

# PROSPECTS FOR THE REINTEGRATION OF KAREN REFUGEES

November 2017



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## Executive Summary

For the last 30 years the Directors of the Institute for International Development have worked in and around Myanmar, witnessing the political, economic and social changes. In particular, in the last 10 years, Myanmar has made considerable progress towards the development of a democratic government from the former military dictatorship. The long civil conflict within the country has diminished, especially in the Karen State, where civil unrest caused the migration of Karen refugees over the Myanmar-Thai border seeking asylum. Recent decreasing international aid and support within the refugee camps, as well as political progress within Myanmar, has opened arguments for the refugees to return to Myanmar after 30 years of residing in Thailand. The Karen refugees within the Thai camps, have identified concerns, that in their opinion need to be addressed for them to understand their prospects of having a fulfilled and peaceful life in Myanmar. By evaluating their employment opportunities as well as the availability of education and healthcare, within urban and rural areas, it will help the refugees to be aware of what their prospects if they decide to return.

Title Page: Figure 1: Map of Thai Refugee Camps

## Acknowledgements

I would like to convey my gratitude for the experience the Institute for International Development has enabled me to have the past four months. In particular, I would like to express my appreciation for the time the Director, John Leake has shared, his knowledge of Myanmar and international development is astounding. John's "on the ground" knowledge of Myanmar provides this report with an insight that it would have otherwise lacked. Thank you.

To the University of Adelaide, I would like to thank the immense guidance and support I have received from Robert Ewers; your encouragement at the beginning of this semester allowed me to push through my final semester. To the Faculty of Arts, especially the Department of Anthropology I would like to thank for the last four years of my university education, for opening my mind to ways of thinking that has equipped me for the future.

Julianne Clark  
November 2017

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## List of Abbreviations

BGF	Border-Guard Force
DKBA	Democratic Karen Buddhist Army
EAG	Ethnic Armed Groups
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IID	Institute for International Development
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
KNLA	Karen National Liberation Army
KNU	Karen National Union
MoH	Ministry of Health
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
NSAG	Non-State Armed Groups
Tatmadaw	Armed Forces administered by Ministry of Defence
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
WHO	World Health Organisation
WFP	World Food Programme

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## Who are the Karen?

The Karen or Kayin people of Myanmar inhabit the Karen State, geographically located within the South-Eastern region of the country. The Karen State sporadically spreads from the Arakan Mountains down to the Delta, along the western border of Thailand (Figure 2)<sup>1</sup>. The State is ethnically diverse, and within the Karen ethnic group itself, there are approximately 10-12 subgroups which declare their differences based upon language used and political ideas<sup>2</sup>. It is important to note the sub-groups and variations of the Karen people greatly depends on who has done the classification. The naming of the ethnic group and subgroups also varies, with the Myanmar Government using the term *Kayin*, whereas the UNHCR mediates between using *Kayin* and Karen. This report will use the term Karen, as it withholds prejudicial judgment associated with the use of the term *Kayin*.

The population of Myanmar is estimated to be 52,885,223 (2016), though this number does vary from source to source<sup>3</sup>. As the third largest ethnic group identified in Myanmar, the Karen are considered to make up 7% of the population. The ethnic group is one of 135 ethnic groups identified by the Myanmar Government. Despite the low percentage of the total population of Myanmar, the Karen and the Karen State have sought autonomy from Myanmar, seeking to form a federal system separate from the military controlled government<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Myanmar Information Management Unit. 2016. *Kayin State*. Image. [http://themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/State\\_Map\\_Tsp\\_Kayin\\_MIMU696v03\\_09Sep2016\\_ENG\\_A3.pdf](http://themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/State_Map_Tsp_Kayin_MIMU696v03_09Sep2016_ENG_A3.pdf). Accessed September 20 2017

<sup>2</sup> Mikael Gravers, "Ethno-Nationalism And Violence In Burma/Myanmar- The Long Karen Struggle For Autonomy," in *Burma/Myanmar- Where Now?* 1st ed., ed. Mikael Gravers and Flemming Ytzen (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2014), 173-198.

<sup>3</sup> "Myanmar | Data". World Bank. <https://data.worldbank.org/country/myanmar>, last modified 2016

