



www.chro.org

The Chin People of Burma: A Struggle for Survival

*A report by Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO)

Winter 2006

■ Who Are the Chin People ?

The remote, western hills of Burma are home to a population of some **500,000 Chin people**. Another one million Chins are scattered throughout Burma. Since the introduction of Christianity to the Chin people by American Baptist missionaries in 1899, the Chin community and cultural identity has been largely characterized by religion.

When Burma gained independence from Britain on 4 January 1948, the Chin hills were incorporated into the federal union of Burma. Independence, however, was wrought with political instability eventually leading to a **military coup in 1962**. Successive military regimes have since ruled the Chin people through tactics of intimidation and unspeakable brutality. Increased militarization of Chin State has resulted in widespread **human rights violations and devastating poverty**.



Chin woman and child living in exile in Mizoram, India

■ Why Are the Chin People Fleeing Burma?

Tens of thousands of Chin have been forced from their homes in Burma since the present military regime, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), came to power. As a predominantly Christian community in a primarily Buddhist country, the Chin people are particularly targeted for persecution by the regime due to their minority status. The Chin are constantly vulnerable to **summary and extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrest and imprisonment, torture, rape, forced relocation, forced labor and other violations of basic human rights**. In addition, military

policies and corruption have driven the Chin people into **unsustainable poverty**. The mass exodus from Chin State continues as systematic persecution and oppression is perpetuated by the military rulers.

■ Where Do the Chins Flee to?

A majority of Chin asylum seekers cross into India and settle in the Mizoram hills, which are adjacent to the Chin hills. The estimated **Chin population living in Mizoram State in India is approximately 55,000 to 60,000**. A smaller number of Chin asylum seekers cross into India and journey onward to New Delhi. Currently, there are **over 1,500 in New Delhi**.

Fearing the dangers of attempting to cross the highly militarized Indian border, others flee to Malaysia. Currently, **18,000 to 20,000 Chin live in Malaysia**.





■ What is Life like for the Chin People Living in India?

A majority of the Chin people who have fled to India live either in New Delhi or the northeastern state of Mizoram. Both locations provide little protections to Chin asylum seekers and refugees.

UNHCR Process

India is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees or the 1967 Protocol. Therefore, the Indian government provides **no protection or benefits to refugees or asylum seekers** living in India. In conjunction with implementing partner groups, UNHCR has developed specific social support programs. These services, however, are limited to only UNHCR recognized refugees.

The UNHCR is only operational in New Delhi. As a result, the **majority of the Chins in India have no access to UNHCR**. Those able to access UNHCR in Delhi, the process can be time-consuming, taking **7 months to one year for a decision** to be rendered. While a case is pending, asylum seekers must live off scarce personal resources.



Aizawl, Mizoram State, India

Residency Permits

To access certain benefits as a refugee in New Delhi, a residence permit must be obtained. Residency permits, however, are **difficult to acquire** as only UNHCR recognized refugees are eligible, landlords are hesitant to verify they are renting to foreigners, and the police frequently demand bribes to expedite the process under threats of delaying the verification up to 7 months.

In Mizoram, residency permits are necessary to rent a flat. To obtain a permit, Chins must acquire a personal recommendation from a local Mizo person. Acquiring a recommendation can be difficult for those new to the community. Hostilities between the Chin and the Mizo population can also complicate the process.

Subsistence Allowance

Newly recognized refugees are accorded financial assistance from the UNCHR. Currently, **only new refugees are eligible** for the allowance. For the first six months, recognized refugees are accorded 2,600 Rupees per month plus an additional 600 Rupees for each dependent up to three dependents. After six months, the allowance is reduced by half and after another six months the allowance is completely cut off.

This system is problematic because it **fails to account for the needs of large families** since the maximum amount available is 4,400 Rupees for any family with more than 3 dependents. Furthermore, the progressive **slashing of allowance amounts is harsh** and insensitive to the realities of life in New Delhi. A large portion of the allowance goes to high monthly rents and covering basic needs. Meanwhile, unrecognized refugees and asylum seekers, including the Chin community living in Mizoram, do not receive any monetary assistance from any source.



Living Conditions

The living conditions of the Chins are difficult in both New Delhi and Mizoram. In New Delhi, the Chins live in **small, overcrowded flats with little privacy or access to basic amenities**. Typically one room flats are shared by more than one family. Rent in New Delhi, meanwhile, ranges from 900 to 3,000 Rupees per month. Higher rents provide the luxury of an attached bathroom and kitchen or access to water. Those unable to afford such luxuries are left to tap overhead wires for electricity and gather water from leaky pipes along garbage lined canals.

