



After Displacement: Mobility and Prospects for Karen Post-Refugee Futures

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Abstract

The long-term prospects for refugees typically fall within a set of well-known durable solutions: repatriation, local integration and third country resettlement. These solutions are fundamentally underpinned by formalist notions of refugees distinguished as involuntarily displaced, and tacitly acquiescent persons. A simplistic model of refugees' solution has been criticized for neglecting the actual dynamics of their displacement and isolating refugees from wider historical contexts and socio-economic transformations. Based on the case of vernacular Karen refugees on the Thailand-Myanmar borderland, this paper investigates how they have approached their prospects and to what extent they have attempted to realise them with actions. Rather than simplifying Karen cross-border movement to a special refugee problem, I would argue that Karen refugees diligently read life alternatives proposed by surrounding environments, and interact with them according to their life status, social circumstances and hopes for the future. Some of them have embraced transnational mobility and multi-sited livelihood strategies as practical ways of making a living. Furthermore, this paper finds there is a need for a paradigmatic shift to integrate mobile and migratory strategies into understandings and international approaches to solutions to refugees. This article draws upon ethnographic fieldworks in Mae Sot town, in northwestern of Thailand in 2009 and 2011.

Introduction

The long-term prospects for refugees are often imagined through a set of alternative 'durable solutions': repatriation, local integration and third country resettlement. From this perspective, Karen refugees on the Thailand-Myanmar border are seen as people who are in desperate hopelessness and legal limbo. From the viewpoint of humanitarian organisations, there is no suitable solution to the protracted Karen refugee situation due to the continued civil war between ethnic minority insurgents and the Burmese military. Repatriation to



Myanmar is depicted as a detrimental alternative because of the Burmese military autocracy. Refugee advocacy, aid agencies and Karen refugee camp leaders argue that the return would lead displaced Karen to further persecution (Davies, 2010, Buncombe, 2011). Additionally, their integration into Thai society has been shut down by existing Thai legislations. Within an appraisal of the care of refugees as a burden, the Thai state has currently placed strong emphasis on discontinuing refugee camps and gearing up for repatriation of Karen refugees.

In 2011–2012, the notion of repatriation gained powerful momentum as Myanmar made considerable changes toward political democracy and signalled a decrease in the military's role in its national politics. Several positive political reforms included the release of Aung San Su Gyi from house arrest in late 2010, the national election in November 2010, Aung San Su Gyi's success in parliamentary by-elections in April 2012 and incredible progress in cease-fire pacts between the Burmese government and diverse armed ethnic groups. A significant event which is relevant to the mass of Karen refugees in Thailand is the KNU's Yangon's visit and talks with the relevant Burmese government minister on the peace-making process (Mizzima News, 2012). Most recently, there appeared a report in May 2012 about a multi-lateral meeting for preparing for the repatriation of war refugees in eastern Myanmar (Saw Yan Naing, 2012).

Public discussions over refugee prospects have typically proceeded toward a particular understanding of refugees. Existing durable solutions to the refugee problem are fundamentally underpinned by formalist notions of refugees that enduringly anchor them in a protective shelter and render them motionless, and objectify them as tacitly acquiescent displaced persons. In addition to conceptualising Karen as a special refugee problem, contemplation of Karen refugees' futures also neglects the actual dynamics of their displacement. The commonly proposed 'durable' solutions of repatriation, local integration and resettlement isolate displaced Karen from wider historical contexts and socio-economic transformations of the Thailand-Myanmar borderland. Researchers have argued that the application of a simplistic model of repatriation to displaced persons tends to make claims about solutions to refugee problem without asking their priorities (Zimmermann, 2012) and neglect social factors involved in individuals' decision on movement (Bakewell, 2000). Repatriation programmes then inevitably result in failure or even worse erode the resilience of refugees.

In this article, I investigate how vernacular Karen refugees have imagined and approached their prospects and to what extent they have attempted to realise them. It examines opportunities situated in changing local contexts, options offered by external intervention, and the way Karen refugees have interacted with them. Rather than simplifying Karen cross border movement to a special refugee problem needing durable solutions, I try to capture directions that they have been using to rebuild their lives. This paper draws upon ethnographic fieldworks among Pwo-dialect speaking displaced Karen (or also known as Hpa-an Karen) in Mae Sot town, in northwestern of Thailand in 2009 and 2011.

