

# Critical Point

## Food Scarcity and Hunger in Burma's Chin State



Chin Human Rights Organization

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Seed pods from flowering bamboo, a major cause for food shortages in Chin State. (Photo taken by CFERC)

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The military regime of Burma has been consistent in their inability and unwillingness to protect and provide for the people of Burma. Burma's human rights record provides testimony of decades of widespread violations and abuses perpetrated largely at the hands of Burma's military rulers and their agents against the Burmese people. Dissent is regularly silenced and opponents brutalized. In a country once known as the "rice-bowl of Asia," Burma is now one of the poorest countries of Asia due to steady economic deterioration driven by the regime's mismanagement. Many in Burma live without access to proper schools, healthcare facilities, reliable electricity, safe drinking water, and stable food supplies. Cowed by policies of extreme oppression and tactics of intimidation, life for much of the population in Burma is a struggle for daily survival. Add to that a natural disaster- and survival in Burma reaches a critical point.

Western Burma's Chin State is at such a point. Since 2006, the region has been plagued by a severe food crisis following a steep reduction in the local harvest and food production. The year 2006 marked the beginning of a new cycle of bamboo flowering, which occurs about every 50 years in the region, triggering an explosion in the population of rats and resulting in the destruction of crops. This has caused a severe shortage of food for local communities primarily dependent on subsistence farming through shifting cultivation. The phenomenon has been documented three times since 1862, and each past event ended in a disastrous famine for the communities in the area.

Compounding the impending food crisis in Chin State due to the bamboo flowering is the continuation of severe human rights violations and repressive economic policies of the military regime, which serve to further undermine the livelihoods and food security of the Chin people. The use of unpaid civilian forced labour is widespread throughout Chin State, which consumes the time and energy of local farmers and reduces their crop yields. The regime also forcibly orders farmers to substitute their staple crops for other cash crops, and has confiscated thousands of acres of farmland from local farmers for tea and jatropha plantations.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, arbitrary taxes and mandatory "donations" collected from Chin households by the Burmese authorities total up to as much 200,000 Kyats a year in major towns.<sup>2</sup> This includes the unofficial collection of money from the Chin public by officials in various government departments at the local level to support such programs as tea and bio-fuel plantations; and extortion and confiscation of money, properties, and livestock by military units stationed at 33 locations across the state. The rising cost of living and skyrocketing food prices is also adding to the already dire humanitarian situation in Chin State. In the last four years, the price of rice has quintupled from 6,000 Kyats a bag in 2004 to as much as 30,000 Kyats today, an amount equivalent to the monthly salary of entry level public servants.

The humanitarian consequences stemming from the dying bamboo and exacerbated by conditions imposed by the regime are enormous, and there are clear indications that unless urgent action is taken to address the crisis, the situation could soon turn into a large-scale catastrophe affecting all parts of Chin State. The hardest hit areas are in the southern townships of Matupi and Paletwa where bamboo grows heavily, but reports suggest that severe food shortages are a state-wide phenomenon with many villages in the northern townships of Tonzang and Thantlang, for example, having already run out of

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<sup>1</sup> Tea plantation now cover over 14, 000 acres of land, most of which have been confiscated from local farmers without compensation. Villagers must buy tea and jatropha seed from local officials for thousands of Kyats per Kilogram and plant them in their farm or garden. Those failing to comply with such orders risk monetary fine or imprisonment.

<sup>2</sup> According to one survey conducted by Chin National Front, a Chin opposition group leading an armed struggle against the regime, the number could be much higher for urban residents than those residing in remote areas.

food supplies. Based on the latest field surveys conducted in the affected areas, Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO) estimates that as many as 200 villages may be directly affected by severe food shortages associated with the bamboo flowering, and no less than 100,000 people or 20 percent of the entire population of Chin State may be in need of immediate food aid.<sup>3</sup> Food scarcity is more severe in remote areas, where families are being reduced to one meal a day or have nothing left to eat at all. CHRO recently visited four border villages in India's Mizoram State where it found 93 families from 22 villages in Paletwa Township, Chin State who fled across the border in search of food.

