

A black and white photograph of a person, likely of Karen ethnicity, shown in profile from the chest up. They have traditional white face paint (thayau) applied to their face and neck. Their hair is dark and pulled back. They are looking upwards and to the right with a contemplative expression. The background is dark and out of focus.

CTER | 2021 - 2026

WHERE THE RIVER FOLDS

THE RESILIENCE AND TENACITY
OF THE KARENNI PEOPLE

PHOTOGRAPHY DOCUMENTARY
IN COMMEMORATION OF
151st KARENNI NATIONAL DAY



COORDINATION TEAM FOR EMERGENCY RELIEF (KARENNI)

Karenni State | Est. March 9, 2021

Introduction

A Voice for the Karenni People Following the events of February 1, 2021, and the widespread Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), the Coordination Team for Emergency Relief (Karenni)—CTER—was established on March 9, 2021. While our organization was originally formed to support the community's call for justice, our focus had to quickly shift as conflict intensified across Karenni State. By late May 2021, widespread fighting forced thousands of families to flee their homes, creating an urgent humanitarian crisis.

This documentary photography book serves as a visual record of the displacement crisis in Karenni State. It captures the sudden and tragic loss of homes, schools, and communities, forcing families to build makeshift shelters in the jungle. More importantly, it documents the unyielding resilience of the Karenni people: the elderly who carry their own weight, the communities that adapt and survive, and the children who refuse to give up their education even when their classrooms are reduced to rubble.

Today, CTER does more than deliver life-saving aid. We published this book to serve as a voice for the Karenni people and to ensure the world hears the truth about the ongoing displacement crisis.

Through these photographs, we aim to document the situation and the destruction left behind, building an undeniable record to seek justice for our community.

We want to bring global attention to the struggles of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), especially the children whose futures are being directly targeted. By showing the reality on the ground, we hope to coordinate with civil society and global partners to secure the essential food, shelter, and medicine our people desperately need.

Every story in this book matters, and every life shown deserves a future. We hope these images inspire you to stand with our displaced communities and be a part of their journey toward hope and healing.

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This road sign once stood in everyone's path — a familiar landmark, a daily reminder of where home was. It was more than just a sign. But now, we remember it differently — surrounded by what was lost, standing alone in the silence it never asked for.



It takes years to build a community, and only a moment to turn it into ruins. These were homes. They were safe places. Now, we stand in the debris of what families had to leave behind.



This truck used to carry food, families, or life-saving supplies. But when conflict passes through a village, this is what it leaves behind.



It takes blood, sweat, tears, and time to grow rice. For the Karenni people, rice is not just food — it is life. But some spent months tending their fields, only to leave it all behind because of the conflict.



A situation can change in the blink of an eye. Tragedy comes to your door without knocking — and suddenly, everything you knew is gone. Where do we go now?



They can only take what fits on their back. Everything else—years of memories, a quiet life, a safe bed—is left behind.



Those tarpaulins stretch as far as the eye can see. Each one covers a family — some cover strangers. But we are not strangers if we are in the same shadow. Each of them has a story of what they left behind.



No one plans to live in the jungle, but when you flee for your life, any shelter becomes a home for the night.



Her face is hidden, but her story is not. Thousands of Karenni people have sat like this — watching, waiting, carrying a pain that has no name.



She sits beneath a fragile shelter, processing her thoughts. She has left behind her home, her land, everything she owned — maybe even her beloved people. But the worry never left with her. One stray thought leads back to the good old days, when they were safe.



At their age, they should be having fun — not worrying about what to eat tomorrow. Two girls carry water jugs through the camp, a bamboo basket balanced from her head, a weight far beyond her years. The world is not fair for some people.



Built by hand, piece by piece. It is not much, but when you are fleeing a conflict, a simple bamboo hut becomes a safe place.



Displacement has a way of turning strangers into family — when you flee together, survive together, and wake up under the same fragile roof — strangers don't stay strangers for long.



When the conflict comes close, everyone suffers — but the elderly suffer in a different way. They are the most vulnerable ones, but also the proudest. As long as they can still stand and walk, they will never ask for help. They would rather carry their own weight than become a burden to the people around them.



Let them splash. Let them laugh. They don't need to know how hard life is. Because children deserve happiness, even on the hardest days.



The water has risen — and so has the worry. But as long as they can still paddle, their spirits won't sink.



When the flood came, he picked up his net. Disaster becomes opportunity — that is the Karenni spirit. They adapt, they survive, they find a way in any situation.



Maybe they have left their homes, but they still have the people who love them. The military could take their properties, but not their spirits.



This is what remains of a school after airstrike. A textbook lies in the rubble — left behind by students who only wanted to learn. Since when does pursuing education become a crime?



These children still show up even in displacement and uncertainty. Their classroom is a bamboo shelter with a tin roof. Their determination is something no conflict has managed to take.



They never chose to study under an unsecured roof. They never chose any of this. All these children want is peace — is that too much to ask?



War can destroy a school building, but it cannot stop a child from holding a pencil. They refuse to give up on their education, because a notebook is where their future still belongs.



Life as an IDP is not easy, and it was never a choice. But somewhere in this displacement camp, a boy bends over his notebook — and refuses to stop learning despite the challenges. The future is not lost while children like him still refuse to give up.



There is no such thing as safe education in Karenni anymore. The military targets students like they are committing a crime — eliminating the future, so he can sit longer on his throne.



Sometimes, the road disappears under water. But the need doesn't disappear. When there is no path left to walk, we build a way to cross.



A small act of help can mean everything to someone who has nothing. CTER's help reaches displaced people — delivering rice, supplies, and the quiet message that they have not been forgotten. These people will always be thankful to those who showed up when it mattered most.



These two children hold their blankets like they hold onto hope — and maybe, just maybe, this blanket will help them through the sleepless night.



Even in the hardest situations, CTER will still show up — with willing hands and ready hearts. CTER will always be there for the people who need it most.



These riders know every turn, every hidden trail through the jungle. Without people like them, the most vulnerable would never be reached — and the world would never know they were there.



Despite everything they have lost, these boys still laugh, still refuse to be broken — and live while they are young with their beloved friends.

**Every story in this documentary is real.
Every face belongs to someone who deserves to be seen.
Thank you for witnessing with us.**

About CTER

CTER was established on March 9, 2021, in response to the humanitarian crisis triggered by the Myanmar military coup. What began as a call for justice quickly became a lifeline for thousands of displaced Karenni families.

Today, CTER continues to:

- Deliver food, shelter, and medicine to IDPs across Karenni State by working with local partners, civil society organizations, and international donor organizations.
- Advocate for the Karenni people on the international stage
- Document the truth of what is happening — so the world cannot look away

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When war changed the course of their lives, the Karenni people did not break.
They bent, adapted, and kept moving forward—like a river folding around a barrier.
Where the River Folds is a powerful photographic journey into the heart of displacement.

Witness the ultimate balance of human character:
the resilience to survive the harshest storms of war,
and the unyielding tenacity to protect a homeland's future.

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