

# **Religious Persecution**

**A Campaign of  
Ethnocide Against Chin Christians  
In Burma**

**Salai Za Uk Ling  
&  
Salai Bawi Lian Mang  
Chin Human Rights Organization**

**Foreword By  
The Baroness, Cox of Queensbury  
British House of Lords**

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## **DEDICATION**

*Dedicated to Michael En Za Pau, who was killed while working as secretary of CHRO, and Salai Zothang, CHRO's field reporter, who along with two Chin villagers, Pu Za Dun and Siamhmingthang, was summarily executed by Burmese soldiers for passing out human rights information to CHRO, and to all the Chin people who are persecuted for their religious belief and their ethnicity*

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*Chin Human Rights Organization*

## FOREWORD

Three days ago, a beleaguered group of destitute men, women and children gathered to greet us by their makeshift huts. Children with scabies clung to their mothers; all were tense, anxious and hungry. Their meagre supply of food was exhausted. When we were able to offer enough resources to supply for their essential needs for the next few weeks, their faces broke into smiles of relief. But what next? What does the future hold for them? They do not know.

These forlorn people are just a drop in the ocean of the many thousands (about 60 thousands) of Chin people driven from their homes and homeland by the brutal policies of relentless oppression by Burmese Military regime Orwellian-named State Peace and Development Council (SPDC).

The Chin people's homeland is a dramatically beautiful region in western Burma. But the beauty is in cruel contrast to the bleakness of the life of its inhabitants, suffering ethnic cleansing by the SPDC. The term ethnic cleansing is no exaggeration. It is justified by the systematic repressive measures inflicted by the ruling military junta on Burma's ethnic minorities in the Chin and many others, such as the Karen, Karenni, Mon, Shan, and Kachin. Policies of oppression include harsh forced labour, ruthless exploitation of people and resources; attacks by the military on innocent civilians; destruction of homes, places of worship, crops and livestock; arbitrary arrest, torture and execution. Their resources are ruthlessly exploited; they are prohibited from farming their own land or harvesting their crops effectively. One haggard, emaciated elderly man described how he was forced to give much of his time and dwindling energy to working on a huge tea plantation for the SPDC, who took all the profits. He said it had become impossible for him to survive, so he had fled to an uncertain future in neighbouring India.

He is one of thousands who have fled from their homes and villages. Many live precarious, stunted lives as IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons) in Chin State; others have fled abroad, often at great risk; many suffer acute deprivation as they struggle to survive in foreign lands. Those who remain in Chinland live in fear, subject to systematic harassment and brutality.

This book describes the history of the Chin people: their aspiration for autonomy in a federal Burma and their transition from adherence to traditional religion to become a predominantly Christian State.

The book also documents in chilling detail the SPDC's response to their yearning for autonomy and for the freedom to practice their faith, by subjecting them to severe dual

discrimination on grounds of ethnic identity and religion. Within Chin State, they are denied these fundamental freedoms. There are numerous examples of the destruction of churches and of the crosses the local people have built on hills or mountains near their villages or at places of special significance. Thousands of Bibles have been burnt; at times, people have been forbidden to celebrate major Christian festivals such as Easter and Christmas in their churches. Many Christians have been forced to contribute both money and labour to building Buddhist pagodas. Christian pastors have been tortured and killed. Simultaneously, the SPDC offers bribes to persuade people to convert to Buddhism, such as financial inducements, extra food allocations or job promotion.

Those who leave Chinland to seek a better life in Rangoon face similar discrimination as illustrated by the policy of systematic blocking of promotion in the SPDC Army according to the "ABC" criteria: AIDS, Hepatitis B and Christianity. The first two result in instant dismissal; the third prevents even the most efficient and talented officer from rising above the rank of Major.

But perhaps the most insidious assault by the SPDC on the Chin people is intended to destroy them spiritually, culturally, psychologically and physically. Chin State is a dry State in which alcohol is prohibited. The SPDC exploits this situation by bringing in large quantities of crude alcohol - industrial spirit or methylated spirits. They sell this, especially targeting the youth and young adults. This type of alcohol can be lethal, destroying the liver and the brain. The use of this dangerous, addictive substance is exploited by SPDC to strike at the roots of Chin Christianity: it is often sold on Sunday mornings when the people would be going to church. Instead, those who are hooked on the alcohol become drunk and disorderly. Thus the abuse of alcohol is used to replace religious worship, weaken family solidarity and undermine cultural cohesion. It is designed to destroy the spirit and the spirituality of the Chin people.