To date, Burma's State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) has done nothing positive to counter the food scarcity, nor has the SPDC provided any kind of help to communities affected by the food crisis. Repeated requests by affected communities for food aid were denied, even as 100,000 metric tonnes of rice was exported to Sri Lanka.<sup>4</sup> Rather, Burma Army soldiers have seized food aid donated by private donors and church groups.<sup>5</sup> In contrast to the situation in Burma, India's Mizoram and Manipur States, both adjacent to Chin State, are facing a similar food crisis related to the bamboo flowering, and have received millions of dollars in aid from the central government as well as international aid agencies, including USAID of the United States government, to support emergency programs to combat and manage the food crisis.<sup>6</sup>

In early May, when Cyclone Nargis ripped through lower Burma and the Irrawaddy delta destroying entire regions of land and leaving thousands homeless, hungry, and helpless, the regime clearly demonstrated their complete indifference to the plight of the Burmese people. In response to this natural disaster, they did shamefully little to ease the suffering of the victims and much to hamper relief efforts. As a result, the people of Burma paid a heavy price in the loss of life and continue to struggle under a regime that fails to protect or provide for its people. As another natural disaster unfolds in western Burma without hope of internal protections or provisions, the Chin people, like the cyclone victims, will be sure to pay a heavy toll unless action is taken immediately.

The critical point for action is now.

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<sup>3</sup> This figure is based on various separate surveys or need assessments conducted by groups such as Chin Famine Emergency Relief Committee (CFERC) based in Mizoram, locally organized relief group such as the Maraland Social Welfare & Development Committee (MSWDC), as well as CHRO's own assessment.

<sup>4</sup> "Cyclone-hit Myanmar to Export Rice to Sri Lanka," Indian Express, May 12, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> More than 300 bags of rice donated by the Roman Catholic Church to victims of hunger in Paletwa Township of southern Chin State, for example, were seized by local authorities. CHRO "Food Relief Hampered for Famine Victims in Western Burma," Rhododendron News, Vol. XI, No. II, April-May 2008.

<sup>6</sup> According to news report by the Press Trust of India, the United States Government has provided US\$50,000 in humanitarian aid to combat food shortages caused by bamboo flowering in Mizoram State.

## BACKGROUND

With a total population of about 500,000 people and an area of 13,907 square kilometres, Chin State is one of the most underdeveloped and isolated regions in Burma, if not all of Asia. Cut off from the rest of the country by steep mountains and strict travel restrictions, Chin State is rarely visited by foreigners and communication with the outside world is limited. The few international agencies and aid organizations that are allowed to operate in Burma are prohibited access to Chin State due to increased militarization of Chin State within the last two decades.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, poverty and disease are rampant in Chin State, and malnutrition and child mortality is one of the highest in the country.<sup>8</sup>

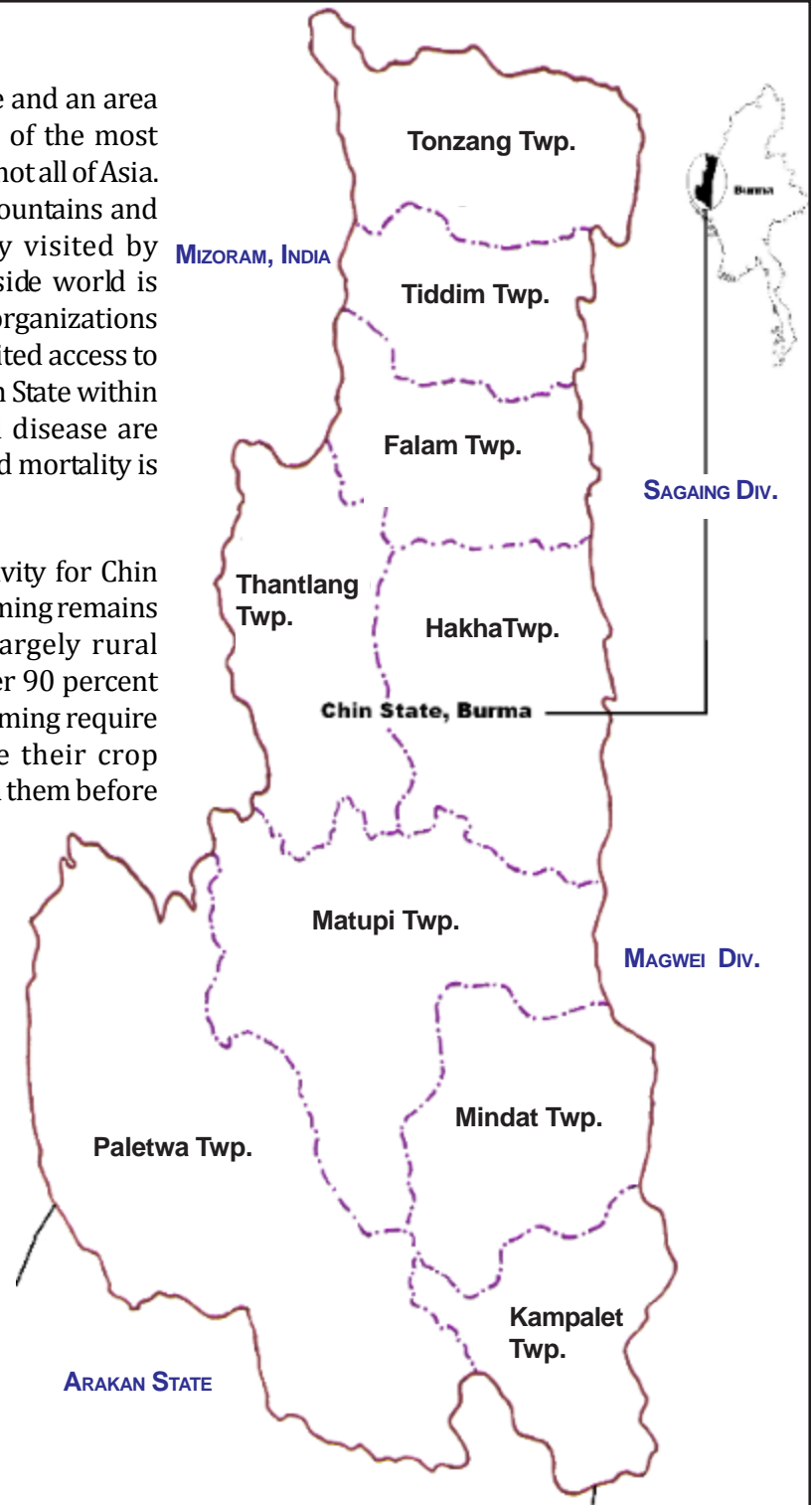
Subsistence farming is the main economic activity for Chin people. Shifting cultivation or slash-and-burn farming remains the primary method of cultivation for the largely rural communities of Chin State, who account for over 90 percent of the population. The traditional methods of farming require strict adherence to a timetable to maximize their crop productivity. Farmers must cut the trees and burn them before the monsoon season begins. The seeds must be planted and weeds cleared after the field is burned. Then the crop must be harvested at a specific time to avoid an over-ripening and rotting of the crops.