<sup>4</sup> Gravers. "Ethno-Nationalism and Violence in Burma/Myanmar" 173-198



# Kayin State

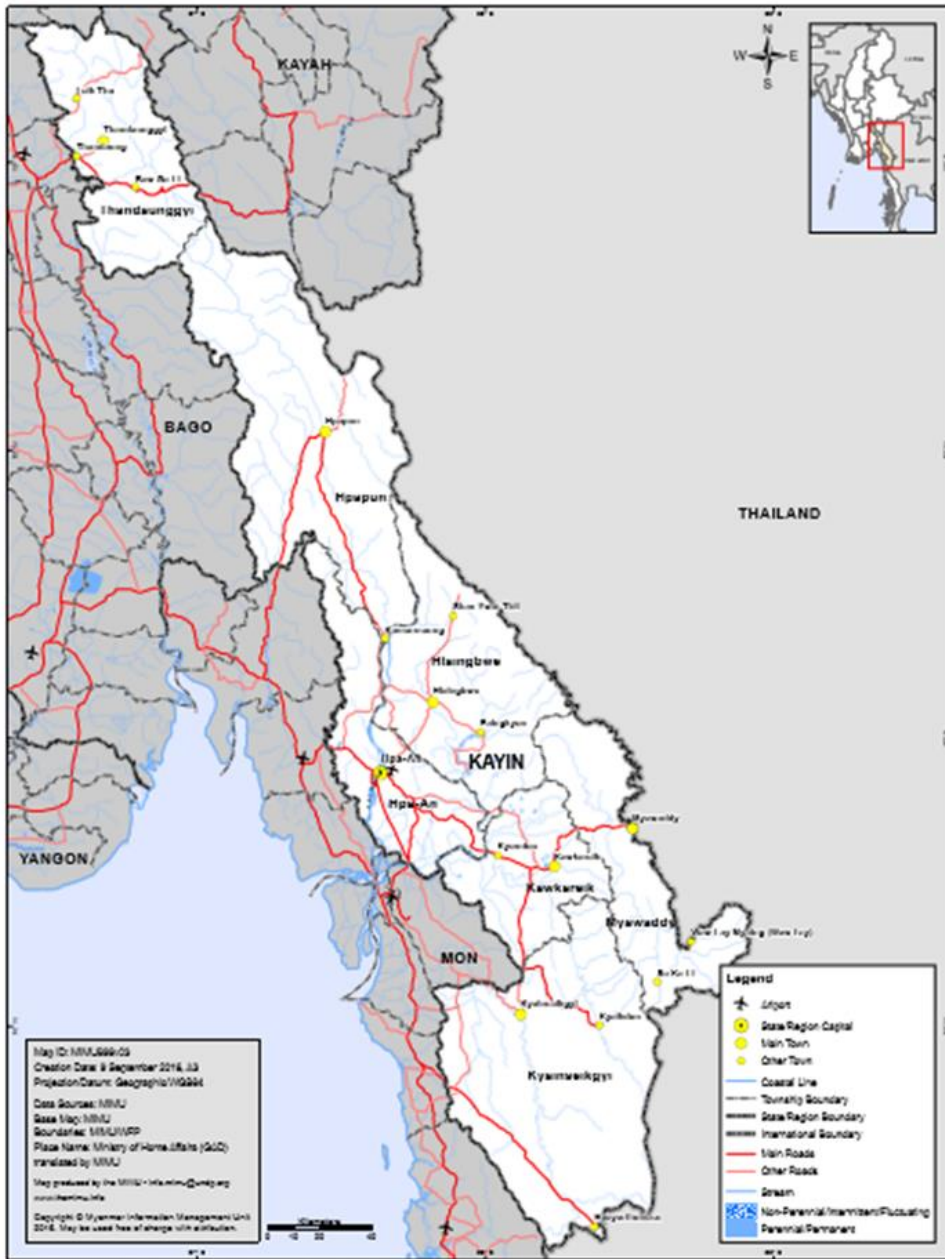


Figure 2: Map of Karen/Kayin State, 2016



## Brief History

### Colonialism to Independence

According to the Karen National Union (KNU), the Karen arrived in Myanmar in 739 BC. Between then and the 1800s, the Karen were subjugated to Mon and Burman Kingdoms, within the formation of a Karen State. The introduction of Christianity to Burma in 1828, created a division in Karen religious beliefs in which even now continues to divide the Karen into Christians, Buddhists as well as the minority Animists. In 1886, the British conquered Upper Myanmar, abolishing the monarchy, recruiting the Karen and other ethnic minority groups into their colonial forces. During Japanese occupation during World War Two, attacks occurred on the pro-British Karen. Independence from the British in 1948, led to growing anarchy that continued throughout the rest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This began in 1949, with U Nu, the first prime minister post-British rule, starting the persecution of ethnic groups. Ne Win, a military commander and politician, on behalf of U Nu, led the attacks on the Karen with the nationalist militia (Tatmadaw) resulting in the outbreak of Karen insurgency, lasting 60 years<sup>5</sup>.

### Civil Conflict and Movement of Refugees

The civil conflict between the Tatmadaw and the Ethnic Armed Groups (EAGs) started in the Karen State, as the Karen struggled for equality and self-determination after the annexation of Myanmar from the British in 1948. The authoritarian regime of Ne Win and the 'Four Cuts' military insurgency campaigns conducted by the Tatmadaw targeted civilian populations opposing the new government. In opposition, the Karen National Union and its armed Karen National Liberation Army fought for the control of the Karen State as well as villages near Rangoon, now Yangon. However, eventually the Tatmadaw pushed back the KNLA towards the Thai border, resulting in the widespread destruction of land through burning down villages, farms and deforestation, as well as human rights abuses including the torture, rape and murder of Karen people. This caused the en-masse response of Karen deciding to flee to Thailand<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Gravers, "Ethno-Nationalism and Violence in Burma/Myanmar" 176.

<sup>6</sup> "History of Conflict and The Border". Burma Link. <https://www.burmalink.org/background/thailand-burma-border/history-of-conflict-and-the-border/>. Last modified May 1, 2015

## What is the situation now?

### Karen Refugees in Thailand

Movement between Myanmar and Thailand has arguably been occurring unrecorded throughout history and even now, illegal and or unrecorded migration continues across borders. The proximity of the Karen State to the Thai border provides the Karen the ability to move, immigrate between and around the border region without detection. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, this provided the Karen a means of escaping the increased conflict within Myanmar. The first refugees arrived 1984, forming the nine current refugee camps along the Western border of Thailand. The nine camps can be seen on Figure 1<sup>7</sup>. According to the UNHCR there are 100,238 verified refugees within the nine camps; 50,101 registered and 50,137 unregistered as refugees. The largest of the camps, Mae La has approximately 36, 677 refugees<sup>8</sup>. Of the refugees, 83% are Karen, with 50% practising Christianity and 36% practising Buddhism. With the humanitarian aid and support provided by NGOs, International Governments and the Thai Government, the 'temporary' refugee camps have been home for refugees as Myanmar has gone through the recent social and political changes.

Since the 2010 elections with the appointment of President Thein Sein, Myanmar has made considerable democratic progress. With political reforms including the relaxation of political restrictions, releasing political prisoners and increasing civil liberties including removing the suppression of information, Myanmar continues to progress in a positive direction. The 2015 election resulted in the election of politician, diplomat and humanitarian Aung San Suu Kyi as State Counsellor of Myanmar, opening a new era of political change for the nation. Following political change, economic and social progress has additionally developed within Myanmar and as such, opened arguments surrounding the return of refugees to Myanmar. This has come from multiple perspectives. Outside the South-East Asian region, the UN and NGOs have been decreasing their humanitarian aid towards refugee camps, limiting provisions made

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<sup>7</sup> Burma Link. 2014. Graphic Map Of Myanmar. Image. [https://www.burmalink.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/BurmaLink\\_infographics\\_map.pdf](https://www.burmalink.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/BurmaLink_infographics_map.pdf). Accessed October 3, 2017

<sup>8</sup>UNHCR. 2017. "RTG/MOI-UNHCR Verified Refugee Population". Mae Sot: UNHCR - Information Management Unit. [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Thailand\\_MyanmarBorder\\_RefugeePopulationOverview\\_July2017.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Thailand_MyanmarBorder_RefugeePopulationOverview_July2017.pdf) accessed August 29, 2017

available through funding. Within South-East Asia, the Thai Government has restricted the movement of refugees, limiting their movement outside of the fenced camps. Additionally, the Thai Government continues to restrict the legal employment of refugees living within Thailand. The Myanmar Government circumscribed refugees' ability to claim Myanmar citizenship (see Figure 3), as well as increasing border control to prevent unofficial movement of refugees back from Thailand<sup>9</sup>. Within the camps, there has been interest to return, leading to the Voluntary Repatriation of 71 refugees in 2016.