But despite their tribulations, there are many who are dedicated to the preservation of all that is precious to the Chin people: their ethnic identity, their faith and their culture. These people are working with great commitment, using their impressive abilities to prepare for the day when Chin State will become free, to be ready to promote transition from oppression to democracy and from subjugation to the establishment of civil society. The authors of this book are among these enlightened, visionary yet realistic men and women. Perhaps most important for them, is their commitment to the Christian faith which inspires them, as it has inspired so many of their compatriots to pay the highest sacrifice for the preservation of their homeland and their heritage.

One of them compared their people's experience of persecution to the springs of a motor car: under pressure, they become stronger and more united. It is my hope and prayer that the Chin people will be able to continue to endure their present tribulations with courage, faith and fortitude and that they will soon emerge, stronger and more united, from tyranny to peace and freedom in their beautiful land.

Meanwhile, it is incumbent upon all of us who live in freedom to have concern for those who are denied it. The British people have a special obligation to remember the Chin who

fought alongside them in the Second World War, with great courage, dedication and sacrifice. They look to us now to support them in their rightful struggle for survival, but their hopes have been dashed, as we have looked the other way, often because of ignorance. For example, someone as close to them as the then Governor of Burma Sir Reginald Dorman Smith, said, I know very little about the Shan States and must confess that I have never even heard of the Chin.

Ignorance may be an excuse for inaction. But now we do know about their tragic predicament, we surely have an obligation to do all we can to honour past loyalties and to help these brave people who are holding frontiers of faith and freedom for the rest of us.

Caroline Cox.

(Baroness Cox of Queensbury)  
House of Lords,  
Westminster,  
London.

## **Executive Summary**

This report was prepared with the aim of bringing to light the decades-long systematic denial and violation of religious rights of Chin Christians who inhabit Burma's western territory of Chin State or Chinland by the country's ruling military junta known as the State Peace and Development Council. The report is a compilation of more than eight years of field documentation by Chin Human Rights Organization, and is the first comprehensive report by CHRO on the situation of Chin Christians who have been suffering persecutions under Burma's ruling military regime due to their religious and ethnic identity.

More than 90 percent of Chin people are Christians. This report reveals that Burma's ruling military regime is systematically persecuting Chin Christians as part of a program to *Burmanize* the Chin. Despite Burma's complex ethnic composition, the Chin people are a relatively homogenous society. A predominantly Christian State, the Chin today strongly identify themselves with Christianity. And as a prominent Chin scholar puts it "Christianity is the pillar of today's Chin society." As this report reveals, Burma's ruling State Peace and Development Council is committing an act of ethnocide against Chin Christians by trying to destroy the Chin religious and cultural identity.

Since the early 1990s, the regime had destroyed several Churches and had removed crosses placed on top of mountains near at least five Townships in Chin State. In many cases, crosses had been replaced with Buddhist pagodas and Christians had been forced to contribute labour and money for the constructions. The regime is also prohibiting the construction of new churches and has ordered to stop several churches under construction in towns and villages in Chin State.

Burmese troops stationed in Chin State have often deliberately disrupted worship services and physically assaulted pastors and church leaders. In some instances, pastors, evangelists and missionaries have been abducted, tortured and even killed by the Burmese soldiers. The regime has also tried to prevent the growth of Christianity by arbitrarily imposing discriminatory and restrictive rules on the activities of Christians.

There is also clear evidence that the regime is actively supporting coerced conversions of Chin Christians. The regime enticed Children from poor families in rural areas with the opportunity of free secular education in cities, and parents often entrusted their children in the care of the state. However, the children are sent to monasteries in Rangoon to become novice Buddhist monks against their will and without the knowledge of their parents. As recently as in February of 2003, five children, between the age of 8 and 17, managed to ran away from the monasteries in Rangoon to reunite with their parents. They

said they had been forced to become novice Buddhist monks and to follow the teachings of Buddha.

