

# Karen-Burmese Refugees



An orientation for health workers and volunteers

# Background Information

- The Karen-Burmese live in mountainous jungle regions of Myanmar (southern and eastern), and Thailand
- Myanmar is located in South-East Asia
  - Formally known as Burma
  - Developing and largely rural
  - Bordered by China, Tibet, Laos, Thailand, Bangladesh and India

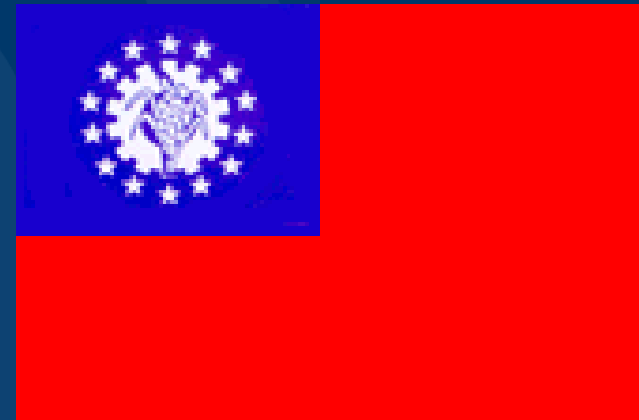


Source: [cyberschoolbus.un.org](http://cyberschoolbus.un.org)

# Myanmar - Background Information

World Health Organisation (2006)

- Population: 50 519 000
- Life expectancy at birth:
  - 61 years
- Infant mortality rate
  - Per 1000 live births: 106
  - 4.7 / 1000 in Australia  
(Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2006)
- Language: Burmese
  - Indigenous peoples have their own languages
  - Over 126 dialects



*Flag of Myanmar*

*Source: cyberschoolbus.un.org*

# History of Myanmar

- 1886: Became a province of British India
- 1948: Gained independence
- 1962: Military dictatorship took power
  - Large outflow of refugees
- 1988: Martial law declared
  - Increased refugee numbers
- State of civil war for much of the past 50 years

# Ethnic Groups

- Major ethnic group: Burmese
- Largest indigenous population: Karen
- Other indigenous races include:
  - Shans
  - Chins
  - Mon
  - Rakhine
  - Katchin
- Ethnic tension between Burman majority and minority ethnic groups



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**Burmese children in refugee camp**

*Photograph by Tom Riddle*  
*Source: [www.tbcc.org](http://www.tbcc.org)*



# Introduction to the Karens

- Population: 6 million (Myanmar)  
400 000 (Thailand)
- Language: Tibeto-Burman family
  - 12 different dialects
  - Over 80% speak either Saga or Pwo
- Religion: Christianity, Buddhism, Muslim, animism

# Karen Culture

- Pride themselves on their:
  - Moral and 'simple, quiet, unassuming and peace loving' nature
  - Vibrant clothing
  - Dance
  - Music



*Photographs by Tom Riddle*  
Source: [www.tbcc.org](http://www.tbcc.org)



# Karen Culture

- Religion
  - Traditional animist - spirit worshipping belief systems
    - *Ther myng khae* (guardian spirits), 'lord of land and water', local spirits, beneficial and malicious ghosts
    - Make sacrifices to natural forces
    - Often incorporated into understanding of organised religion
  - Christian (65%)
    - Emphasis on Bible study and prayer services (hymn singing)
    - Skin adorned with tattoos for magical protection
    - Martyr day – fast for half to full day
    - Some do not drink tea or eat pork on day of worship (Saturday)

# Karen Culture

- Religion
  - Buddhist (28%)
    - Considerable interplay with animist rituals/practices
    - Often wear amulets
    - Do not drink alcohol
  - Muslim (11%)
    - Worship to Allah contributes to both spiritual and worldly well-being to:
      - Enrich and develop the soul
      - Prepare for the life to come
    - Abstain from eating certain foods including:
      - Pork and its by-products
      - Flesh of animals which have died without being ritually slaughtered (Halal meat products are consumed)

# Burmese Health Beliefs

- Health is related to harmony in and between the body, mind, soul and universe
  - Harmony expressed as a balance between 'hot' and 'cold' elements (not necessarily related to temperature)
  - States of health seen as 'hot' or 'cold' – treatment with the opposite medicine or foods
- Postpartum period is time of susceptibility to illness – mother's body 'cold' from blood loss
  - Body should be warmed with external heat and warm drinks as well as foods with 'hot' properties
  - Sour and bitter foods eaten also thought to reduce blood flow

# Traditional Karen Culture

- Family life
  - Women traditionally considered inferior to men. However this has been changing
  - Average of 2 – 3 children per family
- Marriage
  - Whole village consulted as to whether a marriage is appropriate and not offensive to any spirits
  - Adultery is considered taboo - an unnatural act that can bring catastrophe on the whole village

# Traditional Karen Culture

- Relationships
  - ‘a-nah-dah’ expresses Burmese cultural value – “an attitude of delicacy, expressive of a solicitousness for other people’s feelings or convenience”
  - Very hospitable and will expect any guests to eat with them
- Polite greeting
  - Holding your right elbow in your left hand, and using your right hand to shake hands
  - Shoes not worn in home