### 2016 Voluntary Repatriation of Refugees

In the past five years, there has been considerable effort to encourage refugees to return to Myanmar from the nine Thai camps. A combined effort by the UNHCR, the Myanmar and Thai Governments as well as other NGOs, led to a facilitated voluntary repatriation of refugees back into Myanmar in October of 2016. The first voluntary return in 30 years was organised by the Thai and Myanmar Governments with the aid of NGOs facilitated the movement of 71 refugees from Thailand's Tham Hin and Nupo camps back to Myanmar<sup>10</sup>. The ease of the process was further aided by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) providing repatriation transport and the World Food Programme providing cash assistance for three months of food support. Critically, the aid provided by the UNHCR served as an important incentive; refugees were also provided with information on the conditions of their return destinations, as well as committing to further assist in the reintegration process within Myanmar<sup>11</sup>. The return of the refugees in 2016 serves as a pilot for future voluntary repatriations between Thailand and Myanmar and it is hoped that if peace can grow and be maintained, more refugees within the camps will be interested in returning to Myanmar.

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<sup>9</sup> Libby, Hogan. "Karen Refugees Wary of Return to Myanmar As Despair Rises in Camps". Blog. Refugees Deeply. <https://www.newsdeeply.com/refugees/articles/2017/08/11/karen-refugees-wary-of-return-to-myanmar-as-despair-rises-in-camps>. Last modified August 11, 2017

<sup>10</sup> "Myanmar Refugees Pave the Way Home in Pilot Return", UNHCR. <http://www.unhcr.org/hk/en/9891-myanmar-refugees-pave-the-way-home-in-pilot-return.html>. Last modified 2016.

<sup>11</sup> First Myanmar Refugee Returns from Thailand Under Way". UNHCR. <http://www.unhcr.org/en-au/news/briefing/2016/10/580f1c0d4/first-myanmar-refugee-returns-thailand-under-way.html>. Last modified 2016

## Methodology

For this report to provide the most current information on the Karen, it will focus on the last 4-5 years of research conducted within Myanmar and also within the refugee camps. Sources include research conducted by NGOs (such as the UN, UNHCR and HRW), Governments both internationally and domestically, as well as accounts of academic fieldwork. Specifically, these were used to minimise inaccuracy and unverified evidence, as well as the political agendas which surround the movement of refugees between Myanmar and Thailand. These sources provided a means of obtaining information and research without directly conducting fieldwork within Myanmar, the Borders and the Refugee camps. Utilising the knowledge of researchers who have witnessed the change within Myanmar in the last 10 years, has aided in the evaluation of the nation's progress, which is crucial to encouraging refugees to return. Academic research conducted by Mikael Gravers and Flemming Ytzen in particular, provide the means of understanding the complexity of researching within a challenging political and socio-cultural environment.

Nonetheless, anecdotal evidence from the refugees themselves provide 'on the ground' information, which official research by governments and humanitarian aid agencies may lack. As this report will indicate, the anecdotal information refugees have supplied in interviews, stories and reports conducted by refugee advocate organisations like Burma Link and Karen News provides perspectives and attitudes from within the camps. This is important as information the refugees provide, can challenge research and information provided by NGOs and Governments and demonstrate the lack of information received from organisational and Thai governmental actors.

Similarly, the anecdotal evidence supplied by the Karen refugees, demonstrates the lack of information received from Myanmar. It is important to consider that the anecdotal evidence received from Myanmar is subjected to the influence of the political agendas of the Myanmar Government and the Tatmadaw as well as various ethnic groups who have interests in keeping the refugees within the camps and out of Myanmar.

The information provided in this report is intended to support continued research into the prospects of refugees if they return to Myanmar. Identifying key concerns from the refugees in light of evidence can be used as preliminary research to shape and guide future research to further aid the Karen refugees. Visiting and conducting fieldwork, would achieve results that are definitive in providing refugees an answer to what will be their prospects for a peaceful and fulfilled life within Myanmar.

## Difference in Concerns & Attitudes

As a result of leaving before the 2010 and 2015 Elections within Myanmar, the Karen refugees within the camps have not experienced the reforms and progress of the country since their departure. It is evident that the Karen refugees have a different attitude towards Myanmar than that of the Karen who currently reside within the country. This needs to be examined as it firstly, acknowledges how different these two groups are, and secondly, acknowledges the concerns the refugees have if they were to return. The table below (Figure 3), provides a list of concerns identified by the Karen refugees and their concerns or attitudes on the issues in comparison to the Karen who currently reside within Myanmar. Note, that while focused on the Karen State, the table includes a broader examination of issues within Myanmar.

**Figure 3: Concerns & Attitudes**

<b>Concern or Attitude</b>	<b>Karen Refugees in Thailand Camps</b>	<b>Karen in Myanmar</b>	<b>Notes/ Points of Interest</b>
<b>Army/ Military Forces</b>	Fear Burmese military presence and outbreak of conflict		Conflict has risen between the BGF and the DKBA within the Mae Tha Waw area, in the Karen State as of 1 Nov 2017
	Fear internal displacement from conflict		
<b>Landmine contamination</b>	Fear landmine contamination by the military within civilian areas	Landmines are still being used by armed forces of the government (the Tatmadaw), NSAGs, businessmen and villages	Myanmar Government prohibit almost all forms of mine action
	Want the landmines to be removed to guarantee their safety to live and farm	Government refused mine-action activities, including demining by humanitarian agencies	Estimated 10 out of 14 states are contaminated by land mines after decades of conflict <sup>12</sup>
<b>Land Ownership</b>	Fear harassment by the military and military aligned businessmen taking over land	The Vacant, Fallow and Virgins Lands Management Act, enables farmers to legally contest land sales which impede their historical land use, however legal support is expensive	Land grabbing by the military juntas in the Karen region for development projects; including military base expansion, natural resource exploitation and extraction, agriculture projects, infrastructure and tourism <sup>15</sup>
	Loss of previous ownership of land prior to leaving		
	Have lost land to people who stayed	The Land Acquisition Act 1894 requires the government to compensate farmers if land is taken by the government for public purpose. This may be less than the value of the land <sup>13</sup>	

<sup>12</sup>Ashley, South. "Casualties Of War". In Burma/Myanmar- Where Now?, 1st ed., Mikael Gravers and Flemming Ytzen. (Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS 2014). 256-261

		<p>“Land grabs” have escalated as the state opens its markets to foreign investors and pursues policies to dramatically increase industrial agricultural production<sup>14</sup></p>	<p>Myanmar’ is rich in water, forest and mineral resources. Rapid extraction efforts in the past three decades has led to widespread land and water pollution, deforestation and forced relocation<sup>17</sup>.</p>
<b>Citizenship</b>	<p>The Karen refugees within camps can register as an asylum or migrant worker in Thailand</p> <p>Children born in camps have never seen Myanmar or speak their parent’s native tongue and are without identification cards</p> <p>A creole language is spoken in the camps, a mixture of Karen, Thai and Burmese</p> <p>Able bodied refugees seek to escape into Thailand rather than to return to Myanmar (see Further Considerations)</p>	<p>Positive Response from the 2016 voluntary returnee refugees, felt welcomed by the Myanmar Government</p> <p>Returned were given Identification Cards, to obtain national benefits</p>	<p>Thailand has no refugee law nor an asylum policy</p> <p>Karen refugee children born in camps risk not meeting Myanmar’s Citizenship Law of 1982<sup>18</sup></p>

<sup>13</sup> Human Rights Watch. 2016. "The Farmer Becomes the Criminal". Human Rights and Land Confiscation in Karen State. United States of America: Human Rights Watch.

