

# ***BURMA and VIETNAM:***

***The "failed state" and the "resurgent dragon"***

***Why Burma's refugees escape media spotlight***

***Sixty years after the end of British colonialism the scar  
of fragmentation sends thousands of Burmese Karen refugees  
to build new homes around the world -- largely unnoticed***

***From the battlefields of Burma to  
NICKEL AND DIMED in America***

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**By Frederic A. Moritz**

***"The flight of the Karen,  
though little covered by American media,  
slowly puts a human face on  
the country from which they come."***



***A 12 year old Karen fighter; a nine year old Karen wounded***

***"Come you back to Mandalay,  
Where the old Flotilla lay:***

*Can't you 'ear their paddles chunkin' from Rangoon to Mandalay?  
On the road to Mandalay,  
Where the flyin'-fishes play,  
An' the dawn comes up like thunder outer China 'crost the Bay!"*

From: [MANDALAY](#)  
By: [RUDYARD KIPLING](#) 1865 to 1936

[Steps from the Past: Walking the Path to Exile](#)  
[Steps to the Future: Walking the Path to Employment](#)  
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[Are Burma's Cyclone Relief Programs anti-Karen?](#)

English novelist Charles Dickens might have called it "[A Tale of Two Nations.](#)"

On the one hand is Vietnam, whose decolonization from France brought it headlong into global power politics and a devastating war with the United States.

Now it is a prospering "survivor."

It moves forward, a "resurgent dragon" with an increasingly vibrant mixture of socialism and capitalism, drawing enthusiastic investors from many parts of the world.

On the other hand is isolated Burma. Sinking in its own swampy backwater.

Even though the nation now called Myanmar was never sucked into the path of helicopter gun ships.

Instead it fended off the foreigners and defeated its multiple Marxist rebels.

**Yet today it is a mostly socialistic, virtually "failed state."  
It is ruled by a repressive military dictatorship, largely  
isolated from the world and under economic sanctions  
from the West.**

**Both Vietnam and Burma have sent forward large  
numbers of refugees to seek a new life in the U.S.**

**So why have [Vietnam's refugees](#) earned relatively high  
media attention while Burma's exodus is scarcely noticed?**

**Partly because there is a deep "American angle" in  
Indochina where U.S. soldiers died for more than a decade.  
Partly because many Vietnamese refugees, including the  
"boat people" left Vietnam shortly after American  
withdrawal - when American interest in the area where its  
soldiers died was still alive.**

**America's policy makers never felt compelled to directly  
intervene in isolated Burma, which successfully avoided the  
ravages of warfare with outside armies.**

**Without a vivid American presence there have been few  
images on American TV screens of repression and violence  
in Burma.**

**But the story of Burma's isolation and of its displaced  
Karen tells us something special about why today's  
Myanmar has become virtually a "failed state."**

**The flight of the Karen, though little covered by American  
media, slowly puts a human face on the country from  
which they come.**

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**First meet the proud Karen, children of the mountains, refugees now coming by the thousands, refugees striving for education and employment in new homes in the United States, Canada, and Australia. For now many live on "handouts," after spending as many as 20 years in Thai refugee camps such as near [Mae Sot](#).**

**The Karen made up a large part of those killed in the May, 2008 [Cyclone Nargis](#), as they were concentrated in fishing and farming near the storm ravaged Irawaddy Delta.**

**See the May 14 issue of [The Christian Science Monitor](#) for details on how the government's delay in allowing relief to cyclone victims may in part be anti-Karen.**



**In Thailand**

**This writer, former [Asia correspondent](#) for *The Christian Science Monitor*, assembles this summary from reporting, research, and working first hand with Karen refugees he helps settle in [New Bern](#), North Carolina.**

**Here in New Bern, far from the violence of eastern Burma, a modest social experiment takes place: the resettlement of Karen refugees, with sponsorship of local churches and**

