

# Warring Burma tribesmen pin hopes on Britain

**ALISON FISHER reports on a 37-year-old fight for independence**

A SMALL Burmese tribe, once thought to be a lost tribe of Israel, is appealing to Mrs Thatcher to honour a 110-year-old agreement with the British Government.

The Karenni, who live in the inhospitable mountain jungles and river gorges of eastern Burma, have been fighting for 37 years to regain the freedom they lost when they were included in the Union of Burma by military force in 1948.

They originated from China, but because of some strange coincidences between their language and Hebrew, and their belief in the coming of a Messiah, the first missionaries thought they had found a lost tribe of Israel.

It is possibly this messianic belief led some Karenni to see the British as supermen. Even now the old people, many of whom fought alongside the British in the Second World War, say that one day the 'white man' will return and when he does it will mean their lost freedom is close at hand.

When the British began to colonise Burma more than a century ago, they were more than happy to guarantee Karenni independence as a buffer state. An officer of the Raj exchanged 'horns of friendship' with the chieftains, followed by a written agreement in 1875: 'It is hereby agreed between the British and Burmese Governments that the State of Western Karenni shall remain separate and independent and that no sovereignty or governing authority of any description shall be claimed or exercised over that state.'

The name of the British signatory, Sir Douglas Forsyth, passed into Karenni folklore. When other tribes were cajoled into joining the Union of Burma at independence the astute Karenni held suspiciously aloof. After all, they had it in writing that they were already a sovereign state. When the Union of Burma was launched in 1948, it almost immediately disintegrated into civil war and Burmese troops marched into Karenni.

Today, however, the Rangoon Government controls only about half the territory of the 'Union,' and 40 per cent of the population is in open revolt — a mixed bag of hill tribes, Communists and opium warlords pitted sometimes against each other but more often against the 200,000-strong Burmese army.

The 200,000 or so Karenni are the smallest and weakest of the insurgents. They control about a third of the region, bordered by Thailand. They have their own democratically elected Government, their own schools, their own flag and State motto: 'Truth, love, unity, peace'; symbolised by four fish and four frogs.

Their income comes from a tax on traders smuggling black market goods between Burma and Thailand. A mule track winding through the mountains and jungles of Karenni is busy with weary traders, lines of wild-looking tribesmen with knives like swords in decorated sheaths, and shoulder-bags of embroidered red cloth and tassels.



**JUNGLE PATROL : Karenni guerrillas on the march with aging weaponry**

The Karenni's income cannot support a large army. They have 300 regular guerrillas but cannot afford arms for any more. They do have muskets and World War Two issue. The civilian population is hostage to any military success. After an attack on an important mine where a number of Soviet technicians were working, the Russians left in protest and Rangoon had to pay compensation. As a result, 13 villages were put to the torch. Whole villages have been massacred.

Refugees from one massacre, living in small shelters at another village, are bitter, resilient and determined. 'This is our land. This is our country.' Nearby, 12 young Karenni soldiers live in a hut with a parrot in a bamboo cage hanging from the roof. Strips of monkey meat were hung outside in the sun.

The captain looked rather like an Asian Che Guevara. He laughed when I ask if he thought they could ever win. 'I don't know. Yes, we can fight, we can win, but we have few soldiers and we cannot control our Burmese posts.'

'We are very poor, we can't buy many guns, we can't give many soldiers food. We can't manage like this.'

The Karenni and nine other minorities have banded together to form the National Democratic Front, which seeks a federated democratic Burma.

The Karenni leaders are now looking to Britain for diplomatic help. They have written to Mrs Thatcher to remind her that Britain signed an agreement recognising their sovereign rights. They ask Britain publicly to proclaim the legitimacy of their struggle and raise the matter at the United Nations.

Rimond Htoo, Karenni Secretary of State says: 'We feel we have become the forgotten people.' After the war the British soldiers left their tribal allies a bronze shield, which is engraved: 'At the going down of the sun and in the morning, we will remember them.' A local clergyman who was once a quartermaster with the British army, said: 'Just one shield, that's no use to us.'