This study finds that vernacular Karen refugees have embraced the choice of a physical return to Myanmar and mobility. Karen refugees diligently read life alternatives proposed by surrounding environments, and interact with them according to their life status, social circumstances and hopes for the future. Some of them have embraced trans-national mobility and multi-sited livelihood strategies as practical ways of making a living. By conclusion, I would argue that there is a need for a paradigmatic shift to integrate into understandings and international approaches to solutions to refugees.

Resettlement Programme

During my fieldwork, resettlement to third countries was a topic of everyday talk among numerous Karen refugee friends as well as Burmese migrant friends. The resettlement programme for displaced persons from Myanmar has operated under cooperation between Thailand's Ministry of the Interior (MOI) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). At the beginning, the programme was focused on the persons of concern (POC) who were mostly political activists fleeing Myanmar after the 1988 Burmese military crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrations. Later, the programme extended its working scope to give priority to individual refugees who are most in need of protection. The programme expansion was authorised by the mutual agreement between the UNHCR and the receiving countries' governments. Since then, Mae Sot town has been the locus of processing the resettlement programme for the Burmese-origin people.

Through the UNHCR-facilitated resettlement programme, the figures of successful applicants for the third-country resettlement have increased at an unprecedented rate. The statistics from the International Organization for Migration (or IOM)—an

intergovernmental organisation that arranges transportation and a cultural orientation programme before the refugees' departure—give a clear picture of the tendency. An important milestone in the programme was the trebling of the Myanmar-origin people's departure from 4,911 persons in 2006 to 14,636 persons in 2007. The numbers increased to 17,172 and 16,690 persons in 2008 and 2009, respectively. Since 2007, refugees from Myanmar have become the majority of the programme participants, constituting around 96 percent of the total annual volumes of departure through the channel of the IOM-Thailand office.¹ As of the end of October 2010, 66,885 refugees from Myanmar had left Thailand since the programme started in 2004, to 11 countries including Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States.²

At the household level, the choice of resettlement has created different reactions among the vernacular Karen refugees. Although they have opted to be beneath the radar of the institutional assistance system, Karen individuals seek details about the consequences of choosing a life outside Mae Sot. They acquire the information directly from resettled Karen or indirectly from daily conversations with their relatives and friends. Information about new lives overseas, in both positive and negative aspects, has flowed back to the Thailand-Myanmar borderland. The departure to third countries does not mean a complete separation between the resettled Karen and those remaining behind. The latter are able to learn how their resettled Karen friends overseas encounter and adapt to unfamiliar social environments. They interpret the received information and decide their own attitude and position towards the programme.

Many Karen residing in third countries keep contact with friends and relatives and confer with them about their experiences of living in new societies. The contact is mainly made through mobile phones—a common personal asset of many Karen refugees today. Many Karen individuals seem to know at least one person who has resettled to western countries. They might be kin, neighbours or friends whom they knew before. When a person makes

¹ In fact, the majority of the so-called Myanmar-origin people joining the programme are ethnic Karen and other ethnic minorities.

² Statistics in this section are derived from different secondary sources on the organisational websites, including the UNHCR, the IOM and the IRIN.

contact with someone living overseas, what they exchange and discuss is widely disseminated in a few days. Knowledge of different aspects of overseas life spreads widely through neighbour and kinship networks.

In general, Karen people remaining in the borderland are active in learning about different aspects of the resettled people's lives. The hottest topic concerns the livability of different receiving countries. Livability among the Karen is usually measured by the reception and the support scheme that the resettled Karen receive at the early stage of arrival and in the long term. Another aspect of resettled refugees' lives overseas that impresses many Karen in the borderland is the economic opportunities and remunerative employment. The movement to other countries is considered a chance to earn big incomes. Those Karen in Mae Sot valley are so thrilled to hear about hourly-rate wages in the US, European countries and Australia. The financial advantage of resettlement is recognised in the remittances and revisits by some resettled Karen.

At the same time, Karen in the borderland hear about the unfavorable and ambiguous aspects of resettled lives. It mostly concerns difficulties in adjusting into the new physical and social environments. The problems range from freezing weather to unsociable neighbourhoods. Their life in western societies which are embedded with individualistic values confronts the resettled Karen with loneliness and depression.

