

## Refugee Camps on the Thailand-Myanmar Border: Potential Places for Expanding Connections among Karen Baptists

Boonsong Thansrithong and Kwanchewan Buadaeng\*

*Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University, Chiang Mai 50200, Thailand*

*\*Corresponding author. E-mail: kwanchewan.buadaeng@gmail.com*

*<https://doi.org/10.12982/CMUJASR.2017.0006>*

### ABSTRACT

*Since the 1980s, the Burmese army has increasingly seized the Karen National Union (KNU)'s camps and strongholds along the Thailand-Myanmar borderland. Hundreds of thousands of Karen people affected by the war have fled to the Thai side of the border. Since then, ten refugee camps have existed along the border, from Mae Hong Son province in the North to Ratchaburi province in the South. This paper focuses on the operation of the Kawthoolei Karen Baptist Bible School and College (KKBBSC) in the Bae Klaw camp, which is the largest with almost 40,000 residents in 2016. Since 1990, the KKBBSC has produced around 1,000 Bachelor of Theology graduates, thereby increasing the strength of the Karen Baptist church. This paper argues that the refugee camps on the Thailand-Myanmar border are not marginally isolated, but are potential nodes of connection with other places and organizations. Two factors contribute to the potentialities of the camps. First, the camp is an exceptional zone, ruled not by a single government but a liminal contested space of many actors. The second is the camp's high level of technological development which facilitates transportation and communication for the Karen Baptists. Thus, with the active role of Kawthoolei Karen Baptist leaders and close connection with and support from Karen and non-Karen Baptist and non-Baptist international organizations, the KKBBSC has increased its strength, leading to the expansion of Karen Baptist churches elsewhere in the world.*

**Keywords:** Refugee camp, Thailand-Myanmar border, Karen Baptists, Exceptional zone