

The Karenni: A Troubled Borderland People and a Destroyed State

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Introduction

As NATO contemplates military intervention in the Balkans regarding the dire situation faced by the people of Kosovo, it is timely to consider the similar plight of large groups of ethnic people living in the border regions of Burma. Similar issues are involved: state-sponsored violence and killing of unarmed civilian populations; forced migration creating thousands of refugees; the wholesale destruction of villages; extrajudicial killings and dilemmas for the international community over issues of sovereignty and interference in the political affairs of a recognised sovereign entity.

An estimated 120,000 people are currently residing in refugee camps, mostly inside Thailand, along the Thai-Burma border. Among these people, going almost unnoticed by the international community, with the exception of small humanitarian relief operations, are approximately 13,500 Karenni refugees. These people come from Karenni State or "*Kayah State*" on official Burmese maps, and they are quietly tucked away in four refugee camps hugging the border to the west of Mae Hong Son. Whilst the underlying causes of the Karennis' plight are similar to those of other large refugee populations from Burma, such as the Karens, Mons, and Rohingyas (the latter group are Muslims from Arakan who have fled in large numbers to Bangladesh), little is known in the outside world about what has been actually happening inside Karenni State, to the Karenni people, or even about the Karenni people themselves.

The Karennis are "*a troubled people*" according to one Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) official now living near to Mae Hong Son. Their troubles relate to the thorny question of Karenni self-determination and the Burmese military regime's struggle for hegemony over the different groups of Karenni, and over the territory and natural resources of Karenni state. Like so many other parts of Burma, Karenni state has witnessed many battles, both between different insurgent groups and between the *Tatmadaw* (Burmese Army) and fighters of the KNPP. However, it is only in recent times that the whole of Karenni state has been completely transformed by warfare and by a systematic village-by-village attempt to eradicate

forever the possibility of Karenni resistance to Burmese authority.

During the last decade, since the crushing of the pro-democracy uprisings, the military regime – the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), or its more recent incarnation, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) – has been able to move into territories and capture border zones previously controlled by different ethnic armies. The SLORC / SPDC territorial gains have provided Rangoon with *de facto* control over people, resources and land up to Burma's internationally recognised boundaries with neighbouring countries, in many cases for the first time since Burma's independence in 1948.

The Geopolitical tide

The geopolitical tide has turned against the small ethnic political movements and armies opposing the Burmese military regime. During the 1960s through to the mid 1980s groups like the Karen National Union (KNU) and Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) benefited from tacit external economic and political support, because of their avowedly anti-communist positions. For the Royal Thai Army these ethnic groups provided a convenient geostrategic buffer, preventing the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) from linking up with the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). However, the collapse of the communist threat in the late-1980s permitted Thailand to adopt its "*battlefields into markets*" strategy with Indochina and Burma. The military regime in Burma badly needed international friends following its oppressive measures to crush the Burman pro-democracy movement in August 1988. ASEAN embarked on its "*constructive engagement*" with SLORC and eventually allowed Burma to become one of the ASEAN family. The ethnic groups fighting the *Tatmadaw* suddenly found themselves more vulnerable because they could no longer rely on external military support. SLORC started to play a game of divide and rule, by forming a series of ceasefire arrangements with some of the ethnic political parties, whilst at the same time launching

concentrated military campaigns against groups like the Karens and Karennis.

“Four Cuts” into the human landscape

A closer look at SLORC/SPDC and *Tatmadaw* activities in Karenni state is illustrative of what has been happening elsewhere in Burma. During the last four years the Burmese military has succeeded in completely changing the human landscape of Karenni state. The scale and intensity of the military regime’s strategy to control the Karenni people makes it likely that the *Tatmadaw*’s counter-insurgency efforts will one day rank against some of the most brutal in the annals of 20th century history. Information from Karenni state reveals that the SLORC/SPDC regard anybody and everybody living in certain “strategic zones”, defined according to past patterns of insurgent activity, as being rebels themselves or supporters of rebel activities. This means that in certain border regions, literally whole communities are branded as actual security risks for Burma’s military regime. Thus, in the name of “national security” thousands of people have become very insecure and fearful for their lives.

To fully appreciate what has happened inside Karenni state it is necessary to understand the military strategy employed by the *Tatmadaw*. For many years the *Tatmadaw* has applied the tried and trusted *Four Cuts* (*Pya Ley Pya*) strategy – cutting off sources of food, funds, intelligence and recruits to the ethnic insurgent groups. This strategy, employed throughout many parts of Burma, has become the single-most important means by which the military authorities in Burma have managed to manipulate communities, weaken armed opposition, and reshape the *de facto* political map.