The circulation of stories about the Karen refugees who have accepted overseas resettlement plays an important role in shaping Karen positions on the resettlement issue. The vernacular Karen refugees each interpret these stories in line with their own circumstances to construct images of a desired future. Consequently, they have different positions toward the UNHCR-supported resettlement programme. There exists a divergence between those who are reluctant to take up resettlement, as they doubt the prospects it offers for a good life, and those who wish to resettle, due to their expectation of positive changes. The pros and cons of third-country resettlement are widely discussed. In the following section, I explore what impresses Karen youth about resettlement and why they are enthusiastic to accept it as a life option.

Youth and Life Prospects

After years in operation, the resettlement programme has provoked a relevant debate among the Karen refugee community, particular on the brain drain problem. Susan Banki and Hazel Lang's research on the programme's consequences mentions that the Karen refugee camps have rapidly been depleted of skilled workers, especially in two essential sectors of camp life: health and education (Banki S. et al, 2008). Outside refugee camps, the negative effect of brain drain is quite clear on the Karen community development organisations. For example, Mae Tao Clinic (or MTC)—a Karen-dominated community-based organisation which offers low-cost medical health services to undocumented Burmese migrants in Mae Sot town—has lost a number of young skilled and experienced staff to the programme. The chance of resettlement to third countries elicits great interest among displaced Karen youth. To them, the benefits derived from resettlement sound very attractive. A number of young displaced Karen wished they could resettle to third countries.

I am totally bored with being unemployed. I went to work on a construction site as a daily worker for a few weeks. I found it was a terribly exhausting job. Living with an illegal status causes me great difficulty in finding a good and well-paid job. Every job application here requires a Thai ID card—a document which I do not have.

This expression of despair was uttered by a young Karen informant named Thoh. At the age of 22, Thoh graduated high school (grade 12) from a migrant school. His comment implies that life for the Karen vernacular refugees in Mae Sot valley has ambivalent characteristics. Their long-term settlement in this Thai border town and residence in Thai communities has provided safe shelter to Karen people fleeing civil war. The first generation of Karen refugees has attained a relative freedom of movement and opportunities for making a living. These advantages are, however, contingent and situated in local social relations and negotiated interactions. The majority of them remain legally barred from gaining naturalisation as Thai citizens. Their vulnerable status in relation to the Thai state authorities has imposed restrictions on their lives. They are subjected to arbitrary arrest and extortion by the state authorities.

Restrictions on life induce some second generation Karen refugees to perceive the Mae Sot valley as a constraining world. For some young Karen vernacular refugees, this borderlands valley seems to be a restrained parochial bubble. In the case of Thoh, he became nervous

about his future earnings even before his high school graduation. His legally demeaning and limiting status obviously obstructs his personal life progress. During my fieldwork, other young Karen informants told me their subaltern and degrading personal stories. For them, a lack of legal citizenship discourages social mobility. They were not satisfied with the poor low-paid jobs such as daily employment in farming and construction that their parents had relied upon for a living. They were anxious about their prospects of living in Mae Sot valley.

Young Karen refugees seriously reassess the living conditions available to them locally and prefer to ease out of the restrained cage. They promptly grasp the more favourable opportunities open to them. This disposition is reflected in their present life anxiety and enthusiasm for further mobility. They find that the prospects of their post-school life opportunities are largely limited. Many of them dream about a more fulfilling life elsewhere outside Mae Sot valley. They seek employment in Bangkok, where they usually encounter long-hour working, tough living conditions and probably cruel patrons and Thai police's arrest.

From Karen youth's point of view, resettlement seems like an attractive option because it has lucrative material advantages. There are limitations of living as vernacular refugees. Some young Karen refugees are dissatisfied with moving to big cities in Thailand for employment, since they are still subjected to other forms of constraints. An example come from a young Karen woman named Naree whom I met on her return to her parents' house in late 2009. She left Bangkok in order to follow her resettlement application. Naree's desire to go abroad was fostered by contacts with one of her close friends whom she knew in a refugee camp. That friend has been resettled in Buffalo, New York, the United States, since 2007. They often talk to each other on mobiles and on the chat programme which Naree can access at internet shops. Naree was quite impressed by her resettled friend's situation on study and income-making.