Responding to international criticism, the State Peace and Development Council often, and correctly, refers to the fact that 'Buddhism is a peaceful religion in that force-promoting it is against the fundamental beliefs of Buddhism itself.' We have no illusion that that is true, as evidenced by the fact that there is a high degree of respect and harmony between Buddhist and Christian communities in Burma. It should be emphasized, however, that it is the regime, and not Buddhism, that is abusing religious freedom of Chin Christians in the name of 'unifying' the country.

The rise in incidents of religious persecution and other forms of human rights abuses suffered by Chin Christians is directly linked to the increased militarization of Chin State. Prior to 1988, only one army battalion was stationed in Chin State. However, at least 12 additional infantry battalions are now operating in the area. Due to the growing human rights abuse in Chin State, tens of thousands of Chin families have been forced to flee to India, Bangladesh and elsewhere in the region.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **To The State Peace and Development Council:**

1. To immediately abandon its policies of religious persecution and ethnocide against Chin Christians and other religious and non-Burman ethnic groups.
2. To unconditionally lift all restrictive and discriminatory measures placed on the activities of Christian churches, pastors and missionaries.
3. To respect and observe freedom of religion, conscience, belief, worship and observance as guaranteed by article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
4. To declare immediate nationwide ceasefire and to withdraw troops deployed in Chin State and other ethnic areas.
5. To cease militarization of Chin State and begin meaningful political negotiation with the Chin opposition forces, including the Chin National Front and other Chin political parties that won parliamentary seats in the 1990 general elections
6. To consider, as a matter of priority, signing and acceding to international human rights treaties relevant to the protection of minorities, particularly the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) and International Covenant on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights (ICSECR).
7. To fulfil its obligations under article 14 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) by abandoning the practice of abducting and forced-converting Christian children to Buddhism.
8. To initiate the process of tripartite dialogue with non-Burman ethnic nationalities and democratic opposition groups as called for by the United Nations.

### **To the Government of India:**

1. To ratify the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol and adheres to their principles.
2. To provide protection to those fleeing religious persecution and human rights abuses in Chin State and to ensure that they are not involuntarily returned to Burma.
3. To encourage the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees office to establish presence in Mizoram to care for Chin refugees

**To the Government of Mizoram:**

1. To refrain from repatriating Chin refugees until such time as democracy and human rights are restored in Burma
2. To encourage the Mizoram public and social organizations to refrain from evicting and repatriating Chin refugees to Burma

**To the United Nations and International Community:**

1. To Encourage the SPDC to become a party to and honour the appropriate UN human rights instruments, including International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights, International Covenant on Civil and Political and Convention on the Elimination of all kinds of Racial Discrimination.
2. To adopt stronger pressure on the SPDC to respect the human rights of all its citizens and to treat everyone equally regardless of their ethnic or religious backgrounds
3. To monitor the security of refugees in India-Burma and Bangladesh-Burma borders to ensure that refugees are not involuntarily repatriated to Burma
4. To put effective pressure on the SPDC to start meaningful political dialogue with all ethnic opposition forces and other democratic oppositions in the country
5. To ensure that all forms of aid and economic engagement be withheld until such time as genuine political reforms take place in Burma
6. NGOs and UN organizations should initiate support programs for refugees along India-Burma and Bangladesh-Burma borders to ensure that the refugees' humanitarian and security needs are not neglected

**PART I**  
**1. INTRODUCTION TO THE CHIN PEOPLE**  
**&**  
**THEIR LAND**

**Geographical location:**

Chinland is situated in the North-West of Burma, adjacent to the Indian States of Mizoram and Manipur and to the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh to the West, Magwe and Sagaing divisions in Burma to the East, and Arakan state to the south. The land lies between the longitude 92.15°E to 97°E, and in between the latitude 18°N to 27.30°N.

Chin areas in Burma encompasses Chin State as well as other Chin inhabited plains in Sagaing Division, Magwe Division and Arakan State. It is mostly remote hill country, consisting of a few trading towns and hundreds of small isolated villages. The population in Chin State is estimated as about 500,000 and the total Chin population both inside and outside of Chinland is estimated at about two million. A large majority of Chins has converted to Christianity over the last century. Most Chins are farmers, growing rice, corn, and vegetables. The Chins include several tribes such as: Asho, Cho, Khumi, Kuki, Laimi, Lushai, and Zomi etc.

