

The Karen Network for Culture and Environment will not accept the nomination of the Kaeng Khachan Forest Complex as a World Natural Heritage site without recognizing the land and resource rights of the Karen communities.

The Karen Network for Culture and Environment (KNCE), Tanaosri region, demands the World Heritage Committee to allow Karen living in the Kaeng Khachan Forest Complex area receiving rights to manage their forest.

The Karen people living at Bangkloi, Jaipaendin village, Kaengkhachan district, Petchaburi province are one of the indigenous peoples in Thailand. They have long settled in that area before it was declared as a national park in 1981. In 1996, 57 Karen families (with a population of 391 persons) who were living in the Thai-Myanmar border areas were relocated to a new settlement area. They were relocated with the assurance a fair resettlement package which included allocation of enough land for settlement and farming areas for all. However, this assurance was ignored and no agencies paid serious attention to their miseries. As a result, some of these Karen families decided to return to their original settlement area.

When the Thai government (2009-2011) was preparing to nominate Kaeng Khachan National Park as a World Natural Heritage site, Mr. Chaiwat Limlichit-aksorn (the then head of Kaeng Khachan National Park) evicted the Karen communities from their villages and burned down their houses and rice barns, including confiscation of their farming implements. Between April 2010 to June 2011, 98 houses and huts were demolished and burnt down. The eviction drive affected 17 families (80 persons).

The affected families continue suffer from hunger due to severe shortage of land for farming. The recent project initiated by the government to promote terraced paddy fields to solve the above problems failed because developing terraced paddy fields are not suitable in that area. As a result, around 38 families again decided to return to their original settlement site.

Mr. Phawllachee Rakchongcharoen (also known as Billy) stood up on behalf of the affected Karen communities and raised their concerns. Unfortunately, on 17 April 2014, he was arrested by the head of Kaeng Khachan National Park on charges of possessing five bottles of wild honey. Ever since, his whereabouts is unknown and a case of disappearance was filed.

Between 2015 – 2016, the KNCE cooperated and participated in the consultations held by the National Park to get updated information and to register their concerns. But till date:

1. The Department of National Park (DNP) has not given a copy of the report to the KNCE that was sent to the World Heritage Committee. The KNCE followed up by meeting the Director General of the DNP at his headquarters. Unfortunately the KNCE has not received any responses from the DNP.
2. The KNCE was not invited to participate in developing the roadmap to address the concerns raised by the World Heritage Committee.
3. The KNCE submitted a letter to the head of Kaeng Khachan National Park to resolve the issue of land shortage and rotational farming. But no action has been taken till date.

Some members of the KNCE Committee were invited to learn from experiences of the existing World Natural Heritage site (that was declared 25 years ago) in Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary by IUCN. This is an area where the Karen people have been living for more than 200 years. It is a good example of co-management of a World Natural Heritage site by communities and government agencies where the Karen communities are allowed to continue to their rotational farming and livelihood practices. The proposed World Natural Heritage site (Kaeng Khachan Forest Complex) could adopt this as a model for replication in the event of declaring it as a World Natural Heritage site.

The Karen communities in the proposed World Natural Heritage site have been living there for hundreds of years, but the right to manage their forests was not recognized when the national park was declared. Therefore, the KNCE Tanaosri region would like to draw the attention of the World Heritage Committee and the Thai government to the following issues and demands:

1. The traditional farming system of the Karen people must be recognized and allow the continuance of their rotational farming in the area with a 10-year cycle.
2. Karen people must be allowed to choose their own settlement areas.
3. Karen people must be allowed to manage their own settlement and farming areas under a committee constituted by the community members.
4. The Karen's traditional ways of life and rights should be recognized by the government and national park authorities.
5. The KNCE be included as a proponent with the Thai Government to the proposed World Natural Heritage site.
6. To conduct a joint study by Karen community representatives and government agencies on rotational farming in Huay Kra Su, located in Kaeng Khachan Forest Complex, to develop a model for replication in the area.

We reiterate that the above demands and issues are conditional for the approval of the Kaeng Khachan Forest Complex as a World Natural Heritage site.

We earnestly hope that the World Heritage Committee and the Thai government will recognize and respect the land rights of Karen communities living in the proposed World Natural Heritage site (Kaeng Khachan Forest Complex).

Karen Network for Culture and Environment, Tanaosri region

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