The majority of Chin people rely on local food production for their subsistence, and for generations their farms have produced sufficient yields to satisfy the food requirements of the people of Chin State. However, increased militarization and human rights violations have affected Chin harvests, and food production in Chin State has steadily declined under military rule. Forced away from their farms and fields for many days out of a year to fulfill forced labour and portering demands of the regime, farmers are unable to adhere to the cultivation timetable necessary to harvest a sufficient yield to support themselves, their families and their communities.

The bamboo flowering and associated infestation of rats has further debilitated the productivity of Chin farmers, and pushed the Chin people into a famine-like situation for the first time in more than 50 years. CHRO believes that no less than 100,000 people or about 20 percent of the total population of Chin State may be directly affected by severe shortage of food.

<sup>7</sup> Currently there are as many as 14 infantry battalions and 50 army camps in Chin State. Two decades ago, only two battalions operated in Chin State based out of the adjacent divisions of Sagaing and Magwei.

<sup>8</sup> According to the 2003 study conducted by Chin Mobile Backpack Medical Team, 119 out of 1000 children died before they reached the age of five.



## CAUSES OF FOOD INSECURITY IN CHIN STATE

### *Bamboo Flowering and Rat Infestation*

The current food shortage is primarily attributed to the flowering of vast bamboo forests that occupy much of the area in southern Chin State's Paletwa and Matupi Townships as well as the areas along the international borders with India.<sup>9</sup> No data exists to define the exact area of the bamboo forests in Chin State but it is estimated that more than one-fifth of the total area of Chin State is covered by bamboo, much of which is in the southern part.

The flowering of bamboo has widespread and long-term economic impacts in the region, but the immediate impact is most profound. The type of bamboo growing in southern Chin State is called *Melocanna baccifera*. This bamboo flowers every 50 years and when it does it produces a fruit. Rats are attracted to this fruit and feed on its seeds. It is traditionally believed that the rich nutrients found in the bamboo seeds cause rats to multiply quickly, creating an infestation of rats. After exhausting the seeds, marauding rats turn to nearby farms and destroy standing crops and stored grains. This results in a shortage of food, sometimes leading to famine in the area. Famines in the area have occurred every 50 years since 1862, in close correlation with the cyclical flowering of the bamboo.<sup>10</sup>

The timing of bamboo flowering slightly varies in different areas. The first flowering and fruiting was reported in Tonzang Township of northern Chin State in early 2006, spreading to other areas well into 2007. In the most affected areas in Paletwa and Matupi Townships, farmers are left with just a tenth of their usual harvest after the rats attack their rice fields. What this means is that by the time it is ready to harvest, households have only enough food to survive for just two to three months out of an entire year.