**others. As many as 80, including some non-Karen, may arrive in the broader East Carolina region in a year.**

**Coordinated by the [Interfaith Refugee Ministry](#), an affiliate of the Episcopal Migration Ministries, the program offers friendship, help with the immediate needs of families. The needs include housing and furnishings, clothing, food, medical exams, transportation, jobs and language training.**

- **Check Karen refugee [Klee Thoo's](#) perception of the Karen culture and behavior as it affects Karen resettlement abroad.**
- **Check [Wikipedia](#) for a thorough background on Burma.**
- **Check [Wikipedia](#) for a description of Karen Tibetan origins.**
- **Explore the Karen way of life and historic Baptist connection in the massive, comprehensive and multimedia "[Karen Konnection](#)" website.**

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**In Burma**

**Often they seem smiling, even deferential.**

**The Karen are known for avoiding direct confrontation and the open expression of emotion toward "strangers."**

**At first glance it seems hard to imagine they could be first rate soldiers, at least as fierce and brutal as any other people.**

**It is easy to romanticize them.**

**Cheerful, with a sense of fun, the children frolicking, the parents often starting at the bottom, studying English, working menial jobs.**

**But not far behind is a proud warrior tradition, decades of brutal guerrilla war, fighters who have not surrendered, a once demeaned people who have fought a losing battle to create their own nation.**

**The Karen have suffered massacre, razing of their villages, rape, and kidnapping. We often see them as "human rights victims."**

See this [Christian Science Monitor](#) report for a graphic description of brutal Burmese army attacks, their kidnapping and use of Karen child soldiers against the Karen. Some children are escaping in an "underground railroad" to orphanages in Thailand.

Although now much weakened, Karen guerrilla bands have "given it back," in a stiff and sometimes brutal resistance. Karen child soldiers fighting for the Karen rebellion have often played their part.

[Ambushes and "kill ratios"](#) are part of Karen history.

Under British rule Karen troops, the "Karen Rifles," sometimes inspired terror when helping their colonial rulers repress insurrection. In support of the British their guerrillas led a fierce resistance to the World War II Japanese occupation which, in turn, supported the Burmese independence movement.

The post colonial [Karen rebellion](#) sprung in part from the "Karen Rifles."

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**In Thailand**

**According to a July 27, 2007 Bangkok, Thailand dispatch from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR):**

**"More than 10,000 refugees, mostly from Myanmar, have now left their temporary homes in Thailand to start new lives in third countries, as the world's largest resettlement programme picks up steam.**

**"After many years of living in closed camps with limited opportunities for education and no opportunities to work, finally refugees have hope for a new life filled with exciting opportunities in a new country," said Jeffrey Savage, Resettlement Officer in the UN refugee agency's regional office in Bangkok.**

**"Since the UNHCR programme to resolve one of Asia's most protracted refugee problems began in January, 2005, 10,078 refugees have left Thailand, mainly from the nine refugee camps along the Thai-Myanmar border. The 10,000th**



**refugee departed last Tuesday. The camps are home to 140,000 refugees, ethnic minorities who fled fighting and oppression in Myanmar (Burma) over the past 11 years.**

**"The largest numbers of refugees are departing for the United States, which made an open-ended offer in 2005 to take ethnic Karen refugees from the camps in Thailand. So far, 4,876 have gone to the United States, settling in places like Syracuse, New York; Phoenix, Arizona; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Fort Wayne, Indiana and Dallas, Texas."**

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**In August 2006 the U.S. State Department took a [major step](#) toward resettling Karen in the United States.**

**Exercising its discretionary authority under U.S. immigration law, the Department of State for a second time has waived a restriction that blocked thousands of Burma's ethnic Karen people, now living in refugee camps in Thailand, from applying for resettlement in the United States.**

**The department announced that Karen refugees who meet all eligibility requirements of the U.S. Refugee Admissions and Resettlement Program will not be excluded for having "provided material support" to the Karen National Union (KNU), an ethnic secessionist movement that has been active in southeastern Burma since that country's independence from Britain in 1948.**