One critical aspect of the *Four Cuts* approach is that it is not strictly a ‘military’ strategy *per se* in that the major targets for the *Tatmadaw* activities are usually unarmed civilians and ordinary village people. Indeed, *Four Cuts* is inseparable from numerous documented and oral reports of atrocities against people, such as gang rapes, extrajudicial killings, burning and looting of homes, and forced labour. The *Four Cuts* is thus much more than a counter-insurgency operation, for its employment provides the twisted rationale for many dehumanising activities by soldiers themselves, and all in the name of serving the ‘nation’ and providing ‘security’.

Another key element of the Rangoon government’s policy is that it is essentially an exercise in changing

facts on the ground. The *Four Cuts* programme means the destruction of hundreds of villages. The strategy means the removal of people from large areas designated by the military as “strategic zones.” *Four Cuts* implies the deliberate and brutal manipulation of people as if their existence and rights to place and property are meaningless.

It would be wrong to argue that the military strategies employed in Burma are entirely unique. On the contrary, there are similarities between the current-day *Four Cuts* approach and the military methods used by the British Army in defeating the communist insurgency in Malaya. There are also similarities to the so-called “strategic hamlet” programme used by the US military in parts of Indochina. *Four Cuts* also resembles certain counter-insurgency operations used by other contemporary military regimes.

For instance, in the late 1970s, the Indonesian Army, ABRI, deliberately herded many people in East Timor into new “resettlement villages” in sites located near to main roads or at intersections, which could be watched over day and night by soldiers. People were rehoused in zones far away from areas of resistance and each resettlement village was subjected to rigorous systems of internal control. Villagers were only allowed to travel outside the resettlement sites with special passes. No cultivation was allowed within village confines and people were only permitted to tend tiny gardens at short distances from the camps. As a result the basic agricultural needs of the local population could not be met and one of the biggest problems faced by the Timorese people in these resettlement villages was starvation. The deliberate concentration of village people into a few strategic locations and the restrictions on agriculture had no benefits for the Timorese. Nevertheless, the resettlement strategy did have benefits for the Indonesian authorities. First, the people were more easily controlled. Second, by restricting local labour inputs in domestic cultivation the ABRI were able to direct labour into forced work, on road building, timber logging, and the cultivation of export crops – sugar, coffee, and even rice.

In other words, resettlement was not just a military strategy, it was also a means to control people, expropriate resources, use cheap or forced labour, and to extract wealth from East Timor. Similarly, the SLORC/SPDC and the *Tatmadaw* are using the creation of “relocation sites” as a means to transform not only the political base of Karenni society, but also the economic and social base as

well. They are doing so along very similar lines to those used by ABRI in East Timor.

Forced relocations and destroyed villages

The successful employment of the *Four Cuts* approach is illustrated by the scale, pattern and intensity of the forced relocations and village destructions within Karenni state. In total, an estimated 80,000 Karennis out of a total population of approximately 250,000 people have been forcibly relocated. Such figures are now likely to be underestimates due to the fact that forcible relocations are still taking place. The demographic and settlement pattern over a large part of Karenni state is now completely transformed. The erased villages and plantations have probably disappeared from the map forever.

Between the Pon and Salween rivers, 96 villages were forcibly relocated by the *Tatmadaw* between May and June 1996. Relocation orders were sent out to all the village heads in the area and all villagers had to leave their homes by strict deadlines. Any villagers who did not move by these deadlines were shot on sight as rebels. Most of the vacated villages were looted and destroyed. In other words the *Tatmadaw* designated whole territories as being "prohibited for security reasons" and their entire populations were ordered to relocate. For many people, these orders were a virtual death sentence, and for others, it meant the loss of loved ones and the need to start again somewhere else without any resources. Many villagers have fled the relocation sites or escaped into the jungle before the soldiers arrived to destroy their villages. These "internally displaced" people have faced great hardships. Many have been captured and shot, whilst others have faced starvation and malaria. There is no access to medicines for people in hiding. Some people continue to avoid capture and live off meagre resources by scavenging in the jungle. Some people live alongside small bands of Karenni fighters and have small storage barns hidden in secluded areas.

For people living between the Pon and Salween rivers the two major relocation sites were at Sha Daw and Ywa Thit. Conditions in these places were poor. At first people had no place to stay. Many slept in fields, in schools or in local residents' homes. Later people were ordered to build 'barracks-style' housing. At both sites food and water shortages have been common. Sha Daw is located atop a deforested hill and there is only one local stream for the large number of relocatees living there. In addition, many people have died because they lack proper medical facilities and

medicines in the relocation site. Movements to and from these relocation sites are closely monitored by the *Tatmadaw*.