In Mizoram, the biggest problem is simply finding accommodation. To rent a flat, Chins must obtain a recommendation from a local Mizo person. Even with a recommendation, the Chin people often face **discrimination from landlords** who do not want to rent to a Chin person. With limited accommodations available, landlords that are willing to rent to Chins charge excessive rents, ranging up to 2000 Rupees per month or more.

Integration with the Local Population

An overarching problem for the Chin community in India is the lack of integration with the local population both in New Delhi and in Mizoram. The Chin people are **often ostracized and discriminated against** by members of the local population. With only limited entitlements in India, the Chin frequently live at the mercy of the local population.

In New Delhi, the discord among the Chin and local population is accentuated by **communication problems** due to language differences. The general lack of resources in India further heightens tension between the Chin and the local communities that frequently must **compete for scarce resources**. In Delhi, the Chins live in **constant fear of eviction, physical violence, and other abuses**. Most abuse is perpetrated with impunity either because it is unreported or a lack of law enforcement.

“We are not safe in our own country but here we are always scared. I cannot protect my children. We have no one to stand by our sides.”

-Statement of a Chin refugee living in India

Many of the problems between the Chin and the Mizo population are perpetuated by the Young Mizo Association (YMA), a non-political

but extremely influential civil organization in Mizoram. The Chin are often **targeted by the YMA** and threatened with deportation, arrest, or eviction. Over the years, the YMA has led several crackdowns against the Chin people, displacing them from their homes and deporting thousands to Burma. As recently as October 2006, eviction orders were issued against the Chin population in Mizoram by the YMA. As a result of such previous incidents, the Chins live in **constant fear of eviction and deportation**.

Education

Education is a luxury most Chin children living in India cannot afford. Although tuition for attending a government school can be waived for UNHCR recognized refugee children, the admissions requirements to attend a government school effectively exclude access to Chin children. Government schools **require documentation that is difficult to obtain**, competency in the local languages, and residence within a 1 km radius of the school.

“If we have no education for our children, we have no future.”

-Statement of a Chin refugee living in India

Private schools are the only available alternative. Private schooling however is **prohibitively expensive**, particularly for families barely earning enough to survive. In Delhi, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) provides financial assistance to cover educational expenses of refugee children. However, the subsidies are calculated based on the cost of attending government schools, which is inadequate to cover the expense of private schools. For unrecognized refugees and asylum seekers in Delhi as well as the Chins living in Mizoram, no subsidies are available for education. As a result, a majority of Chin children living in India cannot attend school.

Health

Illnesses and medical problems are a common enemy of the Chin communities in India. The Chin people in India struggle with **malnutrition, skin disorders, vitamin and calcium deficiencies, liver and kidney problems, malaria, typhoid, dysentery, gynecological problems,** and other acute issues.

Relief for health problems is not easily obtainable. Discrimination largely inhibits Chin patients from receiving prompt or proper treatment in local hospitals both in Delhi and Mizoram. The language barrier further hinders the ability to obtain proper treatment as Chins are unable to communicate symptoms or health concerns. Reports of misdiagnosis or improper treatment are common.

In Delhi, the Voluntary Health Association of Delhi (VHAD) is responsible for providing healthcare services to refugees. VHAD, however, has **limited hours and is equipped to handle only basic health concerns.** All serious problems and emergency treatment are referred to government hospitals. The government hospitals, however, are **overcrowded and lack adequate resources** to provide proper treatment. As a result, the government hospitals often refer refugees to private hospitals and clinics. However, **VHAD refuses to reimburse private healthcare services** even if incurred during an emergency. Further complicating healthcare access, VHAD has indicated that it will close early next year due to financial difficulties.

Employment

Survival in India for the Chin community is made more difficult by the inability to find work. Without work permits, the Chin community is **relegated to the informal employment sector.** Jobs in the informal sector are typically lower paying, more dangerous, and less desirable. **Exploitative and abusive work environments** are a common problem for the Chins. In Mizoram and Delhi, the typical salary earned by Chin workers is 800-1000 Rupees per month or less for 10 to 16 hour work days. Despite such objectionable conditions, **competition for jobs remains high** and only a very small percentage of the Chin community is actually employed.

For UNHCR recognized refugees living in New Delhi, the Don Bosco Association provides some assistance in the employment

Chin weavers in Mizoram



sector. On 2 May 2005, the **“Salary Top-Up Scheme”** was introduced in an attempt to bring the salaries of refugee workers up to the official New Delhi poverty line. Under the scheme, the UNHCR supplemented the salaries of workers living to ensure they earned at least 3,666 Rupees per month. However, the **conditions of participation are overly burdensome.** For instance, only one member of a family can participate in the scheme and the entire family is disqualified if any family member is receiving the subsistence allowance, even if the allowance is at a reduced rate. Furthermore the scheme is **limited to UNHCR recognized refugees** with a residence permit.