### **Political Background:**

The Chins were living as an independent nation located within the distinct border demarcations of Chinland till the British invaded the land in the late 19th century. The British invaded the Chin homeland from three fronts: from Bengal, which is now Bangladesh, Assam (now in India), and Burma, in three synchronized wars in 1872, 1888 and in 1889 to 1890. The Chinland territories occupied in those wars by each military front were put under the administration of each occupying military force. Thus one part of the occupied territory was administered by the military force under the British Governor of Bengal, which is now Bangladesh. Another part occupied from Assam was administered by the British Governor of Assam. The territory occupied near Burma was administered by the occupying military front under the British Governor of Burma as a part of British Burma.

Despite the fierce resistance of the Chin people, because of their superior military strength, the British proclaimed the entire occupied Chin homeland to be a part of the British Empire in 1895. Even after it came under colonial rule, however, Chinland remained relatively autonomous of British control until the early 20th century. In 1935, the British divided Chinland into two parts by making Burma - previously a province of British-India - a separate colony. The western part of Chinland remained under British-Indian control while the eastern section came under the rule of colonial Burma.

As Burma's independence movement grew under the leadership of Aung San, the Chin decided to participate with him and other ethnic representatives in a constitutional process to develop of a federal union. In 1947, the Chins (along with Kachins, Shans and Burmans) signed the Panglong agreement to form a federal union based on democratic principles and ethnic equality. However, upon Burma's independence from Britain in 1948, the Chin and other ethnic groups in Burma became increasingly concerned that their rights of autonomy and equality as enshrined in the constitution were not being fully respected. Civil war erupted throughout the country over the next decade until the Burma

Army's Chief Commander, General Ne Win, taking advantage of the chaos, staged a military coup in 1962.

Once in power, Ne Win nullified previous efforts to establish a genuine federal union. In claiming to safeguard the possible disintegration of the Union, Ne Win isolated Burma from the rest of the world, eradicated all freedoms of expression and association, and instituted draconian economic and human rights policies. After three decades of Ne Win's rule, in 1988 Burma was declared one of the world's least developed countries. During his rule, Gen. Ne Win aimed some of his regime's most brutal repression at Burma's ethnic minorities, such as the Chin, who were struggling for autonomy and equal rights.

Thousands of Chin students participated in the country's wide student-led uprising in 1988 to topple the country's dictatorship. Millions of people in Burma as a whole demonstrated non-violently, demanding an end totalitarian rule. The military regime brutally crushed these demonstrations and thousands were killed. On September 18, 1988, a military committee, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), replaced General Ne Win who had resigned in July, just prior to the peak of the uprising. The SLORC junta renamed the country Myanmar and set out to quell their opponents by announcing that they would soon hold multi-party elections.

Leaders of the democracy movement continued to be arrested and jailed, and many were killed. Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of Burma's independent hero General Aung San, who joined with colleagues to form the National League for Democracy (NLD) was placed under house arrest in 1989 in the midst of campaigning for elections. While many Chin students joined the armed resistant movement called Chin National Front (CNF), the Chin people in Chin state are organizing themselves to form political parties such as Chin National League for Democracy (CNLD), Mara People Party (MPP) and Zomi National Congress (ZNC) to compete in the election.

By 1990, the junta was so confident that the political opposition had been eliminated that they allowed the election to take place. To their surprise, Aung San Suu Kyi's party won an overwhelming victory.

In Chin state, most of the contested seats were won by Chin nationalist parties such as Chin National League for Democracy, Mara People's Party, Zomi National Congress, and independent candidates. The junta annulled the results of the election and intensified repression against its opponents. All Chin political parties who won the 1990 general elections in Burma were declared illegal organizations by the Burmese military regime. Some of elected Chin MPs were put into jail, and at least three elected MPs took asylum in other countries.