At the end of the bamboo flowering cycle, the bamboo dies off altogether while the seeds from the fruits are left behind to regenerate the bamboo forests. The flowering, death, and re-seeding of the bamboo takes place over the course of one year.<sup>11</sup> However, the consequences of the death of the bamboo forest in Chin State are long-lasting, as the Chin must struggle with the loss of one of their most important local resources. Bamboo is used for a variety of purposes serving as building materials for houses as well as a source of food. This chain of events means that every aspect of the Chins survival and livelihood is affected. While it only takes 2-3 months for the bamboo to regenerate to full adult maturity, it will likely be years before the Chin people fully recover from the consequences of the bamboo flowering.



Chin man in flowering bamboo field. (Photo taken by CFERC, 1 May 2008)

<sup>9</sup> The type of bamboo species in this area is known as *Meocanna Baccifera*. They flower twice in a century. The last three cycles of flowering recorded were in 1862, 1911 and 1958. Each incident was followed by a devastating famine in the region.

<sup>10</sup> The last flowering of bamboo and the resulting famine in the region, which took place in 1958, was so serious that it sparked an armed revolt by Mizo National Front against India, which continued on for the next 20 years until the signing of a Peace Accord with the Government of India in 1987.

<sup>11</sup> International Network for Bamboo and Rattan, <http://www.inbar.int/> (last visited June 30, 2008).

## ***Policies and Practices of Abuse and Repression***

Exacerbating the current food crisis in Chin State are years of arbitrary and repressive policies meted out against the Chin people by the military junta. Natural disaster aside, the Chin people have been able to sustain themselves for generations on their local food production alone. But in the last two decades, there has been a steady rise in poverty levels across the spectrum of Chin society. Spiralling inflation and skyrocketing commodity prices nationwide has meant that even government employees have found themselves unable to make ends meet with their meagre salaries.

The increase in poverty rates is directly linked to the militarization and troop expansion in Chin State. Rural farming communities, who account for the vast majority of the Chin population, bear most of the economic burdens created by the increased army presence. Villagers are routinely required to supply rations and unpaid porter services to army units on patrol. Grossly inadequate supplies and salaries for army personnel have meant that Burmese soldiers stationed in Chin State live almost entirely off the local population, exploiting villagers through abusive practices of arbitrary taxation, extortion, confiscation of food and livestock and widespread use of civilian forced labour.

### **Forced Labour**

The pervasive use of civilian forced labour by the Burma Army is perhaps the single largest factor contributing to the food shortage in Chin State. The army's constant demand for civilian forced labour have served to undermine people's livelihoods and the ability of communities to survive as they often interfere with villagers' traditional cultivation and farming methods. Army patrol units regularly demand unpaid civilian porters to carry supplies and ammunitions. This often means that the most able person in the family, who is often also the bread-earner for the household, has to serve as a porter for the army instead of working for his family's survival.

Such practices continue, even in areas most affected by food shortages, such as Paletwa Township of southern Chin State:

- [On May 23, 2008,] Captain Thang Cing Thang, camp commander of the Light Infantry Battalion (20) stationed in Shinletwa village in Paletwa Township, southern Chin state issued an order directing the villagers to build and fence military camps on the Indo-Burma border.<sup>12</sup>

- On February 25, 2008, Burmese army patrol column from Shinletwah army camp forced 18 people from three villages to carry army supplies. Six porters were taken from each of Khungyu, Sin-Oowah and Pathian Tlang Villages. They served on a rotating basis to carry supplies and ammunitions. Each trip lasted one to two days.<sup>13</sup>



Villagers forced to construct a road in Chin State. (Photo taken by CHRO)

<sup>12</sup> Khonumthung News, "Forced labour for 'No' voters; villagers build military outpost," June 4, 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Chin Human Rights Organization, "SPDC Army Forced Villagers for Porters," Rhododendron News Volume XI No II, March-April 2008.

## **Tea and Bio-fuel Plantation Projects, Land Confiscation**

Adding extra economic burdens to already impoverished communities are the regime's economic policies that seek to transform the basic means of Chin people's livelihood from subsistence farming of staple food, such as rice and corn, into ones based on commercial production of cash crops, such as tea and jatropa or bio-fuel cultivation.