[https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report\\_pdf/burma1116\\_web\\_0.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/burma1116_web_0.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> Forino Giuseppe, Jason von Meding, and Thomas Johnson. 2017. "The Oil Economics And Land-Grab Politics Behind Myanmar’S Rohingya Refugee Crisis". Quartz India, , 2017. <https://qz.com/1074906/rohingya-the-oil-economics-and-land-grab-politics-behind-myanmars-refugee-crisis/>. Accessed October 10, 2017

<sup>16</sup> UNHCR. 2017. "Myanmar SE Operation -Return Assessments". Hpa-An: UNHCR.

<sup>14</sup> USAID. 2017. Land Tenure. "Burma". <https://usaidlandtenure.net/country-profile/burma/>. Accessed October 30, 2017

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> See Mikael Gravers and Flemming Ytzen. 2014. *Burma/Myanmar-Where Now?*. 1st ed. Mikael Gravers and Flemming Ytzen (Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS 2014) page 148



<b>Jobs and Income</b>	<p>Believe they are unable to obtain jobs</p> <p>Fear the loss of land will contribute to lack of livelihood upon returning</p>	<p>The returned Karen refugees in 2016, applied for jobs with the technical skills learnt while in the camps</p> <p>Moving to urbanised centres</p> <p>New sectors of employment</p>	<p>Myanmar has seen an increase in urbanization alongside a pattern of population growth, that is estimated to produce economic growth and material consumption in the future<sup>19</sup></p>
<b>Water &amp; Food</b>	<p>Believe they will be unable to have access to enough water and sufficient sanitation systems</p>	<p>Allowed humanitarian aid implemented small-scale development projects in the field of water and sanitation. including; well renovation, gravity-flow systems and provisions of household latrine materials in rural areas</p>	
<b>Education</b>	<p>Want access to primary and secondary education, especially in rural villages</p> <p>Fear discrimination by teachers and schools</p>	<p>Government has increased educational spending from 1.5% to 5% of its GDP.</p> <p>Higher enrolments of primary school children, including rural areas</p> <p>Allowed humanitarian aid to implement small-scale education projects including teacher training, provisions of teachers; stipends, school gear for children</p>	

<sup>19</sup> Maung, Kyaw Nyunt, et, al. "Comparative Studies on The Driving Factors of Resource Flows in Myanmar, The Philippines, And Bangladesh". *Environmental Economics and Policy Studies* 17 (3) 2014: 407-429. doi:10.1007/s10018-014-0087-9.

<b>Medicine &amp; Health Services</b>	Want and need access to sufficient health care and medicine  Access to clinics within rural areas	Shortage of qualified physicians, nurses, midwives and community health workers as well as lack of medicine, medical equipment and hospital beds <sup>20</sup>  HIV/AIDS remains epidemic despite the Government access to antiretroviral drugs	Within Myanmar there have been increases within the health care workforce, but still there is an uneven spread of skilled health workers between urban and rural areas <sup>21</sup>
<b>Human Rights Abuses</b>	Fear ethnic and religious persecution by military juntas	Since 2011, reforms include release of political prisoners, greater political freedom and increased civil liberties  However, since 2016 civilian-led government has failed to meet expectation to implement reforms <sup>22</sup>  Increase in human trafficking and forced labour	Human Rights abuses continue to occur  Acts of extrajudicial killings, rape, torture and arson occur within the country

<sup>20</sup> Nyi Nyi, Latt, et al. "Healthcare in Myanmar". Nagoya Journal Of Medical Science 78: 2017 123-134. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4885812/pdf/2186-3326-78-0123.pdf>.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> "Burma". Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/asia/burma>, last modified 2017

## Discussion

The difference in the attitudes between the Karen refugees and the Karen who stayed in Myanmar throughout the political and social changes the nation has experienced, has had a significant influence on their view of the future of living in Myanmar. The divide between the two groups is not limited to just their concerns or attitudes, but also to the difference views that the Karen in the refugee camps have acquired over this time. Seeking refuge in Thailand, the refugees escaped political and social restrictions and persecution from the Tatmadaw and EAGs, and while in the camps were able to express themselves, enjoying the freedoms that the Myanmar government restricted. Now as they face the prospect of returning, the ideas and freedom they had and hoped for as a refugee, will be challenged. Thus, in their perspective, returning means they will experience the restrictions they had prior to leaving. However, for the Karen who stayed, life has continued through Myanmar's political and social changes, which in their opinion, grants them the ownership of abandoned land, housing and opportunities left behind by the Karen refugees. The Karen who stayed are responsible for the changes and improvements they have helped to make inside their nation. Improvements to services as well as political and social progress is needed for Myanmar and as this continues, access to employment and quality of living will also develop. Therefore, the prospects for the Karen refugees within Myanmar, is unclear to the refugees.