### **Human Rights Situation:**

Many parts of Chin State have only been brought under effective Burman control after the early part of 1990s. Prior to the nation-wide pro-democracy uprising in 1988, only one Burmese battalion was stationed in Chin State. At present, as many as 10 battalions

are operating in the area. Consequently human rights abuses against the civilian population have increased dramatically. All the battalions are reported to be using villagers as porters to carry their supplies and ammunition over mountains. The villagers are also routinely ordered to carry out forced labor on new roads and army posts as well as to provide food and money to soldiers. At the same time, systematic efforts were made by the Burmese military junta to eliminate the religion (Christianity), literature, culture, and traditions of the Chin people in order to assimilate them into a homogeneous Burman culture. Efforts were also made to impose the Buddhist religion by restricting the practice of other religions, which in Chin State was mostly Christianity.

Many Chin people have fled to the India border States and neighboring countries to escape forced labor, military harassment, as well as a range of other human rights abuses. Because of the military's increasing demands for money and labor, many families who were previously self-sufficient can no longer survive. Due to inaccessibility of the area, the international community is generally unaware of the human rights situation in Chinland even though the Chin people are suffering the world most deplorable human rights abuses committed by the Burmese military regime.

Today, Burma continues to be ruled by the military (the junta renamed itself the State Peace and Development Council or SPDC in 1997) and the Chin, along with other opponents of the regime, continue to face a multitude of human rights violations. Under Burma's military regime, the Chin are not only facing gross human rights violations, but they are also losing their culture, literature, customs, and traditions. This situation has resulted in a massive humanitarian crisis, both inside and outside the country. It is estimated that at least about 60,000 Chin refugees are taking refuge in neighboring countries and many more thousands are internally displaced in Burma.

## **PART II**

### **Christianity and Chin Society**

#### **2. THE ROLE OF CHRISTIANITY IN CHIN SOCIETY**

Culture and religion together form an important part of Chin society. As such, historically these two elements are closely and inseparably intertwined with one another. In modern times, Christian religion is deeply rooted in Chin society. Since the first Chin conversion in the late 1800s following the arrival of American Baptist missionaries to the Chin Hills, Christianity gradually became accepted by a large majority of Chin populations who had practiced traditional animism for centuries. A century later, Christianity has evolved into almost a second culture of the Chin people. Because many Chin traditional and cultural practices prior to Christianity were thought to be inconsistent with Christian beliefs, these

practices were abandoned with acceptance of the new faith. The “Christian way of life” gradually replaced the “old life”.<sup>1</sup>

Because the Chin traditional religion was inseparably linked with the Chin way of life, transition to a new religion also meant changing some of cultural practices to make them consistent with the new Chin religion. In other word, they adopted Christianity not only as their new religion but also as part of their new culture. For example, the newly Christian converts would stage what is called “cleansing of the house,”<sup>2</sup> which involved removing of altars and “skulls of animals [they hung above their doors] that have been sacrificed in days past to appease evil spirits”.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, Chin Christians abandoned many of their traditional feasts and sacrificial ceremonies which were associated with their past religion. These were “the key social and ritual activities through which the transformation of identities and communities are accomplished.”<sup>4</sup> Over the last century, the new “identity” or Christianity has become deeply entrenched in the Chin society.

The impact of Christianity was not only confined within the spiritual and cultural contexts of the Chin people. It manifested itself as a uniting force for different Chin communities who had been deeply divided and antagonistic to one another due to differences in traditional clan systems and isolated from one another by geographical barriers. With their conversion to Christianity, the notion of acceptance replaced their traditional mindset of exclusionism, and Christian Chins embraced one another as members of a community of faith in Christ. At the same time, there developed a new self-consciousness and political awareness of Chin cultural homogeneity, thus providing a new framework for Chin nationalism. Moreover, early missionaries introduced modern education and written communication to the Chin people.