Since the early 2000s, the military regime has designated Chin State to be the "Tea Kettle" of the country. Subsequently, thousands of acres of farmland owned by local communities were arbitrarily confiscated and turned into vast tea plantation areas. As of 2008, over 14,000 acres of land have been transformed into tea plantations, the majority of which have been confiscated from local communities who relied on the land to cultivate staple foods, such as corn, beans and potatoes.<sup>14</sup> In Falam Township alone, over 1,000 acres of farmland were seized from local communities on January 5, 2008, by order of Zaw Win Htey, Chairman of Township Peace and Development Council for Falam Township. No compensation has been given to owners of the confiscated farmland, leaving them unemployed and landless.<sup>15</sup>

In Thantlang Township, town residents who own vegetable gardens were ordered to buy tea seed at 4,000 Kyats a bag from the authorities and to replace their vegetables with tea crops. They were threatened with confiscation of their gardens if they did not comply with the order.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, farmers from over a hundred villages in Falam and Thantlang Townships were forcibly ordered in 2007 to plant jatropa in their farms by the start of a new cultivating season in 2008. According to the order, the villagers are responsible for purchasing the seed of jatropa from local authorities at 6,000 Kyats per one kilogram. Those failing to comply with the order are fined 10,000 Kyats or to face imprisonment.<sup>17</sup>

Another official memo dated April 25, 2008 from the office of Chin State Peace and Development Council, a copy of which was recently obtained by Chin Human Rights Organization, reveals that an additional 60,707 acres of land will be used for jatropa plantation in Hakha and Thantlang Townships for the year 2008-2009. The memo also details specific instructions to local officials on how much money should be collected from each village or community in the two Townships to cover the cost of buying jatropa seeds for the project.<sup>18</sup>

### **Restrictions on Farmers**

While the global food shortage has had a limited impact on the food security for the Chin people, food and other basic commodity prices at the local market have spiked in the last few years. The price of rice has quintupled since 2004. Now at 30,000 Kyats (US\$27) a bag, rice has become a luxury only a few people can afford. Ordinary families now spend almost all of their income on food alone.

Meanwhile, farmers are facing various restrictions and bans on their ability to continue cultivating food crops. Orders are in effect for farmers in Falam Township not to clear new forests for slash and burn cultivation for the 2008 season. At the same time, people in Matupi Township are required to pay to the authorities 2,000 Kyats per household for farming permits along with 12 tins (1 tin consists of about 20 kilograms) of rice paddy upon harvest, according to an order issued by Colonel Zaw Myint Oo,

<sup>14</sup> Khonumthung News, "Farmland confiscated for tea plantation," February 5, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Id.

<sup>16</sup> CHRO, "Town Residents Forced to Buy and Plant Tea Seed," Rhododendron News Volume XI No I, January February 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Khonumthung News, "Villages failing to plant jatropa to be fined or jailed," July 3, 2007.

<sup>18</sup> A copy of the original memo in Burmese, dated April 25, 2008 (official order No. 1/2008) is on file with CHRO.



Commander of Tactical Command II, based in Matupi.<sup>19</sup>

Additionally, restrictions on movement and travel have meant that farmers are not freely able to go to or sleep overnight at their farms without prior written permission from local authorities.<sup>20</sup> As communities clear new forests further away from their villages each year, they must spend several days or even weeks away from their villages to be able to work productively at their farm. Restrictions on movement for 'security purposes' severely affects food productivity and the ability of Chin farmers to maintain the level of food supplies necessary to survive.

## EFFECTS OF FOOD INSECURITY IN CHIN STATE

When the rats attack the fields and farms, eating everything in their path, farmers are left with little or no harvest to survive on. Villagers in Paletwa Township have reported that only very few farmers who sowed early-harvest seeds were lucky enough to reap their crops before the effects of the bamboo flowering began. The majority of people in the area who sowed regular rice seeds have had most of their crops destroyed before harvest.<sup>21</sup> There are reports that hundreds of families have sold off all their belongings in distress, depleting all of their livestock, and foraging for edible roots and tree bark in the jungles.

### **Health Risks: Malnutrition, Diseases and Death**



Chin woman receiving medical treatment at a border clinic in Mizoram, India. (Photo taken by CHRO)

Since rat attacks and the subsequent food crisis first began in 2006, villagers have tried to ration what is left of their food supplies by eating only one or two meals a day of little nutritious value to get themselves through the year. But as the situation becomes worse, the most affected communities are reduced to foraging for food in the forests and only eating roots, barks and leaves of less nutritional value. The cycle of hunger will likely repeat through the next several years as families, who struggle every day in search of their next meal, have no rice seeds to sow or time to cultivate for the next season.

