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INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

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Office of Current Intelligence

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

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INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: The Karen Problem in Burma

The problem posed by the Karens in Burma has recently been accentuated by Communist efforts to make an alliance with them. It is generally believed that an effective alliance would severely impede, if not check, the Burmese Government's efforts to restore internal security throughout the country. It is also widely held that a peaceful Karen-Government settlement is essential to permit the concentration of troops necessary for a decisive campaign against the Communists.

The Karens, the largest ethnic minority in Burma, numbering two to three million, inhabit the Irrawaddy Delta area and the mountainous regions of southeastern Burma. Their long-standing animosity toward the Burmans resulted in a revolt in 1949 against the newly-independent Burmese Government. The immediate cause of the rebellion was the failure of the Karens to obtain an autonomous state within the Union of Burma.

Most Karens at least tacitly support the insurgent leadership, although there are two political groups, relatively insignificant in numbers, which have not rebelled. The least influential of these is the Union Karen League. It is an appendage of the government party, and its leaders are considered "quislings" by the great majority of Karens. The other "loyal" faction, the Karen Congress, acts as a legal opposition to the government, although it is known to be in sympathetic contact with the insurgent Karens.

The military organization of the rebel Karens, the Karen National Defense Organization, is [redacted] divided into two distinct commands -- the (Irrawaddy) Delta Command and the Eastern Command in the mountains of the southeast. [redacted]

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[redacted] The Kawthulay "government," the governing body of the Karen insurgents, is centered in the east because of the region's inaccessibility and its predominantly Karen population. It is believed to exercise only loose political controls.

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Although the Karens are still capable of mounting occasional sizable and effective attacks against specific targets, their situation is precarious because of acute arms and food shortages. Most of the Karen units in the Delta have been forced into its remoter areas, while the eastern forces

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[redacted] are able only to hold their positions. Until recently government armed forces concentrated their efforts against the Karens rather than the Communists, and large forces are still committed to suppressing the Karen insurgency to the serious detriment of the campaign against the Communists.

The continuing Communist efforts to obtain a high level alliance with the Karens have thus far been unsuccessful, although there have been instances of cooperation in local operations. The Karens' aggravated supply predicament, however, makes them increasingly vulnerable to Communist inducements.

Contrary to popular belief, only 10 to 20 percent of the Karens have been converted to Christianity. Almost all Karen leaders, however, are Christians who have been educated in schools which imbued them with the ideals of Western democracy. It is this Christian and pro-Western leadership, as well as the fact that practically all Communists are Burmans, that has chiefly prevented a Karen-Communist alliance

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The Communists' most compelling argument, however, is that neither the United States nor Britain has provided any assistance. For their part, the Karens have used the Communists' promises of aid in their requests for Western support.

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The Burmese Defense Minister recently stated publicly that the Karen problem must be settled by political, not military methods. There have been other indications that the government may be willing to adopt a more compromising attitude. There have as yet been no signs of a favorable Karen reaction to these hints which, if sincere, represent a significant modification of the government's position.

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