External support for insurgencies

The case of the Karen National Union in Burma

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### Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AAPP</td>
<td>Assistance Association of Political Prisoners</td>
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<td>ABSDF</td>
<td>All Burma Students’ Democratic Front</td>
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<td>AFPFL</td>
<td>Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League</td>
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<tr>
<td>ARC</td>
<td>American Refugee Committee</td>
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<td>ASEAN</td>
<td>Association of Southeast Asian Nations</td>
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<td>BIA</td>
<td>Burma Independence Army</td>
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<td>BPP</td>
<td>Border Patrol Police</td>
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<td>BSPP</td>
<td>Burma Socialist Programme Party</td>
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<td>CPB</td>
<td>Communist Party of Burma</td>
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<td>CPT</td>
<td>Communist Party of Thailand</td>
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<tr>
<td>CBO</td>
<td>Community Based Organization</td>
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<td>CC</td>
<td>Camp Committee</td>
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<td>DPFF</td>
<td>Displaced Person Fleeing Fighting</td>
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<td>DKBA</td>
<td>Democratic Karen Buddhist Army</td>
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<tr>
<td>DR</td>
<td>Donor Representative</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECHO</td>
<td>European Community Humanitarian aid Office</td>
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<td>FDB</td>
<td>Forum for Democracy in Burma</td>
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<td>IO</td>
<td>International Organization</td>
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<td>IOM</td>
<td>International Organization for Migration</td>
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<td>IRC</td>
<td>International Rescue Committee</td>
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<td>JRS</td>
<td>Jesuit Refugee Service</td>
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<td>KED</td>
<td>Karen Education Department</td>
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<td>KHRG</td>
<td>Karen Human Rights Group</td>
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<tr>
<td>KKBBBSC</td>
<td>Kawthoolei Karen Baptist Bible School and College</td>
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<td>KNA</td>
<td>Karen National Association</td>
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<td>KNDO</td>
<td>Karen National Defense Organization</td>
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<td>Abbreviation</td>
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<tr>
<td>KNLA</td>
<td>Karen National Liberation Army</td>
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<td>KNU</td>
<td>Karen National Union</td>
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<td>KNUP</td>
<td>Karen National Unity Party</td>
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<td>KPC</td>
<td>Karen Peace Council</td>
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<td>KRC</td>
<td>Karen Refugee Committee</td>
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<td>KRCEE</td>
<td>Karen Refugee Committee Education Entity</td>
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<td>KWO</td>
<td>Karen Women Organization</td>
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<td>KYO</td>
<td>Karen Youth Organization</td>
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<td>LTTE</td>
<td>Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam</td>
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<td>MOI</td>
<td>Ministry Of Interior</td>
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<td>NCGUB</td>
<td>National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma</td>
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<td>NDF</td>
<td>National Democratic Front</td>
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<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organisation</td>
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<td>NLD</td>
<td>National League for Democracy</td>
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<td>NMSP</td>
<td>New Mon State Party</td>
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<td>NSC</td>
<td>National Security Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>ODA</td>
<td>Official Development Aid</td>
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<td>PLO</td>
<td>Palestinian Liberation Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>RTA</td>
<td>Royal Thai Army</td>
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<tr>
<td>RTG</td>
<td>Royal Thai Government</td>
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<tr>
<td>SEATO</td>
<td>Southeast Asia Treaty Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>SLORC</td>
<td>State Law and Order Restoration Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>SPDC</td>
<td>State Peace and Development Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>TBBC</td>
<td>Thai Burma Border Consortium</td>
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<td>TNR</td>
<td>Transnational Rebels</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNHCR</td>
<td>United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees</td>
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<td>USDP</td>
<td>Union Solidarity and Development Party</td>
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<td>UWSA</td>
<td>United Wa State Army</td>
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The people of Burma – and especially the refugees in Mae La – have been immeasurably kind to me. Their willingness to talk with me and answer the undoubtedly sometimes silly questions of an ignorant outsider has deeply impressed me. Their optimism and warmth will stay with me; it is no exaggeration to say that I have lost my heart.

I have added various pictures to this thesis. Some serve as an illustration of what is written but most are just meant as decoration and a way to show the beauty of this country and its people. The majority of these pictures are my own, but some of the best (including the cover photo) are taken by the professional Thailand-based photographer James Robert Fuller. His name is mentioned at those pictures but I like to thank him once again here for his kind permission.

On a more personal level I would like to thank my family. Having travelled half the world in the last years, I write these words back in my hometown, in the house where I was born and raised. I owe my parents for too much to mention here, including visiting me wherever I am. I owe Marianka and Gerbert for their aero bed, deadlines, language corrections and the best wedding one could imagine. I owe Laurien and Armand for their food, drinks, bed and cigarettes. I owe you all for your love and support.

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7.1 Discussion and recommendations
1 Introduction

Outside support is a common and significant feature of rebel groups in the whole world. In their survey of 74 post-Cold War insurgencies, Byman et al (2001) found that 59 of the studied groups received some form of significant external assistance. The most important providers of outside support are states, refugees and diasporas (Byman et al, 2001).

Few insurgencies can survive without outside support, especially since they often face a stronger opponent in the state they are fighting. Kiras (2008, 188) has argued that “external physical and moral support for an insurgent cause is a prerequisite for success.” Such support could be through the provision of arms or money, but less tangible aid is also possible.

One of the most important forms of external support for a rebel group is providing a safe haven (Byman et al, 2001). Salehyan (2009, 5) analyzed post World War II insurgencies and found that 55 percent of them had moved at least some part of its operations to another country, bringing him to the conclusion that “transnational insurgent groups are not exceptional but are common to several so-called ‘internal’ wars.” A sanctuary across the border can provide relief to an insurgency that would have otherwise been defeated. Rebels might also find sanctuary in internationally supported refugee camps, in which case they might even be able to use humanitarian aid for their violent campaign.

Such a safe haven can have serious consequences beyond the mere continuation of conflict. It has been found that transnational rebels increase the possibility of interstate disputes or even international war, for example through cross-border attacks by the rebels’ home state (Byman et al, 2001; Salehyan, 2009). Outside support is thus not only a common, but also a highly significant feature of insurgencies.

Numerous cases throughout the world give proof of the relevance of outside support. Although the Afghan government and its United States/NATO allies are much stronger than the Taliban/Al-Qaeda militants, the latter have for example been able to withstand counterinsurgency operations due to its ability to hide across the border on rough terrain in Pakistan. Various Arabic states have supported the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), while Malaysia has assisted Muslim insurgents in southern Thailand (Byman et al, 2003; Salehyan, 2009). At the time of writing, Saudi Arabia and Qatar give weapons and

Recognizing the new roles and limits of outside backers is essential for understanding the dynamics of insurgency today.

other material to the Free Syrian Army that attempts to overthrow the Assad regime.¹

Differentiating rebels from refugees can sometimes be problematic. Refugees can be caused by conflict but can also cause conflict themselves and assist a rebel group. The orchestrators of the 1994 Rwandan genocide were able to reorganize in refugee camps in neighboring Zaire; the ensuing regional war was a direct result of the serious threat these militarized refugee camps posed to the new Rwandan leadership and a clear example of how outside support can cause further escalation of a conflict. The Khmer Rouge had been defeated by invading Vietnamese forces in 1979, but managed to continue its terror for two more decades due to their control over refugee camps on the Thai-Cambodian border. In both cases humanitarian aid was used to sustain an armed campaign (Lischer, 2003; Terry, 2002).

Support from diaspora members has often less serious consequences, but they can nonetheless provide significant financial and political support. The Sri Lankan Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) is a prime example. It had at some point offices in at least 54 countries throughout the world that raised money, spread propaganda and lobbied foreign governments (Byman et al, 2001; Demmers, 2007).

Despite the significance of this topic, knowledge is limited to only a handful of well-documented cases. Authors of large-N studies on external support have acknowledged the need of additional in-depth studies of specific cases. Byman et al (2001, 107) note that it is “imperative that the impact of outside support be considered within the context and contours of a particular conflict environment.” Salehyan (2009, 122) also argues that examining specific cases is necessary in order to examine “the underlying causal processes behind the statistical correlations, assess elements of the theory that are difficult to test in a quantitative study, and shed light on additional empirical implications of the theory.”

Salehyan (2009, 124, emphasis in original) furthermore notes that more valuable than comparisons between several cases are “comparisons over time within the same conflict. Rather than comparing these cases to one another, it is more important to understand how these conflicts evolved over time.”

An interesting case then is provided by the Karen National Union (KNU), an ethnic minority insurgency from Burma which has continuously fought for more autonomy and equal rights since 1948. Being the longest on-going rebellion in the world, Karen themselves refer to it as ‘the father-to-son war’ (Smith, 2007; Steinberg, 2010).

The incredible longevity and persistence of the KNU, combined with the available academic literature on the interrelation between outside support and insurgency, suggests that the rebel group must have received significant external support. However, to this date a structured analysis of such support is lacking; a gap that will be filled up by this study. To that end, the central research question has been formulated as follows:

*What are the nature, extent and implications of external support for the Karen National Union?*

This study will focus on support from states, refugees and diasporas. Of course this selection is far from exhaustive and other actors could be significant too. In the case of the KNU other rebel groups would be an interesting object of study, but it is nonetheless omitted from this study. Given the sheer endless number of (both ideological and ethnic) insurgencies that have crossed each other at so many points in Burma’s history, their mutual relations deserve a full study on their own.

Had there been a contest for the biggest number of opposition organizations in one nation, Burma would be the winner by large margin.

*Burma’s opposition. Bangkok Post, October 12, 2003.*

Soldiers of the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), armed wing of the KNU. Photo: James Robert Fuller.
1.1 Structure of this study

The three concepts of the research question and the three actors that are studied combined, provide for a set of logical questions: systematically will be determined what the nature, extent and implications are of respectively state, refugee and diaspora support.

The following chapter provides the theoretical framework for this study. It describes the findings of previous studies, illustrated by examples of insurgencies over the whole world that have relied on external support. Chapter three then contains a description of the methodologies used in the course of this study and gives a detailed account of my six months of fieldwork in Thailand and Burma. Chapter four gives a historical background and overview of the KNU, while chapter five and six provide an answer to the research question by consecutively analysing the nature, extent and implications of the three earlier indicated providers of outside support.

Chapter five focuses on state support, whereas chapter six deals with refugee support and, because of its interrelatedness, diaspora support. Chapter seven contains the conclusion, discussion and some recommendations.
2 Theoretical framework

During the Cold War, superpower support for an armed insurgency\(^2\) was a common strategy to pursue ideological interests. Large sums of money went to rebel groups all over the world. Refugees were often seen as part of the armed struggle and decisions to provide aid and offer asylum were based on security-related ideological grounds rather than legitimate concerns of protection (Slaughter and Crisp, 2008; Troeller, 2008; Weiner, 1998).

Although the nature and dimensions of outside aid have changed after the end of the Cold War, this does not mean that rebels no longer seek external support for their fights. Where large sums of money from the United States and the Soviet Union disappeared, other actors became more prominent (Byman et al, 2001; Salehyan, 2007a). Indeed, “even without great power involvement, there is no shortage of potential allies for one side or another in the internal conflicts of countries” (Weiner, 1996, 35). Regional states, refugees and diasporas can all be significant supporters of insurgencies.

Except for a few notable exceptions, scant attention has been paid to these international dynamics of internal conflicts. Although in recent years literature on the topic has grown somewhat, academics but also policymakers and militaries too often assume internal conflicts to be merely internal (Salehyan, 2009; Staniland, 2005). Some of the main studies of civil war that did incorporate measures for external support subsequently failed to test this appropriately. For example, Collier and Hoeffler (2000) included diaspora support in their analysis, but only took migrants in the United States into account and were oblivious to both refugees and diaspora members in other countries. Fearon and Laitin (2003) did notice the importance of third-party support for insurgents, but found it too difficult to observe and could offer no conclusion on external backing.

And yet, outside support and transnational operations are important aspects when studying rebel groups. Lyall and Wilson (2009) demonstrated a highly significant effect

\(^2\) The terms insurgency, civil war and rebellion are used interchangeably. Although lengthy discussions over exact definitions are not uncommon, Salehyan (2009, 11) stays with “organized violence against the state by nongovernmental actors for political ends”. The same definition is applied here.
between external support for insurgent organizations and a decrease in the likelihood of state victory. Both Byman et al (2001) and Salehyan (2009, 5) found that a very large number of insurgent groups receive outside support or go transnational, leading the latter to conclude that “transnational insurgent groups are not exceptional but are common to several so-called ‘internal’ wars.”

**Outside support and transnational rebels**

External support and transnationalism are similar, yet at the same time different features of insurgencies. Rebel groups that operate fully domestically might still receive external backing in the form of money, arms or other material assets. Rebels only become transnational when they move part of their organization across the borders of the state they are fighting (Salehyan, 2007b; 2009; Staniland, 2005). Salehyan (2009, 15) defines transnational rebels as:

*Armed opposition groups whose operations are not confined to the geographic territory of the nation-state(s) that they challenge. TNRs gather funding and resources among the diaspora, recruit fighters abroad, and secure bases in neighbouring countries from which to attack their home state.*

Thus while transnational rebels automatically receive some form of external support, domestic rebels can receive external support without operating transnational. Going transnational is only one way of receiving outside support, albeit an important one. This distinction is significant, because although all forms of outside support increase the opportunities for rebel groups, only some increase the risk of interstate disputes and international war. These are all related to transnational rebels (Saideman, 2002; Salehyan, 2007b; 2009).

Outside support does not only provide insurgencies with crucial advantages that make it possible to drag on their fight longer and on an increased scale. Access to an extraterritorial sanctuary also leads to a high risk of international dispute and cross border violence into the host state. For example, the sending state might cross the border to attack the rebels or refugee camps that are perceived to shelter insurgents (Byman et al, 2001; Lischer, 2005; Loescher and Milner, 2008; Salehyan, 2009). Studying outside support is thus crucial to understand contemporary conflicts and find appropriate solutions.

The following two paragraphs draw extensively on the studies of Byman et al (2001) and Salehyan (2009). Chapter 2.2 on refugee support makes also to a great extent use of the work of Lischer (2005).

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3 The terms ‘sending state’ and ‘home state’ are used interchangeably throughout this study to refer to the country of origin of transnational rebels and refugees. ‘Host state’ refers to the country where they find shelter.
Where necessary, these are supplemented by other authors. Combining these works into an overarching framework is necessary because none of them provides a comprehensive overview of all outside support on its own. As Salehyan (2009, 169-170) acknowledges:

“This study has focused primarily on transnational rebel organizations that have access to bases in neighbouring countries, but this does not exhaust all modes of transnational opposition. Rebel groups benefit from resources provided by international diaspora communities, ethnic kin, and coreligionists, as well as by foreign governments. […] Moreover, opposition activities are not limited to armed conflict. Research should be devoted to other forms of transnational opposition as well, including the establishment of media outlets, lobbying foreign governments, and protest activity.”

2.1 State support

States are the potentially most significant external supporters of insurgencies. Although the end of the Cold War led to a decline in support on ideological grounds from the United States and the Soviet Union, other states still actively (albeit on a smaller scale) support insurgencies. With the actors also the motivations changed: nowadays rebels need to look to regional states which are primarily driven by their own geopolitical interests, such as regional influence, destabilizing neighbors and internal security (Byman et al, 2001; Kiras, 2008).

States can provide insurgencies with money or material when rebels are unable to obtain these by themselves. In extreme cases they can provide direct military support, fighting alongside rebels. State support can also be less tangible in the form of political recognition or lobbying in multilateral forums (Byman et al, 2001; Fearon and Laitin, 2003; Kiras, 2008).

Barber (1997, 12) suggests to small insurgents that they “seek out foreign allies that can block diplomatic recognition of, aid to, and trade with the enemy […] These allies can supply your movement with passports, cash, weapons, and a mouthpiece in world bodies.” In this way state support is thus double layered, by both opposing the enemy and supporting the insurgents.

The United States gave not only material and diplomatic support to the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), but also imposed sanctions against Serbia (Byman et al, 2001). The most important and most common form of state support is the provision of a safe haven where rebels can organize themselves without much interference of their enemy. Rebels might prefer to have a sanctuary inside the country where they operate, but this is
often not feasible due to a relatively stronger opponent (Byman et al, 2001; Kiras, 2008; Salehyan, 2008).

Rebels have the highest chance of access to a safe haven if the state is bordered by either a rival state or a weak state (Byman et al, 2001; Fearon and Laitin, 2003; Salehyan, 2009; Staniland, 2005). It is important to note in this regard that states can significantly support a rebel group without actually doing anything: “sometimes a state’s passivity has more of an impact than any formal support it may provide” (Byman et al, 2001, 106).

The host state has leverage on both the insurgent group and the home state, by either aiding or suppressing transnational rebels (Salehyan, 2009; Zartman, 1992). Which role it will take depends on its own interests. “Quite simply, rebel host countries will agree to limit TNR activities when the benefits of hosting rebels are outweighed by the costs” (Salehyan, 2009, 57). Several factors have influence on its preferences, particularly the bilateral relationship with the home state and its position towards the rebels.

Salehyan (2009) found a very significant relation between transnational rebels and the duration of conflict. Accordingly, rebel groups that are located near international borders have a better chance to continue fighting than groups located more inland. Buhaug and Gates (2002) found that most civil wars are indeed fought near a country’s border.4

Despite the possible advantages, relying on state support comes with risks for the insurgency. Given the motivations of states to support a rebel group, relying on this support can be an uncertain endeavor. Changing geopolitical interests or a complete new regime might end the support abruptly or even transform it into hostility (Lischer, 2003; 2005; Salehyan, 2007b; 2009).

Rebel leaders that operate transnational risk losing touch with their grassroots population and their troops in the field, who look envious to their ‘luxury’ lives abroad and, because of a lack of control, operate rather autonomic. Large sums of money can create a

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4 Although this could be partly attributed to the fact that ethnic separatists and other rebelling groups are often located at a country’s periphery, it also shows that there are abundant opportunities.
corrupt and greedy leadership. Foreign sanctuaries may lead to a gap between the central leadership, fighters and supporting population (Byman et al., 2001; Salehyan, 2009).

### 2.2 Refugee and diaspora support

While refugees are usually victims of violence, they have also repeatedly contributed to the prolongation of conflict. Indeed, refugee communities “are particular likely to engage in political opposition to their country of origin, including rebellion” (Salehyan and Gleditsch, 2006, 342, emphasis added). Refugee camps are usually located near the border but beyond the reach of the sending state. They can be used by insurgents as a safe haven and for recruitment, finances, political support and legitimacy (Byman et al., 2001; Lischer, 2005; Salehyan, 2009; Terry, 2002; Weiner, 1998). A rebel group itself does not necessarily have to be based in a refugee camp to benefit from its advantages (Lohrmann, 2000; Salehyan, 2007a; 2009). Lischer (2003, 92) uses Burundian refugee camps in Tanzania as an example of camps that “themselves do not function as military bases, but they are highly politicized.”

Refugees engaging in conflict can be motivated by grievances, as a result of former violence and persecution targeted against them. Because of previous losses there is often little that stands in the way of joining a rebel group. Security can play a role, as refugees frequently rely on their own fighters for protection against hostile individuals, groups or governments. This is especially the case if those who are entitled to protect the camps are unwilling or unable to do so. Finally, refugees can be coerced into contributing (Byman et al., 2001; Lischer, 2005; Salehyan, 2007a; 2009).

One specific important motivation is a more political one, where refugees have a strong desire to return to the land they had to leave or want to obtain other political goals.

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5 Some authors use the term refugee warrior for refugees that “have fled their homeland and live in neighboring states, most often in refugee communities, and launch attacks against the regime in power in their homeland from bases in neighboring states” (Adelman, 1998, 1). Given the limited connotation of the term I prefer to avoid it: it seems to oust political support for an armed group. Nonetheless, exercising the term might be necessary when I rely on an author that does use it.
Rebel leaders can take advantage of these emotions to gather support (in various ways) for their cause and for their rebel group (Byman et al, 2001).

Insurgents relying on refugee support face some of the same risks that are related to state support. Indeed, because so much depends on the role of the host state, any change in its policy can have relevant consequences for the refugee community and its support. The introduction of a durable solution might lead to a change in preferences of the refugees and a decline in willingness to engage in the struggle (Byman et al, 2001; Lischer, 2005).

However, Terry (2002) argues that refugee support is less vulnerable to unpredictable host state policies because refugees are entitled to protection under international law. Any violation of these norms by the host state is likely to result in widespread condemnation. Humanitarian aid is also less prone to a sudden withdrawal than direct material support provided by a single state. Rebels that use humanitarian aid for their struggle benefit from the fact that this is often provided by multiple donors and subject to close monitoring by interested organizations and popular opinion.
2.2.1 Explaining refugee support

Lischer (2003; 2005) provides a framework to explain why certain refugee situations lead to violence and prolonged civil war, whereas others do not. She rejects the common cited socioeconomic explanations and instead introduces an interpretation based on the political context of the refugee crisis. Depending on the type of refugees, it is the host state that has a critical role to avoid violence. If the host state fails to do so, international aid might become a valuable resource to combatants.

2.2.1.1 Type of refugees

Lischer (2005, 145) distinguishes three types of refugees based on levels of politicization, albeit she notes that most refugee situations “are better regarded as falling on a continuum.” A higher level of politicization at the outset of the refugee crisis means a higher risk of conflict.

**Situational refugees** flee general chaos and want to return as soon as the situation has stabilized, regardless of the outcome of the conflict. Having hardly any political organization, these refugees are unlikely to engage in violence.

The second type is of more risk: **persecuted refugees** are victims of group-based persecution that target them for ethnic, political or religious reasons. They may not return unless their safety is guaranteed; this often requires political change. Their level of political organization differs, but it might grow stronger as their refugee situation becomes more protracted. Since they are seen as a threat by the sending state they are prone to violent cross-border attacks.