This positive perception of resettlement seems a response to the limitations Karen youth have experienced. Before her return from Bangkok, Naree had worked as a domestic worker for three years. According to her account, her work entailed the routine tasks of cleaning and taking care of two young children after school, with a 5,000 baht monthly salary. After working for three years, she got bored and saw no progress. She worried that she might be like her elder sister who had been in the same tiring jobs for more than ten years. When she heard how much money her friend in Buffalo could earn, she felt in a self-pitying mood. Three years before, she had nearly succeeded in her resettlement application,

but she gave it up because of her mother's objection to the idea. She resubmitted her application again in 2009 and hoped it would easily pass the screening process.

Liminality and Mobility

Young Karen people's interest in joining the resettlement programme signifies that they give a high value to mobility as a way to alleviate the socio-economic constraints. The phenomenon of staff fluidity at Mae Tao Clinic (MTC) also reflects Karen youths' desire for mobility. An investigation of the process of MTC staff's entrance and departure stress this point. I gained access to details about fluctuations in MTC staff in a talk with Sophie, who has been working there since 1998, and was now nominated as the head of the department of reproductive health.

For a number of young Karen, MTC has been targeted as an initial means of movement. MTC is a philanthropic organisation aiming to improve the health situation of poor Myanmar-origin patients living on both sides of the border. MTC develops human resources for basic medical treatment through different medical training programmes, such as a two-and-a-half-year course for medics and an eight-month scheme for reproductive health workers. These programmes have attracted young displaced Karen to leave refugee camps or their impoverished communities, learn medical knowledge and practices, and get paid employment. Some trainees chose to work at MTC, instead of going back to camps or their origin villages at the end of training courses. The salary of MTC workers is not high, but it is better than other local options.

Numerous young Karen refugees have managed to take advantage of the workplace as an opportunity to facilitate future mobility. MTC has recently encountered the constant outflow of staff, especially those staff departing to resettle in third countries. Certain MTC staff stayed there for a few years in order to get certificates and then went elsewhere. Some of them list their medical work at the clinic on the resettlement application and later gained resettlement in third countries. Sophie explained why young Karen staff members at her workplace are so interested in the resettlement programme:

Many of us were born in camps or worked here for long. We do not dare to go back to Myanmar. We are scared that the Burmese military understood us as the Karen insurgent's sympathisers, even we are not. Neither could we live with freedom in

Thailand. Then moving to third countries with granted legal status sounds much better. Some friends were scared about how long MTC will have the right to remain here. One day, the Thai government might intervene and stop its operation.

Based on Sophie's account, Karen youths' interest in the resettlement programme seems to stem from a feeling of 'in-betweenness'. 'Youth' is defined as an interval phase between children and adulthood (Turner, 2004, Hamshire K. et al, 2008). Potential adulthood for displaced adolescents is, however, interrupted by flight and livelihood constraints. Their transition into maturity is not socially supported by their personal status; they remain dependents even after their physical bodies have changed into those of mature adults. Simultaneously, economic difficulties obstruct them from establishing a family in Thailand or living as peasants in a physically bounded community as their ancestors did. The Karen's displaced lives then resemble Victor Turner's notion of liminality—a phase in 'betwixt and between' and 'interstructural situation' (Turner, 1967).

I argue here that the liminal phase that young Karen vernacular refugees experience creates an interval of being in-between that prompts them to mobility. This liminal phase ambiguously affects Karen youth. On the one hand, they cannot proceed into maturity in conformity with their physical status and traditional or modern expectations. On the other hand, liminality opens up other possibilities and creates room for manoeuvre in the displacement situation. The in-betweenness drives Karen youth to imagine the formal resettlement option as positive change for the future. Several young displaced Karen make use of their liminal status as a springboard for achieving entry into adulthood. Resettlement receives great attention among the youth because it promises escape from the restrained life choices of Mae Sot valley.