## Evaluation of Prospects

### Poverty

To understand the positive changes Myanmar has made in recent years, an evaluation of these changes should be made. One change can be demonstrated by evaluating the poverty within the country and the inequality between rural and urban areas. The findings in a recent Myanmar Poverty Assessment published by the World Bank, found poverty within the country steadily declining over a ten-year period, from 32.1% in 2004 to 25.6% in 2009, to 19.4% in 2015<sup>23</sup>. The steady decline in poverty within Myanmar, highlights the identifiable changes from the results of opening the economy to international markets. The World Bank, in conducting their Assessment, identified improvements to the living standards. This was indicated by the increased sales of consumer goods above the current population growth within Myanmar<sup>24</sup>. For example, ownership of motorcycles and televisions increased from 10% of households in 2009, to over 42% of households in 2015. Poverty, a comparison between urban and rural areas, shows urban poverty declining from 21.5% in 2004/05 to 15.7% in 2009, to 9.0% in 2015. Rural areas also declined but at a slower rate, from 35.8% in 2004/05, to 29.2% in 2009, to 23.3% in 2015. According to the Assessment, the World Bank suggest the more rapid decline in urban poverty to rural poverty has mirrored the sectorial growth in manufacturing and services more than in the agricultural sector over the same period<sup>25</sup>. On average this impacts the Karen within Myanmar more than others as for every 100 people within the Karen State, 78 live in rural areas, versus 22 living in urban areas. As a whole, the 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census, found that 70% of the population of Myanmar lived in rural areas, with only 30% living in urban areas<sup>26</sup>. Government data indicates within the Karen State, that agriculture remains to be the main source of income for the population. Specifically, within the KNU-controlled areas, it is estimated that 75% of the population

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<sup>23</sup>The World Bank. 2017. *An Analysis Of Poverty In Myanmar : Part One - Trends Between 2004/05 And 2015*. (Washington, DC: World Bank Group). <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/556581502987486978/An-analysis-of-poverty-in-Myanmar-part-one-trends-between-2004-05-and-2015>. Accessed November 2, 2017

<sup>24</sup> Maung, Kyaw Nyunt, et, al. "The Driving Factors of Resource Flows in Myanmar", 407-429.

<sup>25</sup> The World Bank. "An Analysis Of Poverty In Myanmar" 2017.

<sup>26</sup> Department of Population. 2015. "Kayin State Report". The 2014 Myanmar Population And Housing Census. (Nay Pyi Taw: Ministry of Immigration and Population).

[http://themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/Report\\_Kayin\\_State\\_Census\\_Report\\_MOIP\\_May2015.pdf](http://themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/Report_Kayin_State_Census_Report_MOIP_May2015.pdf)

rely on agriculture and/or animal husbandry<sup>27</sup>. Therefore, in considering a possible return to Myanmar, without succumbing to poverty, further evaluation of the employment and potential to sustain a livelihood for the refugees is needed, especially as the urban areas with a growing rate of manufacturing and service sectors would benefit the Karen more than a return to former farming areas.

## Employment

As described in Figure 3, employment and financial stability are some of the concerns identified by the Karen refugees to be an important in determining if they return to Myanmar. In terms of employment, the Karen will have to consider their chances of finding employment within rural areas, or finding employment in urbanised areas. This is significant, as the poverty assessment indicates, the Karen within rural areas have an increased prospect of succumbing to poverty verses resettling in urban areas. However, there is a lower population in urban areas than rural areas and this may be thought to limit the capacity for additional settlers. According to the 2014 Population Census, there are approximately 329,166 people living within urban areas, with the majority residing in Myawaddy (116,580)<sup>28</sup>. In rural areas, approximately 1,175,160 people reside, with 346,434 people allocating Hpa-An as the closest township (refer to Figure 2: Map of Karen/Kayin State). The significant difference between these numbers, highlights the limited movement the Karen have made away from the rural areas to urban areas, despite the increase growth in urbanisation within Myanmar's economy. From the decreased number of people within urbanised areas, the availability for employment is likely to increase as the development of the manufacturing and service sectors expands in cities and require more workers.

## Recognition of Education

Figure 3, indicates a noticeable difference in understanding between the Karen who stayed and the Karen who left, of the changes Myanmar has had economically,

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<sup>27</sup>PeaceNexus Foundation. 2013. "An Assessment Of Business Opportunities In The Kayin State". PeaceNexus. [http://themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/Assessment\\_Business\\_Opportunities\\_in\\_Kayin\\_State\\_PeaceNexus\\_Foundation\\_Nov\\_2013.pdf](http://themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/Assessment_Business_Opportunities_in_Kayin_State_PeaceNexus_Foundation_Nov_2013.pdf). Accessed 4 November 2017

<sup>28</sup>Department of Population. "Kayin State Report". 2015.

especially in the development of new jobs in the emerging sectors. Across the globe, new jobs and career pathways are continuing to evolve as sectors develop and emerge as new and exciting technology develops. A considerable contrast between the Karen in the refugee camps and the Karen in Myanmar, is in their perception of where they will find employment and what will they be doing<sup>29</sup>. Firstly, location of employment needs to be considered in two points. One, the growth of the manufacturing and service sectors within urban areas that suggests an increased demand for workers. Two, mining, rubber and palm productions by government and military aligned businessmen within rural areas has limited the availability of land for farming by farmers already within Myanmar. Additionally, it would avoid and or limit the fear of persecution and harassment by the Tatmadaw or by EAGs over land rights, a clearly identified fear by the Karen refugees. What the work refugees would be doing, ultimately would depend on the documents they have on return to Myanmar. Besides, the issue of citizenship and the right to work within Myanmar, refugees face significant challenges of obtaining credible certificates of education and training within the camps that are recognised by the Myanmar Government <sup>30</sup>, as illustrated in the examples below.

In October 2016, the UNHCR in preparation for the voluntary repatriation of 71 refugees<sup>31</sup> from the Thai Tham Hin and Nupo refugee camps, published an article on the refugees as they started the process of returning across the border. This article gave a significant example of one refugee, who found that certificates obtained while in the camp in cooking, sewing, business and auto repair, in preparation to set up a small business in Myanmar, were not considered valid by authorities<sup>32</sup>. This highlights a difficulty the refugees will face, if certificates like these are not recognised within Myanmar, it will increase the difficulty of reintegrating into their new life in Myanmar. However, this is not limited to Myanmar, as refugees would likewise be limited in the recognition of their education and training in other countries if they were to be

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<sup>29</sup> See ""These Certificates [From the Camp] Are Not Recognised In Burma": Refugee Interview #7". 2015. Burma Link. <https://www.burmalink.org/these-certificates-from-the-camp-are-not-recognised-in-burma-refugee-interview-7/>. Modified June 26, 2015

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Information Management Unit. 2017. "Thailand-Myanmar Assistance Package For Facilitated Voluntary Repatriation". Mae Sot: UNHCR. [data.unhcr.org/thailand/download.php?id=1565](http://data.unhcr.org/thailand/download.php?id=1565) accessed October 3, 2017

<sup>32</sup> UNHCR. "Myanmar Refugees Pave The Way Home In Pilot Return". 2016.

relocated. For example, if they decide to remain in Thailand, their presence and ability to work would be illegal, hence any certificates would likely not be recognised. Implementation of a policy like that of the European Union, on the assessment of skills and recognition of qualifications of refugees and migrants would be beneficial to Myanmar, to supplement the already emerging sectors<sup>33</sup>. Yet, realistically, it will only add to the list of policies Myanmar has to implement in targeting the inequalities of the country.

