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## Thailand's imposition of National Parks: The Indigenous Karen People's struggle for their forests and survival

*In January 2021, Indigenous Karen People from Bang Kloi returned to their ancestral home in the Kaeng Krachan forests, after years of dispossession due to the creation of the Kaeng Krachan National Park. Karen communities are mobilizing around the country in solidarity to the Bang Kloi communities' right to return home.*

In January 2021, Indigenous Karen People from Bang Kloi returned to their ancestral home deep in the Kaeng Krachan forests in Thailand after years of dispossession and near-starvation. The creation of the Kaeng Krachan National Park in 1981 meant the beginning of the dispossession of the Karen people of Bang Kloi. Since then, they have fought for their rights to live in their original territories. On top of the unbearable situation they confront in area where they were relocated, the Covid-19 pandemic made it clearer that returning home was the only answer for their survival.

Now, the situation in the Kaeng Krachan forests is at the very least tense. While Karen communities are mobilizing around the country, National Park authorities have denounced the Karen communities of clearing patches of forests, in an attempt to deepen the prejudice against them as forest destroyers. For the Karen People however, returning home is not only a matter of survival. It is also another effort to restore their cultural life, identity and dignity.

### ***National Parks = Dispossession and Violence***

The Karen People from Bang Kloi have practiced rotational agriculture for generations – cultivating one area before moving on to the next, giving the soil time to replenish, - together with fishing and foraging. Bang Kloi is deep in the 2,915 km<sup>2</sup> of what is now categorized as the Kaeng Krachan National Park, a large forest along the Myanmar border. Since the designation of the National Park there have been recurring conflicts between the Karen indigenous people and state authorities.

The Thai Department of National Park, Wildlife, and Plant Conservation accuses the Karen communities of being illegal encroachers. Their rotational agriculture practices are vilified as a form of deforestation, even though those same practices have kept the Kaeng Krachan forest healthy for generations.

A major turning point was in 1996 when National Park officials wanted to move the indigenous Karen out of the forests. 57 Karen families, 391 people, living in Bang Kloi, were relocated downhill to Ban Pong Luek-Bang Kloi. After failed promises to provide plots of land, many moved back to their ancestral territories.

In 2011, the then Park chief, Chaiwat Kimlikitsorn, led a team of armed soldiers and forest rangers to torch the Karen's houses and rice barns, accusing them of being drug criminals and illegal encroachers. They cause damage to 98 houses. This was publicised within Thailand as an operation against 'national security' threats.

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The forest dwellers fled in fear back to the resettlement village. This was followed with more violence, murders and threats.

When the forest dweller's advocate, Tatkamon Ob-om, exposed what really happened in Bang Kloi, he was gunned down. The then Park chief was arrested but eventually freed because the gun could not be found.

Moreover, Porlajee "Billy" Rakchongcharoen, a young Karen land rights activist, who helped the Bang Kloi Karen to pursue a case against Chaiwat, and who was a key witness for the court case, mysteriously disappeared in 2014, after being detained by Chaiwat and park rangers for harvesting wild honey.

Two witnesses who testified that Billy had been released by Chaiwat after a brief arrest confessed later that Park officials told them to lie. Five years later, in 2019, the Department of Special Investigation found fragments of Billy's skull in an oil drum near the Park's office. But Chaiwat was not charged claiming that there was insufficient evidence.

Meanwhile, the Supreme Administrative Court ruled that Park authorities broke the law by torching indigenous Karen's houses and destroying their belongings. The court also told Park authorities that if the Karen people lived in the forest before the area became a National Park, their land rights must be respected. But forest authorities turned a deaf ear. Forest evictions kept ongoing while Chaiwat kept on being promoted.

The Department of National Park, Wildlife, and Plant Conservation issued, in response to the Court decision, a much more violent National Park Law. The Law was rushed through the National Legislative Assembly in 2019 and was passed right before the military-installed assembly was dissolved.

The new National Park Law makes National Park officials more powerful than soldiers under an emergency decree. This means, among others, that they can enter and destroy forest people's homes at all times by citing urgency, without the need to investigate anything. Also, the maximum jail sentence for "forest encroachers" has been increased to 20 years and they can also face fines to up to two million baht (over 65 thousand dollars). Insisting that forests must be "free of humans", the Law outlaws millions of people who have been living in the forests for generations.

Consequently, Karen communities have to face constant litigation cases against them with encroachment charges, forcing them to move out as land becomes consumed into National Parks territories.

Not losing the hope and strength to fight for their forests, in August 2020, the indigenous Karen from Bang Kloi submitted a letter to the Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation Strategic Taskforce, which prompted the Taskforce's Advisor to visit the area and hear the communities. It was revealed how the villagers have been suffering from landlessness and an extremely difficult access to any livelihood. But there was no progress made after that.

On 8 December 2020, the Karen people from Bang Kloi submitted a letter to the Minister of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation hoping for a concrete action to solve their problems, but there has been no answer.

In consequence and after many attempts to restore their rights to live on their territory, on the 9th

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January 2021, members of the Bang Kloi community have returned to their ancestral home, after they were forcibly evicted in 1996 and 2011, to practice their rotational agriculture. Another essential reason to return for them was to perform a ritual for the spirit of Karen leader Grandpa Ko-I, who was born in the Kaeng Krachan forest in 1912. It was essential that his descendants use rice from there to feed the people who participated in the ceremony. This would make the spirit of Grandpa Ko-I to ascend according to their belief.

Despite these conflicts and violence, the government of Thailand is planning to submit the latest application for giving the Kaeng Krachan National Park the World Heritage Site status in mid-2021—something that has been postponed before due to the ongoing conflicts with the Karen People.

It is time that the Karen People from Bang Kloi get back their right of returning and living in their territory. They are not only fighting for a piece of forest on which to live. They are fighting for justice and dignity.

#### References

[Video on the struggle of Granpa-Koi and the Karen People in the Kaeng Krachan forests. \(in Thai with English subtitles\)](#)

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