This recalls Simon Turner's term for young Burundian Hutu refugees in a Tanzania refugee camp as 'liminal experts' (2004, 99). It is well recognised that young refugees are not universally dependent and vulnerable, but rather able to find their own way of managing adversity, healing stressful experiences and regaining strength (Turner, 2006, Hinton, 2000, Boyden, 2003). I would like to supplement this with my own observation that young Karen refugees are also adept at appropriating 'mobility' to change things to their own advantage. The second generation of Karen refugees seriously assesses their circumstances and attempt to overcome displacement-induced adversity.

Karen Adults' Views of Resettlement

As mentioned above, not all displaced Karen unequivocally accept resettlement as their life solution. In scattered settlements of Pae areas, the divergent responses to the resettlement scheme clearly cut across the Karen generations, both in the general Karen community and at the family level. While Karen youth conceive of optimistic changes brought by resettlement, most Karen vernacular refugees of the middle-aged and above generations are somewhat ambivalent about moving abroad. They acknowledge the economic prosperity enabled by overseas mobility. However, such positive changes come at the cost of difficult adaptation and struggles in an unfamiliar society. Their reluctance arose from the conception of the alien physical and social environments of prospective resettlement societies.

From a broader perspective, I argue that the resettlement programme not only brings out generational differences in attitudes towards mobility, but implicates culturally embedded ways of identifying desired futures. External observers might find middle-aged Karens' reluctance to make an overseas journey puzzling. The resettlement option seems to propose full-scale freedom and a legal status that is more secure than settlement through contingent relations. I contend that their rejection of resettlement should be construed in terms of certain underlying cultural forces. Middle-aged Karen's unwillingness to resettle elsewhere to a certain extent lies in their conception of human security and well-being.

Cheerful moments among vernacular Karen refugees seem to take place in their sociality with familiar and like-minded people. I came to realise this when I joined a trip to a wedding of a female informant's cousin in a village on the Burmese side of the border, 60 kilometres from Mae Sot town. The informant is well known over her objection the resettlement choice. She took four days off from work and travelled along with her family members to Myanmar. What really struck me was her interaction with the event. She looked very happy when meeting and chatting with many relatives and friends. The event was an occasion where she could reunite with them. Her contentment in the convivial company of her kin and friends was obvious after the wedding ritual, in joining the popular Burmese-style dance named *zat pwe*, known in Karen as *za*. This example shed some light on the way that Karen adults identify their life prospects.

The story above indicates that Karen sociality through kinship networks has been spatially extended across national boundaries. Hpa-an Karen's world and communication are not

bound to a small community as they were in the past. At the outbreak of civil war in the 1970s, Karen families and individuals dispersed toward Thailand. They have moved to and settled in different locations within the Mae Sot valley, either in Thailand or Myanmar. In the dispersal, Karen sociality has been subsequently stretched into cross-border patterns. Karen desire for sociality with beloved and like-minded persons to a certain extent is fulfilled by the Karen extended socio-cultural system. Life-cycle events, like the wedding, serve as social spaces where family members can reunite. Karen people also experience happiness during sporadic meetings

It is well acknowledged that Karen animist belief and practices have been a traditional impetus for Karen sociality. Anthropological literature has discussed Karen matrilineal kinship and its spirit cult; the ritual focus of the cult is the ancestral spirit offering at the household and clan group levels. Yoko Hayami argues that the ritual's essential character focuses on 'sacrifice and communion' (Hayami, 2004). Karen people traditionally propitiate ancestral spirits and solicit blessing for their well-being and fertility. In a context of physical displacement, the chance of being with parents and receiving the foregoing type of blessing and well-being has decreased dramatically. The armed conflict discouraged animist Karen from performing the practice, since people bound within a particular set of kinship ties were scattered in different locations.

However, spatial dispersion does not completely dissolve the Karen kinship inclination. This type of Karen sociality is explicit among the Karen female adults. Some Hpa-an Karen women still preserve their animist customs and beliefs. I met some newly-married couple prepared trip to the wives' village inside Myanmar, in order to conduct a ritual for her matrifocal ancestral spirits. In the same time, I also found that some female informants actually kept conducting small animist practices. They made an offering to maternal ancestral spirits, by putting small pieces of food over the head of bed. Some send money back home inside Myanmar and ask their relatives there to do regular offering on the behalf of them.