### Employment Opportunities

Employment opportunities for the Karen within the Karen state are mainly in the service sector, especially in tourism as well as in manufacturing and agriculture. A report conducted on business opportunities within the Karen state found large potential for growth in tourism. Business opportunities include; providing increased suitable accommodation, community-based activities, local Karen-speaking guides and bus transportation. Manufacturing and the growth within this sector is largely affected by the lack of infrastructure; limited access to electricity and adequate roads challenges the regional potential for growth in manufacturing. Small-scale manufacturing within conflict affected areas, was suggested in the report to benefit and supplement the tourism sector by producing agricultural products and handcrafts to be sold to tourists. The agricultural sector, although the largest with the Karen state provides one of the biggest risks in producing long-term results, as business opportunities and income security are in the small-scale farming that produce and support short-term results. Nevertheless, potential in all three sectors is limited by the bureaucracy of the Myanmar Government as they have the authority to approve, object or limit the development of any business<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup> NGO Network of Integration Focal Points. 2007. "Policy Briefing On The Assessment Of Skills And Recognition Of Qualifications Of Refugees And Migrants In Europe". European Council. <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/index.cfm?action=media.download&uuid=2A9D2FF5-B4A9-51CA-900BB8CE659198D0>. Accessed November 4, 2017

<sup>34</sup>PeaceNexus Foundation. "An Assessment Of Business Opportunities In The Kayin State".2013.

## Access to Services

Currently, within the refugee camps the Karen experience, in their opinion, had received limited services, because of the restrictions the Thai authorities impose. Other than access to employment, as Figure 3 indicates, the Karen refugees prioritise access to health care and education as a fundamental necessity inside the camps, as well as within Myanmar if they were to return. Inside the camps, the refugees access to education and quality learning is subjected to funding and aid provided by the Thai Government and NGOs<sup>35</sup>. Similarly, in the recognition of certificates of qualifications and training, the education system within Myanmar differs to that received by students within the camps. The informal nature of the education received within the camps, alongside the act of displacement within a set education system, renders the refugees ill-equipped to continue studies or obtain employment outside of the camps from their education, whether in Myanmar or in Thailand. Prioritisation of education by the Karen refugees, highlights the need for the further evaluation of the quality of education within Myanmar for the refugees to take into account when determining to relocate to villages.

## Education in Myanmar

The UNHCR conducted a survey on the quality of education, the availability of preschool, primary and secondary education in relation to the location of villages which provide schooling at all levels. The importance of such a survey demonstrates the services available in one village differ from the next. This promotes the competitiveness in obtaining land and housing within villages which have increased services between the Karen who stayed and the Karen refugees who fled. Since June 2013, the UNHCR has been piloting a system to assess the spontaneous returnees in the Southeast of Myanmar, a process that may have started because of the absence of an organized Voluntary Repatriation operation<sup>36</sup>. The assessed villages were Hlaingbwe, Kawkareik, Hpa-An, Kyainseikgyi, Myawaddy and Thandaunggyi. This assessment, summarised in Figure 4, shows the percentages of assessed villages in

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<sup>35</sup> Oh, Su-Ann. 2010. "Education In Refugee Camps In Thailand: Policy, Practice And Paucity". Education For All Global Monitoring Report. UNESCO. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0019/001907/190709e.pdf>. Accessed 5 November, 2017

<sup>36</sup>UNHCR. "Myanmar Refugees Pave The Way Home In Pilot Return". 2016.



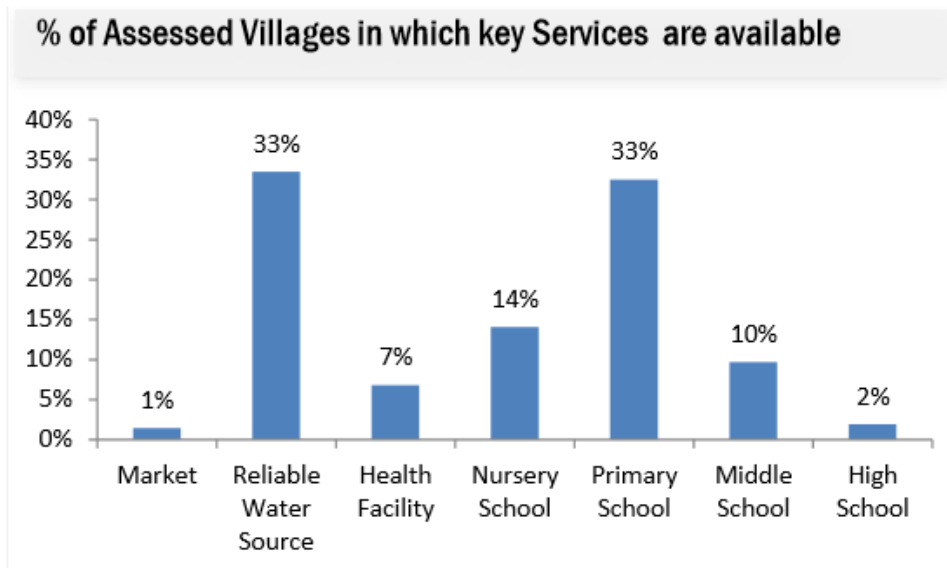


Figure 4: Assessed Villages with Key Services, 2017

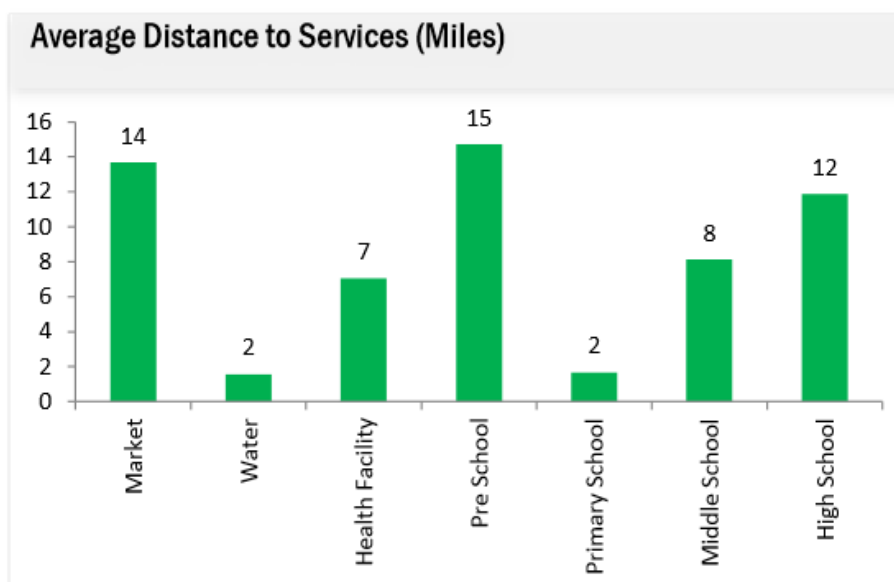


Figure 5: Average Distance to Services, 2017

which key services are available. Primary school education is the highest form of education available (33%), followed by Nursery School, (14%), Middle School (10%) and High School (2%) within the assessed villages (Figure 4<sup>37</sup>). The assessment also provides the average distance to such services (Figure 5<sup>38</sup>), Nursery School, 15 miles,

<sup>37</sup> UNHCR. 2017. "Myanmar SE Operation -Return Assessments". Hpa-An: UNHCR.