■ What is Life like for the Chin People Living in Malaysia?

Some 25,000 Chin live in Malaysia. Life in Malaysia for the Chin community is harsh and daily survival is precarious. The Chins in Malaysia are **unable to work, attend school, access health or social services, or obtain adequate living accommodations**. Moreover, refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia are **vulnerable to extortion, theft, sexual abuse, arrest, deportation**, and many other difficulties.

UNHCR Process

In Malaysia, there are some **11,500 Chin asylum seekers without documents**, many waiting for over two years simply to be considered for refugee status. Furthermore, Chin asylum seekers living in remote areas of Malaysia have difficulty in participating in the process since it requires long and expensive journeys to Kuala Lumpur.

Holding UNHCR documents, however, provides **no guarantee of protection or access to benefits** in Malaysia. Like the Indian government, the Malaysian government has failed to ratify the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. Despite assurances of security, UNHCR document holders are generally treated the same as illegal immigrants in Malaysia and are still subject to arrest, detention, and deportation.

Security

Harassment and abuse by the Malaysian authorities is a constant part of daily existence for the Chin community in Malaysia. In addition to **raids on neighborhoods and work places**, immigration forces also approach individuals in public areas threatening arrests in order to **requisition bribes**. The bribes can be very costly, particularly for asylum seekers and refugees with little resources available. However, those who are unable or unwilling to pay bribes **risk arrest, detention, and deportation**.



An immigration raid of Chin refugees and asylum seekers.

Chin asylum seekers without UNHCR documents are particularly vulnerable to immigration harassment, arrest, detention, penalties, and deportation. Without documents, asylum seekers are subject to **severe penalties for illegal entry** including a fine of up to 10,000 RM (US\$2,700), a jail term of up to 5 years, and up to 6 strokes of a cane.

As of November 2006, **over 530 Chin** asylum seekers and refugees were being **held in immigration detention facilities**. The conditions in immigration detention are deplorable. Detainees are often kept in **overcrowded, unhygienic cells, inadequately fed, and given little access to basic amenities**. Illness and disease is a common threat to detainees. Furthermore, complaints of harassment and physical abuse by guards and facility officials are widespread.

Arrests of asylum seekers and refugees that go unreported often result in deportation, particularly since detainees are **not permitted to make phone calls**. Thirty-one UNHCR-recognized Chin refugees were deported in April 2006 alone, including two pregnant women.



Employment

Chin asylum seekers and refugees are not allowed to work in Malaysia. Without any other way to support themselves or their families, Chin asylum seekers and refugees are relegated to the **informal work sector** where work is often **dangerous, low-paying, and impermanent**. Even in informal work sector, the availability of work is limited. As a result, less than one-third of the Chin community in Malaysia is employed. Those who are employed are often subject to **exploitative employers**, long work days in hazardous conditions without any labor protections. The typical wage earned by Chin laborers in Malaysia range from **19 to 35 ringgit per day** (about US\$5.15 to US\$9.50). However, many employers often pay less than initially promised for the work or simply refuse payment altogether.

Living Conditions

The Chin community in Malaysia is concentrated in mainly three regions of the country, Kuala Lumpur city center, Putra Jaya, and the Cameron Highlands. Regardless of the location, Chin asylum seekers and refugees often live a precarious existence with little access to aid and social support structures.

The majority of Chin asylum seekers and refugees live in devastating poverty within the capital city of Kuala Lumpur (KL). Chin asylum seekers and refugees in KL typically **share small, urban flats with 35-40 others**. The flats are cramped, usually with only three or four bedrooms and one bathroom. Rents range from 900 to 1500 ringgit (US\$245 to US\$409) per month. A deeply religious community, the Chins practice of Christianity is hindered because churches are hesitant to host Chin religious services in their facilities due to potential penalties by the authorities. As a result, the **limited worship venues** often accommodate congregations of up to 700. Many arrive at the church two hours in advance to reserve a seat.

A community of about 1000 Chins lives in hilly jungle camps of Putra Jaya, while another 500 have set up camps near the expanding construction sites of Putra Jaya, where the new government buildings are being built. The Chins who work as laborers on these buildings live in squalid, overcrowded, plastic-roofed **makeshift tent camps**. The **wages** they receive on the construction sites are shared communally and are generally **inadequate** to fulfill basic needs. Their **water supply** is also **unreliable** and a contributor to **sickness and disease**. Due to the relative remote location of the Putra Jaya camps, medical services are not readily available.



