groups called East

and West Karenni. King Kay Poe Du ruled both groups. When he died his sons Khu Te and Khu Tyar divided Karenni state. At the time Bo Nay Win ruled in Burma and he started a war against Karenni state. When Khu Te and Khu Tyar died, the King U Bee Tu Ree and Saw Shwe became rulers of Karenni state.



*Karenni women have traditionally been a strong part of leadership within the community.*



*Hte Thu Phe, leader of the Karenni nationalist movement.*

On 9<sup>th</sup> August 1948 Burmese troops started to invade Karenni state which then officially declared itself independent. When U Bee Tu Ree died, the king Saw Shwe escaped. At the time Saw Shwe went to fight the Burmese again but he died in battle. Then his wife became ruler of Karenni state. Her name was Katherine Shwe. After Katherine Shwe died, new leaders Toh Plo, Kyaw Nyint, Saw Maw Reh, Khu

Shay Muah Reh, Plyar Reh, Hte Bue Peh, Byar Reh and The Thu Phe continued to rule Karenni state.

## Compromises and Setbacks

by Severi Raja-aho



*King Kawila of Chiang Mai.*

As a small state between larger empires, Karenni state has struggled to maintain its sovereignty throughout its history. During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century the Karenni kings were involved in conflicts with sovereigns in the vague and changing border area between the Burmese and Siamese empires. The conflicts were results of competition for trade revenues of the Andaman Sea as well as fertile and rich lands of northern Siam around Chiang Mai. The sovereigns had to play a careful game of diplomacy to ensure their power over their land, as both empires saw them merely as pawns in their wars. Wrong allegiance at the wrong time would mean the end of their kingdoms. It was a game of balance between obligations to alliances and the sovereigns' desire to keep the power within their own hands. King Kawila of Chiang Mai Kingdom, a vassal to Siam, started a campaign against Burma in 1802 and began to look for allies from the border region.



*The Kings of Siam and Burma had countless wars over the trade routes of Andaman Sea and Over the fertile lands of the river valleys in Burma and modern Thailand.*

In 1809 a new war between the Siamese and Burmese empires broke out in Mon state, today's southern Myanmar and Andaman sea. As the battles took place in the south, King Kawila of Chiang Mai wanted to reinforce the Siamese frontiers in the north. He sent a diplomat to the Karenni state to make a treaty with Phra Pho, the king of Karenni. He saw his kingdom not as a vassal to Burmese kingdom at the time. A treaty with Chiang Mai would strengthen his position against the Burmese.

The oath taking ceremony followed Karenni customs and it took place in Tambon Saya, a crossing on the Salween river. A buffalo was slaughtered and its blood was mixed with liquor to create the “liquid of truth” that was served in two horns, one to Karenni king and one to the Thai diplomat which he was to take to his king to keep. A vow was made: “So long the waters of Salween do not go dry, the horns of the buffalo do not straighten, the white Elephant cave not sunk, Karenni and Chiang Mai would maintain their values of friendship.” The union was sealed with a marriage between the princess of the Karenni royal family and Chao Uparaj Kamlangka, a relative to king Rama I. As the kingship of Chiang Mai was passed to the next generation, the oath was renewed and a new royal marriage between the dynasties was made.

### **The arrival of the Colonialists**

The arrival of the British changed the balance of power in the region. The hunger for new markets for British manufactured goods included not only Burma but also Siam. After the second Anglo-Burmese war in 1852-1853 British influence in the region grew considerably. Arrival of western powers to South-East Asia kept the Siamese empire on its toes. Its influence beyond inside and outside of its borders. The small



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kingdoms in the border areas had to form relations with the new power in the region. Initially in 1864 the Karenni prince requested to be the British protectorate, but was not shown any interest at this time. As in other parts of the world, the British used Divide and Rule tactics to control the areas.



