

## Encounter with the Karen in the Mountains of Thailand

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When I was in the third grade of elementary school, I lived in Thailand for a year due to my father's work. I went with my father and others to deliver a water storage tank to an elementary school deep in the mountains of Thailand. At that time, I asked, "Why is there a water shortage even though it rains a lot in Thailand?" The answer was, "It rains, but there are no water storage tanks to collect the rainwater, and of course, the water supply and sewage infrastructure is not developed."

The elementary school was attended by Karen children. The teacher at the school said, "Here, everyone learns English, Thai, and math." When I heard that everyone couldn't speak Thai, I asked, "Why can't they speak Thai even though they live in Thailand?" The teacher replied, "They are refugees." I wondered, "What is a 'refugee'?" The teacher continued, "They have moved to Thailand, crossing the border mountains from Myanmar. However, they originally couldn't speak Burmese either. They speak their tribal language as their mother tongue." At that time, I didn't understand what it meant.

Now I have heard about the people of Ukraine fleeing to countries like Poland as refugees due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and some of them have even come to Japan. This has given me a vague understanding of what refugees are. So, I looked up "refugee" in the dictionary. It seems that a refugee is someone who has fled to another country due to being persecuted or fearing persecution for various reasons in their own country. It is said that there are as many as 120 million refugees worldwide<sup>1)</sup>. That figure is almost the same as the population of Japan.

I also looked up the "Karen people". Karen seems to be a general term for highland people who speak Karen languages, residing in northern and western

Thailand and eastern and southern Myanmar. As of July 2019, the number of Myanmar refugees in Thailand is still about 96,000, living divided among nine camps<sup>2)</sup>. It is said that many people are flocking to the Thai border fearing repression by Myanmar's military regime, and it is not only the Muslim Rohingya, but also the Karen people who are still living in refugee camps.

People in the Karen village cultivate and harvest crops like corn and longan. While longan is tasty, it doesn't fill their stomachs. The longan is transported to Bangkok, where it is sold in markets. They use the income from shipping longan to purchase necessities of life. At the entrance to the village, there is a souvenir shop selling unique Karen ornaments. I also bought a small item, and I heard this income is a valuable source of revenue for the tribe.

I go to school every day without any worries, study, and talk with friends. On the other hand, I have also come to understand the fact that many refugees are emerging in various parts of the world. Why can't the United Nations, which I learned about in textbooks, solve the refugee problem? Of course, I don't have a solution either. However, I want to think and act and do something to help solve this problem.

出典

【Webページ】

- 1) UNHCR (国連難民高等弁務官事務所) 日本「数字で見る難民情勢 (2023)」  
(<https://www.unhcr.org/jp/global-trends-2023>)  
(最終アクセス2024年11月20日)
- 2) UNHCR (国連難民高等弁務官事務所) 協会「タイでの数十年を経て、ミャンマー難民が祖国へ戻る」  
(<https://www.japanforunhcr.org/news/2019/17929>)  
(最終アクセス2024年11月20日)