The most dangerous group is dubbed **state-in-exile refugees**. This group has been defeated or marginalized in a civil war. They will not return unless their political goals are achieved and will reject any compromise from the sending state. They have a strong political organization that might even grow stronger in exile. Although the majority of these refugees has no political aspirations and is unwilling to become involved in violence, the nature of this group makes them more likely to have a political and/or military role (Lischer, 2003; 86-95; 2005, 19-28).
2.2.1.2 Host state response

Lischer continues by arguing that in the case of persecuted or state-in-exile refugees (i.e. ‘dangerous’ refugees) it depends on the host state whether they will become an active part of the civil war. Byman et al (2001, 67) summarize this well: “if the state favors the refugees’ cause or is too weak to impose its will, displaced communities can often act with impunity, channeling whatever assistance they can to a rebel group.” As noted in chapter 2.1, the host state can have a large impact by mere passivity.

Under international refugee law it is imperative that refugee camps maintain a civilian character. Any political or military activity within these camps is therefore prohibited. The United Nations Security Council has agreed that it is the host state that bears the primary responsibility to “ensure protection, in particular by maintaining the security and civilian character of refugee and internally displaced person camps.” It should therefore take care of admission, recognition, registration and screening of the refugees and ensures security and non-refoulement (Slaughter and Crisp, 2008).

This is to avoid the entrance of any combatants, arms and other non-civilian elements into the camps and protect refugees from attacks and intimidation. Only people who can qualify as refugee should be allowed to enter the camp and receive international protection. However, host states often fail to operate in accordance with these rules as a result of incapability, unwillingness or both (Terry, 2002).

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7 The principle of non-refoulement prevents the forced return of refugees who will face serious risks.
8 The 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees defines a refugee as a person who, “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his [or her] nationality” (http://www.unhcr.ch/html/menu3/bio_e_ref.html). Some authors suggest adding “people who flee conditions of general violence, such as civil or international wars and the breakdown of political regimes”, which seems more in line with “the current understanding of refugee movements among nongovernmental and intergovernmental organizations as well as in popular discourse” (Salehyan and Gleditsch, 2006, 341). Explicitly left out of this definition are economic migrants, although Salehyan and Gleditsch (2006, 341) “acknowledge that migration decisions are often made for multiple reasons and that political and economic motivations may not be easily separable.”
Ethnic Hmong rebels from Laos have received a wide array of external support. During the Cold War they were trained by and fought alongside American troops against communist forces. Defeated in 1975, they moved to refugee camps in Thailand and many subsequently to the United States. For twenty more years, the rebels waged guerilla war from the refugee camps with support from the Hmong diaspora. It took another major resettlement program to finally end the insurgency (Lee, 2007).

2.2.1.3 Humanitarian aid

If dangerous refugee situations are not prevented by the host state, humanitarian aid might exacerbate conflict. Murshid (2011) found that refugee camps have a higher risk of militarization when international NGOs are present. Barber (1997, 11) argues that “any guerilla movement can co-opt international refugee aid for military, political, or even racist purposes so long as refugees are languishing in camps.” Humanitarian aid can help rebels in multiple ways: “feeding militants, sustaining and protecting militants’ dependents, supporting a war economy, and providing legitimacy to combatants” (Lischer, 2005, 6).

The standard reply to a refugee crisis is to give basic necessities, provided by international aid agencies and funded by Western governments; with declining interest by major players, aid is these days often used as a substitute for political action (Lischer, 2003; Shearer, 2000). But both governments and aid agencies consistently fail to consider the political context of displacement (Adelman, 1998; Lischer, 2005; Weiner, 1998). Lischer (2003, 82) argues that “humanitarian assistance may be delivered with impartial and neutral intent, but the effects of the humanitarian actions always have political, and sometimes even military, repercussions.”

When rebels or rebel family members are fed and protected by aid money, it already sustains their war efforts. But rebels can also exploit refugee camps to attract international money or material and use it directly for their violent struggle. This can be realized by theft, taxation of the refugee population and overestimating the number of refugees. Another way in which humanitarian aid can sustain an insurgency is by providing legitimacy. Terry (2002, 45) claims that “international aid agencies just by their presence and participation can be a strong propaganda tool in the service of governments or insurgents.”

Aid agencies can deliberately or unintentionally support rebels. They might not notice that they support an insurgency, may perceive their cause as just, or see it as irrelevant as long as they remain able to supply the refugees, or see no other choice because they need to deal with rebel leaders to have access to a needy population – the latter being especially relevant with state-in-exile refugees (Lischer, 2005).
Contemporary policies that actively try to empower refugees through participation in camp administrations might produce undesirable outcomes. Zohlberg, Suhrke and Aguayo (1989) described how camp structures, that were introduced by international humanitarian actors and based on democratic ideologies, became helpful features for rebel groups in politically controlling the refugee population. When refugee representatives are appointed, these positions are often fulfilled by the insurgents. By claiming leadership positions the rebels get in charge of the distribution system and bestow legitimacy and power, especially in camps were refugees cannot leave and are dependent on international aid (Terry, 2002; Zohlberg, Suhrke and Aguayo, 1989).

### 2.2.2 Protracted refugee situations and durable solutions

A refugee situation is called protracted if “refugees find themselves in a long-lasting and intractable state of limbo. Their lives may not be at risk, but their basic rights and essential economic, social and psychological needs remain unfulfilled after years in exile” (UNHCR, 2004, 1).

Protracted refugee situations have the highest risk of militancy. “Prolonged and unresolved refugee crises almost universally result in politicization and militancy of refugee communities with predictable adverse consequences for host state and regional security. These populations frequently become the archetypal ‘refugee warrior’ communities.” (Loesch and Milner, 2005, 36).

Grievances might grow stronger during a prolonged stay in a refugee camp or people might simply find that joining a rebel group is a better way to spend their days than hanging around in a refugee camp with no meaningful activities. When a peaceful way out of their situation seems unlikely, refugees may find that radical change in their homeland is the only way to a possible return (Lischer, 2003; 2005; UNHCR, 2004). Militant leaders can use these feelings to their benefits and attract refugees to join or at least support them. A comparison between two subsequent and similar flights of Bosnian Muslim refugees reveals the possible positive effects of a durable solution. During their first period in exile the Muslims formed a refugee army under the leadership of Fikret Abdic and attacked the Bosnian army to regain the land they lived on before they were expelled. But after their second flight one year later, the option of resettlement to Western countries became available (unlike the first time). This time Abdic found no support, as the previous militant refugees preferred this new peaceful alternative (Lischer, 2003).

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9 UNHCR uses a “crude measure of refugee populations of 25,000 persons or more who have been in exile for five or more years in developing countries” (UNHCR, 2004, 2).
The Sri Lankan Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) is generally considered to have the most sophisticated and effective diaspora network in the world. In 1998 it had offices in 54 countries worldwide, including a principal headquarters in London. It utilized this network to raise large sums of money and spread propaganda, thereby extensively using modern communication technologies (Byman et al, 2001; Demmers, 2007).

UNHCR recognizes three so-called durable solutions for protracted refugee situations: voluntary return, local integration in the receiving state and resettlement to a third country. As voluntary return is often not feasible, the other two solutions can offer relief (Lischer, 2005; UNHCR, 2004). However, local integration needs the acceptance of a host state to officially allow a large number of refugees settling permanently in their country. Similar, resettlement abroad is dependent on the willingness of third states to adopt thousands of refugees. Although highly desirable, these solutions are often not available for political, financial or practical reasons.

2.2.3 Diaspora support

While stating that it fell beyond the scope of her study, Lischer (2005, 194) rightfully pointed out that, although it reduces the threat of refugees, “resettlement abroad or integration into the host country may create a new problem – a politically active diaspora.” Similar concerns are expressed by Morris and Stedman (2008), who accept the plausibility of resettlement abroad in terminating civil conflicts but warn for an organized diaspora that funds violence and is often more radical than the actual combatants.

With improvements in transportation and communication in a globalized world, diasporas become increasingly important players in supporting insurgent movements (Staniland, 2005). Demmers (2007, 7) argues that “the study of contemporary conflict (e.g. the onset, duration and termination of war) is impossible in the absence of close attention of diasporic dynamics.” With money from states diminishing since the end of the Cold War, rebel groups have to find other ways to finance their activities. Diaspora members are usually

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The first country is the home state of the refugee, the second country the initial country of asylum.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines a diaspora member as someone “who is part of a community of migrants who have settled permanently in countries other than where they were born but who remain aware of their country of origin and continue to maintain links with their country of origin.” Refugees are not seen as part of the diaspora community, as they have not settled permanently in another country.

wealthier than the insurgents and their money is often more worth in the region the rebels are operating in.

Often lacking possibilities themselves, insurgents also need to rely on diaspora members for international representation and support. They can get engaged in putting pressure on their host governments, spreading nationalistic propaganda, raising public awareness, developing networks and mobilizing opposition. Several diaspora communities have been successful in influencing foreign policies of their host state towards their countries of origin (Demmers, 2007; Fearon and Laitin, 2003; Lohrmann, 2000; Salehyan, 2009).

One interesting feature is that “diasporas tend to be more extreme than the populations they have left behind” (World Bank, 2003, 85-86).

The influence of a diaspora community depends largely on the host state’s ability and willingness to prevent them from actively supporting a rebel group. As previously noted, passivity can have more influence than activity. Many Western countries have high levels of civil rights and liberties that make it possible to engage in a range of activities that can at least draw attention to a group’s cause. On the other hand, these states can also offer space for the development of contesting groups that were unable to rise in a censured homeland environment (Byman et al, 2001; Demmers, 2007).
A large part of diaspora politics is nowadays concentrated on legitimizing the insurgent group and creating the right image in the host state. Terminology has become crucial in the post 9/11 world: so-called freedom fighters can obviously count on more support, and thus more space to operate, than perceived terrorists (Bhatia, 2005; Demmers, 2007; Kiras, 2008).

For a long time the LTTE enjoyed a remarkable high degree of legitimacy in Western states and was able to operate freely in many countries. But over time the group lost this privilege: the United States placed the organization on its list of foreign terrorist organizations as early as 1997 and the European Union labeled them a terrorist organization in 2006. Subsequent crackdowns and criminal convictions for political activities have led to increased difficulties in its diasporic operations (Byman et al, 2001; Demmers, 2007).

2.3 Conclusion

Three types of external support have been described, of which states are the potentially most significant ones; especially during the Cold War when superpower support was common throughout the world. Nowadays the most important form of state support is through the provision of a safe haven in a neighbouring state. Rebels have the highest chance of access to such a sanctuary if the host state is either a weak state or has a bad relationship with the home state and sympathizes with the rebels’ cause. Transnational rebels risk losing touch with their supportive population and troops in the field. The chance of interstate war or cross border violence significantly increases when rebels operate transnational.

Three factors are crucial when studying potential support of refugees: the type of refugees at the onset of the crisis, the response of the host state response and the influence of humanitarian aid. Contemporary refugee policies can sometimes strengthen insurgencies. Protracted refugee situations have the highest risk of militancy, but durable solutions might reduce this risk. However, resettlement to a third country might create a politically active diaspora.

Diasporas are often more radical than the population that is left behind. They might send significant amounts of money and can pressure their host state to influence foreign policies towards their home state. Its space of operation depends on the host state; it is usually large in Western states, unless the rebel group is marked a terrorist organization.
3 Methodology

Data for this case study were obtained through a variety of qualitative research methods. First, I analyzed existing academic literature on my research topic. During the time of this research, I also followed popular media related to my research topic. This was a perfect way to stay up-to-date with recent developments that were not yet covered by academic literature.

The online and exile based newspapers ‘Irrawaddy’, ‘Mizzima’ and ‘Democratic Voice of Burma’ have good online newsletters. In Thailand I read the English language newspapers ‘Bangkok Post’ and ‘The Nation’ on a daily basis to see if they had any coverage on topics related to my research. As many developments took place in Burma during my stay in Thailand, this was often the case.

It has been noted in the introduction that existing literature on the Karen insurgency is relatively scarce, let alone critical studies on the specific aspects of my research question. As I felt I could not collect enough information from literature alone to come to a satisfying answer to my research question, there was a need for additional fieldwork. When conducting an in-depth case study, qualitative research is the most appropriate form of data collection (Bennet and Elman, 2006).

Besides the analysis of literature, important qualitative research methods are formal and informal interviewing, focus groups and participant observation (Bryman, 2004) and these are the techniques I have mainly deployed for this study. For my fieldwork, I have all in all held 41 formal interviews, with the number of informal meetings and conversations (including many short exchanges) rising well above one hundred.

3.1 Triangulation

When one particular research methodology proves to be inadequate to answer the research question, a multitude of methods can be used to come to a satisfying result. This is called triangulation (Maxwell, 1996). Triangulation makes it possible to compare the findings of several research methods and cross-check the results. Findings obtained through varying methods can also complement each other (Ager, 2000; Omidian, 2000). The results from
qualitative data collection will become increasingly more objective and reliable once multifarious methods (both formal and informal) are used (Omidian, 2000). For reasons of both completeness and reliability, I have thus used various data collection methods and sources.

3.1.1 Methodologies

Formal and semi-structured interviews “offer a practical, flexible and relatively economical way of gathering research data”, while providing a wealth of rich and additional information (Carter and Henderson, 2005, 218). The respondents I interviewed ought to have up-to-date and in-depth knowledge of topics related to the research question and these interviews provided very valuable information in addition to the literature study.

Focus group discussions could have been an interesting method to gather opinions of Karen refugees or civilians, but as this was usually difficult to organize I have not undertaken many serious attempts to that end. However, some interviews in Mae La refugee camp closely resembled a focus group setting, as various refugees added inter-group discussions to the questions I asked. Informal encounters at cafes, restaurants, etc. with a group of people sometimes also approached this method.

Participant observation was particularly useful to gather ideas; it indeed provided “a yardstick against which to measure the completeness of data gathered in other ways” (Becker and Geer, 1957, 109). Numerous contacts, observations and informal conversations provided an additional tool for triangulation.

3.1.2 Sources

Triangulation not only means various research methods, but also as many sources as possible (Ager, 2000). Besides employing a wide array of research types, I therefore tried to meet and interview as many and different people as possible. Many actors might possibly provide support for the KNU (states, refugees, diasporas, etc.) and interviewing people from various backgrounds who deal with the different aspects of my study helped to cover all areas of interest for my research question. Donor countries, NGOs, CBOs, international organizations and experts all play their own specific role in this situation and are thus important voices to be heard.
Besides completeness, verification of data was an important reason for triangulation of sources. Information could be (deliberately or not) biased and respondents might have a particular interest to conceal certain information from me (Becker and Geer, 1957). By interviewing a wide range of different actors, all with different self-interests, I could compare information and thus test its reliability. For example, independent experts were a good source to check the reliability of information from other respondents that were more prone to subjectivity; NGOs were in a position to verify criticism about their work that was expressed by donor country representatives.

### 3.1.3 Added value

Triangulation was thus twofold, both in the methods employed and in the sources consulted; it produced not only valuable additional information but also increased its reliability.

Finally, I strongly believe that a desk study is insufficient to adequately understand a conflict situation on the other side of the world. Even if whole libraries on the topic would exist, actual seeing the sights, hearing the stories and feeling the situation is impossible if you stay behind your desk. In order to get a meaningful understanding of such a complex picture as Burma’s ethnic conflicts, you have to get out, to where the stories are. It is as close as you can get to any truth that might possibly exist.

### 3.2 Fieldwork

Prior to my departure to Southeast Asia, I had a few preliminary meetings in the Netherlands. For example, I visited the Dutch office of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), where I learned about the processes around invited Karen refugees in the Netherlands and got introduced to their office in Mae Sot. Similarly, I met some experts on Burma and on Dutch humanitarian aid for Burmese refugees at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. When I left the Netherlands, I already had a fair number of contact details I could use in Thailand.
3.2.1 Housing and transportation

Fieldwork in Thailand and Burma was carried out during the period September 2011 – January 2012. The main research sites were Bangkok, with its embassies, universities and international organizations, and Mae Sot, the biggest city on the Thai-Burmese border, close to Karen refugee camps and home to many NGOs and the KNU leadership.

Most of the time I was based in Bangkok, where I rented a small condominium near Sukhumvit Road. In other places (e.g. Mae Sot, several places in Burma) I stayed at a guesthouse. Throughout these months, I always travelled by either public transport or a rented vehicle, such as a bike or motorbike. The only exception was when I attended a cultural orientation training for refugees that were about to be resettled to Australia. As this training was at a remote compound outside Mae Sot, I was happy to be offered a ride by the IOM
training staff.

I never paid anyone for an interview or meeting. In case I would meet someone for lunch or a drink, I usually offered to pay the bill, which some people accepted while others wanted to split or even insisted to pay for me. I had no research assistant, translator or interpreter. The people I formally interviewed all spoke adequate English, although with informal meetings this sometimes frustrated communication.

3.2.2 Finding respondents

Most persons I formally interviewed were approached by e-mail; the address was usually available on the website of their organisation (or my e-mail was forwarded by the secretariat to the appropriate person). This was particularly effective for staff at embassies, NGOs and international organizations. In few cases a phone call was necessary to get an appointment.

As I came to know more people, I also learned about possible new respondents through snowballing, a technique whereby respondents are asked to identify possible other respondents that could be of value for the study (Gilbert, 1993). For example, this is how I managed to get in contact with a senior member of the KNU Executive Committee, who turned out to be one of the most valuable respondents that I interviewed.

3.3 Interviews

This paragraph covers the formal interviews I have conducted. It gives an overview of all organizations and persons I met and explains why I believed it to be valuable to specifically talk with them.

3.3.1 Donor representatives

In September 2011 I collected my first set of interviews in Bangkok with representatives of the six largest donor countries of the refugee camps.12 Together, these donors provide over 85 percent of the funding of these camps and receive the vast majority of resettled refugees (TBBC, 2011). There were several good reasons for these interviews. As the assistance to the refugee camps could possibly provide support for the KNU and invited

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12 These are Australia, the European Commission, the Netherlands, Sweden, the United States and the United Kingdom. They will be referred to as DR1, DR2, etc. The numbers do not correspond with above mentioned order.
refugees might become active diaspora members, these representatives were thought to hold valuable information and opinions on these issues. Moreover, these countries play a role in the geopolitical aspects as they usually held sanctions against the Burmese government or might even actively support (or have supported) the KNU.

None of the persons approached refused to meet me. Most questions discussed were related to refugee camps, humanitarian aid and resettlement, but often the conversations covered other topics as well, since many interviewees were generally very knowledgeable on Burma.

As a couple of my questions obviously touched on politically sensitive topics, it was sometimes difficult to determine whether the answers of respondents were entirely frank and complete. I tried to solve this by strategically using information I had obtained during previous interviews. By doing so, respondents realized I already knew specific facts and would only have to confirm it. In some cases they would even go further and elaborate on it. I also profited from the fact that in most countries there is relatively little attention for Burma; the risk of political tension on a domestic level is therefore much smaller than with, for example, Afghanistan. Donor representatives might therefore feel less hesitation to give away certain information.

Interviews were semi-structured: one list of questions was used for all donor representatives, one list was specifically prepared for individual donor countries and the remainder was the result of interactions and additional questions that came up during the course of the interview. I did not record any of the interviews, as I was afraid this could obstruct discussing potentially sensitive topics. Instead, the interviews (like all observations, experiences, informal conversations and ideas) were recorded in field notes.

The persons I talked to worked for the political or humanitarian / aid sections of their embassy; the number of people attending the interviews ranged from one to three. Everybody asked for the final result of the study and some asked to be informed about the data I was able to gather in Mae Sot. With some I kept in touch through e-mail or even had a follow-up meeting after my time in Mae Sot. Many asked not to be named in the final study, or at least not in a way that information could directly be traced back to them. Therefore, all donor representatives are referred to anonymously.
3.3.2 NGOs, CBOs and international organizations

In October and November 2011 I spent nearly four weeks in Mae Sot, where I conducted interviews with several groups of people. The first group consisted of seven members of the NGOs\(^{13}\) that deal with Karen refugees and thus have first-hand knowledge of the refugee camps and activities in and around Mae Sot. As they are also in a position to develop and implement refugee policies, I considered them important actors to interview. Most of these NGOs receive support from donor countries that I had interviewed in Bangkok.

Interviews were again both semi-structured and individually designed, which was now even more necessary due to the specific field of operation of some of the NGOs (e.g. education, health care etc.). One member of a bigger NGO had already been interviewed in Bangkok. For similar reasons as with the donor representatives, information cannot to be traced back to specific organizations or people.

I also visited and interviewed seven Community Based Organizations (CBOs)\(^{14}\) in and around Mae Sot that specifically work with the Karen population. These range from organizations for women and youth to refugee and camp committees. They are run by members of the Karen (refugee) community and, as a result, have good insight in the ins and outs of the Karen community, the refugee camps and the border area in general.

Similarly, international organizations (IOs) that are present in Mae Sot and deal with Karen refugees (such as UNHCR and IOM) were visited and interviewed. These organizations are usually well-informed and more neutral actors in a politicized environment as the Karen refugee crisis (Barnett and Finnemore, 1999). I had already visited the headquarters of some of these organizations in Bangkok in September, but the persons working in Mae Sot were often more in the field and thus particularly knowledgeable.

Procedures while interviewing CBOs and international organizations were similar to that of the interviews with donor representatives and NGOs.

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\(^{13}\) Thai Burma Border Consortium (TBBC), ZOA Refugee Care, ICCO, International Rescue Committee (IRC), Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), Diakonia and American Refugee Committee (ARC).

\(^{14}\) Karen Women Organization (KWO), Karen Youth Organization (KYO), Karen Refugee Committee (KRC), Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG), the Kawthoolei Karen Baptist Bible School and College (KKBBSC), Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) and Mae Tao Clinic.
3.3.3 Rebel leaders

In Mae Sot I managed to get in contact with several KNU members, which eventually led to formal and in-depth interviews with two central persons of the organization: Naw Zipporah Sein (General Secretary) and Saw David Taw (Senior Member Executive Committee). Clearly, interviewing these KNU-leaders was very valuable for a study that focuses on that organization. I had the opportunity to discuss some of my assumptions and findings with them, which proved to be an important step in the triangulation process. Both interviews lasted somewhere between one and one and a half hour and were semi-structured. In this case no anonymity was guaranteed: because of their position in the organization they can be regarded as speaking as representatives, and thus on behalf of and in the name of the KNU. Therefore, it has to be clear to whom I impute such legitimacy.