Hunger and malnutrition are exposing children, the elderly, and nursing and pregnant mothers to even greater health risks. A recent assessment conducted within the Mara area by the Maraland Social Welfare and Development Committee (MSWDC), identified 11,983 children below the

age of five, 1,151 pregnant women and 4,045 nursing women as being directly affected by the food crisis and at a high risk of exposure to diseases such as diarrhoea and malaria.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> CHRO, "Unfair Tax and Restriction Imposed on Chin Farmers," Rhododendron News Volume XI No I, January February 2008

<sup>20</sup> Anyone wishing to travel outside of their village or town must have a prior written approval from the local Peace and Development Council office or from the army battalion stationed in the area, which they must present at military checkpoints or to soldiers they encounter on the way. Those failing to show proper permits are liable to be arrested and accused of being a member of anti-government operatives. They also risk being shot and killed if the Burmese soldiers suspect them to be a member of the Chin National Army.

<sup>21</sup> CHRO interviews with villagers from Paletwa Township who fled to Mizoram. March 25, 2008, India-Burma border.

<sup>22</sup> The Mara area, as identified by MSWDC consists of parts of Thantlang, Matupi and Paletwa Townships. Maraland Social Welfare and Development Committee (MSWDC), "A Terrible Famine Swipes the Bamboo Landers: Report and Appeal of the Bamboo Famine in Chin State, Burma," March 17, 2008.

As the monsoon season gets underway, there are increased risks of diarrhoea and malaria outbreaks, two of the most common diseases that claim many lives each year, especially infants and young children.<sup>23</sup> Raising such fears is the difficulty in getting timely information about the situation in some of the most affected areas due to the remoteness and lack of reliable means of communication, such as roads or telephones. But the very limited information that is coming out of some of the most affected areas paints a very grim picture. A photographer from Britain who recently crossed into Chin State from India was quoted by the Telegraph newspaper as saying, "We saw stick-thin children and old women who hardly had the strength to dig up roots to eat."<sup>24</sup> While there have been no confirmed cases of death as a direct result of hunger, such scenarios are likely to unfold soon unless there is an urgent and effective response to the crisis.

Adding to such concerns is the fact that there are no hospitals or medical help available in remote areas of Chin State. Villagers have to travel several miles in order to get medical treatment. Doctors and medicines are also in short supply. There are only 56 doctors and 128 nurses, and 12 full-fledged hospitals in Chin State, which has an estimated population of 500,000.

### ***Migration and Displacement***

*"We are compelled to leave our village because we have nothing left to eat."<sup>25</sup>*

For families that have already depleted their food supplies and livestock, fleeing across the border into India's Mizoram State offers the only hope for them to continue to survive. In response to reports of such flight, CHRO conducted a week-long visit to the Mizoram-Chin State border in March 2008 where it found more than 400 people belonging to 93 families from 22 villages of the southern township of Paletwa, Chin State taking temporary shelter in four border villages inside Mizoram. They included 50-60 children, of which half were school age.



Chin villagers who recently crossed into Mizoram, India to escape food shortages in Chin State. (Photo taken by CHRO, 26 March 2008)

The exodus from this particular area of Chin State started in October 2007, and there are indications that more people from the area will resort to coming into Mizoram in the near future. It is likely that there could be more communities who have already crossed the border into Mizoram whom CHRO has not been able to reach. Since CHRO's visit in March, it has been reported that an additional 200 to 300 new people have arrived there.<sup>26</sup> This is despite the fact that there is a standing order from the army prohibiting villagers from moving out of their village.

<sup>23</sup> In June of 2007, for example, the spread of diarrhoea in Matupi Township killed two three-year-old children in Pasin village. Two months later, entire communities in Dawn and Ralpel villages in Thantlang Township were struck by malaria. Khonumthung News, "Diarrhoea spreading in Chin State," June 14, 2007, "Hundreds afflicted by Malaria in Chin State," August 18, 2007.

<sup>24</sup> "Plague of rats devastates Burma villages," The Telegraph, June 21, 2008.

<sup>25</sup> CHRO interview with a villager from Paletwa Township who crossed into Mizoram with his family, March 25, 2008.

<sup>26</sup> Information updates received in June 2008 by CHRO indicate that up to 300 new people have arrived in the area visited by CHRO in March. The report notes that there may be more people who have arrived since there is no system in place to track their movement.

Internal migration is also widely reported in areas such as Thantlang and Tonzang Townships, where more rural households are moving to towns in the hope that rice might be readily available for buying. For many of these people, it is more practical to move to towns altogether than buy their food supplies from the town and spend a considerable amount of time and energy transporting them back to their village.