These practices suggests that the Karen's well-being is engendered and fostered by the close connection between deceased parents, surviving parents and their descendants, or what I call here 'Karen spiritual commensality'. Some displaced Karen women have retained ancestral spirit-related beliefs which are reproduced through small animist practices and social gatherings. In being displaced Karen in Mae Sot valley, they have attempted to maintain this traditional Karen approach to obtaining well-being. I argue that Karen

spiritual commensality contributes to the resistance to resettlement among the first generation of Karen refugees. Commensality, experienced both as an obligation and a pleasure, might become too difficult to practise if they complied with the proposal to resettle overseas. Such a movement might be too extreme for Karen adults to accept.

The Karen adults' attitude toward mobility overseas reflects not only the way different generations think of their life prospects, but also the importance of generation-specific ties to place as a social force determining actions. While young Karen refugees formulate positive responses to the resettlement programme based on their dissatisfaction with the constraints and contingencies of life in the borderlands, Karen adults' affiliation with that same local lifeworld shapes their disposition as sceptics towards the journey overseas. Their generation questions and does not immediately embrace resettlement—the so-called durable solution to displacement, because such a future as they imagine it conflicts with the attainment of wellbeing through commensality with the spirits, kin and consociates. If indeed they do not move along with their children, the potential opening up of new transnational connections would be an intriguing terrain of investigation for further study.

Reengaging with Myanmar

Recently, the prospect of Karen refugees' return to their country of origin is ripe for discussion, as is the notion of what 'repatriation' might mean. Repatriation is depicted as return to home or status quo, an idea heavily imbued with the persistent 'sedentary bias' (Bakewell, 2008) in representations of durable solutions. However, it is an illusion that persons remaining on the borderland and preferring like-minded sociality will be prompt to endorse the idea. Vernacular Karen refugees have interacted with their country of origin in the past decade, and have made decision to again sink roots in their country of origin as a variety of 'reengagement' constrained by opportunities available locally and in their homeland.

Recently, Karen contact and connection with their country of origin have tremendously depended on the changing geopolitics on the Burmese side of the border. Most lowland areas in Karen state since the late 1990s have been under the shared control of the Burmese military and the DKBA (Democratic Karen Buddhist Army). The Burmese military government unofficially has permitted the DKBA leaders to run businesses along the border, as a reward for their political allegiance in fighting against the KNLA (Karen

National League Army) – the armed force of the Karen secessionists. In general, there has been no fatal armed fighting; guerrilla warfare has been limited to only mountainous and forested areas. Consequently, Karen refugees and those remaining at home can contact and travel to visit each other.

In the present political context, Karen families' return to the Burmese side of the border is not uncommon, but these moves have been shaped by the political particularities of the borderlands region. The largest movement back across the border was the result of a great deal of persuasion by DKBA for people to return. I found several new villages along the border where Karen repatriates reside. These new residences are not their home villages; they are just situated on the Burmese side of Mae Sot valley (eastern side of Dawna Range). These villages were mostly established and have been controlled by the DKBA. One of the large settlements is *Shwe Khoko* (literally: golden rain tree). *Shwe Khoko* in 2009 had about 4,000 inhabitants, and a part of the village area is the 999 army division of the DKBA.³

The DKBA, at that time, encouraged displaced Karen to leave Thailand and settle in *Shwe Khoko* with a land offer. A Karen informant in the settlement said that some Karen refugees moved to *Shwe Khoko* after the claimed DKBA raid and arson attack on a Karen refugee camp. He explained that he and other friends decided to settle there because the DKBA provided tenured possession of land for cultivation to Karen returnees. The campaign succeeded to a certain extent; hundreds of Karen refugees went back to the Burmese side of the border and got rewarded with farming land. The group of returnees ended their refugeehood and became *Shwe Khoko* residents and farmers.

The departure from Thailand-based refugee camps to *Shwe Khoko* has several advantages. Returnees' households have better access to resources and security of residency. On arrival, they received a free housing plot and 30 acres of arable land which are used for corn and mungbean cultivation. Living in *Shwe Khoko* means that lives are more self-reliant. The village residents earn their living from selling agricultural production to Thai market, which is on the opposite side of the border. The disadvantages of living there mainly come from the demands of the DKBA, which can include requests for free labour, military conscription of young men and arbitrary taxes.