I also interviewed the General Secretary of the ethnic alliance organization National Democratic Front (NDF) Mai Bhone Kyaw, the General Secretary of the Forum for Democracy in Burma (FDB) and ex-leader of the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF) Naing Aung, and the current General Secretary of the ABSDF Than Khe.

Naw Zipporah Sein. Photo: James Robert Fuller.
3.3.4 Experts

I met or otherwise communicated with a number of leading experts (academics, journalists, etc.) on Burma. These people have often spent a considerable amount of time in Burma, including areas that are usually restricted to foreigners. They have published important literature on the country and are welcomed speakers on international conferences. I met many of them at a two-day conference in Amsterdam, organized by the Transnational Institute and the Burma Centre Netherlands in February 2012. Others were met in Bangkok, Burma or merely online. Discussing my ideas and findings with them considerably improved this work and formed an important part of the triangulation process. These meetings were usually more like conversations or discussion than formal interviews, with questions being mutually asked.

3.4 Mae La refugee camp

Through the above mentioned formal interviews with donor representatives, NGOs and CBOs I was able to obtain a fair share of information about the Karen refugee camps. Especially CBO members in Mae Sot, who are refugees themselves and thus in certain ways representatives of the refugee population, were valuable inside information sources for the camps.

However, community leaders in refugee settings are often far from truly representative. This is especially true in protracted refugee situations, such as Mae La (Crisp, 2000; Harrell-Bond and Verdirame, 2005; Hyndman, 2000). I thus felt the need to engage with refugees themselves who do not bestow leadership positions and might hold different views, especially because they can offer important information that could otherwise be hard to obtain. As Mackenzie, McDowell and Pittaway (2007, 308) have argued, “these informal, ‘back stage’ channels may provide more useful insights into the true situation faced by individuals or communities in vulnerable positions than ‘front stage’ information given through formal channels.”

Since this is where I faced the most severe methodological problems, I find it necessary to elaborate somewhat more extensively on the choices I made and the way this particular part of my fieldwork was carried out.
Entrance to the refugee camps is strictly prohibited by the Royal Thai Government (RTG) authorities and a camp pass is needed to access any of the camps. This pass is available for personnel of NGOs and international organizations, but nearly impossible to obtain individually. This brings the possibilities of interviewing refugees basically down to two options.

The first option is to follow Vogler (2007) and volunteer for an NGO that could provide access to the camps. However, this has several downsides. Individual space of operation is limited: most of the time you are obliged to follow the organization and participate in their activities. Vogler describes the need to use lunch breaks in order to walk around freely. Another problem relates to objectivity. Vogler (2007, 58) found it “extremely hard” to distance herself from her “academic understandings and to support the perspectives of the NGO in a way that was still compatible with [her] intellectual position.” Conducting research that could potentially be critical towards humanitarian aid could lead to tensions between the academic researcher and everyday work of the NGO. Moreover, the role of NGOs was an object of my study itself and aligning myself with one could thus threaten my objectivity. Finally, this approach would mean I had to devote a considerable amount of time and devotion to the work of an NGO. After weighing these costs against the potential benefits, I deemed this approach undesirable for my study.

Both Kenny and Lockwood-Kenny (2011) and Kuroiwa and Verkuyten (2008) interviewed Karen refugees outside the camps with assistance of a CBO (respectively the KWO and KYO). This method also has its problems, mainly with regard to objectivity. Both organizations have ties with the KNU, the main object of my study. The informants of Kenny and Lockwood-Kenny (2011) were selected by the KWO, thus raising questions about the representativeness of these informants for the whole refugee population. Kuroiwa and Verkuyten (2008) readily admit their research was supervised by the KNU.

Mackenzie, McDowell and Pittaway (2007, 304) argue that “the acceptance of research populations nominated by ‘community leaders’ [is] highly problematic.” They subsequently quote several refugees from various regions to give weight to their argument, including one from Thailand: “They come in and just talk to the leaders and their wives—they never hear what it is really like in the camps.” It is thus unlikely to hear dissenting views when interviewing refugees that are selected by a CBO. Therefore, I felt that being assisted by one of these organizations in order to gain access to the refugee population was undesirable, even more so because of the nature of my research.
I finally decided to use another and more controversial way of visiting one of the refugee camps and talk with some of its residents. Several persons had informed me that security at the camps was weak or even non-existent. One PhD-student told me that it was common knowledge among fellow researchers that everyone could just walk into the refugee camps and the worst case scenario was the need to bribe a guard. So for three subsequent days I drove a motorbike to Mae La, parked it along the road and simply walked into the camp; I did not pay anything at any moment.

This method has its very obvious limitations and I am not arguing that any information I gathered in this way is unbiased or complete. Moreover, ethical concerns arise out of this approach. Nonetheless, there were a few advantages. I could walk around quite free and observe without any constraints or limitations. Initial conversations were limited to those people who spoke some English, although later I was able to talk to some other people with the help of an English-speaking refugee. These were limited conversations as the man was not an experienced translator nor did I want to ask him to spend full days assisting me with the interviews. Moreover, the setting was often not suitable for semi-structured interviews. Some interviews were one-to-one, whereas others more closely resembled focus-group discussion.
During these three days I talked with approximately 13 residents of the camp, ranging from very informal fifteen minute encounters to more serious and in-depth conversations that lasted well over two hours. Next to this, I tried to see as much as possible and was given a tour by one man of his section of the camp (Mae La is divided in three sections). I already learned a lot by merely observing, noticing for example living conditions, (a lack of) security, the ratio between churches and monasteries and small trade occurring amongst residents and even with outsiders.

Although the people I spoke to are definitely not representative for the whole Mae La population (which is a rather diverse group) they were particularly good informants on everyday life in the refugee camps and provided useful additional information to that already obtained through more formal interviews with NGOs and CBOs. This ‘back stage’ channel, as noted above, thus proved to be very valuable indeed.

3.5 Participant observation and informal meetings

I also tried to conduct some sort of participatory observation, to develop ideas and gather as much information as possible. As mentioned above, this is an important part of the triangulation process. It meant having numerous informal conversations and short encounters with all kinds of people that somehow related to my research.

I tried to talk with as many and different people as possible, in both Thailand and Burma. I spoke to journalists, discussed my work with academics, visited symposiums, met human rights and democracy activists, listened to former and active rebels and held numerous conversations with Burmese (especially Karen) persons of various backgrounds and positions. Interactions were as varied as the informants, ranging from serious and in-depth conversations to informal and short encounters.

With every informant I tried to be completely open about my research and the most useful information was indeed obtained from persons who were fully aware of my status and study. Of course there were also people I only met briefly who did not come to know what I was doing.
3.5.1 Thailand

During my fieldwork in Thailand, I tried to frequent those places where I would have a high chance of meeting Burmese and Karen people. There is a large Burmese (including Karen) population in Thailand and several events were organized during my stay. As Burma made it repeatedly to the front pages in the fall of 2011, attention for the country was probably bigger than usual. Nonetheless, for several reasons it was hard to really get involved with a Burmese, let alone specific Karen, community in Thailand.

As most Burmese live illegally in Thailand and face arrest and possible deportation, they prefer to stay of the radar. Another problem was my limited knowledge of the Burmese, Karen and Thai languages. Finally, as my overall stay was relatively short, gaining confidence and trust through long-term relationships was often difficult.

That being said, especially in Mae Sot, where over 75% of the residents is Burmese (Lee, 2008), I was able to meet and talk with numerous Karen people and visited as many relevant places and events as possible.

Mae Sot has numerous markets, restaurants, art galleries and tea houses that are run or frequented by Karen people. A good example of an event I repeatedly attended was the Burma Film Series, a weekly movie displayed in a cafe in Mae Sot. These were excellent opportunities to engage with Karen people, especially politically active persons.

In Bangkok all this was considerably harder, as the Karen population is relatively small and less visible. Most of the places and events I visited there had a more Burman focus, such as the opening of a photo exhibition about Burmese political prisoners.

3.5.2 Burma

In December 2011 I spent two and a half week in Rangoon, Mon State and the areas of Karen State that are accessible by foreigners. I devoted my time to those areas where I was most likely to meet Karen people. I was particularly interested in hearing opinions of Karens living in government controlled areas of Burma. My space of operation was for obvious reasons rather restricted and I preferred to keep a low profile. Besides many informal and spontaneous encounters, I had a few prearranged meetings with experts and academics living in Burma.

While in Mae Sot I could have had the chance to cross illegally into Burma and visit certain areas of Karen State which foreigners are not allowed to enter. This would mean
travelling under protection of a KNLA unit. Although this practice is far from uncommon,\textsuperscript{15} I felt this could frustrate objective information gathering and threaten my position as a researcher. I therefore decided to refrain from any such activity.

\begin{quote}
That in such a case it is easy to lose your objectivity or even assist a conflict actor, is clearly demonstrated by this example of Jakobsen and Landau (2003, 192):

\textit{Academics have also been known to engage in quasi-military activities, taking sides with rebel groups and aiding them with information. (There is one troubling case of an academic involved with Burmese Karen rebels on the Thai border, who invited graduate students doing research in the refugee camps to accompany him — 'as an adventure' — when he passed information to the rebels.)}
\end{quote}

\subsection*{3.6 Ethical concerns}

Part of this research was undertaken in very complex, difficult and sometimes even potentially dangerous situations. This also meant I was confronted with several ethical issues. The first and foremost was related to my research question and the very study itself, as it might produce adverse results for certain persons or groups (such as refugee communities or rebel groups). However, as Ellis et al. (2007, 466) have argued, “erring too far on the side of protecting participants from potential harm may lead to simply not doing research – a situation that is, in and of itself, unethical.”

Although I believe that a potentially unfavourable conclusion is no reason to completely abandon scientific research into a certain topic, a careful reflection is needed on the necessity of the study in the light of possible harm of the results. In general, research into human suffering is considered justifiable if it brings about greater understanding and can potentially contribute to an ending of this suffering (Hugman, Pittaway and Bartolomei, 2011). As there has been relatively little attention for the protracted conflict I studied here, with a specific lack of theoretical analyses, there is a clear need for this type of in-depth studies to enhance our knowledge of such a complex conflict environment. Moreover, I have been particularly diligent with regard to possible harmful information published in this study and believe no such information has been included in the final result.

Conducting such research also means that it is necessary to show ethical awareness, methodological competence and accountability (Hugman, Pittaway and Bartolomei, 2011).

\textsuperscript{15} Fong (2008), Tangseefa (2006) and Thornton (2008) are a few authors who have somewhat more extensively described this process.
When making critical statements about certain actors, it has to be clear that these are based on solid academic research. This is to ensure that a complex situation is presented in an accurate and objective way. These factors are reflected upon in this methodology chapter.

On a more individual level, ethical concerns rise when interviewing vulnerable persons. Interviewing traumatized persons might lead to psychological problems for the respondents, while participating in a study might put them at risk of reprisals by state authorities or other groups (Ellis et al., 2007). Although these risks were not relevant for the formal interviews with donor representatives, NGOs and CBOs, they were only more relevant for refugees and people inside Burma. This was partly set off by of the nature of my research question, which did not require asking any questions into traumatizing events.

However, while conducting research in Mae La refugee camp I faced some serious ethical dilemmas. Before asking any questions related to my research, I always made sure to have the oral informed consent of the respondent and ensured them anonymity. I furthermore indicated that reporting back would become nearly impossible, as I would have left Thailand at the time I would finish my thesis and sending it by post or e-mail was not feasible.

I also explicitly made clear I did not belong to any organization or could offer any help with resettlement procedures or other activities. By doing so, I tried to avoid raising any unrealistic expectations of my presence on their part. I did not approach people myself, rather letting them come up to me. In this way, I would not bring anyone into a difficult position.
I was careful in not directly mentioning anything about the KNU or the KNLA, to avoid so-called advocacy research, “where researchers already know what they want to see and say, and come away from the research having ‘proved’ it” (Jacobsen and Landau, 2003, 187). When interviewing vulnerable persons (especially refugees), there is a high chance that they will feel pressured to tell a researcher favourable stories (Dervin and Dewdney, 1986). There is thus a certain tension between refraining from advocacy research on one hand and complete openness on the other hand. If I would say to a Karen refugee I was investigating KNU presence in the refugee camps, it is possible that that person does not want to argue anything against that.

Therefore I was extremely cautious in my conversations at Mae La. Most of the times I explained that I was conducting research on the Karen, although I often felt that a full account of my research question and theories was unnecessary for the more informal conversations. In some cases I simply stated I did research on the Karen situation. If a respondent asked further questions, I would obviously be open about the details of my research. However, I continued to ask only open questions to avoid directing the informant into certain answers.16

During informal conversations in Burma I followed much of the same line as in Mae La refugee camp. I never actively approached people and I would let them guide the conversation. Because of safety concerns (not so much for myself, but rather for the Burmese people I spoke to) I never brought up potentially sensitive topics myself. I would only ask more sensitive questions if a person had indicated a willingness to discuss such issues by raising a political topic him-/herself.

At the initial stage of a meeting, I never specifically mentioned I was a researcher focusing on the Karen. However, the more general indication that I did research on Burma often led to animated conversations and more details would then naturally come up during the course of longer and in-depth conversations.

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16 For example, I avoided asking directly about anything related to the KNU or KNLA. Instead, I asked about everyday life in the refugee camps, ranging from their activities to food distribution to security issues. If a topic of interest was then brought up by the respondent, a subsequent question would usually be: “Can you tell me more about that?”
4 Historical background

Burma has been dubbed a paradise for anthropologists. If so, it must be hell for statisticians. As Steinberg (2010, xxv) remarks: “Data are very unreliable. Facts are negotiated more than they are observed in Myanmar.” The following description should therefore rather be seen as an illustration of the complexity that is called Burma than an absolute and indisputable account of the country’s facts and figures.

The largest country of mainland Southeast Asia, Burma has a population of about 55 million people. Geographically diverse, it runs from the Himalayan Mountains in the north (near Tibet) to the mangrove swamps and white beaches at the Bay of Bengal. The central delta area is surrounded by “a horseshoe of highland areas”, consisting of mountains and often deep jungles (Steinberg, 2010, xxvi). In 2005 the capital was moved from Rangoon to the newly-built city of Naypyidaw.

It is the most ethnically diverse country in the region. The central government distinguishes 135 national ‘lu myo’ (translated as either race; ethnicity; people; or nationality). These can be subdivided in several larger ethnic groups (Gravers, 1999). Since independence, each of these larger minority groups has taken up arms against the central government at some point.

According to the 1983 census, the Burman majority comprises 69% of the population and lives mostly in the delta regions. The border areas are inhabited by the Shan (8.5%), Karen (6.2%), Rakhine (4.5%), Mon (2.4%), Chin (2.2%), Kachin (1.4%) and Karenni (0.4%) minorities. These seven groups have their own state under the 2010 constitution, in addition to the seven Burman divisions. Despite this division, “much of Burma’s population map resembles an ethnographic mosaic” (Smith, 2007, 8). Indeed, no single region is ethnically consistent.

Burma refers to the country, Burmese to the citizens of this country and Burman to the ethnic majority group of this country. In 1989 the military government changed a number of names to make them look more like local pronunciations. For instance, Rangoon became Yangon, Moulmein became Mawlamyine and the Karen were renamed Kayin. The most significant change was renaming the state Myanmar. Citizens therefore became Myanmars. For some, this term seems more inclusive than Burmese, which closely resembles the name of the majority group. Others (especially people outside the country) have argued that using the new name means supporting the illegitimate regime. I employ the old names as they will be more familiar to most readers and are more often used in the existing literature. I do not so to make any political statement.

Ethnic leaders often prefer the term ‘ethnic nationality’ as it provides more status and legitimacy. For example, the KNU has claimed that “the Karens are much more than a national minority. We are a nation” (Government of Kawthoolei, 1984). In this work I use the term ‘ethnic minority’, which is common usage in literature on insurgencies. I have no intention of reducing certain groups.
The Karens number somewhere between three and seven million and live throughout Burma: not even 25 percent lives in actual Karen State. Karen is an umbrella term for about twenty subgroups. The two largest subgroups (comprising about 85 percent of all Karens) are the Pwo (typically Buddhists from the delta) and the Sgaw (usually Christians and living in the hills). The Pwo and Sgaw speak different dialects of the Karen language, which are not mutually intelligible. Approximately sixty percent of the Karen population is Buddhist, one third Christian and the remainder animist (Smith, 1999; Thawnghmung, 2008).

River scene near Hpa’an, Karen State.

4.1 The colonial era

Religion is not only one of the most important elements of contemporary daily life in Burma but also played a defining role in shaping the country’s history. In a similar fashion, crucial events in the history of the Karen have been characterized by religious impetuses.

Burma was annexed by the British Empire in the three Anglo-Burmese wars of 1824-1826, 1852-1853 and 1885. Because the rural and mountainous border areas had always been
little affected by central governments prior to the British arrival, Burma was divided in two areas. Ministerial Burma (the central delta area mainly inhabited by the Burman majority) came under strict British rule; the Frontier Areas (covering 47 percent of the land and home to 16 percent of the population, mostly ethnic minorities) were to a large extent left alone. The division was further exacerbated by the rejection of Burmans into the British Burma Army; instead, ethnic minorities filled the ranks. The Karen, who had already served as guides for the British in the first two Anglo-Burmese wars, made up a disproportionate 27.8 percent of the forces (Smith, 1999; South, 2008; Steinberg, 2010).

During colonial rule, a large number of Christian missionaries moved into Burma. Finding little interest with the Buddhist Burmans, they turned to the minority groups and had considerably more success. Many Karens were converted by the missionaries, whose influence and education had a “dramatic impact” on daily Karen life (Smith 1999, 44). Mission schools attracted large numbers of Karens, it was an American Baptist who produced the first script for the Sgaw Karen language and Christian Karens established in 1881 the first pan-Karen organization, the Karen National Association (KNA) (Harriden, 2002; Smith, 1999).

Many Burman nationalists looked rather suspicious to these relationships between the Karens and members of the foreign oppressor. When resentment against the British began to grow, it equally grew against their ‘Karen allies’. Together with a colonial policy of divide-and-rule, religion thus started to divide the Burmese population. As Taylor (2005, 270) summarizes, “the consequences of the policies pursued by the British reified ethnicity and made religion an issue in the politics of Myanmar.”

Throughout the 1930’s the KNA made several requests for an independent Karen State. However, as Smith (1999, 52) notes: “the entire question of Karen separation or independence was completely overshadowed by the Burmese national liberation movement and the growing political ferment on the plains.”

Indeed, Burman nationalism began to grow. A large role in the protests and demonstrations against British rule was played by students of Rangoon University. One of them, Aung San, eventually allied with Japan and, together with thirty others, received secret training in Japan. All but one of them were Burman (Charney, 2009; Steinberg, 2001).

This small group of young man (their average age was 24) came to be known as the
Thirty Comrades. They were formally inaugurated as the Burma Independence Army (BIA) on 28 December 1941 in Bangkok. By that time they had recruited over 3,500 volunteer fighters and were ready to take the political stage in an independent Burma, which they would come to dominate for the next decades (Charney, 2009; Smith, 1999).

A violent period was to follow as Burma became one of the most dramatic but forgotten theaters of the Second World War. Although this eventually concluded with independence, it also exacerbated ethnic grievances. The seeds of racial and religious conflict might have been sown in the colonial era, they really came to fruition during the bitter years of World War II.

4.2 World War II

When BIA units began to enter Burma, they received a warm welcome from the Burman majority but many ethnic minorities, including the Karen, stayed (again) loyal with the British. Soon afterwards, stories of excessive violence in Karen villages began to circulate. Aung San and several other BIA leaders tried hard to keep things in hand, but could not avoid that approximately 1,800 Karen were killed, some in brutal massacres (Smith, 1999). Especially Christians were targeted (South, 2008).

A Japanese controlled interim government declared Burma independent on 1 August 1943, but “Burmesse administrative autonomy was a myth” (Charney, 2009, 53). Nonetheless, Smith (2007, 9) notes that “many minority peoples never forgot what they regarded as their ‘second-class’ treatment by Burman leaders under the Japanese occupation.”

Because the alliance with Japan had not brought the desired result, Aung San made contacts with the British in India. In August 1944 the underground Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL) was formed and on 27 March 1945 the BIA joined the allied forces against the Japanese. Suddenly, the Karen and the BIA were on the same side again, as the eastern minority guerillas killed over 12,500 retreating Japanese. But this unofficial alliance came too late as “much damage had already been done and many Karens had started to plan for independence” (Smith, 1999, 63).
4.3 (In) dependence

Burma rapidly became independent after the defeat of the Japanese. Although the Karen were equally ready for their own state, the Burman leaders would not allow any concessions, fearing ‘disintegration of the Union’. Matters were made more complicated by vague promises of an independent Karen State by British officials throughout and right after the war (Smith, 1999).

The Karen felt neglected; official requests and demands were largely ignored by the British. A 1946 ‘Goodwill Mission’ was sent to London to discuss Karen separatism, but to no avail (Lintner, 1994). As Smith (1999, 83) notes: “Karen leaders had decided it was time to take action for themselves.” All existing Karen groups agreed to unite in one single organization: the Karen National Union was officially established on 7 February 1947. A military wing, the Karen National Defence Organisation (KNDO), was added five months later (Smith, 1999). The world’s longest running insurgency was about to set off.

Aung San had ensured the British there was no need for a separate treatment of the Frontier Areas, because in a free Union of Burma all ethnic minorities would enjoy equal treatment. The first test to this claim was the second Panglong conference in February 1947,

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19 A recurring theme in Burmese history: many military actions have been justified by the need to avoid “Non-disintegration of the Union”, the first of the three main causes of the Burmese Army (Steinberg, 2001, 55).

20 Although these promises eventually meant next to nothing, they have been remembered by a large part of the Karen community. In December 2011 I met a Karen man in Hpa’an (Karen State) who demanded apologies from every British person he met for this “British betrayal”.
just days after the formation of the KNU. The main intention was to satisfy the needs of all ethnic groups. The congress was largely boycotted by the Karen, who sent only four observing delegates (Fredholm, 1993; Lintner, 1994; Smith, 1999).

The Constitution that was finally adopted on 24 September was to a large extent rather inconsistent and vague. A few minorities were granted the right to secession after ten years, some did not even receive a state and others were completely denied being a distinctive ethnic group. As for the Karen, no decision was made at all: their case would be decided after independence (Lintner, 1994; Smith, 1999; Walton, 2008).