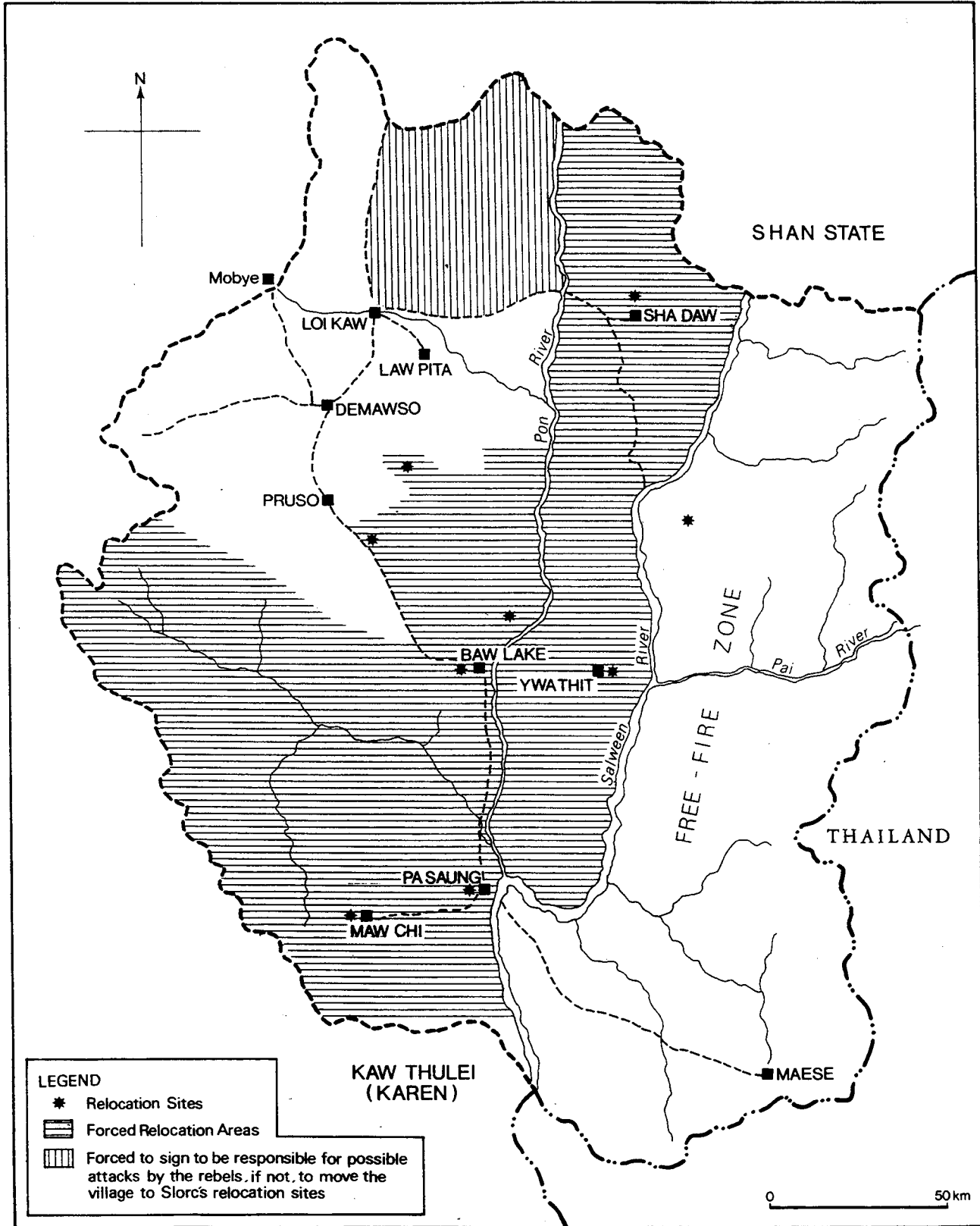
The southwest of Karenni state is another zone that has had a high concentration of forced relocations because this is one of the former strongholds of the KNPP. The area near to Maw Chi has been devastated by the *Tatmadaw* which has systematically destroyed villages, coconut, mango and banana plantations, and confiscated rice stores. In the main relocation site the military at first provided no food to relocatees and many villages went hungry, with some people dying of starvation. Later on, the military sold food at inflated prices, and provided eight milk tins of rice per person per week, about one third of what most villagers would normally consume in their former villages. It seems that another strategy employed by the *Tatmadaw* is to coerce and control people via their stomachs, by restricting diet and by controlling supplies of food to the relocation sites.