**Under terms of the [USA PATRIOT Act](#) -- passed**

**in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States -- and the Real ID Act of 2005, the U.S. government adopted a broad definition of what constitutes a "terrorist organization," ensnaring the KNU, a rebel militia.**

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## ***WALKING THE PATH TO EXILE***

**To understand who they are (and part of why Burma has "failed"), let us visit the paths they have traveled.**

**Below is a short version of their voyage, from the days of the British Raj to the present.**

**Check out this nationalist [Karen National Union](http://www.knunion.org) (KNU) site for a Karen nationalist perspective.**



**19th Century Rangoon Harbor**







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1) "At the beginning" -- as in the case in other parts of S.E. Asia, the Karen were a somewhat separate hills people, looked down upon by Buddhist lowlanders -- but buoyed into a new sense of cohesiveness and consciousness by the liberating proselytizing of British and American missionaries.

**2) As the British expanded their control of Burma from 1830's to 1880,'s (partly to secure India and partly to cultivate rice, etc.) they turned to the Karens and some other hills peoples as military allies.**

**The Karen happily obliged, gained stature and a kind of regional nationhood, perhaps supremacy, by helping garrison Burma for the British, sometimes fiercely putting down lowland Burmese insurrection, i.e. the famous "Karen Rifles."**

**3) When the Japanese invaded and formed an anti-British alliance with the Burmese independence movement, the Karen remained staunch British allies, fiercely fighting the Japanese and their Burmese allies. Guerilla war was the order of the day. No innocence on any side.**

**4) Now, over the course of the British rule, the Karen saw themselves as a true nation, expanding even from their limited bases.**

**5) As the Japanese went to defeat, revenge seeking Burmese on occasion took their toll in massacres of Karen collaborators with the British.**

**6) At the end of the war, the Burmese independence fighters broke with the Japanese, sought to run their own show. Britain came back in.**

**7) A hasty post world war II British move toward decolonization left a power vacuum. The**



**demands of fighting [communist insurrection](#) in Malaya left the British little space to guide a gradual Burma decolonization which might have protected peoples like the Karen with autonomy or separation.**

**8) Post war conferences aimed at creating a new nation sputtered -- with the Karens and some others refusing to participate in unification conferences, feeling the cards were stacked against them. The Karens sought their own separate state.**

**9) Assassinations and power splittings among native Burmese coincided with the full scale emergence of armed anarchy. Various hill tribes and Marxist groups split off in a complicated, protracted series of insurgencies and counter insurgencies which produced decades of militarization.**

**10) By 1947 a major Karen offensive threatened Rangoon, after capturing Mandalay. See contemporary *Time Magazine* account, "[The Baptist Rebellion](#)."**



**In Thailand**

**11) As the Burmese government gradually gained control, defeated insurgents or negotiated settlements, the Karen almost alone continued the battle.**

**12) After Gen. Ne Win, the supreme commander, ousted civilian government in 1962, the pressure on the Karen grew -- and so they were gradually vanquished.**

**13) Burmese military and many others can remember the time when the country was a splintered mess of warring tribes and parties.**

**While battling this they built a massive military establishment, which eventually took over the country.-- and became a major path for those who sought a rice bowl.**

**The fear of a nation re-splintering is one legacy among the military. Another is the simple quest to hold and consolidate power.**

**14) And so it has continued since -- with an aging oligarchy harking back to the ancient times of Burmese greatness ---- and a stubborn, fierce Karen resistance skilled at insurgency.....but losing to a military for decades trained in counter insurgency.**

**Human Rights violations? Yes, but in the form of classic insurgency and counterinsurgency warfare.**

**15) And a Burmese road to socialism, rigid, army controlled, rejecting capitalism, free enterprise as an historic British ploy to strengthen Indian and Chinese merchants, while consigning local Burmese to menial labor in the rice paddies.**

**Socialism became a way to protect Burmese from British favored foreign ethnic groups.**

**16) India, plagued by religious and ethnic division has emerged from the stability, then chaos, resulting from British rule.**

**Burma has not gotten there yet.....and long degraded tribesman who hoped they could ally themselves with the British to build their own nation are, for now, history's losers.**

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## ***WALKING THE PATH TO EMPLOYMENT***

**Once in America, the challenge for Karen is to navigate**

from the sheltered Thailand camps with their inexpensive housing, food, and medicine to the extraordinarily complicated, costly nature of American society.