Nonetheless, Aung San booked important results. By advocating some sort of federalism, he had brought together most of the ethnic groups, giving proof of his charismatic personality and political skills. Despite several shortcomings in the conference’s outcome, much praise has been given to ‘the spirit of Panglong’ (Walton, 2008). The father of Burmese independence was “trusted by the minorities; no other leader at that time or since then has played such a role” (Steinberg, 2010, 42).

Five months after Panglong, he was having a meeting with several members of his intended government. Suddenly five gunmen stormed in the room and, before anyone realized what happened, sprayed it with bullets. Only three men survived; Aung San did not. He died on 19 July 1947 at 10.30 a.m., less than six months before the fulfillment of his task. His successor was U Nu, another Comrade (Lintner, 1994; Smith, 1999).

On 4 January 1948 Burma became independent. But the assassination of Aung San had been a devastating blow for a country about to be born. Without its charismatic and unifying father, Burma was destined to have a problematic coming of age. The Union was in deep trouble.

4.4 A turbulent start

U Nu, the prime minister of now independent Burma, was thus facing a formidable task. Within three months of independence, troops of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) already formed a serious threat to the weak central administration. Smith (1999, 109) claims that “the government was only saved by the continued loyalty of the Chin, Kachin and Karen

21 A Burmese politician was later convicted for the murder amidst heavy rumors of British, communist or even AFPFL involvement.
The trouble was that the Karens demanded just too much.


The trouble was that the Karens demanded just too much.


Throughout these turbulent months, KNU chairman Saw Ba U Gyi negotiated with Nu about an independent Karen State. Although Nu’s AFPFL Cabinet had offered the Karen a state that “would be considered generous today,” the KNU wanted much of the Delta region as well, despite the fact that this area was home to a large number of Burmans (Smith, 1999, 86).

If the KNU had been able to hold Insein and to push on toward Rangoon, the history of Burma would have been completely different.


An agreement was never reached and on 1 September 1948 the KNDO shortly captured Thaton and Moulmein, the third city of the country and important seaport. In response, the government deployed local armed groups who carried out a number of hostilities against Karen villagers. The KNU, claiming to fear a repeat of the wartime massacres, took over hundreds of local administrations (Smith, 1999).

Numerous Karen soldiers in the Burma Army deserted to the KNU, which had moved its headquarters to Insein, nine miles from Rangoon. On 30 January 1949 the government outlawed the KNU; one day later the Karen commander of the Burma Army was forced to resign. He was replaced by yet another Comrade: Ne Win (Callahan, 2003; Smith, 1999).

Immediately whole Karen regiments deserted and fighting broke out. This was the start of the battle of Insein, a crucial and intense clash that lasted for 112 days. But more importantly, this was the start of the Karen rebellion. Sixty years later, it still had to be concluded.

4.5 The birth of Kawthoolei

The start was excellent. KNDO units not only took control over Insein, but also seized the airport and came as close as the suburbs of Rangoon. Several other towns and cities were captured before a combined Karen/Kachin force took over Mandalay in the north, the second city of Burma (Smith, 1999). The effects were long lasting. As Charney (2009, 75) notes about these early KNU victories: “their near success in toppling the Nu regime made certain that suppressing domestic rebels would remain a chief priority, whether in words or in fact, of every government after independence.”

The chaos was intensified by CPB rebellions and Nu must have been relieved when a
ceasefire at Insein was established and Saw Ba U Gyi came down to Rangoon for negotiations. Although they reached an agreement, this was rejected by two prominent KNDO leaders. Their new proposal was then rejected by U Nu and Ne Win and three days later fighting erupted again (Smith, 1999; Tinker, 1957).

The short ceasefire had brought just enough time for the government forces to take a breath, resupply and reorganize. They started to slowly but surely take over Insein. On 22 May the KNDO forces had to retreat northeast to Toungoo. There, on 14 June 1949, they established Kawthoolei, with Saw Ba U Gyi as its first prime minister. One year later he formulated the ‘four principles’, which have since formed the heart of the Karen revolution:

*There shall be no surrender*

*The recognition of the Karen State must be completed*

*We shall retain our arms*

*We shall decide our own political destiny*

In 1950 government forces captured Toungoo and in 1956 the new capital of Papun was seized, forcing the KNU further into retreat and losing control in the important delta area. Meanwhile, Ne Win was rapidly expanding the Burma Army. As his Tatmadaw (armed

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22 Kawthoolei is used to describe the independent Karen State, although this has no exact geography; it is roughly meant to encompass southeastern Burma. The exact meaning of the word is disputed even among Karen. Claims vary from ‘land of flowers’, ‘land of Iilies’, ‘land without evil’ or ‘the land burnt black’, which can refer to either a land that must be fought for or the slash-and-burn agriculture of the Karen (Smith, 1999). In any case, it refers to what could be called the Karen Shangri-La.
forces) grew in size and strength, so did his influence (Callahan, 2003).

But the biggest setback to the KNU had happened earlier, in the hills near the Thai border. Saw Ba U Gyi was the KNU and very much the Aung San of the Karen. He was regarded as “the one KNU leader capable of uniting the Karen movement and building bridges with the AFPFL in Rangoon” (Smith, 1999, 144). On 12 August 1950, a few weeks after a KNU congress and allegedly on his way to Bangkok to seek external support,23 he was trapped in an ambush and killed by the Tatmadaw. Uniting the diverse Karen population had never seemed further away (Lintner, 1994; Smith, 1999).

4.6 The Tatmadaw in control

Nu sought some engagement with the ethnic militias, which for the military naturally meant a threat to ‘national unity’. Combined with a deteriorating economy and a lack of law and order, Ne Win and his Tatmadaw saw reasons enough to step in (Callahan, 2003). On 24 September 1958 they established a military ‘caretaker’ government by what Smith (1999, 175) described as “a military coup by another name.”

Despite promises that there would be elections within six months, Ne Win remained in power for almost two years. Nonetheless, his caretaker government performed well. Steinberg (2010, 56) notes that “the military’s success was lauded by both Burmese and foreign observers, for not since the British period had the state been run so well (if undemocratically).”

Although he was opposed by Ne Win, U Nu returned to power in February 1960. He had won elections on promises to make Buddhism the state religion and create new autonomous states for some ethnic minorities. His new government was short-lived. First, the ethnic rebellions expanded with the Kachin and Shan minorities. Simultaneously, a ‘Federalist Movement’ emerged. They agreed with U Nu to start a ‘federal seminar’ in February 1962, where the ethnic minorities were allowed to discuss their issues with the

23 This is by no means certain, but often assumed because of the location he was killed and his last words on the KNU congress (Fredholm, 1993).
Federalism is impossible; it will destroy the Union.


Burma overnight became one of the most isolated and hermetically sealed countries in the world.


4.7 More setbacks, four cuts

After the death of Saw Ba U Gyi, the KNU had made a swing to the political left. General Secretary Mahn Ba Zan established a vanguard party, the Karen National Unity Party (KNUP). The new line, called the second phase, was close to communism. But Saw Ba U Gyi successor Tha Hmwe had grown distant from this new ideology, especially after he realized that US support was unlikely for any communist oriented organization. In April 1963, he withdrew from the Third Kawthoolei National Congress. In his absence, the KNUP adopted an even more leftist line (Smith, 1999).

When Ne Win organized a peace parley in 1963-1964, Tha Hmwe’s unit was the only ethnic rebel group to sign an agreement with the Tatmadaw (Smith, 2007). This split within the Karen movement was aggravated when they attacked a KNUP base and killed seventeen people, some of them after brutal torture. Although soon after most of these men had already
returned to their old bases, it was a clear demonstration of the difficulties of creating unity within the Karen movement (Smith, 1999).

As hardly any peace was concluded during the peace parley, Ne Win decided to enhance counter-insurgency operations and adopt a new strategy. This ‘four cuts’ tactic proved as simple as effective: cut the insurgents from food, finance, recruits and intelligence. Whole communities were moved to new ‘strategic villages’, controlled by the Tatmadaw and usually located on the central plains. Any person remaining in his village was treated as a rebel and shot on sight (Cline, 2009; Smith, 1999).

The four cuts strategy is characterised by gross human rights violations and the main reason for widespread allegations of war crimes, crimes against humanity or even genocide. Looting and burning of villages, forced labour, confiscation of food and destruction of crops are all common. Rape is well reported although there is no evidence of systematic use of it as a weapon of war (Fink, 2008). According to a Karen saying there is a fifth cut, the head of the insurgents (South, 2011).

Whole areas became depopulated and at the beginning of the 1970’s the KNU had all but lost its control in the Delta. Its once vast ‘liberated zones’ had decreased and by now it only controlled territory in the remote and mountainous border areas of southeastern Burma (Callahan, 2003; Fink, 2001; Smith, 1999). Thawnghmung (2008, 27) notes that “although the Karen resistance forces had originally been drawn heavily from Rangoon and the Delta, the KNU gradually lost touch with the Karen population in those areas as they came under government control.”

4.8 The Kawthoolei dream

Another disastrous policy by Ne Win unintentionally shifted the power balance within the KNU. Burma’s economic isolation led to a flourishing black market trade. Since the KNU controlled much of the eastern border, it saw an impressive rise in income through taxation of goods flowing in and out of Thailand. Previously impoverished areas now became the main contributors to the KNU movement and its leaders thus rose in prominence. One of them was Bo Mya (Smith, 1999; South, 2008).

After issuing all KNUP troops out of the Eastern Division, he basically took control
over the whole border region. He received another boost when KNUP chairman Mahn Ba Zan came over to join him in 1968. The stage was set for a turn in political ideology. A return to the term KNU followed soon, based again on Saw Ba U Gyi’s four principles. During the same time the armed wing of the KNU was renamed the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), which is still in use today (Smith, 1999; South, 2011).

A stanch Christian and anti-communist, Bo Mya “ruled the KNU with an iron fist, suppressing dissent, or any criticism, of his increasingly personalized rule,” but initially created a strong unity within the Karen movement (South, 2008, 40). And although KNU influence largely disappeared from the Delta, it had only grown stronger in the east. According to Smith (1999, 299), “the KNU was the de facto government along most of Thailand’s western border.”

Kawthoolei was right there, in the forests and mountains of southeastern Burma. In 1974 the KNU had established its capital at Manerplaw, ‘Field of Victory’. Income was thriving, international recognition seemed finally on hand and a large area was completely under KNU control, administered from Manerplaw. The whole territory was dotted with Karen schools, hospitals and government departments (Thawngmung, 2008). It was the closest the KNU would ever come to realizing the Kawthoolei dream.
During the mid- and late 1980’s the Tatmadaw expanded its four cuts campaign to the mountains of southeastern Burma. As in the delta area, it brought large successes to the government forces. The KNU had long been able to fight the Tatmadaw in “the fixed positions of conventional warfare, which was vital for the defense of border strongholds and trade posts” (Smith, 2007, 36). Consequently, with the loss of its border bases, it also saw a rapid decline in its income of the black market trade (Smith, 1999; South, 2008). As once again the KNU had to retreat further eastwards, the first Karen refugee wave started to enter Thailand. Kawthoolei was on the fringe of collapse. But so was the Burmese government.

4.9 The democracy uprising

The end of the Cold War marked a tumultuous period in world history and Burma formed no exception. First, the government announced major economic liberalizations in 1987, marking the beginning of the end of its self-imposed international isolation (Charney, 2009).

One week later it declared all 25-, 35- and 75 Kyat bills (comprising about two-third of the value of all bills) illegal without any possibility to exchange them. Economic and political frustrations then led to mass demonstrations in the whole country, which reached its height on 8 August 1988 (8-8-88, an auspicious date). The Tatmadaw responded with a harsh crackdown (Charney, 2009; Maung Maung, 1999).

One month later, after about 10.000 people had died, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) was created to retake power through a “coup by consent” (Steinberg, 2010, 81). It was headed by one of Ne Win’s trustees. Unlike the Philippines in 1986 and South Korea in 1987, people power in Burma had eventually failed. One year later the world would witness the events at Tiananmen Square.

But there had been a remarkable appearance during the protests. Pictures of Aung San had been widely displayed in the weeks before. On 26 August at Shwedagon Pagoda (the holiest Buddhist monument) an immense crowd had gathered for one speaker. The people had

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24 The third of three rather different military coups in modern Burmese history (following 1958 and 1960).
This national crisis could in fact be called the second struggle for national independence.


not forgotten their great independence hero and now listened breathlessly to the words of his only daughter: Daw Aung San Suu Kyi (Thant Myint-U, 2006).

Her story is a fairytale, although the happy ending has yet to be written. She lived in the United Kingdom with her British husband and two sons, but had returned to Burma in 1988 to care for her sick mother. Caught up in the popular uprising, she joined the newly established National League for Democracy (NLD). The party won a landslide victory in the 1990 elections but was never given power by the SLORC. Being under house arrest for most of the time since 1989, the military even refused to allow her to be with her dying husband. She won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 and has become the absolute icon for democracy in Burma (Wintle, 2007). ‘The Lady’ is the opposition.25

The holy Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon, where Aung San Suu Kyi announced Burma’s second struggle for independence.

25 Aung San Suu Kyi is often referred to as ‘the Lady’ because “even to speak her name evokes the memory of the national founder, Aung San, and indirectly provides her some legitimacy” (Steinberg, 2010, 89).
4.10 New alliances and ceasefires

Thousands of young students had fled to the ‘liberated zones’ after the military crackdown. Although many could not face the hardships of a rebel life in the jungles and either died or fled to Thailand, others stayed and joined the ethnic militias. For the first time in history, the Burman opposition and ethnic insurgents had joined both politically and military. As this caused great alarm within the Tatmadaw, the years after 1988 would see another increase in the number of operations carried out against the KNU (Silverstein, 1997; Smith, 1999).

Another response of the Burmese regime to the new threat was the agreement of ceasefires with many ethnic armies. Seventeen ceasefire agreements were agreed between 1989 and 1997. The SLORC only negotiated with individual rebel groups in what South (2008, 119) called a “classic divide-and-rule strategy.” The ceasefire agreements weakened the alliance organisations, weakened the KNU and confronted them with harsher military attacks from a Tatmadaw that could now focus on the remaining active insurgencies (Oo and Min, 2007).

Although the terms of the ceasefires differed, the insurgents were usually allowed to keep their arms and administer their areas where they could engage for economic activities. In return, they recognized the Burmese state and let the SLORC employ development projects, usually in the field of infrastructure. The agreements, often verbal, were very elementary and did not offer any real political solutions: these would be dealt with when a new constitution was written (Oo and Min, 2007; South, 2008).

Smith (2002, 33) notes that there are differences between “those groups who believe in a ‘peace through development’ strategy, such as the KIO and NMSP, and those who believe in a ‘politics first’ approach, such as the KNU (and the NLD).” The KNU did not agree on a ceasefire because it wanted a political solution before any ceasefire with the government could take place. Moreover, they only wanted to negotiate in a joint insurgency front instead of individually. Another reason was the governments demand to lay down arms after the new constitution was approved: this was interpreted by Bo Mya as surrender and thus a violation of the four principles of Saw Ba Oo Gy (Oo and Min, 2007; South, 2008; 2011). These demands and the unwillingness to compromise on such principles would obstruct a ceasefire throughout the following decades.
It was a decision that would have devastating consequences, as the KNU would soon receive the biggest setback in its long insurgency campaign.

4.11 The fall of Manerplaw

When the Karen insurgency started in 1948, this was motivated by a lack of ethnic rights and grievances felt by Karen leaders. They were not the only ethnic minority that felt such political grievances, given the number of other ethnic conflicts that erupted after Burma’s independence. Such grievances have been apparent and sometimes reinforced throughout the last sixty years, especially in response to Ne Win’s Burmanization policy.

Although the KNU started its insurgency because of a lack of ethnic rights and a desire to have their own state, the period after 1962 “saw the emergence of significant economic agendas in the prosecution of armed conflict in Burma” (South, 2008, 39). With the international isolation of Burma, the border areas flourished because of the black market trade. Insurgency became institutionalized, a way of life. South (2008, 40) argues that “in the 1970s and 1980s the KNU became more concerned with defending lucrative trade routes – and later, logging concessions – than taking the fight to the enemy.” Commanders on all sides personally prospered in a political economy that was based on low-scale conflict. Cooperation between local military elites that were supposed to be enemies complicated the picture in Karen State (South, 2008).

However, profits were unequally divided. The KNU leadership had always largely consisted of Christian Sgaw Karen, despite being a minority within the Karen population. Under Bo Mya this was not different: indeed, the whole KNU leadership by that time was Christian. Educated by the missionaries during the colonial era and therefore preferred by the British for the army and administration, they formed some sort of elite within the Karen population (Cho, 2011; South, 2008). In contrast, most rank and file soldiers were Pwo Buddhists (Smith, 1999).

Under Bo Mya’s authoritarian rule this Christian leadership in Kawthoolei build up personal fortunes on the fundamentals of a largely Buddhist population that faced the hardships of civil war at the front lines deep inside Burma (Harriden, 2007; Smith, 1999). These soldiers grew frustrated over “an increasingly remote, corrupt and authoritarian KNU leadership,
many members of which were content to spend their time on the border or in Thailand, rather than on the front-lines” (South, 2008, 38).

Such frustrations finally led to a dramatic split. U Thuzana, a Karen monk at Manerplaw, had gathered numerous followers that expressed disagreements with the ongoing armed conflict and religious discrimination by the Christian dominated leadership of the KNU. When more and more Buddhist soldiers deserted to join U Thuzana, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) at the end of 1994 (South, 2008; 2011).

The government was quick to support the DKBA and aggravate alienation between the two Karen groups. Nonetheless, South (2008, 58) argues that “ultimately (…) the emergence of the DKBA (…) was a result of genuine grievances within the Buddhist community.” As Fong (2008, 167) notes, “the source of the problem was the distribution of wealth and power among the Karen.”

As religion had divided the Burmese population before independence, it had by now deeper penetrated into the society’s different groups and further segregated the Karen population. And as the British were criticized for a policy of divide-and-rule, so was the Tatmadaw happy to prevent unity between and even within the different insurgent groups. In 1992 government forces had already captured the strategic position of ‘Sleeping Dog Hill’ but
it failed to take over the Karen capital in “the greatest set-piece battle ever witnessed along the Burma-Thailand frontier” (Smith, 1999, 425). Now, making use of new intelligence provided by the DKBA, a joint Tatmadaw-DKBA force was soon able to seize Manerplaw. The opposition capital finally fell in January 1995 (Smith, 1999; South, 2008).

Kawmoorah, the KNU’s last major base and an important opposition site, was captured two months later. Other important strongholds soon followed. Tens of thousands of refugees poured into Thailand as the KNU lost its last liberated zones. Over the next years, its influence would decrease to some lose pockets of territory. In 1998 guerilla tactics were officially adopted as the KNU’s strategy, acknowledging its strong decline in military strength. In essence, it acknowledged the end of Kawthoolei.

4.12 A crumbling dream

The United States and other Western countries had declared sanctions on the SLORC following the crackdown on the democracy uprising and failure to hand over power to the NLD (Pedersen, 2008). In 1997 the SLORC, headed by Than Shwe since 1992, was replaced by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in what most observers called a ‘cosmetic change’. Meanwhile, Tatmadaw units became increasingly self-reliant, exacerbating abuses against civilians. The number of refugees in Thailand started to swell up to well over 100,000, mirrored by more than half a million internally-displaced persons (IDPs) (Steinberg, 2010; Fink, 2008). Extreme poverty, malnutrition and preventable diseases added to what had become one of the worst humanitarian crisis in the world (Smith, 1999; Steinberg, 2010). And although far less than the Tatmadaw, KNLA soldiers were also involved in human rights violations such as the planting of landmines, enlisting children and summarily executions (Human Rights Watch, 2002).

The DKBA had soon grew equal in troop strength with the KNU. DKBA leaders (and most leaders of other splinter organizations) are pretty much ‘conflict entrepreneurs’, despite claiming strong ethno-nationalist sentiments. Their central leadership is extremely weak and many commanders enjoy nearly full autonomy. They cooperate with the government and have profited from economic projects, including the trade in narcotics. They have also improved infrastructure in the areas they control, where grave human rights violations have been greatly reduced. As such, they provide an alternative to the KNU’s ‘no ceasefire before a political
settlement’ approach (Oo and Min, 2007; South, 2008).

Four more KNU splinter groups emerged during the 1990s and agreed ceasefires, although with far less dramatic consequences as the DKBA split. Nonetheless, the KNU was further weakened and kept losing territory. These developments marked the beginning of the end of Bo Mya. In 2000, after he had ruled the KNU for almost 25 years in authoritarian fashion, he was demoted to Vice-Chairman (Fong, 2008; South, 2008).

But on 12 December 2003 he surprised friend and foe with the announcement of a ‘gentleman’s agreement’ between the KNU and the SPDC. Although even the KNU leadership had not anticipated this cessation in fighting, it nonetheless decided to start negotiations. And while both sides did not completely stop recruiting (sometimes forced), moving and supplying their forces, fighting had slowed down considerably. A first hopeful round of talks was then organized (South, 2008).

The second round of talks was suspended by the SPDC after KNLA troops had attacked a Tatmadaw camp. Six months later Khin Nyunt, the ‘architect’ of the ceasefires, was purged as Than Shwe consolidated his power. Although more talks eventually took place, these negotiations soon ended as the SPDC only offered some small territorial concessions and was not willing to discuss any other options (Charney, 2009; South, 2008). In early 2006 the Tatmadaw resumed its counter-insurgency campaign against the KNU (South, 2007).

A desperate attempt in 2006 by some Karen leaders to bring an ailing Bo Mya to Rangoon to discuss a separate ceasefire for their area failed as the General realized their intentions. He passed away on Christmas Eve 2006, leaving behind the crumbling dream of a united Karen state. In 2007, those same Karen leaders defected from the KNU to form the Karen Peace Council (KPC), agree peace with the SPDC and being granted a patch of territory in Karen state. Secretary One of this new faction was Bo Mya’s own son. It was just another sign of how divided the Karen movement had become (Core, 2009; South, 2008).