³ In 2010, Myanmar's military government tried to incorporate numerous armed ethnic groups into a single border guard force. The DKBA agreed to the requirement and today become a Border Guard Force (BGF) subordinate to the regional Burmese military commanders, except DKBA troops of Brigade 5 that opposed the group's decision.

The example of Karen movement to *Shwe Khoko* indicates that displaced Karen have commenced to consider and trial reengagement with Myanmar. They have actively learned about the major changes that have happened there, and have experimented with reconnecting with their country of origin. Karen refugees carefully assessed conditions offered in the choice of return before making a decision. Some displaced Hpa-an Karen grasped the opportunity and resources offered by the DKBA on the Burmese side of the borderland, while still maintaining a connection with the Thai market. These Karen refugees' return to Myanmar then is not 'repatriation' in the sense of a return home, but rather onward mobility to reengage with the home country.

Mobility in Practical Solutions

The Karen refugees' onward mobility described above reveals complexities embedded in the phenomenon of Karen displacement. Karen forced migration is not just a problem of political persecution and conflict aversion, but has been inextricably intertwined with persistent deprivations of social and economic rights in the broader Burmese society. While there has been a prospect of things improving toward more peace and social security, Karen prospects might be found in increasingly complicated patterns of mobility, rather than the termination of movement according to a simple model of repatriation. Hpa-an Karen's social lives will engage more in transnational spaces.

Inge Brees argued that refugees from Myanmar are active in transnational engagements, predominantly as remittance senders (Brees, 2010). I would add that Karen refugees engage in transnationalism not only in terms of carrying materials across national boundaries, but Karen individuals themselves have been involved in multi-sited social life ways. I present here a case study of how a Karen individual has reengaged with his country of origin and simultaneously created social networks across national boundaries.

Ako is a Karen man who grew up as an orphan. His parents died in the civil war within Karen State in the late 1970s. As a 13-year-old boy, he fled from his home village to take refuge with employers in Thailand. After 22 years of work in Mae Sot town, Ako currently lives in Myawaddy, a Burmese border business town, which is just opposite Mae Sot town. He earns a living from the operation of an inter-town transport service. The business involves carrying people and commodities between Myawaddy—a gateway town to Thailand—and Hpa-an—the capital of Karen State. The vehicle he uses is a mid-size pickup

with two-story seating on its rear body. Making the journey every other day, Ako's mini truck is one of an estimated more than 200 pickup trucks providing public transport between the two towns.

Ako's return to Myawaddy in 2004 was a thoughtful movement which was carried out with political sensitivity. He moved there with two Hpa-an Karen friends; all of them realised the economic opportunity in the booming Myawaddy economy. They received the DKBA's permission to be public transport operators on the Mywaddi-Hpa-an route. Ako relied on his family's saving to accomplish this planned move. Ako bought a second-hand pickup from Thai side of the border and a small land plot in Myawaddy where he built a small house. To do this business required them to deal with several constraints in the military- and warlord-controlled society. He sought Burmese car registration by paying several hundred thousand kyat of bribe to local authorities to get a registration plate. All public transport operators also have to pay two hundred thousand kyat per month to the influential DKBA for the concession.

Ako and his wife found that their relocation to Myawaddy and the transport business quite satisfactory. Three assistants were employed by the family to staff the business; a Burmese man as the driver, and two Karen men as porters of luggage and other cargo. The team makes the six to eight hours drive to Hpa-an, stays overnight there and drives back to Myawaddy on the next day. Ako has discovered that the operation of inter-town transport is a profitable career. The passenger fee is 5,000 kyat per person; other freight items, which can be a box, a motorcycle or even a chicken cage, are charged by shape and size. On average, Ako earns 100,000 kyat per two-day trip in the dry season, when people most often travel back and forth between Myanmar and Thailand. By contrast, the income might drop to one fourth of that in the rainy season.