Forced labour

Another grim aspect of life for many of the relocatees is that at any time they can be called upon to work on forced labour projects. For instance, families in Maw Chi relocation site and in the town itself have had to send one person each day to work on the Maw Chi-Toungoo road, which is 96 miles long. The clearance for the road is 600 feet wide. This includes space not only for the road itself but for a wide "killing ground" along both sides of the road to prevent any ambush or sabotage by KNPP troops. Men, women and children have worked on this project. People have to take along their own food and sleep beside the road. They have to work from 6am until 5pm with only a one hour break. Every family is assigned a length of road to finish, and they must remain along the road until their task is completed.

Whilst the major forced relocations and village clearances have been in the lands between the Pon and Salween rivers and in the southwest around Maw Chi, other parts of Karenni state have not gone untouched. In the areas to the north and northwest of the state, village leaders were initially told that there would only be relocations if rebel fighters were found to be operating in the vicinity of the villages. Many of these villages remained intact because they were in a part of Karenni state controlled by the Karenni National People's Liberation Front (KNPLF), a rival to the KNPP which had concluded a ceasefire deal with SLORC in 1994. However, due to recent disagreements

Figure 1: The Forced Relocations and “Free-fire Zone” in Karenni State



between the military authorities in Rangoon and the KNPLF the zone covered by the ceasefire has been reduced and numerous villages in this part of Karenni state have been forced to relocate their inhabitants. Since the beginning of 1998, many villagers in the north have been forced into relocation centres at Nwa La Bo and other small recently-created sites. This effectively means that the SLORC/SPDC has now succeeded in altering the human landscape of practically the whole of Karenni state in the space of three years (Figure 1).

One piece in the jigsaw

The destruction of Karenni state is one piece in a jigsaw of deliberate coercive changes affecting thousands of villages in many parts of Burma, particularly in the borderlands. For instance, in neighbouring Shan state an estimated 1,478 villages and almost 56,000 households have been affected by forced relocations since 1996. In total there may be as many as 300,000 people who have been relocated from an area of Shan state that is around 19,000km². In the Karen state of Kawthoolei, the number of internally displaced people is estimated to be between 100,000 and 200,000, which is in addition to 91,000 Karens who are refugees inside Thailand. In other words, approximately 30% of the rural Karen population of eastern Burma are currently displaced.

The meaning of "security"

The statistics of forced relocations, displacement and refugees reveal a terrible on-going story of military occupation and of violence against unarmed people in the names of "security", "peace", "restoring order", and "territorial sovereignty." The scale of destruction is certainly similar to that which the international community has condemned in the Kurdish parts of northern Iraq by the military regime of Saddam Husain. As in Burma, the Iraqi military were very systematic in their approach. As in Burma, the Iraqi military created so-called "prohibited areas" or "security zones" within which every village was to be "eliminated." As in Burma, the elimination of villages should be translated to also mean the destruction of communities, the breaking-up of families, the razing of crops, the looting of property, the burning of villages, mass deportations, broken families, relocation sites without adequate food, water and medical supplies, and of course, the killing of many people. As in Iraq, the leaders of the Burmese military regime view the destruction of villages, homes, schools, churches (many Karenni people are Baptist or Catholic), and the manipulation of people's lives as a rational exercise aimed at

extending their own versions of "order" and "security." It is a sad fact of life that the people who remain inside Burma are more at risk than the refugees who have made it across the boundary into Thailand. The principles of state sovereignty and non-interference in Burma's "internal affairs" are shielding the main perpetrators of violence and destruction.

"Free-fire zones"

Another strategy used by the *Tatmadaw* is the creation of so-called "free-fire zones" (the same strategy also appears to be emerging in Kosovo). The *Tatmadaw* has created numerous free-fire zones in the borderlands with Thailand. In Karenni state the whole of the territory to the east of the Salween River right up to the international boundary is effectively a large free-fire zone within which no civilians are permitted, no unauthorised movements are allowed, and any civilian straying into the zone is in great danger of being shot (Figure 1). To create this particular free-fire zone the *Tatmadaw* had to remove all the civilian population living there, mostly north of the Pai River. The zone has a heavy military presence with several light infantry battalions in place. This means that it is extremely dangerous for any Karenni seeking to make the long trek to the border and to the relative safety of the refugee camps.