Soon afterwards KNU General Secretary Padoh Mahn Sha was assassinated by unidentified killers at his home in Mae Sot, although many suspect DKBA soldiers. He was succeeded by Naw Zipporah Sein, the first woman to hold this position (Core, 2009; Than, 2009). The following years the KNU would continue low-level guerilla warfare, while the Tatmadaw did not halt counter-insurgency operations; its offensives are often carried out together with the DKBA (Smith, 2010).
4.13 The dilemma of national unity

Burma has been plagued by what Silverstein (1980) has called ‘the dilemma of national unity’, a dilemma that has been equally problematic for the Karen population. Because of the duration of the Karen insurgency, the term ‘Karen’ has commonly been used to describe a group of people that in reality conceals vast internal differences. These people do not only speak different languages and profess separate cultures, but also live scattered throughout Burma.

Despite this diversity “the KNU elite has tried continuously to promote a unified image and a singular pan-Karen identity,” even though “history has proved the quest for Karen unity to be elusive, and perhaps illusory” (Kuroiwa and Verkuylten, 2008, 392; South, 2008, 211). The KNU promotes Karen ethnicity and identity as strictly separate from Burman and other Burmese groups; I call this separative ethnicization. Such a common identity is necessary to legitimize the claims for an

Displaced Karen. Photo: James Robert Fuller.

The KNU is the sole organ for the development of the Karen national cause, the elite of the Karen national revolution. The KNU is the highest organ for all Karen people and represents all Karen people.

autonomous Karen homeland, Kawthoolei, inhabited by all Karen and represented by the KNU.

For long the KNU has been seen as the sole representative of the entire Karen population and only valid protector of Karen identity and Karen culture. Its approach comes down to a militant secessionist (since 1984 federalist) aim, if necessary realized by armed struggle. Surrender is out of the question and a ceasefire agreement impossible before a comprehensive political settlement is reached.

However, many alternative Karen views have emerged during the long history of armed insurgency. Besides the various KNU splinter groups, there is a population of over 75 per cent of the Karen that live outside Karen State and thus beyond the control of these armed factions. Many of them live in areas and cities that were initially sites of conflict, but have long since been under control of the Burmese government. Thawnghmung (2008, 10) has argued that these Karen often do not share the separative ethnicization and armed methods of the KNU and have stayed in the Union “either because they rejected the principles and methods of the KNU, because they thought the risk of joining the armed resistance was too great, or simply because they were politically passive.”

These ‘other’ Karen, as she refers to them, have long been ignored in studies of the Karen population, “which focus predominantly on the Karen insurgency and Karen refugees” (Thawnghmung, 2008, 11). However, many of them have had remarkably different experiences than their ethnic kin in conflict areas. They have interacted extensively with the Burman population, speak the Burmese language and have adopted some aspects of Burman culture. Although suspicion and distrust are still apparent, “relations between ‘other’ Karens and the Burmans have been free of violence, and even friendly at times” (Thawnghmung, 2008, 18).

This does not mean that the Union Karen do not subscribe to a Karen identity, but rather that they do not recognize the KNU leaders as their representatives and have found alternative ways to express and preserve their culture (South, 2008). Instead of challenging the government, they have sought accommodation with the state and tried to find ways to engage in activities with the objective to preserve Karen culture and language (South, 2007). Although most expressions of Karen culture faced repression by the government, these other Karen have nonetheless been able to “manage their own affairs and preserve their identity as Karens under the watchful eye of the authoritarian military” (Thawnghmung, 2008, 12). To

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26 South (2008) calls this group Union Karen.
that end, an emerging civil society has played a crucial role.

4.14 The civil society alternative

According to Steinberg (2001, 106), “civil society died under the BSPP; perhaps, more accurately, it was murdered.” However, since the end of the BSPP in 1988 there has been a significant expansion of a wide array of formal and informal local organizations, signalling the relevance of the other Karen. Especially ceasefire regions witnessed an emerging civil society, but also in areas were conflict was on-going did such organizations come into existence. Local Karen organizations mushroomed after the 2003 ‘gentleman’s agreement’, while the space for civil society in whole of Burma further expanded following Cyclone Nargis in 2008 (Kramer, 2009; 2011; Pedersen, 2008).

These organizations are usually self-sufficient and able to operate independently from the government, which has resulted in broad public support from the communities they work for (Kramer, 2011). Many, but not all, are formed along ethnic or religious lines. They often have higher levels of community participation, accountability and transparency than local armed groups (Pedersen, 2008; South, 2004; 2008). Such civil society organizations engage in numerous activities aimed at community development and “democratising society in the country at large,” but also deliver aid and promote peace talks and reconciliation (Kramer, 2011, 29). In ceasefire areas they have even been able to undertake activities in the field of social and cultural rights of ethnic minorities (Kramer, 2011).

Many of these organizations do not believe in radical regime change and promote bottom-up changes. They aim at grassroots development as a way to gradually realize political change (Kramer, 2011; South, 2008). They often reject armed struggle, realizing that many Karen have become extremely weary and fed up with the civil war. As an important Karen civil society actor stated: “the Karen leaders in Myanmar have projected the idea of transferring the ‘armed struggle in the battle field’ to the ‘political struggle around the table’” (Saw U, 2007, 219).

4.15 Neither-war-nor-peace

The new century has generally seen low-scale conflict along the Thai border, with the KNU carrying out some guerrilla attacks and the Tatmadaw continuing its counter-insurgency operations in areas where the KNU is still active. But although conflict has generally
lessened, many civilians in Karen State have not experienced circumstances that are even remotely close to peace (Callahan, 2007; Kramer, 2009; Smith, 2010).

The last decades the KNU has experienced this pattern of declining influence. With every territory it lost control over, it also lost income through taxation or natural resource extraction, which further weakened the organization and in turn caused additional loss of territory. By 2011, the organization controlled little more than some loose enclaves along the border with Thailand, a few bases in southern Karen State and one larger area in Northern Karen State (South, 2011).

Various Karen breakaway factions have emerged that sought to control former KNU territory, often in cooperation with the government. South (2011) distinguishes no less than seven different armed Karen groups, without including various local militias. The KNU’s large liberated zones have definitely become history; the map of Karen State nowadays shows a quickly changing mosaic pattern of groups claiming various degrees of authority in a neither-war-nor-peace-environment.

War weariness is rife among civilians in Karen State, where the burden of conflict has already long ago become unbearable. Smith (1999, 264) has argued that the success of the four cuts strategy “strongly suggests that in many areas there were villagers, tired after many years of rural insurgency, who were only too glad to help the Tatmadaw if their cooperation offered the prospect of peace.” But whereas many insurgencies in Burma realized the hopelessness of their struggle and sought accommodation with the regime through ceasefires,
the KNU maintained its ‘hard-line’ position.

Young KNU members, realizing this war weariness, looked sympathetic to the ceasefire agreements of other ethnic armies. Many favour a more pragmatic approach without adhering to the strict principle of a political settlement and joint negotiations with the other ethnic armies before agreeing on a ceasefire (Taw, 2005). Such a political settlement is so broad and complex that it requires “a long and complicated process of negotiation and the involvement of multiple actors. It is not an issue that can be dealt with in ceasefire talks alone” (Thawnghmung, 2008, 40). Strict adherence to these requisites basically obstructs any chance of a ceasefire.

However, the KNU’s “internal political dynamics are hierarchical, intolerant of criticism and resistant to change” (McConnachie, 2012, 17). Senior leaders continued to resist a ceasefire agreement, considering any form of compromise as weakness and tantamount to surrender. Some had also vested economic interests and were afraid to lose influence in the case of a ceasefire agreement. The result has been that “many of the younger educated leaders have left the party out of frustration with what they consider to be a lack of dynamic, coherent, and well-thought-out strategy” (Thawnghmung, 2008, 32).

4.16 The rough road to democracy

Just prior to his purge, Khin Nyunt had launched the so-called ‘road-map to democracy’. The SPDC was prepared to establish a ‘disciplined’ democracy, under guidance of the military. A new constitution would be written, followed by a referendum and ultimately elections. But after two terribly tragic events within one year, the government probably lost any legitimacy it still possessed with both its own citizens and the Western world.

First in 2007, the military violently suppressed the ‘saffron revolution’, a large protest movement under the leadership of Burma’s deeply respected monks. As pictures and videos spread over the internet and through satellite television, the Burmese people could now directly see the violence of the Tatmadaw. They must have looked horror-struck to the atrocities committed against the most revered persons in their society and the killing of approximately one hundred people (Thawnghmung and Myoe, 2007).

Then, on 2 and 3 May 2008, Burma was hit by “the single most devastating disaster to strike Burma/Myanmar in recorded history” (Steinberg, 2010, 139). Cyclon Nargis is estimated to have killed as many as 140,000 people. The damage caused was about 27 percent of the country’s GDP.
As the regime was preparing for its constitutional referendum, it refused any foreigner to enter the country. All relief supplies were strictly controlled by the government. For three weeks, the official response to the disaster was one of denial of a crisis. According to South (2008, 226), “there was an ethnic dimension to the government’s response. The majority of the cyclone-effective population were ethnic Karen.”

Western boycotts and sanctions had already expanded following the 2007 crackdown. Now, only after intense international pressure (including talks about invoking the ‘responsibility to protect’ principle) and after even China expressed concerns, some sort of disaster response was set up. By that time the constitution had been approved by 92.48% of the people (Pedersen, 2008; Steinberg, 2010; Thawngmung and Myoe, 2007).

An important step of the roadmap was taken on 7 November 2010 with national elections. 25 Percent of the seats was already reserved for the military; the government’s Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) finally won 874 of the 1.140 seats in Burma’s first civilian government since 1962, headed by Thein Sein. Conflict along the border flared up on election day, showing that the KNU still had their significance (Turnell, 2011).

Although the new government is “mostly a ‘constitutionalized’ façade for ongoing military rule,” some remarkable developments took place after it took office (Turnell, 2011, 148). Within a week, Aung San Suu Kyi was released. Thein Sein subsequently started dialogue with her and she has been allowed to participate in the 2012 by-elections, in which her NLD won 43 out of 45 seats.27 Furthermore, restrictions on freedom of expression were eased, some political prisoners were freed and construction of a controversial dam in Kachin State was stopped to “respect the will of the people.”28

As the government sought international recognition, it was quickly rewarded. It was not only awarded the 2014 chairmanship of ASEAN; in December 2011 it received US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, the highest visit by an American official in more than 50 years.29 And although skepticism remains to the true intentions behind these reforms, many

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observers agree that ‘this time it is different’. It did not take long before Western countries started to ease many of their sanctions.\textsuperscript{30}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{clinton_shwedagon.jpg}
\caption{Clinton touring Shwedagon Pagoda, December 1, 2011.}
\end{figure}

As for the remaining active rebel groups, renewed ceasefire negotiations started and soon agreements were reached. The KNU did not lag behind this time and broke with its sixty year old demand of a political solution before a ceasefire. An initial ceasefire was agreed on 12 January 2012 in Hpa’an, Karen State.\textsuperscript{31} The KNU said the next step would be a permanent ceasefire, followed by the discussion of politics.\textsuperscript{32} The reason it agreed on a ceasefire was its believe the new government was trustworthy and sincere.\textsuperscript{33} Peace talks continued during 2012 and the KNU opened liaison offices in several Burmese towns.\textsuperscript{34} Meanwhile, fighting had stopped in nearly whole Karen State.

Perhaps then, after more than sixty years, change is finally coming.

\begin{quote}
\textit{Change is inevitable.}
Buddhist proverb.
\end{quote}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{31} As relations warm with Myanmar, U.S. will ease trade limits. New York Times, May 17, 2012.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Burmese government and ethnic rebel group sign cease-fire. New York Times, January 12, 2012.
\item \textsuperscript{33} KNU, government focus on ceasefire details. Mizzima, April 11, 2012.
\item \textsuperscript{34} KNU believes government is trustworthy. Irrawaddy, May 4, 2012.
\item \textsuperscript{34} KNU opens liaison offices. Mizzima, April 11, 2012.
\end{itemize}
4.17 Conclusion

Racial tensions had been built up in Burma during the colonial era and World War II, but truly surfaced right after the country became independent: the Karen insurgency started in 1948, amidst numerous other rebel groups. Although the KNU was nearly successful in toppling the government, its history has afterwards been characterized by a slow but gradual retreat eastwards.

During the 1970s and 1980s the eastern borderlands contained large ‘liberated zones’ in what has been the closest attempt to create the Karen Free State of Kawthoolei. Although the Karen were hit hard by the four cuts campaign, optimism was high one more time in 1988. The aftermath of the democracy uprising saw promising alliances between the Burman opposition and ethnic minorities.

This optimism was short-lived. While other ethnic armies agreed ceasefires with the government, the KNU was not willing to give up its political demands. The Tatmadaw could now focus more on the KNU and dealt hard blows to the insurgency. However, the biggest blow came from within the Karen self.

Buddhist Karen deserted from the KNU to form the DKBA, citing a greedy, corrupt, authoritarian leadership and religious discrimination as their motivations. Cooperating with the government, they soon captured the KNU’s headquarters and effectively ended the Kawthoolei dream.

Although the KNU continued to wage a guerrilla war, numerous alternative Karen voices have emerged. These are epitomised by various armed splinter groups in Karen State and numerous civil society organizations throughout the country that do not necessarily agree with the separative ethnicization of the KNU. The Karen nationalistic movement seems by now more divided than ever and the KNU is only one of many actors.

Democratic developments in the last years have ended Burma’s isolation and its image as a pariah state. Seeking rapprochement, the Burmese government finally concluded an initial ceasefire with the KNU in January 2012.
5 State support

This chapter will analyse support that the KNU has received from states throughout its long history of armed opposition. Much attention will be given to Thailand, which played a particularly significant role in the KNU insurgency.

The chapter has a largely chronological structure and starts with state support during the Cold War era. This is followed by an examination of the events around the end of the Cold War, when geopolitics turned against the KNU. Paragraph 5.3 discusses the position of Thailand during the 1990s and the effect this had on the KNU, including the fall of Manerplaw and its ability to subsequently move transnational. The chapter then logically continues with the 21st century, including an examination of the (primarily economic) factors that improved the relationship between Burma and Thailand and had a debilitating effect on the Burmese opposition forces in Thailand. The KNU has nonetheless been able to continue its operations from safe havens in Thailand and it is paragraph 5.5 that details the reasons the KNU has to date not been expelled from Thai territory. The next paragraph briefly discusses Western support since the end of the Cold War, which had far less impact than Thai support. Following the structure of the central research question, paragraph 5.7 analyses the implications of support the KNU has received from states. The chapter is finished with a short conclusion in paragraph 5.8.

5.1 State support during the Cold War

After the KNU had to abandon Insein and retreated eastwards, it quickly realized the importance of external support. As early as 1954, a Karen delegation travelled to Bangkok to discuss possible support from the Royal Thai Army (RTA). The Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) had its headquarters in Bangkok and the city was filled with American officials. Thailand was the most important ally of the United States in the fight against the spread of communism throughout mainland Southeast Asia. To prevent Thailand from falling to communist forces, a ‘buffer zone policy’ was implemented, in which the country was surrounded by neutral states or sympathetic militias that patrolled and controlled the porous borders of the Kingdom. The KNU was one of these forces and acted as a substitute for the RTA (Fong, 2008; Smith, 1999).

The KNU was used to stop the threat of a possible link between the Chinese-backed
Communist Party of Burma (CPB) and the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), and to give the RTA the ability to concentrate on CPT activities in other parts of Thailand. In return, the KNU (and other insurgency movements in the Thai-Burma border area) received tacit support from the Thai government. Like so many insurgencies worldwide, the KNU was used in grand Cold War politics. But as the communist threat in Burma was considered relatively small, United States assistance was not as substantial as that for Hmong rebels who literally fought alongside the CIA and American soldiers against the communist forces of Laos and Vietnam (Lee, 2007).

Nonetheless, due to this support the KNU was able to hold numerous permanent rear bases that were perched against the border in the mountainous jungles of southeast Burma, an area largely impenetrable for the Tatmadaw (Smith, 1999). When Manerplaw became the KNU headquarters in 1974, “the KNU established a string of jungle villages on the Thai side of the border” (South, 2008, 89). As the KNU was allowed to use Thai soil and the Tatmadaw was not, these strategic bases could only be attacked from one side and were thus very defensible.

By strategically using the neighbouring country, the KNU was able to keep its secure rear bases in Burma and could operate as a de facto government in large parts of Karen State. As they were allowed to control the lucrative cross-border trade, the KNU could finance its struggle by taxing the black market, taking full advantage of Burma’s economic isolation under Ne Win (Smith, 1999; South, 2008). Moreover, “KNLA commanders have been allowed untroubled access to Thailand and the region’s thriving arms black market” (Smith, 1999, 299).

Besides Thai support, the KNU also tried to find Western aid, most notably from the United States. However, the leftist line that was adopted under the second phase effectively foreclosed the possibilities of such aid, as the United States grew concerned over these ‘communist ideals’. Western pressure subsequently played a crucial role in the early ending of this leftist experiment and the replacement of its leaders by more right wing and Western oriented Karen, including Bo Mya.

South (2008, 39) speaks about “the rise of General Saw Bo Mya, a tough field commander, staunch Christian and anti-communist, who became a key asset in Thai and US strategy in the region.” It was under Bo Mya, who explicitly propagated his right-wing views, that the KNU perfectly utilized the buffer zone policy.

In its search for Western aid, the KNU allied with groups that did receive such
support. They even cooperated with erstwhile enemy U Nu for the promise of money and arms, paid by the CIA (Fong, 2008; Smith, 1999). However, Smith (1999, 287) also argues that “perhaps most gratifying of all to Karen leaders was the first hint, after 20 years’ harsh warfare, of real international recognition for their largely forgotten struggle.” Indeed, during the period 1970-1974, the KNU was allowed to operate from an official liaison office in Bangkok (Fong, 2008). It marked the highlight of the search for international recognition, which is a less tangible but nonetheless sometimes significant form of support.

The 1970s and early 1980s marked, in retrospect, the best attempt to realize the Kawthoolei dream. This period saw the buffer zone policy in optima forma in which the KNU used the full range of available forms of state support. It led to the most flourishing era of the KNU, with not only Thai and United States support in the form of money, weapons and moral support but also the approval to use Thai soil and exploit the lucrative cross-border trade.

If the West would help us with money and recognition, they would not regret it.

5.2 The end of the Cold War

The end of the Cold War caused a mix up of interests and preferences of the Karen allies. The United States had lost its interests in preventing the spread of communism through Southeast Asia. As the CPB and CPT collapsed, the threat of a link between the two rebel forces disappeared, and Thailand had no security reasons anymore to support the KNU (Smith, 1999). This period also marked the end of Ne Win’s isolationism and the opening up of Burma for foreign investors. Especially neighbouring countries were quick to respond. Thawngmhun (2008, 30) accordingly notes that “by the early 1990s, the geopolitical situation was no longer favourable to armed resistance groups.”

As the days of ideological motivations were over, economic agendas started to determine Thai policy on Burma. Thai-Burmese relations had already improved during the 1980s and in 1988 Thai Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan launched its policy of ‘turning the battlefields of Indochina into new market places’ (Chongkittavorn, 2001; South, 2011). Under this economic approach, “the Foreign Ministry played almost no role in formulating policy on Burma” (Chongkittavorn, 2001, 127). Instead, the military started to dominate policy towards Burma, influenced by local businessmen and their associations (Buszynski, 1998). Lee (2008, 195) argues that “in this new political economy, money began to play a decisive role in gaining political power.”

After the crackdown on the democracy uprising, Thailand did not join the international community in its sanctions against Burma as it considered this an internal affair (Chongkittavorn, 2001). Instead, in an unprecedented break with its long-standing policy of supporting Burmese opposition forces, “Thailand, under the immense power wielded by then Thai Army Chief of Staff General Chaavalit, granted international recognition to the Union of Myanmar” (Fong, 2008, 278). It was a reward for lucrative logging concessions in the teak woods of southeast Burma he had just secured during a visit to Rangoon (Buszynski, 1998). Chongkittavorn (2001, 118-119) notes that “it has been an open secret that the Thai military used to obtain concessions, especially in the lucrative logging and gemstone business,
Every now and then observers predict the end of the KNU within the foreseeable future. But every year they manage to carry out several attacks and continue their insurgency.

Donor representative 3.

in exchange for security cooperation.” Thus as another reward, Tatmadaw troops were now allowed to use Thai territory and attack KNU positions from the rear.

The Thai change of heart had severe consequences for the KNU. The previously secure and permanent rear bases were captured by the Tatmadaw, finally leading to the fall of Manerplaw in 1995. Heavy deforestation and roads built by Thai logging companies brought an end to Kawthoolei as the perfect hiding place for insurgents. With the KNU losing position after position, it also lost its ability to levy tax on the cross-border trade. (Cline, 2009; Smith, 1999). The days of large liberated zones came to an end; the Kawthoolei dream vanished.

5.3 Thai support in the 1990s

As the KNU had gradually been pushed further eastwards and now lost the last of its remaining safe havens inside Burma, it had no alternative than to relocate across the border. Its whole leadership has since 1995 essentially operated as a government-in-exile from Thailand. All political activities were moved to the relatively safe border town of Mae Sot, which basically became the new Manerplaw.

Soon after the end of the Cold War the KNU thus found itself on the long list of insurgencies that, in the face of a stronger opponent, sought sanctuary in a neighbouring country. As nearly everyone I interviewed agreed on: the KNU mainly survived because it could operate from its safe havens, provided for by Thai passivity about rebel activity on its territory. The passive and tolerant attitude of Thailand had several reasons, which will be outlined in the following paragraph.

5.3.1 Thai tolerance

Once the KNU started to operate transnationally, it became dependent on the tolerance of its host state. It has been noted in paragraph 2.1 that the host state preferences depend mainly on its bilateral relation with the rebels’ home state and its attitude towards the insurgents.

The improved cooperation in the late 1980s between Burma and Thailand was primarily driven by economic interests and continued after the apparent ousting of General

35 Described by South (2008, 55) as “the long retreat – from Insein to Papun, to Mannerplaw to Mae Sot.”

36 That this safety is rather relative was demonstrated when KNU General Secretaty Padoh Mahn Sha was assassinated at his home in Mae Sot in 2008.
Chaowalit in 1990 (he would shortly become Prime Minister in 1996 and Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister in the Thaksin government of 2001). Thailand - and ASEAN - opposed Western sanctions that were imposed after the 1988 crackdown on the grounds of the non-interference principle and the policy of ‘constructive engagement’, which was first introduced as an alternative to the Western approach of sanctions and isolation in 1991. After decades of self-imposed Burmese isolation, Thailand argued that any contact with the regime was better than no contact at all (Chongkittavorn, 2001; Harriden, 2007; South, 2011).