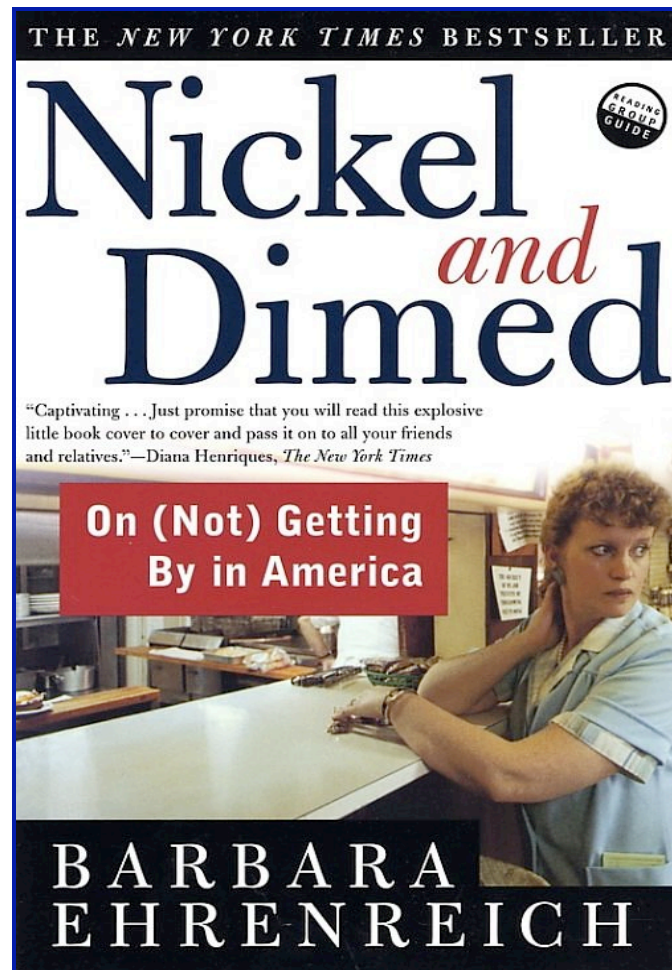
With the growth of globalization and decline of America's middle class, many Karen refugees become a part of a growing economic group publicized by journalist [Barbara Ehrenreich](#) in her "going undercover" *[Nickel and Dimed: On \(Not\) Getting By in America](#)*.

They enter a society in transition with a declining middle class and all the challenges of globalization. Where a seven dollar an hour job can be a key to survival.

Where cheap prices at Walmart become an economic safety net. Where a patchwork combination of supportive social and faith-based services combine with no holds barred laissez faire.

Where a wage rise by acquisition of another family job can cost the adult family [Medicaid](#) benefits with private medical insurance through an employer costing as much as \$200 a month.

Where a medical emergency may require a visit to a hospital emergency room -- or seeking out the services of a free, volunteer staffed clinic, such as [Hope Clinic](#) in nearby Pamlico County.



Barbara Ehrenreich's [Nickel and Dimed](#)

**Where expensive, often dilapidated rental housing, high utility costs, and high medical costs combine with the high cost of running a car frequently necessary for holding even a minimum wage job.**

**Complicated regulations, huge gaps in medical care, and frequently minimum wage jobs.**

**All, most often, with little or no English.**

**Many Karen must join, at least temporarily, the growing number of Americans working two to four jobs per family to maintain the minimum wage lifestyle.**

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**The problem of rents is easy for the non-economist, even a sparsely educated low-wage worker to grasp: it's the market, stupid.**