Small groups of Karenni refugees usually have to be escorted by KNPP fighters who are very familiar with the terrain and the locations of *Tatmadaw* units. There are many reports of people disappearing in the free-fire zone. This is yet another example of the SLORC/SPDC's changes in political geography making ordinary people's lives more insecure than ever. Furthermore, the very fact that there is a high *Tatmadaw* presence just across from the refugee camps inside Thailand raises the very real possibility of cross-border sorties and of clandestine night raids on the Karenni refugee communities. There have already been some attacks on the refugee camps by *Tatmadaw* soldiers in violation of Thailand's territorial sovereignty.

The SLORC/SPDC and *Tatmadaw* have sought a form of border and national security that has left hundreds of thousands of people insecure, displaced, and vulnerable to a whole range of abuses. Further testimony to these aspects of life inside Burma are provided by the detailed reports of the Karen and Shan Human Rights Groups and by the Karenni Information Office. These reports are largely based on interviews with ordinary village people who have managed to escape relocation sites

and find their way into Thailand. There are now thousands of brief oral histories reporting on life under military occupation, on how people were forced into leaving their homes, on life inside relocation sites, on personal experiences of forced labour, and reports on the often long and dangerous journey by foot to the Thai side of the border.

The lists of the dead

One of the most disturbing aspects of the human rights reports are the lists of people who have been killed by the *Tatmadaw*. Some of these lists are able to record the names of victims, their ages, their sex, their villages of origin, the date of death, the sites of the killings, and the particular army battalion responsible. These bold facts help to personalise the grim statistics of violence against civilians. Under the simple category of "Notes" there are often recorded the way people have met their deaths – "shot dead", "beaten dead", "killed by mortar shell", "burnt to death", "electric shock and beaten dead", "beheaded." These lists are another vitally important record of the human costs of the *Tatmadaw's* brand of security. The vast majority of people killed are under thirty years of age. Many girls and young women fall under one of the grimmest categories of all – "raped and killed." These lists provide further confirmation that, as in other areas of civil warfare and in other cases of genocide, rape is being used by the military as a weapon to terrorise and dehumanise local people. Rape is a degrading and humiliating weapon against ordinary village people who have no real means to defend themselves against such abuses. Rape is a brutal way of emphasising the power of the *Tatmadaw* over local people. Rape is more than a mere weapon of war, it is an affirmation of control.

Extrajudicial killings are simply a fact of life wherever the military has employed the *Four Cuts* policy. The people of Karenni state have had their share of killings as have the Karens, Mons, Shans, Chins, Rohingyas, Burmans and other groups. Virtually everybody in the Karenni refugee camps has had loved ones, relatives, friends and fellow villagers killed by the *Tatmadaw*. Most of these people have witnessed atrocities committed by the *Tatmadaw*. They have to live daily with their terrible memories and there is little help for anybody suffering from psychological trauma. Thankfully, the International Rescue Committee does provide much-needed medical assistance to the Karenni refugees. Whilst these people cannot forget the horror of what they have been through, as one member of the Karenni National Women's Association put it, "we can at least sleep at night."

The constant fear that living in a zone earmarked for relocation or of living in a relocation site or of being "on the run" from the military has given way to the relative safety and uncertainty of refugee existence.

Homeless orphans

Another sad fact of life in the refugee camps are the large numbers of children who may grow up inside these camps and who may never be able to go home. Some children are in the doubly difficult position of being both homeless and parentless. One orphanage in Camp 3 (Figure 2) is home for ninety boys, most of whom have lost parents – either missing or killed inside Karenni state and there are others whose parents are now too impoverished, weak or sick to take care of their sons.

Living on a hope and a prayer

Life for the Karennis has become a matter of day to day survival. Refugees continue to make it across the border in small numbers. There are still many reports of violence, relocations and forced labour filtering out of Karenni state. The grip of the military regime on the territory and resources of Karenni state is tightening. Whilst the immediate prospects are gloomy for the Karennis, it is important to stress that many people themselves continue to show a spirit of hope that is stronger than the brutal methods being used to oppress them. Unfortunately, hope alone will not produce a safe home for these people to return to.

Daubed on the rocks near to the Sacred Heart of Jesus Church built by the refugees themselves in Camp 3 are the words "Pray for Us." The international community should do much more than pray. The voices of the Karennis should be heard. It is important that the international community does not simply allow the destruction of people's lives to be forgotten.

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Figure 2: The *Tatmadaw* Presence on the Burma (Karenni State) side of the Border and Karenni Refugee Camps inside Thailand