One result of constructive engagement was the acceptance of Burma into ASEAN in 1997, which signalled the definite end the country’s international isolation (Hyndman, 2001). Another result has been that in the absence of Western investments, neighbourhood countries solely profited from Burma’s resources.

The relationship between Thailand and Burma thus generally improved during the 1990s and it could be expected that this would lead to a more hostile approach of Thai authorities towards the KNU. However, realities were more complex than that. Despite increased cooperation and an improving relationship between Thailand and Burma, there are several reasons why Thailand was reluctant to take a firm stance against Karen rebels on its soil and tolerated their presence.

The first years of the decade, Thailand faced “a myriad of domestic political issues, including frequent leadership changes” (Chongkittavorn, 2001, 123). A coherent policy on Burma was lacking and power fragmented between the RTA, Foreign Ministry, National Security Council (NSC), Ministry of Interior (MOI), Border Patrol Police (BPP) and other institutions. Thai-Burmese and Thai-Karen relations were primarily based on personal friendships (Chongkittavorn, 2001; Grundy-Warr, 2004).

The KNU had long profited from the buffer zone policy and generally maintained good relations with Thai military and intelligence officers (Fong, 2008). Burma is Thailand’s historical archenemy, a relationship that dates back to the great wars of the 18th century kingdoms and wrecking of Ayutthaya, the Siamese capita, by the Burmese. Thai people generally despise their Burman neighbours, having more in common with the Mon, Karen and Shan that frequently lived on both sides of the border and have sometimes even ethnic ties with the Thai.37

Because of such sympathies, the KNU long received “special attention and treatment from local authorities” (Lee, 2008, 202). Even the Royal Thai Army in general maintained

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37 Based on conversations with Thai friends.
very cordial relations with the opposition forces. As Smith (1999, 299) explains, “the Thai Army owes a debt of deep gratitude to the KNU and NDF alliance, which might explain why senior Thai Army officers are reluctant to turn their backs on the KNU, despite closening of Rangoon-Bangkok ties in the late 1980s.”

Extensive political reforms in 1997 meant that the Foreign Ministry was able to reassume the leading role in formulating policies on Burma (Chongkittavorn, 2001). Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai, who ruled Thailand between 1997 and 2001, subsequently “took a hard line against the Tatmadaw” (Ganesan, 2004, 31). Bilateral relations deteriorated, which positively affected the KNU. KNLA soldiers were also helpful in combating drug trafficking from Burma into Thailand, which the Thai government declared a threat to national security in 1998 (Ball, 2003). Finally, Bangkok could use the KNU’s presence on Thai soil in negotiations with the volatile regime in Burma (Brees, 2010).

So although the 1990s were illustrated by heavy losses for the KNU and an ending of unconditional Thai support, the insurgency was relieved by the most important and most common form of state support: a safe haven across the border. To that end, it benefitted from fragmented power and local sympathies in Thailand and later from the critical stance that the Chuan government adopted towards Burma. Thailand remained passive about opposition activities on its soil and the KNU was able to transform itself during the 1990s into a successful transnational rebel organization.

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*Thailand’s 1997 Constitution is generally referred to as the ‘People’s Charter’. It was the first Constitution to be drafted by a directly elected Constitutional Drafting Assembly and led to a civilianization of Thai politics and decline in military domination of various aspects of public policy. It is often regarded as a watershed event in Thai political history (Chambers, 2010; Dressel, 2010; Kittayarak, 2003).*
5.3.2 International dispute and cross-border violence

An extraterritorial sanctuary leads to a high risk of cross border violence; the host state can get involved in a previously domestic conflict. And indeed, from the beginning of the 1990s the SLORC repeatedly accused Thailand of harbouring rebels. Such accusations were sometimes accompanied by attacks on KNU forces on Thai territory. According to Buszynski (1998, 299), “in 1992 there were various border clashes which nearly escalated to a full-scale conflict between the Thai and Myanmar militaries.”

Similar events took place in 1995, when the Tatmadaw violated Thai sovereignty to capture Manerplaw and Kawmoorah. Thai forces responded with the deployment of forces on the border and shelling of Burmese troops, which was interpreted by the SLORC as support for the KNU (Buszynski, 1998). Throughout the 1990s Thailand was “subject to regular incursions by armed forces from Burma, sometimes involving Tatmadaw units, but more frequently its surrogate ethnic forces such as the UWSA and the DKBA” (Ball, 2003, 13).

5.4 Thailand and Burma in the 21st century

In January 2000 a group claiming to be a KNU splinter group took about 200 people hostage in a hospital in the Thai city of Ratchaburi, before being killed by Thai forces. The event raised concerns about domestic security threats caused by Burmese opposition forces and negatively affected Thai public opinion about the KNU (Brees, 2009; Rajah, 2001).

One year later Thai policy towards Burma underwent a complete reversal when Thaksin Shinawatra replaced Chuan (Ganesan, 2004). His foreign policy has been described as ‘personal diplomacy’ and was primarily based on economic interests and the protection of his own corporate interests, especially in neighbouring countries. It motivated him to improve relations with Burma’s top leadership (Brooks, 2004; Chachavalpongpun, 2009; Phongpaichit and Baker, 2004). Trade relations were fully restored in return for promises of cooperation against narcotics. Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Chaovalit, known for having particularly close ties
with the Burmese generals, became the main person to formulate policies and make decisions on Burma (Chongkittavorn, 2001; Grundy-Warr, 2004).

Ball (2003, 5) notes that “by late 2002, the official relationship between Bangkok and Rangoon was improving markedly, and by early 2003 was probably better than it had been for nearly a decade.” It was a relationship that had a devastating effect on the KNU, as it gave the “Burma government greater leverage over Thai policies towards Burma dissidents and refugees in Thailand” (South, 2011, 22). The forging of closer ties led to an increasingly hard-line stance towards Burmese opposition forces in Thailand; pressure on the KNU leadership in Mae Sot subsequently intensified (Huguet and Punpuing, 2005; Human Rights Watch, 2004). Economic forces played a crucial role behind these developments.

5.4.1 The business of politics, the politics of money

Economic interests started to determine Thai politics in the late 1980s and this accelerated after Thaksin came into office. Under the ASEAN strategy of constructive engagement “state - and above all private corporate – agencies sought to engage directly with the military government and business networks” (South, 2011, 20). Thailand increased its economic cooperation with Burma and Thai corporations initiated several projects in natural resource extraction with the SLORC/SPDC. Besides logging and extraction of gems and jade in Karen State, three large projects particularly affected the KNU and Thai attitudes towards the KNU.

5.4.1.1 Yadana gas pipeline

The first project was the construction of a pipeline - amidst numerous allegations of violations of human and environmental rights - from the Yadana gas field in the Andaman Sea to Thailand, cutting through Karen territory. The gas field and pipeline are operated by the French company Total, with a United States, a Burmese and a Thai partner. The latter has a 30% stake in the project. A 1 billion dollar deal was concluded in February 1995, just days after Manerplaw was conquered by Tatmadaw forces making use of Thai soil (Buszynski, 1998). When KNLA soldiers killed five pipeline workers in March 1995, Thailand was furious and the United States warned the KNU “to leave the pipeline alone” (Fong, 2008, 182). The pipe line started operating in 1998.

5.4.1.2 Salween hydroelectric dams

Another joint Thai-Burmese initiative was the construction of several hydro-electric dams along the Moei and Salween rivers, right in the heart of Kawthoolei (Fong, 2008; Smith, 1999). Discussions had already started during the visit of Chaovil in 1988, but issues of human and environmental rights make it a controversial project. A 6 billion dollar deal was signed between the Thai and Burmese governments in 2006 for the Ta Sang dam in the Shan State. Preparations for the Hat Gyi Dam in Karen State were halted in the same year because conflict flared up in the area. Such dams would have a very negative impact on the possibilities of cross-border supplies and movements for the KNU (South, 2011). The KNU killed two Thai engineers working on the project, further worsening the image of the insurgency (Smith, 2010).

40 The politics of dam construction along the Salween. Mizzima News, August 15, 2009
5.4.1.3 Dawei deep-sea port

The last of these projects is the planned deep-sea port in Dawei (Tavoi), which will include a Special Economic Zone and improved transport options to Bangkok, other Southeast Asian countries and China. An 8.6 billion dollar deal was signed in 2008 with Thailand’s largest construction company, Italian-Thai Development Public Company Limited (ITD). This strategically located port will improve transport options between Asia and Europe and make it possible to avoid longer transport routes through the more insecure Malacca Strait. Like the proposed dam projects, the related infrastructure will further disrupt the KNU’s operation space (South, 2011).

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42 *Thai-Burma deep sea port project.* Bangkok Post, November 12, 2010.
5.4.2 The effects of economic projects

Most of the resources that are involved in these projects can be found in – or have to be transported through – areas where the KNU operate. As the Burmese government tried to secure its control over these natural resources and industrial projects, Tatmadaw presence heavily increased in these areas. Fink (2008) calculated that the number of troops in Eastern Burma had doubled since 1995.

The projects also had a major impact on Thai (lack of) support for the KNU. Fink (2008, 460) argues that “given Thailand’s significant economic interests in Burma today, which include natural gas and hydroelectric power, Thailand may be reluctant to allow any major scaling up of organizations operating from its borders.” As money started to determine policies, “the KNU was transformed from a valuable (if low-profile) ally of the Thai security establishment to a nuisance, impeding investments in the borderlands” (South, 2008, 20).

Thailand repeatedly made clear it wanted the KNU to sign a ceasefire agreement. Besides the willingness to improve bilateral relations, Thai security and business groups had a
specific interest in such an agreement, as it would bring stability in the areas they wanted to exploit (Core, 2009). Since 2002 there have been numerous attempts by the RTG to pressure the KNU and lure the SPDC into talks (Harriden, 2007; Huguet and Punpuing, 2005; Oo and Min, 2007; South, 2011; Taw, 2005).\textsuperscript{43} South (2004, 239) stated that it was “an open secret that the KNU is being pushed by the Thai government into a hasty agreement with Yangon,” and the 2003 gentleman’s agreement was at least to some extent the result of Thai persuasion (Smith, 2007; Taw, 2005).

5.4.3 International dispute and cross-border violence

As cooperation between the governments grew and Thaksin showed a willingness to restrain Burmese opposition activities in Thailand, military tensions between the two countries decreased. Ball (2003) found that “since late 2002, there have been relatively few intrusions by Burmese forces into Thailand, and few cross-border shellings.” One year later Ganesan (2004, 35) noted that “Thailand has much more to lose if the situation spirals out of control as it almost did in December 2002 when the two countries faced a tense standoff.”

Although troubles along the border sometimes continue to exist and violations of Thai sovereignty have not ceased completely either,\textsuperscript{44} the general development of increased engagement on the national level means that both countries are reluctant to take up arms against each other. As Roberts (2010, 92) argues, “the increased economic interdependence between the two countries and the removal of other contentious factors has meant that the prospect for armed conflict has been reduced in the present circumstances.”

5.5 Thai support in the 21st century

Increased cooperation between the two governments since 2001 has weakened the KNU and caused Thailand to become more prone to Burmese complaints about opposition activities on Thai territory. Although Thaksin had to resign in 2006, Thai policy on Burma has remained largely the same. Moreover, negative public attention and large economic projects that were disrupted by the KNU adversely affected Thai attitudes towards the insurgents. Harriden (2007, 130) consequently argues that “the improvement of bilateral

\textsuperscript{43} Thaksin will persuade Yangon to talk to rebels. Straits Times, January 28, 2003.

\textsuperscript{44} For example, in 2006 the Tatmadaw fired at a Thai military helicopter and in 2010 a Thai village had to be evacuated after skirmishes just inside Burma. Thai troops were then called in to prevent any troops from crossing the border (Brees, 2010; Roberts, 2010). However, such local border violence has generally not disrupted bilateral relations.
relations between Thailand and Burma had had a debilitating effect on the KNU, economically, militarily, and politically.”

Indeed, Thai pressure has only become heavier in the last couple of years and several persons stated that this has severely affected the operation space for the KNU and other opposition forces along the border. Thailand has tried to restrict Burmese opposition activities through travel restrictions, harassments and the closure of offices (Huguet and Punpuing, 2005; Wongpolganan, 2005). KNU leaders have repeatedly been told by Thai authorities to stop organizing activities from Thailand and safe houses in Mae Sot and other border towns have been raided (Smith, 2010).

Nonetheless, the KNU leadership has continued to operate from Thailand throughout the 21st century. Moreover, it plays a leading role in united fronts with other opposition groups that are based in Mae Sot and other Thai border towns. Related organizations as the KYO and KWO have also offices in Mae Sot. Their members often live there in their own compounds and make use of a ‘KNU card’ to identify themselves. This card is issued by the KNU and acknowledged by local Thai authorities, so these Karen do not risk arrest or deportation (Lee, 2008).

So although many observers believe that a real coordinated approach could wipe out the last remnants of the KNU, it has hitherto not happened. This has various reasons, which will be discusses in the following paragraph.

### 5.5.1 Local realities on the Thai-Burmese border

Thailand is reluctant to take a real tough stance towards Burma’s opposition forces, as it regards itself a democratic country and suppressing Burmese opposition activists will inevitably cause Western complaints. As the international community generally wanted Thailand to take a more critical position towards the Burmese government, the RTG has

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45 Interviews DR1, DR4, DR6, Saw David Taw.
46 Interview Saw David Taw.
47 Interviews Mai Bhone Kyaw, Saw David Taw.
48 Interviews CBO1, CBO3.
49 Interviews DR2, DR4, DR5.
walked a precarious line between pleasing both the SPDC and Western countries (especially the United States); a walk in which the KNU has been mainly used to advance one of these aims.

Therefore the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs only concerns itself with the KNU when the Burmese government complains, and it has been argued that it just carries out some raids and public statements after SPDC criticism; KNU leaders were sometimes even informed beforehand. According to these leaders themselves, they can still operate in Thailand as long as they keep a low profile.

Moreover, extensive decentralization in Thailand since the 1997 Constitution has created more “participation, representation and accountability”, but also increased the autonomy of local authorities (Haque, 2010, 687). Several agencies still differently interpret and apply central policies, while regional RTA commanders continue to hold significant de facto power (Grundy-Warr, 2004). Brees (2010, 39) explains that “despite Thailand’s official

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50 Interviews Saw David Taw, DR3, IO2.
51 Interviews DR1, DR3, DR6, Saw David Taw.
52 Interview Naw Zipporah Sein.
stance towards the Burmese opposition forces, at the local and more discrete level there has always been a lot of space for negotiation.” Policies from Bangkok are often different from realities on the border, where decisions are more based on ad hoc local security/military and business interests.53

As long as the KNU remains a useful actor for any of these interests, it is unlikely that there will be a real Thai effort to remove them from their soil. And as the KNU still controls some patches of territory, holds a small army and is able to disrupt economic projects in Burma, local Thai authorities have to acknowledge its role in the borderlands.

In response to the skirmishes around the 2010 elections, local security and business groups “told the KNU that while fighting inside Burma is acceptable, armed conflict should not flare up along the border” (South, 2011, 44). It was a prime example of the pragmatic realities and relationships that exist on the Thai-Burmese border.

5.6 Western aid since the end of the Cold War

The KNU has never stopped searching for Western aid, but since the end of the Cold War it had little success. However, its presence in Thailand means it has easy connections with Western diplomats and has received visits from members of National and European Parliaments.54 These are important recognitions for an ailing insurgency.

It has at several instances asked for money or arms, but to no avail; most countries have policies that they do not provide material support for armed opposition groups. Although the KNU has claimed that it is possible to give aid for health care and education without supporting its armed wing (the KNLA), these states have not been susceptible to such arguments.55

It has been noted in paragraph 2.1 that state support can be double layered. Although not providing tangible support for the KNU, most Western states have held economic and political sanctions against the Burmese regime since 1988. They provide no official aid to the government and block international trade with Burma, which is in stark contrast with the

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53 Interviews DR2, DR4, Saw David Taw, e-mail conversation with Ashley South.
54 Interview Naw Zipporah Sein.
55 Interviews DR1, DR4, Naw Zipporah Sein.
ASEAN policy of ‘constructive engagement’ (Charney, 2009). As such, this opposition could be seen as a form of (limited) support for the KNU. Western opposition to the Burmese regime has also played a role in the relatively lenient Thai attitude towards the KNU’s presence in Mae Sot and other Thai towns.

Important to note however, is that these sanctions have not so much been given in by the Burmese policy regarding the Karen or the KNU, but rather the lack of democracy, the crackdown of the democracy uprising and treatment of Aung San Suu Kyi. This was for example made clear when United States Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice named six ‘outposts of tyranny’, in imitation of President Bush’s ‘axis of evil’. Burma was claimed to be such an outpost of tyranny because of the oppression of its people, and not so much because of the civil wars fought in the border lands.

Female KNLA soldiers. Photo: James Robert Fuller.

5.7 Implications of state support

The most important implication of external state support for the KNU has been the continuation of an insurgency that could otherwise have been expected to end. Geopolitical

developments turned against the KNU after the end of the Cold War and the formation of the DKBA caused the fall of Manerplaw, but the organization was subsequently able to reorganize itself across the border. For nearly twenty years, the KNU has now been a transnational rebel organization. The provision of a safe haven in Thailand has been crucially for its survival.

The experience of exile only seemed to strengthen certain hard-line elements within the KNU. It has been noted in paragraph 2.2.3 that diasporas are often more radical than the populations they leave behind, but for the KNU this already seems true for its leadership just across the border; I call this radical transnationalism. Whereas other Karen groups (both civil society and armed splinter groups) operated in Burma and sought at least some sort of arrangement with the government, the KNU leadership resided in Thailand and continued its armed struggle. The insistence on a political settlement and other demands do not seem to reflect a realistic assessment of its bargaining position. The KNU’s hard-line position is controversial at least, “especially as the insurgents were never going to win the war, and thus the end was unlikely ever to justify the means” (South, 2008, 109).

Transnationalism has also been a crucial factor in its success to remain the principal Karen voice for the outside world. Many groups nowadays compete for control over the Karen population and hold different political opinions, but these various non-KNU voices have been marginalized in the international discussions on Burma, especially in accounts produced by external English speaking persons, such as missionaries, aid workers, political activists and other actors with vested interests (South, 2008). The transnational KNU has profited from the international isolation of Burma in order to remain the main Karen voice for the outside world; an effect that I name dominant transnationalism. English language skills, good networks through international church connections and accessibility through offices in Mae Sot or even Bangkok has given the KNU elites great advantage over groups operating in Karen State.

Based on the border, the KNU’s uncompromising rhetoric found its way to the outside world much easier than the opinions of those working for change inside the country, who have to remain more low-profile. South (2008, 110) notes that “unfortunately for Burma, and especially for the civilian populations of conflict zones, the voices of exiled elites have often drowned out better-informed, more nuanced and constructive views.”

Comfortably based in Mae Sot, the KNU leadership sacrificed the interests of Karen communities in Burma for their own economic benefits and unlikely chance of radical change
in the political landscape. As recent as 2010, KNU leaders hoped that controversy over the elections or a breakdown in ceasefires would change the situation in Burma to their advantage (Smith, 2010).

The people in Karen State paid the price for these ‘no compromise’ politics. In areas of on-going fighting, they have little choice then to support either the KNU or the Tatmadaw (Smith, 1999). They might not support the tactics or political views of the KNU, but do face the consequences. This means prolonged conflict, difficulties in rebuilding communities and continuation of violent counterinsurgency tactics that target civilians.

**5.8 Conclusion**

The neighboring state has been the most important provider of support for the KNU. Its most successful years were during the Cold War, when it received assistance from Thailand and the United States. As with so many insurgent groups, this support diminished with the ending of the Cold War. Economic interests started to play a decisive role in policy making and the relationship between Thailand and Burma improved during the next two decades.

While formal support stopped after 1988, the KNU was subsequently able to make use of the most important and most common form of state support: the provision of a safe haven. Host state passivity was crucial for its transnational operations. Despite the improved relationship between the two central governments and official hard-line stance of the RTG towards the KNU, realities on the border have been much less straight-forward. Among other
factors, the KNU has mainly profited from fragmented power and local sympathies and interests in Thailand.

This creates a more complicated picture than the theories offer, which claim that a rival state or weak state will be of advantage to the insurgents and this will be influenced by the bilateral relationship between the two states and host state position towards the rebels. The case of the KNU suggests that, in order to assess the chances for a safe haven across the border, it is necessary to look beyond the state level and focus on other levels of authority as well.

After the KNU moved transnational, it lost touch with the realities and population in Karen State and maintained its strict adherence to certain principles before it was willing to discuss a cessation of violence; radical transnationalism. It has also profited from its transnationalism in order to remain the main Karen voice for the outside world; dominant transnationalism. Although the KNU’s claim of a unified Karen population has been surpassed by history, the organization has nonetheless stuck to such views and continued its armed struggle. The civilian population in Karen State paid the price for such policies made by a leadership in Mae Sot.
6 Refugee and diaspora support

This chapter covers possible support from Karen refugees and the Karen diaspora for the KNU. Similarly structured as chapter 2.2, it starts with a short description of the Karen refugee situation before determining the type of refugees, according to Lischer’s model. As the Karen are considered ‘dangerous’ refugees, the host state plays a crucial role in preventing militarization. Paragraph 6.3 will therefore detail Thai refugee policy and its implications for the KNU, while paragraph 6.4 will discuss the role of humanitarian aid and NGOs in sustaining the KNU. As both factors have independently influenced the chances of support from refugees for the KNU, implications will also be treated separately per chapter.

The introduction of resettlement as a durable solution in 2005 changed the dynamics of the refugee situation and will receive attention in paragraph 6.5. As resettlement created a large Karen diaspora, their possible support will be looked at in the following paragraph. The chapter is finished with a short conclusion.