*Compared to the Burmese, British were more tolerant masters. The divide-and-conquer policy was destructive in long term after the independence of Burma.*

The ethnic Burmese were treated as second-class citizens compared to many of the ethnic groups that had a lot of autonomy within the British rule. This would have long lasting effects for relations between the ethnic groups until this day. In 1869 the Karenni renewed the request for fear of the Burmese rule. This time the British formally recognized four states Kyebogyi, Namekan (Nammekon), Naungpale and Bawlake in order to weaken the prestige of the Burmese king. Decreasing power of the Burmese was indicated by the recognition of the states by both the British and the Burmese in 1875.

On 28<sup>th</sup> of November 1885 the British armored warships sailed up the Irrawaddy river to Mandalay. Thibaw Min, the last king of Burma, was forced out of the royal city on a bullock cart and was sent to



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exile to India. Burma had a new ruler. The British established a direct rule to provinces by nominating British administrators to the provinces.

The ethnic states were stripped of some of their independence and put under the supervision of British officials. In 1889 the Karenni states were forced to surrender to the imperialists by signing an agreement of submission to Queen Victoria as their new empress. They also had to pay tribute to the British official and obey his orders. Although Karenni states were given recognition they were still not completely independent. This was a compromise similar to what the Karenni kings made with Thais at the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### **The World War and Independent Burma**

During the Second World War the British lost their control of the country as another imperial power, the Japanese, marched to Burma. Thailand allied with the Japanese and claimed areas inhabited by Kayahs in Eastern Karenni State. Again the Karennis were in a bind between bigger powers. Only after the sanctions by the UN after the end of the war did Thailand withdraw its troops from the areas. The struggle for independence of both Burmese and the ethnic states became more complex. The Burmese independence movement was divided into fascists and federalists.



*The core of the Burmese independence movement, “The Thirty Comrades” ,divided ideologically after the Independence war.*

After the war an independent Union of Burma began to be formed by Aung San and the ethnic leaders. The ethnic leaders were promised that their people would have autonomy under New Burma that was to be formed, but as so many times earlier in history, the promises were in vain as Aung San was swallowed up by the power struggles inside the Burmese independence movement and assassinated. Karenni state lunged into armed struggle for half a century.

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## The Uncertainty

A new government consisting of representatives of civil society has been elected for the first time in the Burma's history. At the same time, none of the representatives of Karenni ethnic parties made it to the parliament. More importantly, the transition to civil government is still uncertain. Decades of violence that lasted more or less until ceasefire in 2010 are still fresh in the memories of people. The generals are aware of risk of losing their privileged position and the NLD is aware of not stepping on the toes of the military while trying to establish a civil government to the country for the first time. For the Karenni as well as other ethnic groups, a possible change can't be expected to come overnight.



*Karenni villagers hearing about the principles of free and fair elections before the historic elections of November 2015.*

The weight of history and perhaps the biggest obstacle for a free Karenni state, be that federal or not, are the ethnic tensions, a heritage from the British rule. It is not only obstacle for the Karennis but also for the Burmese and can only be overcome with active participation to peace process is required. As so many times before, the Karenni decision makers have to walk on the thin line of compromises towards independence.

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# Home near the Refugee Camp

by Severi Raja-aho and Saara Loukola

Living in Dokhita, near the Refugee camp #1 and working at SDC has been a remarkable experience that we will never forget. We have been taken as part of community of people, who are at the same time the most resilient and the most gentle I have ever met. Despite bearing the scars of a conflict that ended not so long ago, they have an optimistic attitude towards their lives. Living as part of this community has been a home for us and we are very grateful for the warm memories we have from this place. It has been a great honor for us to meet the people who work in SDC as well as the students who have inspired us every day here.



*14th basic course getting ready for a group photo.*



*14th basic course students at our farewell party.*



*As the roads part, I wish happiness for all the people I met here.*



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## Help us achieve our goals

To achieve the goals and the promise we made in our mission statement we rely on many avenues of support. Core organizational and project funding comes from our main donors. We are also supported by our own community, local staff and volunteers from around the world.

**But we still need support to continue doing the good work we do. So if you are able to support us financially or with advice or expertise please [contact](#) us:**

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