Camp in the Putra Jaya jungles burnt down by the Malaysian authorities

The Cameron Highlands is home to **several hundred Chin** asylum seekers and refugees who travel to this remote location in search of agricultural work. Unemployment however remains high and those who are able to find employment are typically **paid very little**, about 19 ringgit (US\$5.15) per day. In addition, farm work hosts its own set of hardships and health concerns. Typically, the workers live far from the farms they work on and must **walk long distances** carrying all their daily supplies. Many workers are provided **inadequate protective gear** causing exposure to noxious insecticides and other harmful chemicals. Due to the remote location, affordable **health services are not accessible**.



RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Government of India

- Ratify and implement the provisions of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. Respect the principle of non-refoulement.
- Prevent unwarranted evictions and deportations of Chin communities.
- Develop programs to promote local integration of the Chin community in India. Promote sensitivity trainings for local community leaders and organizations to understand the situation and concerns of refugees living in India.
- Provide work permits and establish labor protections and complaint mechanisms.
- Revise the admission requirements for Government Schools to increase access for Chin children. Establish financial assistance or fee waiver programs to ensure education is affordable for Chin refugee children.
- Expand affordable health care and increase quality health coverage for asylum seekers and refugees in India.
- Allow UNHCR access to asylum seekers living in Mizoram and remote areas of the country.

To the Government of Malaysia

- Ratify and implement the provisions of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. Respect the principle of non-refoulement.
- Prevent RELA abuses, immigration raids, and harassment of asylum seekers and refugees by the authorities. Train police, immigration officials, and others to respect the human rights of refugees and asylum seekers.
- Release asylum seekers and UNHCR recognized refugees currently being held in immigration detention facilities.
- Ensure detention conditions conform to international and domestic standards. Ensure detainees are provided sufficient food, medical treatment, adequate bedding and clothing, and other basic necessities.
- Prevent all formal and informal deportations of asylum seekers and refugees.
- Ensure refugee and asylum seekers have access to the educational system, affordable and quality healthcare, and employment protections including work permits.

To the UNHCR

- Decrease the time it takes to render refugee status determinations by increasing staffing and resources.
- Promote mobile services in order to access and protect asylum seekers and refugees located in remote locations.
- Continue to promote the resettlement of refugees to third countries.
- Offer training and guidance to government officials on respecting the rights of asylum seekers and refugees.
- Continue to support the Chin refugee community in New Delhi through implementing partner programs by expanding the coverage of the programs and improving the quality of the services. Create social assistance programs in Malaysia to ensure the health, education, employment, and welfare needs of the refugee community are provided for.
- Develop programs to increase local understanding about the situation of refugees and asylum seekers in order to decrease incidents of discrimination and intolerance against the Chin community.
- Advocate to the respective governments to represent the interests and concerns of the refugee and asylum seeking communities.

To the International Community, NGO's, and United States

- Provide funding for the development of humanitarian relief programs, including health and education assistance, to the Chin communities living in India and Malaysia.
- Support initiatives to build the capacity of the Chin community.
- Apply pressure on UNHCR, the governments of India, Malaysia and Burma to protect and assist the Chin community.
- Encourage policy makers and others to learn more about the people of Burma and their lives as refugees to gain a greater understanding of the political and humanitarian situation.
- Give preferential treatment toward the Chin refugees recognized by UNHCR for resettlement.
- Coordinate activities and work together with Chin churches, community organizations, and CHRO to provide assistance more efficiently and effectively to the Chin people.

Chin Human Rights Organization

* CHRO is non-governmental, not for profit organization legally registered in Canada with branch offices in New Delhi and Aizawl, India and in the United States. CHRO is working to protect and promote the rights of the Chin people inside and outside of Burma. Over the years, CHRO has paid regular visits to India and Malaysia to assist and coordinate advocacy activities with the Chin community and other NGOs.

CHRO and the Chin people need your support. To support CHRO in this important work, please contact one of our offices:

Canada:

2 Montavista Avenue
Nepean Ontario
Canada K2J 2L3
Tel/Fax: +1 613.843.9484

USA:

3112 Deakin Street, #3
Berkeley, California
USA 94705
Tel: +1 510.981.1417

Also visit the CHRO website at:
www.chro.org

For information specific to this report, please e-mail:
Amy Alexander, CHRO Legal Consultant
amyalex_thailand@yahoo.com

Acknowledgments

CHRO thanks the Chin church communities across the world for their concern, financial support, and prayer. CHRO is grateful for the tireless dedication of the Chin community groups in India and Malaysia and for supporting CHRO trips. Most importantly, CHRO is grateful to the individuals in the Chin community in India and Malaysia who generously shared their time, energy and personal experiences for the production of this report.