This latest outflow of more refugees from Chin State has the Mizoram government concerned since there are already 60,000 to 80,000 Chin refugees living in the State who have come from Burma in the last 20 years to escape persecution and massive abuses of human rights in their homeland.<sup>27</sup> Mizoram is already dealing with its own food crisis from bamboo flowering, which has reported an estimated loss of nearly US\$100 million worth of crops.<sup>28</sup> The continuing influx of refugees from Chin State will likely increase tension between Chin refugees and the local Mizo population and could further complicate the already volatile security situation for the tens of thousands of Chin refugees living in Mizoram.

## RESPONSE TO FOOD INSECURITY IN CHIN STATE

### *Response by the State Peace and Development Council*

Unlike India and Bangladesh where the governments have taken aggressive measures to combat the food crisis resulting from the bamboo flowering, there has been no known actions taken by Burma's military junta to alleviate the human suffering in Chin State.

Instead, the military regime has ignored repeated request for intervention and assistance by communities suffering from severe food shortages, and has even gone so far as to obstruct relief efforts meant to assist victims of hunger by seizing more than 300 bags of rice donated by private groups.<sup>29</sup> Burma Army battalions stationed in southern Chin State have also issued warnings against the delivery of aid to people in the affected areas, citing suspicion that the aid may be linked to opposition groups in exile.<sup>30</sup>



Privately-donated food aid being delivered to villagers in Chin State by the Chin Famine Emergency Relief Committee. (Photo taken by CFERC)

These actions and inactions by Burma's military regime stands in stark contrast to measures taken by the Indian government, which has long anticipated and planned pre-emptively to combat the impending food crisis in Mizoram and Manipur States as early as 2001.<sup>31</sup> Millions of dollars have been put into programs to manage and counter the food crisis in India. In Mizoram, for example, the State Government has set up the Bamboo Flowering and Famine Control Schemes (BAFFACOS) with the view to limiting the impact of the food crisis caused by bamboo flowering in the State. Several international aid agencies have also been actively involved in the relief efforts.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Sudha Ramachandran, "India quakes in the year of the rats," *Asia Times*, April 9, 2008.

<sup>28</sup> Save the Children, "Mautam: Food Crisis in Mizoram (Northeast India)," Emergency Situation No. 1, April 2008.

<sup>29</sup> In early 2008, a request for food aid by seven villages in Thantlang Township viz. Belhar, Tluangram (a), Tluangram (b), Lulpilung, Hmun Halh, Sialam and Vomkua was turned down by the Township Peace and Development Council. Chin Human Rights Organization, "Food relief hampered for famine victims in western Burma," April 2, 2008.

<sup>30</sup> CHRO, "Double Jeopardy: When global food shortage meets local crisis," *Rhododendron News*, Volume XI No. II, March–April 2008.

<sup>31</sup> Pallava Bagla, "India girds for famine linked with flowering of bamboo," *National Geographic News*, June 22, 2001.

<sup>32</sup> UK-based international organization Save the Children and ActionAid are now among international organization active in the relief effort. The USAID has also recently contributed 50,000 dollars for relief effort in Mizoram.

## ***Response by the World Food Programme (WFP)***



Chin woman digging for edible roots in the jungle.  
(Photo taken by CFERC)

The World Food Programme conducted an assessment of the situation in Chin State. While they did find that “the [rat] infestation has worsened the food security for many in the affected areas,” they concluded that no famine conditions existed in Chin State as “[p]eople are not dying of starvation.”<sup>33</sup> Based on this assessment, the WFP has decided to refrain from distributing WFP relief food but has indicated a possible expansion in their “food for work” program in the affected areas.

This response fails to take into account the numerous reports documented by CHRO and other news organizations of famine-like conditions in Chin State, particularly in remote and difficult to access areas of Chin State. The WFP

assessment was limited to Thantlang Township and information from partner groups. Centrally located Thantlang Township is not as severely affected by the bamboo flowering as the southern areas of Chin State, where the bamboo is prevalent. Meanwhile, many villages in the affected areas have difficulty reporting food shortages due to the lack of adequate roads and communication systems. It is clear, however, from the continued exodus of hungry and destitute villagers into Mizoram State that an escalating problem exists in Chin State. While increased support for a food for work program is appreciated, such programs address only future food production issues and fail to respond to the current food shortages in Chin State and impending humanitarian crisis. Finally, WFP is working under a narrow definition of “famine.” Action should be taken to prevent deaths, rather than responding only after preventable deaths have occurred.