6.1 Karen refugee crisis

The first Karen refugees arrived in Thailand’s Tak Province in 1984, after the Tatmadaw advanced into southeastern Burma with its four cuts tactic and drove approximately 10,000 people across the border. Karen civilians had temporarily stayed in Thailand before, but they usually returned to Burma at the end of annual dry-season fighting. As this time the Tatmadaw maintained its positions, the refugees stayed in Thailand. Within two year, there were 18,000 Karen in twelve camps, while Karenni and Mon refugees also started to arrive during the late 1980s (Bowles, 1997; 1998).

Continuance of the four cuts campaign over the following years caused an increase of refugees; up to 80,000 in 1994. After the fall of Manerplaw in 1995 and remaining KNU bases in subsequent years, the refugees totalled 115,000 in 1997. This number has since remained relatively stable. Nowadays, ten camps on the Thai side of the border provide refuge to 135,579 persons.\(^\text{57}\) Seven of these camps are predominantly Karen, two Karenni and one Shan.\(^\text{58}\)


6.1.1 Mae La refugee camp

The largest and best facilitated of the camps is Mae La, located about 57 kilometres north of Mae Sot. It is considered an educational centre for refugees and the Kawthoolei Karen Baptist Bible School and College (KKBBSC) is based here. The camp is long and narrow, located between two ridges of approximately 300 meters high. It borders Thai highway 105, which runs north along the border from Mae Sot and contains several military checkpoints. The total camp area is approximately 4 square kilometres and is divided in three administrative zones and 22 sections. Mae La houses some 46,239 refugees; according to 2008 figures, 97% of these were ethnic Karen.\(^{59}\)

The camp feels like a village, although a cramped one. Because refugees are not allowed to build permanent constructions (Mae La being a ‘temporary shelter’) they have built bamboo houses with thatch roofs, which look surprisingly good. There are small shops, churches, schools and monasteries. Besides the official main entrance, guarded by Thai militia, there are several other entrances right on highway 105. Although the camp is surrounded by fences and some barbed wire, at many places this is absent and it is easy to just walk into the camp from the main road.

6.2 Type of refugees

According to theory, the type of refugees depends on its characteristics at the outset of the refugee crisis. Although many Karen refugees fled fighting between the Tatmadaw and the KNU, they have also been targeted by the Burmese army for ethnic reasons. Any return to Burma, therefore, requires guarantees that they will not face such persecution anymore. South (2008, 90) furthermore notes that “in the early years, most Karen refugees initially fled with their KNU-orientated community structures more-or-less intact.” They thus arrived in Thailand with a certain level of political organization, while still holding intimate ties with the KNU across the border. As such, they could be described as persecuted refugees.

The fall of Manerplaw changed the dynamics of the crisis because of “the consequential influx of KNU personnel from all sectors of the organization into refugee camps and eventually abroad” (Thawnghmung, 2008, 30). This can be seen as the second onset of the refugee crisis. As the KNU leadership relocated across the border, they continued

to insist on a comprehensive political settlement before it was willing to negotiate a possible end to hostilities (South, 2008). Everything else was tantamount to surrender. Unlike most other ethnic insurgent groups, it did not agree to a ceasefire. Therefore, it could be argued that they were defeated or marginalized in a civil war, continued to reject any compromise from the sending state and as such were state-in-exile refugees.

As is usually the case, most Karen refugees have no political aspirations themselves and simply wish to return home as soon as possible. These people often lived in small villages in southeast Burma and generally do not want much more than simply ‘be left alone’. However, as Horstmann (2011, 7) notes, “for the refugees, the refugee camps constituted a safe haven, and refugees refrained from openly complaining about the politics of the KNU leadership.” The result was that the refugees that faced persecution on ethnic grounds, became part of the ‘no compromise politics’ of the KNU.

The Karen refugees could therefore best be seen as falling on a continuum, closely resembling both persecuted and state-in-exile refugees. It means that the theories suggest there was a high risk that these refugees would come to play a political and/or military role from the beginning and this even increased after the second onset of the crisis. It also means that the host state has a crucial role in preventing militarization of the refugee camps.

### 6.3 Thai refugee policy

Because of the large influx of especially Indochinese refugees that Thailand received in the past, it considers itself a special case (Brees, 2008). Therefore, it has neither signed the Geneva Convention of 1951 concerning the Status of Refugees nor the 1967 Protocol. It means that every person entering Thailand without permission is initially considered an illegal migrant (Huguet and Punpuing, 2005). This approach gives Thailand the flexibility to deal with refugee inflows without adhering to strict international regulations, which might cause additional pull factors for migrants from poorer neighbouring countries (Huguet and Punpuing, 2005; Loescher and Milner, 2008).

Nonetheless, Thailand has been relatively tolerant towards Burmese refugees. It refers to them as ‘displaced persons fleeing fighting’ (DPFF), to emphasize the temporary nature of their stay. They are allowed to stay in refugee camps, which the Thai authorities call ‘temporary shelters’, but expected to return to Burma as soon as fighting ceases (Brooks, 2004; Chantavanich, 2011; Huguet and Punpuing, 2005).
When the first Karen refugees arrived in 1984, Thailand struggled with hundreds of thousands of refugees from Indochina, mainly on the Cambodian border (Helton, 1989; Robinson, 2000). As the RTG did not want a recurrence of that situation, attract a minimum of international attention and avoid creating any pull-factors, it preferred a low-key solution with a minimum of aid, to what was then seen as a temporary problem (Brooks, 2004). Local Thai authorities were quite tolerant and Karen community leaders even negotiated with them about the location of the camps. Refugees were hardly restricted in their movements (Bowles, 1997; South, 2008).

Bowles (1998) and Horstmann (2011) note that these early camps more closely resembled small KNU villages. South (2008, 96) accordingly argues that during these initial years, “it was impossible to work with the refugees and not be aware that their plight and daily life was intimately connected to the social, military and political situation across the border.”

During the 1990s the number of refugees increased and it became clear that this was not going to be a short-term problem. It was also during this time that security concerns were on the rise, especially after the fall of Manerplaw. During the period 1995-1998, DKBA forces carried out numerous attacks on Karen refugee camps in Thailand, killing at least 20
refugees. Camps were often completely burned down, food and cash stolen and some KNU leaders kidnapped into Burma. The attacks were justified by claiming that insurgents were active in the camps and weapons were stored. (Bowles, 1998; Brooks, 2004; Rajah, 2001; South, 2008). As a result, the RTG became stricter in its approach. Numerous smaller camps were merged into several larger camps, fences were erected, Thai militia deployed and people were no longer allowed to freely move in and out of the refugee camps (Bowles, 1998).

As the refugee population continued to increase, the Chuan government decided in 1998 to invite UNHCR to establish three field offices, but only in order to assist in the protection of the refugees. At least two camps were subsequently moved for security reasons (Brooks, 2004). The Chuan government also explicitly authorized retaliation against intruding forces, adopting a stricter approach to such violations of sovereignty. Large-scale attacks on refugee camps have not occurred anymore since the end of that year (Brees, 2010). In 1999, UNHCR and MOI started the first formal refugee registration to decide on the status of asylum seekers, that is, to determine who were genuine DPFFs (Brooks, 2004).

As described in chapter 5.4, an increased harshness in Thai policy on Burmese opposition groups was noticeable after Thaksin took office. The refugees, especially those that drew public attention to their opposition to the Burmese regime, became an irritating factor in his attempts to improve relations with the SPDC. They provided evidence of the brutalities of the Tatmadaw, while Burma accused Thailand of harbouring rebels in these camps (Brooks, 2004; Human Rights Watch, 2004). Like their approach to Burmese activists, Thai policy on refugees has been a balancing act between avoiding Western criticism and improving relations with the Burmese government. Although Thailand has to provide at least a minimum of protection, it has repeatedly signalled its willingness to resolve the refugee issue as quickly as possible and made clear refugees should reside in the camps and not in urban areas. It further decreased the chances of Burmese attacks on the refugee camps (which would indeed not occur anymore).

The MOI and UNHCR finished a new registration process in 2005. It registered a total

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61 Interview IO1.
62 100,000-plus refugees to be sent home. Bangkok Post, April 12, 2011.
of 136,053 legitimate refugees, of which 101,992 were re-registered from 1999 (TBBC, 2012). Soon after, Thailand allowed resettlement of these registered refugees to (mainly Western) third countries.

Brees (2008, 384) notes that since the latest registration process was completed in 2005, “the Thai Government has in practice closed the gates, by refusing to register new arrivals and as such denying them protection.” The RTG (legitimately) feared that the resettlement option would create a pull factor. This has, however, not prevented new arrivals from entering the camps and as a result, 45% percent of the 137,157 refugees that now receive rations from the NGOs are not formally screened and registered (TBBC, 2012).

Undoubtedly a large number of these new arrivals have been attracted by the resettlement programme. A new formal registration process is necessary to determine who are genuine refugees and to filter out any non-civilian elements, but Thailand has so far refused to allow such a process. The result, as DR1 stated, is that “nobody knows who is there.”

### 6.3.1 Implications of Thai refugee policy

There is another reason that nobody knows who is there. As a host state, Thailand is responsible for the security of the refugee camps and Thai soldiers have been permanently present since the 1990s. However, corruption is high at the local level and refugees often make arrangements with Thai officials. Although there are security checkpoints on the roads to the refugee camps and Thai guards at the camps themselves, it is an open secret that unauthorized movements of refugees occur on a large scale.63 Many Karen work in local factories and other parts of the Thai informal economy, for low wages (Huguet and Punpuing, 2005; South, 2008). During recent informal screenings it was found that sometimes up to one third of the population of a refugee camp was absent.64

“More problematic, however, is the movement of insurgents in and out of the camps” (Rajah, 2001, 16). Thailand has generally been reluctant to fully secure the civilian character of the camps. KNLA soldiers often have relatives living in the refugee camps and stay themselves for extended periods of time as well. South (2008, 56) argues that “at any one time, about half of these personnel were located among the 150,000-plus refugees in Thailand.” Most refugees I interviewed in Mae La confirmed these frequent movements of KNLA troops in and out of the camps. When the KNU lost its main sources of income during

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63 Interviews NGO1, IO2, DR3, DR4.
64 Interview IO2.
the 1980s and 1990s, the refugee camps provided a welcome alternative to fend for these soldiers and their families.

Incidents of recruitment undoubtedly occur, as South (2004), Cline (2009) and Horstmann (2011) have claimed. The large numbers of young men in a protracted refugee situation are more likely to be willing to join an insurgency. UNHCR has attempted to collect information about the possible recruitment of child soldiers. Although some cases were revealed, information remains limited (Huguet and Punpuing, 2005).

There have also been some isolated incidents in which weapons and explosives were found by Thai authorities in the camps (Mogire, 2004; Rajah, 2001). In 1995 Thai forces seized a considerable amount of weapons after a surprise search in four refugee camps and claimed that it would make sure there would be no weapons in the camps at any time. It shows that Thailand, unlike with the Khmer Rouge refugee camps during the 1980s, did not look favourable on militarized camps (Jacobsen, 1999). Despite the presence of many KNLA soldiers, there is indeed no evidence of systematic military activity in the camps. As one academic quickly assured me: “it is nothing like the Cambodian situation there.”

Seven rocket-propelled grenades, 16 M-16 rifles, 13 Kalishnikov rifles, four M-79 rocket launchers, three M-79 bomb launchers and 3,729 rounds of ammunition were found during the search.

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6.4 Humanitarian aid

The Thai response to the Karen refugee crisis has generally consisted of providing the location and some security. It interferes little with the administration and daily running of the refugee camps, which is left to the international community.\textsuperscript{66} However, “the RTG has always insisted that NGO activities remain low-profile and that there be no permanent expatriate presence in the camps” (Bowles, 1997, 12). In the early years, a few Christian agencies provided only limited food and medicine, complying with a request to that end of the Ministry of Interior (Horstmann, 2011).\textsuperscript{67}

NGOs tried to create programs that promoted refugee autonomy and participation in the administration of their own camps. They wanted to avoid imposing unfamiliar structures on the refugees and prevent aid dependency. Therefore, they left much of the running of the camps to the refugees themselves. This approach also fitted the Thai desire for a low-key solution (Bowles, 1997; South, 2008).

The growth of refugee numbers during the 1990s went along with increasing international awareness of their plight and subsequent rising aid budgets; funding for a Burmese refugee is now about 2.5 times as high as funding for a Palestinian refugee.\textsuperscript{68} Simultaneously, more and more specialised NGOs got involved (South, 2007; 2008). They not only started to provide additional materials (such as building materials and more cooking stuffs), but also became involved in non-material aid as education, protection, health care and social and spiritual welfare (Brooks, 2004; Horstmann, 2011). Due to restrictions that the RTG imposed during the same time, “aid dependency among the Karen refugees was clearly on the increase” (Brooks, 2004, 107). As refugee empowerment through participation in camp administrations was considered a success, the system remained very much the same.\textsuperscript{69}

The Karen refugee camps are governed and represented by the Karen Refugee Committee (KRC), which was first established by community leaders. The KRC has an office in Mae Sot and personnel in the Thai border towns of Sangklaburi, Umphang and Mae

\textsuperscript{66} Interviews NGO1, NGO3.
\textsuperscript{67} History of TBBC. http://www.tbbc.org/aboutus/aboutus.htm#history. Last retrieved at June 20, 2012.
\textsuperscript{68} Interview DR1.
\textsuperscript{69} Interviews DR3, NGO3.
Sariang (Bowles, 1997). “They oversee activities of all the camps through the camp committees, coordinate assistance provided by NGOs and liaise with UNHCR, the RTG and security personnel.”

Bowles (1997, 10) notes that “all assistance is supposed to be channelled through the refugee committees.”

The Camp Committees (CCs) are responsible for the administration and day-to-day running of the individual refugee camps. They take care of issues as health, education and security, but also supplies and judicial issues. They used to be responsible for registration of the camp populations and “ultimately, the responsibility for accountability and transparency in aid distribution, particularly food aid, also rests with them” (Bowles, 1997, 11).

Serving members of the KNU are officially not allowed on the KRC or CC and KNU leaders deny any direct influence on the refugee population (Brooks, 2004). However, most Karen refugees came to Thailand with their community structures intact and NGOs started to work with them through refugee committees that were formed by the existing leadership. Rajah (2002) explains that KNU leaders from Kawthoolei were able to assume refugee leadership positions because of their education, administrative experience, and ability to deal with Thai officials and NGOs. It is generally understood that the KNU wields great influence

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71 Interview Naw Zipporah Sein.
over the refugee and camp committees (Brees, 2009; Brooks, 2004; Horstmann, 2011; South, 2007; 2008).

One donor representative stated that “simply put, the KRC is the KNU.”72 The same is to a large extent true for the CCs and CBOs, which are closely related to the KNU. As such, existing camp structures that started as a convenient and low-key solution - and were maintained to strengthen democratic governing of the camps, autonomy and refugee participation - have provided the KNU leadership with control over the refugee population.

6.4.1 Implications of humanitarian aid

The KNU profits directly from services that are realized through the financial assistance of international donor countries. The distribution of aid (particularly food) is done through the KRC and CCs, although TBBC recently started to more closely monitor the process.73 When Kent and Abu-Duhou (2009) interviewed resettled Karen refugees in Australia, several of them raised the issues of corruption in the distribution process and camp leaders that did not distribute the full amounts. Overestimation of population numbers has also occurred, although on a very small scale (not more than five percent).74 But even if such misappropriation does not occur, it has been argued that aid distribution through the KRC maintains an idea among the refugees that the KNU is still taking care of them (Brees, 2009; Thawngmung, 2012).

Educational facilities in the refugee camps are free of charge and usually better than the options available in Karen State. As a result, many parents send their children to the camps to attend school. Sometimes classified as orphans, these children stay at ‘boarding houses’ in the refugee camps.75 Many of them are actually brought in by the KNU, who agree with their parents that “in return for caring for the boy and sending him to school he will later have to serve the KNU, whether as a soldier or in a civilian capacity” (Human Rights Watch, 2002, 136).

The presence of the refugees increases the external legitimacy of the KNU, as it gives proof of the brutalities of the Tatmadaw. The NGOs, already by their presence but especially by working through the KRC, strengthened this legitimacy. It is unlikely that these organizations failed to notice this effect of their assistance. Rather, many perceive the Karen

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72 Interview DR3.
73 Interviews DR1, NGO1.
74 Interview DR1, NGO1.
75 Interviews NGO1, IO2, DR2.
struggle as just, because of the atrocities committed by the Tatmadaw and the illegitimacy of the Burmese regime. As one NGO member explained to me: “it is hard to not be against the Burmese regime, right?” As such, these NGOs and their international donors are often far from neutral and have “empowered one side to the armed conflict” (South, 2011, 33).

However, international donors have not so much strengthened one conflict actor, but rather one particular side within that actor. It has already been described in paragraph 5.8 how the KNU’s transnationalism has helped the organization to be the main Karen voice for external actors (dominant transnationalism). The insurgency has allied itself with various border-based and exiled opposition groups that have campaigned for international isolation of Burma (radical transnationalism). Kramer (2011, 28) notes that “in contrast to civil society organisations based in the country, organisations in exile have had a disproportionate influence on international policy on Burma – especially within the EU and USA.” The KNU and their allies in Thailand and Western countries successfully called for international isolation of Burma and fuelled certain assumptions regarding the legitimacy of actors working in Burma, who were perceived to be unable to operate in an independent manner without enriching and legitimizing the regime (Kramer, 2011).

As a result, Official Development Aid (ODA) to Burma has been extraordinary low. In 2003, Burma received $US 2.50 ODA per capita, while other countries in the region received $US 37.33 (Cambodia), $US 48.03 (Laos) or even a staggering $US 145.00 (East Timor) (Roberts, 2006). Despite the massive humanitarian crisis in Eastern Burma, international donors have been unable and unwilling to provide aid to one of the most neglected regions in the world. While aid to Burma has been largely absent, a big humanitarian industry\textsuperscript{76} emerged on the border which has supported the KNU’s separative ethnicization policies. Even most aid that reaches victims in Karen State is realized through cross-border operations from Thailand. Humanitarian aid to refugees has been used by Western countries as a substitute for political action in Karen State itself. This \textit{distorted aid division} is thus a result of the radical and dominant transnationalism of the KNU and has disproportionately empowered the insurgency.

NGOs that started to work with the existing leadership structures empowered the KNU. McConnachie (2012) has argued that cooperation between the KNU and international donors and NGOs in the given context might be beneficial to all sides, but “this arrangement was based on the (generally unexamined) assumption that the KNU was the sole legitimate

\footnote{\textsuperscript{76} A term introduced by Duffield (2001).}
Most of the camps are controlled by different factions of the KNU. Since I had a conflict with a KNU faction, if I enter the camp I will be killed.


representative of the Karen people” (South, 2011, 32). Horstmann (2011, 7) argues that “NGOs’ reliance on the ad hoc refugee committees was rarely matched with the participation or the voices of the refugees who depended on the mediation of the KNU.” They uncritically accepted the Christian Sgaw leaders as the natural leaders of the Karen population, also because they were generally better educated and spoke better English. Subsequently, the KNU has been able to take control over the refugee camps, where it continues to impose a Christian Sgaw identity on the Karen population and has promoted feelings of ethno-nationalism, including strict and separative definitions of Karen ethnicity.

6.4.1.1 Christianization

Christian refugees generally have much better access to resources than their Buddhist, Muslim and animist counterparts. Through control over the camp administration and international support from Christian churches in the United States and South Korea, the Christian leadership has been able to give the camps a distinct Christian identity (Bowles, 1997; Horstmann, 2011).
Churches clearly outnumber monasteries in Mae La, which has caused frustration with some of the Buddhist refugees.\textsuperscript{77} The KKBBSC plays a central and prominent role in the daily camp life. The camp, mainly inhabited by Christians, is according to Horstmann (2011) an important place for proselytization. Animist arrivals are targeted for Christianization. The vast majority of resettled refugees is also Christian, in some countries over 80 percent (Kenny and Lockwood-Kenny, 2011).\textsuperscript{78}

Education in the refugee camps is mainly designed for Christian Sgaw speaking Karen. The main language for teaching is Sgaw Karen, which basically excludes refugees that do not speak this language (Gross, 2011). One Pwo refugee family I spoke to had sent their son to a monastery in Mae La to receive his education, because they felt that the formal education opportunities in the camp were inaccessible.

Media in the camps is controlled by KNU-linked, Christian Sgaw Karen as well. Cho (2011, 471), a former Mae La resident herself, described how under pressure from donor organizations “principles of media independence have only been implemented on the surface”, while in reality all Karen journalists “take sides and have clear bias” and “solely use Sgaw Karen with missionary script.”

The way that Sgaw Christian culture has been imposed on the Karen refugee population somewhat resembles the Burmanization of ethnic minority cultures, which the KNU leadership has (justifiably) condemned (South, 2011).

\textit{6.4.1.2 Separative ethnicization}

The refugee camps are also an important site for nurturing Karen nationalism through a narrowly interpreted ethnicization of the refugee population, which serves the KNU’s nation-building ideas. These ideas are formed around a Karen identity that is radically different than other Burmese ethnicities. Whereas many Union Karen live relatively harmonious with their Burman neighbours, the KNU promotes separative ethnicization in the

\textsuperscript{77} Interviews Mae La.
\textsuperscript{78} Interviews DR1, DR3.
refugee camps: a strong ethnic perception that sees the Karen as notably distinct from the other Burmese groups and therefore unable to live together with them under one government.

Zeus (2008) compared Karen refugees in Mae La and Mae Sot, and found that those in Mae La had more traditional notions of ethnicity, which included sharp boundaries. She argues that “the camp by purportedly being the only locus that enables maintenance of identity, traditions and culture is perceived as having the monopoly on the purity of Karen ethnicity” (Zeus, 2008, 18).

My own experiences have confirmed this picture. When thirteen refugees at a cultural orientations training were asked who considered their own culture to be better than others, everyone raised their hand. Similar views were expressed by many refugees in Mae La, who generally showed much more pride in their specific culture than Karen in Mae Sot and Burma. Refugees had a much more ‘separative’ interpretation of the concept ‘Karen’ than Karen living in other parts of Thailand or in Burma.