<sup>38</sup> UNHCR. 2017. "Myanmar SE Operation -Return Assessments". Hpa-An: UNHCR.

Primary School, 2 miles, Middle School, 8 miles and High School, 12 miles. The UNHCR Village Community Profile within the Karen State further addresses the availability of services and the accessibility for villagers to access in nearby villages. For example, Kat Sat in the Kyainseikgyi township, Primary and Middle school were available in the village, but Nursery and High school were not available. In the village of Khoke Khwar in the same township, Nursery and Middle School were available but Primary and High School were not. The information which is provided by the UNHCR in these assessments indicates rural areas having a disparity of education systems from Nursery to High School. It also indicates the necessity of travel between villages to access education, creating a harder environment to encourage schooling<sup>39</sup>.

### Healthcare in Myanmar

In terms of assessing the access to health care including availability to health facilities and medical staff, the UNHCR provide clear, specific information from the Karen State. In Ka Sat, the health staff available include one aux-midwife, one health assistant and one traditional birth attendant. There is no health facility and the nearest facility is six miles away. In Khoke Khwar there is one midwife, one health assistant and one traditional birth attendant with a health facility within the village. Whereas in Ta Gay, only one aux-midwife and one traditional birth attendant were available. The on-the-ground fieldwork and research done the by UNHCR, produces information which firstly, is vital to refugees who are considering returning and secondly, supports or challenges information believed by refugees on the prospects of return. It also challenges other information on healthcare within Myanmar.

Alongside the research conducted by the UNHCR, the overall health care within Myanmar should also be considered, especially in understanding the future prospects of the healthcare system. As mentioned previously in delivering services to citizens, Myanmar faces challenges in reducing the disparity of the distribution of services between urban and rural areas and this includes the healthcare system. Although the healthcare system is a mixture of public and private sectors both in the aspects of the finance and supply of care, the Ministry of Health remains the major provider of

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<sup>39</sup> Information Management Unit. 2017. "Village Community Profile-Kayin". Mae Sot: UNHCR. <http://data.unhcr.org/thailand/download.php?id=1614>. Accessed September 2017

healthcare services within the country<sup>40</sup>. Within the MoH, the healthcare system is divided into six departments. Additionally, the support of NGOs, local community based organisations and religion-based societies, provide supplementary support and healthcare services.

Similar to employment, accessibility and availability of health care within Myanmar is better in urban areas, and large cities have the best capacity to deliver effective healthcare. Although there have been increases in the overall numbers of staff within the healthcare sector, the disparity of skills follows the trend of employment within Myanmar with better service in urban areas. The number of skilled healthcare workers in rural areas is part of the insufficiency of access to and availability of healthcare. This is critical as 70% of the population of Myanmar resides within rural areas and without roads to support transportation, access to medical aid can be difficult.

Within rural areas, healthcare is delivered by a mix of health and medical professionals<sup>41</sup>. Basic health staff are commonly the primary healthcare workers. One rural health centre (RHC), has four sub-centres comprising; one public health supervisor Grade I at the RHC, four public health supervisors Grade II, five midwives (one at the RHC and one at each sub-centre), one lady health visitor at the RHC, and one health assistant at the RHC<sup>42</sup>. The responsibilities for the basic health staff include; maternal and child health (clinic or homecare), school health, nutritional promotion, immunization, community health education, environmental sanitation, disease surveillance and control, treatments of common illnesses, referral services, birth and death registration, and the training of volunteer health workers (community health workers and auxiliary midwives)<sup>43</sup>. The low number of roles and responsibilities for the health workers within rural areas challenges every aspect of delivering healthcare to rural areas. Issues surrounding the delivery of healthcare include; the limited number of workers, difficult transportation to remote villages as well as the access to medical resources such as medicine and equipment. Overall this impacts on the quality of healthcare received by people living in rural areas.

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<sup>40</sup> Nyi Nyi, Latt, et al. "Healthcare in Myanmar" 2017.

<sup>41</sup> See Nyi Nyi, Latt, et al. "Healthcare in Myanmar" 2017.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

For the Karen who want to return to Myanmar, but deem having reliable healthcare as a primary concern, this may be a concern in returning to rural areas. Disabled, injured and or ill refugees may face extreme disadvantages in receiving healthcare and medical support in rural areas. This highlights a dilemma the refugees may face in deciding to return to Myanmar. For example Thant Zin Maung, who returned with his family in the Voluntary Repatriation in 2016, his first priority was his ill wife, stating “I wanted to go back a long time ago, for my children’s future and for my wife’s health”. His wife Ta Pyi Soe had an undiagnosed medical problem which, after receiving medical treatment and residing in better living conditions, got better<sup>44</sup>. Refugees in similar circumstances may find Myanmar an option that allows them to receive medical attention that they currently do not receive in the camps, or illegally in Thailand.

Relocating to urban areas, particularly the cities of Nay Pyi Taw, Yangon and Mandalay, may provide the best initial medical support. Within the private sector, charity hospitals operated by NGOs provide healthcare and support for the poor, particularly for those who suffer from severe health problems. These hospitals are private non-profit clinics operated by community-based organizations and religion-based societies, which also provide outpatient care. Among them, some have developed to provide inpatient care, although the funding and provision of care is still fragmented according to research<sup>45</sup>. The healthcare provided by these hospitals supports the poor within urban cities in an effort to eliminate the disparity between the access of healthcare between those who can afford it, and those who cannot.

Although improvements of the healthcare system within Myanmar is slowly progressing, the treatment of major diseases shows the effort by the Government to develop and improve the overall health of its citizens. Increased spending on healthcare as well as the transparency of information due to the political changes, has enabled international organisations to become aware of the prevalence of diseases and illnesses such as Malaria, Tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS within Myanmar. Malaria within the South Asian Region remains prevalent, with India (89%) and Indonesia (9%)

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<sup>44</sup> Tan, Vivian.. "From Camp To City, Myanmar Returnees Grapple With Yangon Life". Yangon: UNHCR.