**When the rich and the poor compete for housing on the open market, the poor don't stand a chance. The rich can always outbid them, buy up their tenements and trailer parks, and replace them with condos, McMansions, golf courses, or whatever they like.**

**Since the rich have become more numerous, thanks largely to rising stock prices and executive salaries, the poor have inevitably been forced into housing that is more expensive, more dilapidated, or more distant from their places of work.....**

**Insofar as the poor have to work near the dwellings of the rich -- as in the case of so many service and retail jobs -- they are stuck with lengthy commutes or dauntingly expensive housing.**

***-Nickel and Dimed, page 199***

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**To begin in poverty is nothing new in the long history of refugees in America.**

**But the Karen are not middle class or wealthy**



**entrepreneurs such as often fled communism in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, Vietnam and Cuba.**

**They are not world renowned scientists and intellectuals such as the small number of Jewish refugees who found shelter in the U.S. during Nazi rule.**

**They are people from the hills, people who must jump perhaps a century in time to find a place in America.**

**Yet there remains the prospect of moving ahead for the persistent who hold to their dreams, manage to acquire employable skills and find a way to navigate the complex maze that is America today.**

**Networks of friends and relatives, assistance from volunteers, and the support of religious groups can make all the difference in the world.**

**For newly arrived Karen there are several paths to employment:**

**1) Block job grants via Interfaith Refugee Ministry (IRM) negotiated in chunks with major area employers, such as plastic factories and appliance makers.**

**These are created based on IRM moral and public relations clout. The IRM intermediates, sets terms, protects refugees, and rations jobs according to need of families.**

**It can intervene to solve problems on the job. It can assure some quality control to both employers and employees.**

**This approach preserves Karen dependence, and**

is conditional on broad hiring and layoff policies of large employers. Priority goes to one spouse per family, so an unemployed spouse may be neglected.

**2) Karen networking.** Karen identify possible employers based on experience of other Karen. Karen themselves introduce to the employer applicants for jobs in cleaning, restaurant serving, etc.

This can encourage personal responsibility, gradual self learning of American system. Karen can maintain their independence, their ability to leave, resign at will. There is relative freedom from bureaucracy, lots of Karen "control."

Karen can get hooked up with unscrupulous and unpredictable employers without an IRM advocate, although IRM can intervene if asked. By this process some Karen may join, at least temporarily, the growing number of Americans working two to four jobs per family to maintain the minimum wage lifestyle.

This approach also discourages negotiation of job issues. When a problem arises, the Karen may simply quit.

Because of language barriers a new employee is sometimes briefed on the new job by other refugees, not by the employer. This can produce possible later misunderstanding or "exploitation."

**3) Based on resume and education background,** some refugees may attempt to move into similar employment as in past life in Thailand refugee

**camps.**

**There may be less stigma, sometimes, but not always, better pay. Teaching, childcare come to mind.**

**There may be lots of hurdles to jump through: language, educational, testing, and certification.**

**This process can be hampered by the variety of sometimes parochial local gatekeepers and a process of bureaucratization and regulation which has grown in American society. Lots of coaching from an expert may be necessary to get certified, employed.**

**If churches and IRM can directly or indirectly lobby the gatekeepers and get them on board for ideological, religious, or public relations reasons, local institutions such as community colleges can sometimes work to open rather than close doors.**

**4) Another approach is for Karen to set up businesses, for example. handicrafts for local sales or export. Difficult but in some cases might provide cottage industry support. Of course in Asia, setting up a food stall or restaurant might make sense.**

**No doubt in places like New Bern, Karen could create marvelous restaurants. The complexities of health regulation, capital costs, and all the rest make the Karen equivalent of even a licensed "hot dog stand" at present a fanciful dream.**

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**No, the Karen first dream frequently was not the glory of living amidst the marvels of the U.S.**

**They are defeated now with little choice. So they must construct a new dream -- once again in a land dominated by others.**

**There is no going back.**

**History has its winners and losers.**

**It can take years and years, but losers can sometimes win again.**



## In New Bern -- where losers can sometimes win again

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