Close scrutiny of Ako's personal life reveals that his family has become intensively engaged in transnational spaces. While the family resides in Myawaddy, his eldest daughter still studies at a migrant school in Mae Sot town. The girl travels to stay with her parents in Myawaddy during the school break. Weekly, Ako or his wife visits the daughter and gives her pocket money. Meanwhile, their frequent trip to Mae Sot town is also a part of the business of money transfer. The inter-town mini trucks have been an important channel which young Karen working elsewhere in Thailand use to send home remittances. Ako acts as an agent in this money transfer service. Senders transfer money through the Thai banking system into Ako's bank account. He has owned the account since he worked with

his Thai ex-employer. After the transfer, senders inform Ako via mobile phone. Then he goes to Mae Sot to withdraw the money. The remittances are changed into Burmese currency (kyat) and then carried in the pick-up to be handed over at the doors of receivers in Hpa-an Plain. Ako as agent charges a transaction cost of five percent of the total transferred amount.

Ako's relocation to Myawaddy not only appears as an example of transnational mobility, but also strengthens his ties with Karen sociality. The move is valuable; it gives him both material benefits and strengthens his kinship network. He maintains close relationships with siblings. One of his important kin is his elder sister. On the way back to Myawaddy, he stopped his pickup at his sister's house and loaded up sacks of rice. He got them in exchange for free delivery of consumable commodities from Myawaddy to his sister's grocery shop in Hpa-an. The exchanges are by implication livelihood earning strategies by members of a family with translocal networks and relationships.

In Home alone?: a review of relationship between repatriation, mobility and durable solutions for refugees, Katy Long suggests that there is a need for a paradigmatic shift to integrate mobile and migratory strategies into understandings and international approaches to repatriation and reconstruction as durable solutions to refugees (Long, 2010). Based on **Castles (2003), Nyberg-Sorensen (2004) and Van Hear (2006)'s** discussion on transnational mobility as a de facto solution for forced displacement (Castles, 2003, Nyberg-Sorensen, 2004, Van-Hear, 2006), Long argues that mobility can play an important role in promoting the process of repatriation and reconstruction. Refugees who return to post-conflict states usually develop various forms of mobile and migratory livelihood strategies rather than simply return, and these strategies can contribute to reconstruction prospects.

Following the argument, we should understand Ako's movements as representative of a complex mixed flow which cannot be easily distinguished into voluntary/involuntary or forced/economic migration. Beyond the refugee-migrant nexus, such forms of mobility are not incompatible with the existing framework of durable solutions. In the context of a broader social transformation of Mae Sot valley, Ako's expeditions and his miscellaneous assortment of cross-border practices entail potential socio-economic and political contributions which suggest that mobility can reinvigorate refugee repatriation and reconstruction of fragile circumstances both in Karen State and Myanmar in general. Within partial changes in Myanmar in the past decade, refugee individuals such as Ako have integrated mobility into their reengagement with Myanmar. His specific case, the

maintenance of translocal kin exchanges and the transport and cross-border money transfer business, significantly underpins benefits to Karen people on both sides of the border and provides one indication of how refugee mobility might figure in the process of Myanmar's post-conflict reconstruction.

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates that Hpa-an Karen refugees diligently read life alternatives proposed by surrounding environments, and interact with them according to their life status, social circumstances and hopes for the future. In embracing the resettlement programme, young Karen are attracted to movement overseas for they portray their current lives as self-settled refugees as being fraught with limitations. Their earnest acceptance of resettlement to third countries reflects both their dissatisfaction with their present circumstances and the prospect that movement holds as an expedient means of entering maturity. In contrast, a number of Karen adults are ambivalent about and hesitate over the radical form of movement. In the meantime, many have developed extended socio-cultural system on the Thailand-Myanmar border to connect themselves with the past and sketch out a desired prospective life. Hpa-an Karen people remaining on the borderland have observed changes unfolding in their country of origin and have experimented with novel forms of repatriation and reengagement.

To understand the life prospects of displaced Karen people requires incorporating what they have been practising into the consideration. Karen vernacular refugees are not passively waiting for sustainable solutions to their displacement, but have actively developed practical avenues into an array of potential post-refugee futures. The chapter illustrates case studies of displaced Hpa-an Karen who embrace translocal and transnational practices as a way of making a living. Mobile and multi-sited livelihood strategies, among Hpa-an Karen, go beyond the traditional division between forced and economic-induced migration. Furthermore, their mobility seems to have potential role in supporting future repatriation and the time-consuming process of post-conflict reconstruction of their homeland in Myanmar.

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