Family sharing one bowl of chopped up roots and vegetables foraged in the jungle. (Photo taken by CFERC)

## ***Response by Civil Society Groups***

The enormity of the crisis, on a scale unseen since the late 1950s, prompted a Mizoram-based Chin exile group to set up the Chin Famine Emergency Relief Committee (CFERC) on February 20, 2008.<sup>34</sup> A five-member Committee was subsequently elected to coordinate relief efforts in order to provide aid to communities affected by food shortage in Chin State. The CFERC has since conducted assessment missions inside Chin State, and has provided 1,000 bags of rice to at least 60 villages in Thantlang, Falam, Tonzang and Paletwa Townships, primarily with funds raised from Chin communities and churches in various countries, including Australia, Canada, Norway, the United States, etc. Although its food provision has helped some communities; CFERC admits it was far inadequate to make an impact on the crisis.

<sup>33</sup> E-mail communication between WFP Representative and CHRO, April 22, 2008.

<sup>34</sup> The CFERC was formed at a meeting involving 29 Chin churches and fellowships, 13 Chin civil society groups, Chin political parties and interested individuals acting on their personal capacity.

CHRO has been actively supporting the efforts of CFERC by raising awareness of the looming humanitarian crisis. In addition to supporting fact-finding missions to the famine-affected areas, CHRO has issued several editorials, news stories, and press releases to highlight the situation in Chin State.<sup>35</sup> CHRO has been advocating for responsive action by humanitarian aid organizations and donor groups to support locally-driven relief efforts in Chin State. CHRO has also been engaged in other fund-raising activities for the benefit of famine victims.



CFERC team delivering food aid to affected areas in Chin State. (Photo taken by CFERC)

Local communities have also organized themselves to fight potential starvation through churches and community-based organizations inside Chin State. In the Mara area, for example, the Mara Social Welfare and Development Organization has taken initiatives to raise funds by sending out appeals to Chin communities in countries around the world.<sup>36</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The situation in Chin State has reached a critical point. As evidenced in this report, a crisis is unfolding in western Burma. There are no internal protections or provisions available to ease the suffering of the Chin people. The military regime has made that abundantly clear through decades of extreme disregard for its people and the consistent flouting of international human rights and humanitarian laws. From widespread hunger and malnutrition and the potential outbreak of diseases to the exodus propelled by the hunger of hundreds of people, it is apparent that immediate attention by the international community is necessary now.

The critical point to act is now.



<sup>35</sup> CHRO "Cross-Border Aid Needed to Address Humanitarian Crisis in Chinland," *Rhododendron News*, Vol. XI, No. 1, January – February 2008; CHRO, "Double Jeopardy: When Global Food Shortage Meets Local Crisis," "More Communities Flee Famine Affected Areas," "Critical Point: Humanitarian Disaster in the Making in Western Burma," and "Food Relief Hampered for Famine Victims in Western Burma," *Chin Famine Emergency Relief Committee (CFERC) Formed*, *Rhododendron News*, Vol. XI, No. II, March – April 2008.

<sup>36</sup> Maraland Social Welfare and Development Committee (MSWDC), "A Terrible Famine Swipes the Bamboo Landers: Report and Appeal of the Bamboo Famine in Chin State, Burma," March 17, 2008.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### ***To the State Peace and Development Council***

- Refrain from confiscating and preventing relief aid from reaching the people in need and allow aid organizations to operate without hindrance or interference.
- Take immediate action to implement measures to combat and manage the food crisis in Chin State, similar to those already taken by the Government of India and the State Governments of Mizoram and Manipur.
- Desist from actions that could adversely affect the livelihoods and exacerbate the situation of Chin people, including arbitrary tax collection, the use of forced and unpaid labour in its various forms, arbitrary restrictions on and interference with the operations of Chin farmers.
- Review and re-assess economic policies that are adversely affecting and undermining the livelihoods of the Chin people, including tea and jatropha plantation projects being implemented in various townships.

### ***To the Governments of India and Mizoram***

- Continue to provide temporary shelter for those fleeing the latest crisis in Chin State and provide them with necessary protections for their well-being.
- Extend famine relief and other social welfare benefits to Chin who have come to India to escape food shortages in Chin State.

### ***To the International Community***

- Recognize that food shortages in western Burma are a serious and urgent humanitarian concern that, without urgent response, could result in human tragedy.
- Provide immediate assistance to support relief and preventive programs in the affected areas of Chin State, and ensure that such programs also benefit communities and families already displaced by food shortages and hunger.
- Demand unhindered aid access to the regions in western Burma affected by the food shortages in ongoing negotiations with Burmese authorities regarding humanitarian aid operations in Burma.
- Support initiatives by local non-governmental and relief organizations currently engaged in cross-border humanitarian operations from India to ensure that aid reaches all the people in need, especially those in remote and isolated areas of Chin State.
- Ensure the provision of humanitarian relief to Chin State is accompanied by other longer-term programs designed to rebuild the livelihoods of Chin people with a view towards achieving sustainable development in the region.

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## 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:

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