<sup>45</sup> Nyi Nyi, Latt, et al. "Healthcare in Myanmar" <http://www.unhcr.org/en-au/news/latest/2017/5/5912d97e2c/camp-city-myanmar-returnees-grapple-yangon-life.html> modified May 10, 2017

followed by Myanmar (2%) sharing the estimated cases of Malaria in 2015. Funding for the prevention of Malaria as well as for those at risk, relies heavily on international funding.<sup>46</sup> Likewise funding for Tuberculosis relies heavily on international aid, but as with Malaria, the overall funding for these diseases increases year by year. In 2016, an estimated 25, 000 people died from Tuberculosis. Tuberculosis additionally exacerbates the mortality rates of people living with HIV/AIDS, with the combined cases resulting in a rate of 9.3 per 100,000 people<sup>47</sup>. UNAIDS reported that in 2016 there were an estimated 230,000 people living with HIV, with a prevalence rate of 0.8% and 7,800 HIV/AIDS related deaths (excluding Tuberculosis)<sup>48</sup>. However, it has been pointed in reports and by academics, that due to the sensitivities of information within Myanmar, accurate reports on the number of people affected may be obscured, similar to the inconsistency regarding the population of Myanmar<sup>49</sup>. This information does help refugees to understand that, while healthcare within Myanmar needs to be developed further, there is progress in the treatment of the major diseases and infections within the country. indicating the improvements and efforts the country has made in this direction. Refugees can be assured that if they decide to return, healthcare and medical aid is available for their health and the health of their family members.

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<sup>46</sup> World Health Organisation. 2016. "World Malaria Report 2016". Geneva: World Health Organisation. <http://www.who.int/malaria/publications/world-malaria-report-2016/report/en/> accessed 10 November 2017

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> "Aidsinfo | UNAIDS". 2017. UNIADS <http://aidsinfo.unaids.org/>. accessed 10 November 2017

<sup>49</sup> Ditlevsen, Marie. 2014. "Social Issues". In *Burma/Myanmar-Where Now?*, 1st ed., Mikael Gravers and Fleming Ytzen (Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS Press 2014) 121-134.

## Further Considerations

While this report has endeavoured to maintain a neutral perspective, not taking on any political stance or agenda, which often surrounds the repatriation of the refugees from Thailand, it is also important to consider other perspectives regarding repatriations. Two points of interest have been found. Firstly, that repatriation of refugees back into Myanmar or relocation to other countries is not the only answer, there may be opportunities to remain in Thailand. Despite being broadcasted by the Thai Government as a 'security threat' and a burden to society, the illegal refugees who reside in Thailand also provide the country economic benefits. The economic growth, the declining fertility rate, the extension of basic education to secondary schools and the subsequent changing preferences for skilled jobs has facilitated the exit of Thais out of unskilled jobs, creating a high demand for foreign labour<sup>50</sup>. This has opened the market for the refugees to work in the least attractive jobs, at lower wages previously worked by Thais. Overall, the refugees positively contribute to the Thai economy; directly by enlarging the labour force, and indirectly by enlarging the market for local suppliers and attracting international aid<sup>51</sup>. Secondly, as indicated in Figure 3 some of the Karen who stayed in Myanmar throughout the civil conflict do not wish the refugees to return. This is due to multiple factors, including the availability of land and housing, but also in the fundamental ideas of social and cultural identity. The refugees in Thailand, whether they are Karen or of another ethnic group, are different after 30 years of residing outside of Myanmar. Not only because of the changes Myanmar has had, but the refugees themselves are different. Figure 3, highlights, the fundamental aspects of social and cultural identity are different, indicating a possibility of being out-casted and or rejected by the Karen in Myanmar. To produce a positive outcome in the social relations between the Karen in Myanmar and the Karen refugees, assistance may be needed to prevent the emergence of tension that would be heighten in the fragile peace in some areas.

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<sup>50</sup> Inge, Brees. n.d. "Burden Or Boon: The Impact Of Burmese Refugees On Thailand. *The Whitehead Journal Of Diplomacy And International Relations*. [http://blogs.shu.edu/wp-content/blogs.dir/23/files/2012/05/06-Brees\\_Layout-1.pdf](http://blogs.shu.edu/wp-content/blogs.dir/23/files/2012/05/06-Brees_Layout-1.pdf). Accessed September 20 2017

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

## Conclusion

Addressing the concerns of the refugees empowers the refugees to take control of their future. With the increasing pressures on all Myanmar refugees to return to Myanmar, the Karen refugees in particular, may find it difficult to return as Myanmar has changed, and continues to develop democratically. It is apparent that the prospects for the refugees considering return to Myanmar, is likewise continuing to change as the country fluctuates politically, economically, and socially. Although, there are obvious improvements to be made, especially in the availability of healthcare, education and employment, it is crucial that a positive attitude is kept to keep the dialogue of repatriation open. The UNHCR cooperation in the 2016 Voluntary Repatriation, should be regarded as a principle example for the positive response of continuing the dialogue between the Myanmar and Thai Governments, to encourage a bi-lateral solution to an issue that affects both countries. If a negative response were to grow and harden in both Governments, the outcomes may hinder the relations of both countries and also challenge the already limited resources supporting the refugees inside the Thai camps. With the increased international spotlight on Myanmar and the refugee crisis occurring within the region, there is an undoubted need for research to go into finding a solution for these people as an early example for others to follow. Without the support and aid from the international community, Myanmar may struggle to overcome the current challenges, which may result in a decline in its progress towards democracy. Myanmar's development should above all else be encouraged to prevent another era of civil conflict.

## Recommendations

The following are a list of recommendations targeted towards assisting in future research on this topic as well as improving existing policies and practices.

- Independent information directed towards refugees within the camps should be available clearly. For example, in the form of posters, pamphlets and or accounts by trusted individuals and organisations, particularly previous returnees. This will act to prevent incorrect information and rumours being spread and decrease anxiety about returning to Myanmar
- Introducing programs within the Thai camps to encourage the refugees to relocate to urban areas by making them aware of the benefits of being able to access increased services and employment opportunities
- Further research should be conducted in Myanmar from the perspective of the Karen who stayed, on their thoughts of refugees returning. This would support the UNHCR and other NGO efforts in collecting information on refugees having difficulty in acquiring land and housing after their return.
- Implementing family reunion repatriation program by working with family members of refugees within Myanmar to encourage return and to give incentives for refugees to relocate to urban areas



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