In a country as ethnically and religiously diverse as Burma, mutual tolerance would seem to be preferable to racial exclusion and diversion something to be embraced instead of despised. Unfortunately, as South (2007, 62; 2008, 217) has argued, “for Karen and many other refugee communities, the experience of exile seems to reinforce the most ‘hardline’ elements of socio-political identity,” while the “tendency to fetishize ethnicity has led to a type of zero-sum politics, which has benefited few in the country, beyond restricted leadership circles.”

The camp promotes the pan-Karen identity and the idea of a Karen nation in many ways. This starts with a common sense of repression and suffering, caused by the Tatmadaw. Karen communities previously unknown to each other now share a common background and enemy. This sense of community is strengthened by the lay-out of Mae La. Most refugees live for the first time with a large group of Karen on a very small space. The cramped conditions, confinement, large percentage of Karen and low levels of interaction with other ethnic groups make an ideal setting for the development of Karen nationalism. Through expressions of Karen culture like wearing traditional clothes, singing the national anthem and raising the national flag, a strong sense of ethnic consciousness is created.79

Education plays a central role. The curriculum has been developed by the Karen Education Department (KED), the Ministry of Education of the KNU, and promotes ethno-
nationalism and the creation of a pan-Karen identity that is notably distinct from other Burmese groups. It creates problems if children want to continue their education in Burma. (Rajah, 2002; South, 2008).

After demands of international donors to decrease KNU influence, the KED was replaced in 2009 by the Karen Refugee Committee Education Entity (KRCEE). However, NGOs still struggle to implement objective programs and to that end much more improvement is needed. As NGO3 said, “you can take the child away from the parents, but the parents stay the same.”

6.4.2 Increased awareness

Long considered very successful in creating refugee participation, international donors have recently become more aware of the risks of the organisational system. As one donor representative stated: “it is sad to notice that the administrative system of the Karen refugee camps is coming under pressure because of its own success.” They have put pressure on NGOs to improve processes in order to avoid too much influence of the KNU on the civilian refugee population and avoid for example food misappropriation.

Consequently, NGOs had to adopt changes that would decrease KNU influence in the camps. One of the results has been that KNLA forces do not receive aid anymore for protection of the refugee camps, which was a cheap and convenient way to provide security. Election processes for KRC and CC leaders have been improved to ensure a more democratic leadership. A few other measures were adopted, although some seem to have only been implemented on the surface (Cho, 2011). The result has nonetheless been that the KNU, although still wielding considerable influence in the governing bodies of the refugee camps, has come under additional pressure.
6.5 Resettlement

Support from refugees for an insurgency is particularly likely in a protracted situation. As Karen refugees started to arrive as early as 1984, there has to be no doubt that this is such a protracted situation. Although this has been first and foremost caused by the intractable crisis in Eastern Burma, Thai policies since the 1990s have not helped to provide the refugees with meaningful prospects for their future. As a result, the KNU has “been able to tap into a reservoir of resentment toward the Burmese military state” (Thawngshmung, 2008, 22).

However, in 2005 the RTG has allowed resettlement to third countries as a durable solution for the Karen refugees. The result has been one of the largest and most successful resettlement programmes to date, with a total of 73,775 persons having moved to a third country by July 2011. Over 75 percent of them has gone to the United States (TBBC, 2012). As an illustration, in 2010 only Iraq had more refugees successfully applying for resettlement.

![Resettled Karen refugees in the United States. Photo: James Robert Fuller.](image)

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86 Interviews IO1, IO2.
87 Interview IO1.
This has had a lasting impact on the refugee camps and its population, as educated refugees and those working for NGOs and CBOs tend to resettle in significant higher percentages than other refugees. “Individuals with experience, authority, and leadership qualities are also applying for resettlement in higher proportions than the rest of the population” (Banki and Lang, 2007, vii). These refugees are generally more interested in resettlement but it is also the result of a ‘first in, first out’ approach and selection on education and skills by some of the resettlement countries (Banki and Lang, 2007; 2008). Although concerns have repeatedly been expressed about the subsequent ‘braindrain’ that reduces the capacities of the refugee organizations, international donor countries continued to accept high numbers of refugees.

Banki and Lang (2008, 43) have argued that “resettlement has sapped the energy of those refugees who have been working for change in Burma.” Indeed, the international donor countries have removed people from a source of support and recruitment for the KNU. Large numbers of their leaders have by now moved to Western countries. Although new refugees have entered in equal numbers, “most of these people hoped to move on soon, and had little interest in joining the KNU struggle” (South, 2008, 97).

The resettlement programme is obviously one of the most important topics for refugees in Mae La. Freedom, education and economic opportunities are the main reasons to leave. KNU leaders claim that people that are committed to the KNU will remain in the border area to continue the struggle for Kawthoolei. It is a close echo of Bo Mya’s words after the fall of Manerplaw and although this may be true, young committed people who are willing to become the capable leaders of the future are increasingly hard to find.

Families with young children have a desire to move overseas, so that their children can enjoy a good education. Young Karen, who are often born in the refugee camps and have never experienced Tatmadaw brutalities themselves, are increasingly more interested in pursuing educational opportunities in foreign countries than joining the armed struggle for a homeland they have never been or seen. The result is that potential Karen elites have left the refugee camps and abandoned the revolutionary aims of the KNU. South (2008, 96) notes that “ironically, the same international

88 Interviews CBO1, CBO2, CBO3, DR1, NGO1, NGO3.
89 Interviews DR2, DR3, DR4, IO1, IO2.
90 Interview Naw Zipporah Sein.
organisations that had for so long supported the KNU now found themselves in the uncomfortable position of removing the insurgents’ support base.”

It calls into mind the case of the ethnic Hmong rebels, who had been supported as a proxy force by the United States during the Cold War. Although many were resettled after the communist takeover in Laos in 1975, others faced a protracted refugee situation in Thai camps. From there a low scale insurgency lingered on until the closure of the last camps through another major resettlement operation in 2004 (Lee, 2007).

It is as one donor representative said: “the biggest enemy of the KNU in recent years has been the resettlement programme.”91 The Karen refugee camps can for now still be used by those KNU members that did not resettle, but an eventual closure of the camps might put a definitive end to an already ailing insurgency.

6.6 Diaspora support

The Karen diaspora was for a long time negligible, but with the large influx of Karens in western countries since the resettlement programme started in 2005, it could be expected that diaspora support has become an important form of assistance for the KNU. This programme initially caused some problems; Karen refugees were not allowed to enter the

91 Interview DR2.
United States because of a law that barred everyone from entry that has provided material support for a terrorist organization. The scope of both provisions (‘material support’ and ‘terrorist organization’) had expanded significantly after September 11, 2001. A waiver issued by the Secretaries of State and Homeland Security was finally needed to exempt six Burmese and seven other groups from the provision of material aid (Fullerton, 2011; Nezer, 2006). The importance of the host state position towards the diaspora’s home state has been noted in chapter 2.2.3 and this waiver was a clear demonstration that the United States looked favourable on the KNU and other Burmese opposition forces.

6.6.1 International advocacy and pressuring of host country government

Karens have already started to cluster in the United States, where community organizations and networks have been established (Kenny and Lockwood-Kenny, 2011). However, the KNU’s diaspora has not even come close to the effective and sophisticated organization we have seen with some other insurgencies, most notoriously the LTTE. Large-scale assistance for the KNU from the Karen diaspora has been absent for several reasons.

Many Karen still struggle with adapting to their new countries and learning a new language. Effective political and advocacy organisation will likely take more time, or perhaps even a new generation born in exile, although this does might mean assimilation in their new country and less feelings with the KNU.

Whereas the Karen diaspora is relatively young, a larger Burman diaspora has been living in countries around the globe for much longer. Banki (2006, 42) found that “in Japan and elsewhere, divisions between Burma’s majority population and its ethnic minorities are profound.” The Burman diaspora has at times overshadowed the voice of Burma’s minority diaspora groups; despite the growing numbers of the Karen diaspora, it has not been able to form a distinct voice from this mainstream Burmese diaspora.

In Western countries the debate on Burma has focussed more on the ‘democracy issue’ and Aung San Suu Kyi than on the ‘ethnical issue’ and the KNU. It centred mainly on the

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93 Interviews DR2, DR4.
question of sanctions and isolation versus constructive engagement (Brees, 2009). Karen activists therefore have to ally themselves with more general Burmese opposition groups.

It has been noted that diaspora members are often more extreme than the population they leave behind and this is also visible in the Burmese diaspora. Exile-based opposition groups have generally been against any form of engagement with the regime, against ceasefire agreements without a political solution and pro-sanctions. As Burma is a ‘boutique issue’ in United States foreign policy, it has been easy for politicians to make grand rhetoric statements and impose sanctions on the regime (South, 2008; Steinberg, 2010).

Exile-based groups have often been “uncritically supportive of anti-government groups” and would lose influence if the KNU agrees on a ceasefire (South, 2008, 109). The KNU leadership has linked itself to such broad networks of border-based and exiled opposition groups that try to isolate the regime and call for a recognition of the 1990 elections results, which means radical regime change.

Such links have not always been profitable. In 1994 the KNU stopped ceasefire negotiations at the urging of the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB) in New York, who saw this “as undermining their own efforts at the UN to win decisive international action against the SLORC” (Taw, 2005, 2). Soon afterwards the Tatmadaw captured Manerplaw, while such decisive international action never came.

The Burmese diaspora has profited from civil rights and liberties to influence the host states’ policy on Burma themselves. But although an effective diaspora has influenced Western countries’ policy on Burma, it has been dominated by hard-line positions and a ‘democracy focus’, which have overshadowed Burma’s ethnic minorities. As such, the profits for the KNU have been mainly in the form of opposition to the regime instead of direct support for the insurgency.

6.6.2 Remittances

There has to be no doubt that resettled Karen send remittances back to Burma and Thailand. This can be particularly helpful, because ten dollar buys more in the Thai-Burma border area than in New York. In Mae La it was not hard to find foreign currency and one man even asked me if I could change his thirty Canadian dollars into Thai baht. However, the exact amount of money send to Karen people that stay behind is hard to come after.

The same goes for money that is sent to organizations, such as the KNU. Although
they certainly receive money from supporters in Western countries (including some particularly wealthy individuals), the exact amount is unclear. With the large number of resettled Karen in recent years, this has likely become more. The KNU increasingly tries to stay in touch with these Karen living abroad, realizing they could be an important source of income and support.\(^\text{94}\)

### 6.7 Conclusion

Whereas Mae Sot has become a safe haven for the political leadership of the KNU, the refugee camps constitute a safe haven for soldiers and other personnel. The organization has profited from a lack of control of the refugee population by the host state and local corruption. However, Thai authorities have been able to prevent serious militarization of the refugee camps through the seizure of weapons and explosives in an early stage.

Humanitarian aid has definitely not been as blatantly used as in some well-known other cases (Rwanda, Cambodia). Nonetheless, the KNU has been able to make use of ‘contemporary policies that try to empower refugees through participation in camp administrations’ in order to politically control the refugee camps and its population. They have profited from the legitimacy provided through the presence of the NGOs, the distribution of aid and educational facilities.

With the international isolation of Burma - supported by the KNU - aid for refugees has greatly surpassed aid to Karen State itself. This distorted aid division has been a result of the radical of dominant transnationalism described in chapter five and has disproportionately supported the KNU and some of its controversial policies; the camps serve as sites for Christianization and the promotion of separative ethnicization. Increased awareness by international donors in recent years has caused more pressure on the KNU.

Resettlement has further weakened the KNU, as many Karen left for Western countries. Although this could have created an active diaspora that supports the KNU, the Karen have been overshadowed by a broader Burmese diaspora and generally not been able to form a distinct voice. The KNU has linked itself to such Burmese diaspora networks which have generally adopted radical anti-government positions.

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\(^{94}\) Interview Naw Zipporah Sein.
7 Conclusion, discussion and recommendations

The central research question of this study, as formulated in the introductory chapter, is:

*What are the nature, extent and implications of external support for the Karen National Union?*

Chapter two provided an overview of the main theories of outside support, focussing on states, refugees and diasporas. It was discussed that states are generally considered to be the most significant providers of support, especially during the Cold War when superpower support was common throughout the world. Nowadays the most important form of state support is through the provision of a safe haven, often in a neighbouring state. Rebels have the highest chance of access to such a sanctuary if the host state is either a weak state or has a bad relationship with the home state and sympathizes with the rebels’ cause. The chance of interstate war or cross border violence significantly increases when rebels operate transnational. Refugee support was explained by a framework that was based on the work of Lischer (2003) and noticed three factors: the type of refugees at the onset of the crisis, the host state response and the influence of humanitarian aid. Contemporary refugee policies were sometimes found to strengthen insurgencies. Because protracted refugee situations have the highest risk of militancy, durable solutions can help to decrease the likelihood of this. However, resettlement to a third country might create a politically active diaspora, which can send significant amounts of money and can pressure their host state to influence foreign policies towards their home state. Its space of operation depends on the host state, but is usually large in Western states.

Chapter three contained the methodology. It gave a detailed account of my fieldwork in Thailand and Burma and the significance of the many interviews and observation for answering the central research question. Chapter four covered the history of the KNU, including its origin, gradual retreat eastwards, the formation of the DKBA and heavy losses during the 1990s. Important was that numerous alternative Karen voices have emerged next to or even in opposition to the KNU and that many people disagree with its separative ethnicization and armed struggle. The following two chapters then analysed the nature, extent and implications of support for the KNU from states, refugees and diasporas.
The analysis started with state support in chapter five. It discussed that during the Cold War the KNU was one of the many allies of the United States in the fight against communism and was used as a ‘buffer’ between Thailand and Burma to prevent a link between communist forces. As Ne Win isolated Burma, the KNU was able to greatly profit from the black market trade. The period marked in retrospect the KNU’s best attempt to realize its own state, Kawthoolei.

The holy Zwegabin Mountain near Hpa’an, Karen State.

The end of the Cold War changed everything. The communist insurgencies collapsed and the KNU lost its relevance for the United States and Thailand. As economic interests started to determine Thai policies, Thailand gave up support for the KNU in return for logging concessions in Karen State. It did not take long before the KNU lost its last main bases and was forced transnational. Initially causing some cross border violence and tensions between Thailand and Burma, improving relations between the two countries later prevented this.

As the relationship between Thailand and Burma gradually improved over the last two decades and Thailand grew more critical over the Burmese insurgencies, it is remarkable that the KNU has been able to continue its transnational operations. However, it has profited from local actors that had significant de facto power and their own sympathies and interests.
The KNU has seen both dominant and radical transnationalism. The organization has been able to dominate international opinions and perceptions on Burma, as its rhetoric reached the international community much easier than the voice of actors inside Burma, while its hard-line positions were reinforced in exile and have caused a continuation of conflict

Refugee and diaspora support were covered in chapter six. It was found that there were two different onsets of the Karen refugee crisis, with distinct characteristics. Considered to be falling on a continuum, the Karen refugees had a high risk to stay involved with the conflict in Burma. However, the Thai response to the first signs of militarization prevented heavy militarization of the refugee camps; any comparison with the Rwanda or Cambodia refugee crisis is out of the question.

Nonetheless, KNLA personnel and their relatives have been able to stay in the refugee camps due to local corruption, the absence of a recent registration and weak security. This was a much needed relief for an insurgency deprived of its funds and permanent bases. Although the camps initially endured several attacks by DKBA forces, this diminished due to better security and restrictive measures that Thailand adopted to please the Burmese government.

Through contemporary refugee policies that promote autonomy and refugee participation in the administration of the camps, the KNU has been able to assume control over the refugee population. As such, the insurgency has profited from legitimacy provided through the presence of the NGOs and services (food, education) that are implemented by them. Christianization and separative ethnicization are promoted in the camps. Calls by border based and exiled opposition groups for international isolation of Burma have caused a distorted aid division that has disproportionately supported the KNU. However, in recent years pressure on the KNU has increased as international donors have indicated to be unsatisfied with the rebels’ involvement.

Resettlement has further weakened the KNU. Although the tens of thousands of Karen that now live in the United States and elsewhere could provide significant support for the KNU, many have struggled with adapting to a new country. Moreover, the Karen have been overshadowed by a larger and louder Burmese diaspora that has prevented the emergence of a possible distinctive Karen voice. The KNU has linked itself to broad anti-government networks that have advocated for sanctions and international isolation of Burma and support for border-based and exiled opposition groups.
Concluding, the most important implication of external support for the KNU has been its ability to continue the insurgency. As Manerplaw fell and the Kawthoolei dream ended, Mae Sot became the new Manerplaw and the Kawthoolei dream was recreated in Mae La. Greatly weakened, the KNU continued to wage a guerrilla war in Karen State for another seventeen years, although its claims for a united Karen population had been surpassed by history. Numerous alternative Karen voices have emerged that do not agree with the KNU’s separative ethnicization and armed methods, but radical and dominant transnationalism have been supportive for the KNU. Grown out of touch with the realities in Karen State but strengthened by its external support (especially its ability to operate from Thailand and control over the refugee camps) the KNU has sacrificed the wellbeing of the Karen people for its own interests. As such, the legitimacy of the insurgency has become contested at least.

8.1 Discussion and recommendations

It is often questionable whether a rebel group can be perceived to act in accordance with the wishes of a larger group they claim to represent. This dilemma gets even more relevant if the political leadership operates from secure bases abroad that are far away from the actual sites of conflict. The experience of exile might lead to more radical views and the risk of losing touch with the population and realities ‘on the ground’ is in such a case very realistic.

The most important finding of this study is how external support has contributed to the prolongation of a conflict that is hardly supported by the people that are most affected by it. Especially the distorted aid division has disproportionately strengthened the leadership of one
specific part of the Karen population that does not even operate from Karen State. Western
countries seem to have perceived every form of resistance to the illegitimate Burmese regime
as just. They were unable and unwilling to support people in Burma, because of Burma’s
isolation and certain assumptions that were further fuelled by border based and exiled
opposition groups. As such, they have played a crucial role in the continuation of conflict in
Karen State, while it is questionable to what extent the views of the wider Karen population
have been heard in this process. It is an effect that has so far received relatively scarce
attention, neither in studies on Burma nor in general studies on conflict and humanitarian aid.
Burma has reached a historical point in its history, as real change seems finally on hand. What
it now truly needs are not people that foster distrust and prefer separation, but rather those that
embrace diversity and promote reconciliation. A more equal division of aid and inclusion of
the many alternative voices in the country is likely to be more profitable for the population in
Karen State.

Such considerations were clearly on the rise during the course of my research. Several
donor countries had already cut funding for the refugee camps whereas most others had this in
consideration. Meanwhile, aid to (civil society) groups in Burma and IDPs is increasing. One
example is a recently launched initiative by the Norwegian government: the Myanmar Peace
Support Initiative aims to involve all relevant actors in Karen State in order to support the
ceasefires and prepare for the return of IDPs. The 66 million dollar project will work with
existing NGOs and civil society groups in Karen State and was launched in the wake of
Norway’s decision to end all aid to border based groups.95

Because the case of the KNU is not an isolated one, awareness of these effects is
important beyond Burma. Other contemporary cases from over the world show comparative
characteristics that raise questions about the legitimacy of external support and humanitarian
aid. For example, various states give these days support to Syrian rebels, which seems to be
motivated by general opposition to the regime of Assad and resistance against its gross human
rights violations. However, such support has hardly been matched with a thorough
examination of the legitimacy of these opposition forces or considerations of the impact of
support on the continuation or even escalation of a bloody conflict. Moreover, criticism of
human rights violations by the Syrian opposition is generally absent.

Another example that shows similarities with the case of the KNU is provided by the

Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria, one of the most protracted refugee situations in the world. The camps are fully controlled and administered by Polisario, a rebel movement which seeks their own state in Western Sahara that is independent of Morocco. The refugee population is completely dependent on humanitarian aid, which is to a large extent supplied by the United States and European Union (Farah, 2009). The camps have been crucial for Polisario’s ability to continue its civil war, as was recently once again demonstrated when conflict flared up in a refugee camp and caused over fifty casualties. Such examples suggest that the findings of this study are not unique to this specific case but relevant in other situations too. Practitioners working with refugees or in diplomacy should be aware of such risks in order to prevent similar outcomes in comparable cases, although research into the specific dynamics of other situations is necessary to formulate conclusions on independent cases.

The findings of this study also indicate that some of the existing theoretical notions on outside support given to insurgency groups may need adjustment. The case of the transnational KNU, for example, suggests that in order to determine the chances of access to a safe haven, merely looking at the bilateral relationship between the insurgency’s home and host state and the latter’s attitude towards the insurgency is insufficient. Apart from these ‘macro’ perspectives, it is important to identify those powerful individual actors that may informally have relevant influence. The case demonstrates that economic interests, ethnic sympathies and/or personal friendships on the local level may result in host state passivity that is not in line with the host country’s official position. Especially in large countries with a weak central administration or extensive decentralization, a true understanding of state support is only possible if one looks beyond the authorities in the capital city and focus on other (informal) levels of authority as well.

Regarding refugee support, the findings of this study confirm Lischers (2005) views that dangerous refugees need to be prevented by the host state. The way the KNU has made use of contemporary refugee policies to politically control the refugee population is also in line with the theoretical suggestions. The findings of this study suggest that closer monitoring by international donors and NGOs of those who claim leadership positions is necessary to prevent a political or military organization to dominate the refugee camps. The introduction of a durable solution decreased support for the KNU, which confirmed existing knowledge on the topic.

96 Western Sahara conflict flares again as refugee camp is broken up. The Guardian, November 16, 2010.
One of the reasons that the Karen diaspora has not been able to provide significant support is that it has been overshadowed by a larger Burmese diaspora. It is likely that other ethnic minorities that are confronted with an exiled majority population face the same obstacles. Unfortunately, current knowledge is limited to a few extreme cases like the Sri Lankan Tamil Tigers.

The comparative examples and suggested adjustments of existing theories provide direction for future research. The complex interrelatedness of insurgencies, states, refugees and diasporas deserves more attention, as existing research is still relatively limited. More testing of some of the theoretical aspects as well as more comparable in-depth case studies are necessary to enhance our understanding of these complicated relations and in order to improve policies that aim at achieving peace. Nonetheless, this study already found several new and interesting features; it is hoped that these lessons of over sixty years of warfare have been learned both inside and outside of Karen State.