When Chin leaders signed the Panglong Agreement on February 12, 1947 to join the newly independent Union of Burma as an equal constituent state, from a religious point of view, it was more than merely becoming a political unit of a new modern state: it also meant having to live together with other religious groups within a greater political collective. As there is a correlation between ethnicity and religion in Burma, “political identification with Christianity, with the Church, gave the Chin a basis for treating the Burman on more or less equal footing.”<sup>5</sup> According to Salai Lian Hmung Sakhong, a prominent Chin scholar and an authority on the study of Chin religion and politics, the movements of Chin Christian institutions in pre-independence period have “inspired the new Chin [political] self-consciousness within the Union of Burma.”<sup>6</sup>

In the post-independence era, through Christian religious associations such as Chin Hills Baptist Association (CHBA), also known inter-changeably with All Chin Baptist

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<sup>1</sup> Lian H. Sakhong, *Religion and Politics among the Chin People in Burma*. Uppsala University: 2000, p 340

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 342

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 344

<sup>5</sup> Lehman, F.K, *The Structure of Chin Society*. Urbana: Illinois University Press, p 5

<sup>6</sup> Lian Hmung Sakhong’s Ph.D. dissertation: *Religion and Politics among the Chin People in Burma, 1986-1949*, was published by Uppsala University, Sweden in May 2000.

Association,<sup>7</sup> and now reformed as Zomi (Chin)<sup>8</sup> Baptist Association, Christianity continues to provide a venue for the Chin to develop their bonds and strengthen their relationships with one another.

Although some of their old cultural practices were discontinued, many Chin traditions were preserved by slightly modifying them to conform to Christianity. For example, because “there was no worship without feasts”<sup>9</sup> in old Chin culture, this tradition is carried on to the “new faith.” “Christmas (Khrismas), New Year (*Kumthar*) and Easter (*Tho*) became the most important social feasts and festivals for the new Chin Christian community.”<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, as a cultural and religious practice, gathering and sharing with members of the community are important activities for the Chin people, functions that, in many parts of Chin State and in areas populated by Chin Christians, are now either restricted or disallowed under the present military regime.

In the late 1970s, the Zomi Baptist Convention (ZBC), the highest religious institution of the Chin, launched an indigenous missionary program, Chin for Christ in One Century (CCOC), aimed at making the entire Chin people become Christians by the end of the twentieth century. Under the program, the ZBC recruited volunteer missionaries and evangelists from various parts of Chin State to carry out its mission in certain parts of Chin State, especially the northern part, and other adjoining areas inhabited by many non-Christian Chins. By the end of the program in late 1990s, the CCOC converted a large proportion of non-Christians, despite several restrictions and persecution suffered by the missionaries from the Burmese authorities, including coercion, intimidation and physical attacks by the army.

Christian pastors and ministers secure high reverence and respect among the Chin people. They are highly respected as intermediaries between God and the congregations. Even outside of the Church, they play significant leadership role on occasions such as death, birth or marriage in the community. Also, because there are no Chin people represented in the local or state administration under the Burmese military regime, even in a secular setting, they receive high degrees of respect as leaders of the community. Today, their dignitary position has attracted the attention and jealousy of the ruling military regime, making them the first targets in the regime’s campaign against Christianity and Chin people.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 337

<sup>8</sup> Zomi is synonymous name for Chin

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 348

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 349

### **3. Churches and Christianity in Chin State**

#### **A. The Misionary**

Rev. and Mrs. Arthur Carson and his wife from American Baptist Churches come to Chinland (present Chin state in Burma) in 1899 and founded mission station at Haka (present capital town of Chin state). Rev. Carson, invented Roman alphabets for Chin literature in 1907. He died of appendicitis in 1908 at Haka mission station.

Soon after Rev. and Mrs. Carson setup mission station in Haka, medical missionary Dr. East and his wife come to Haka to work as medical missionary in 1902. Then, another medical missionary Dr. & Mrs. J.G. Woodin came to Haka in 1910 but they didn't work long.

In 1925 another American Baptist missionary couple Rev. & Mrs. Chester Strait come to Haka. Rev. Chester Strait established Bible school in Haka and completed translation of the New Testament in the local language (Lai-Haka) and published it in 1940.

The last American Baptist missionary Rev. & Mrs. Robert R.G. Johnson arrived Haka in 1946. Soon after he arrived, Rev. Johnson began translation of Old Testament to the local language (Lai-Haka) while building a big stone Church building in Haka. In 1966 Rev. Johnson and his family were forced to go back to America by the Revolutionary Council, the then Burmese military government led by General Ne Win who took state power in 1962.

In 1904 the two Chin couple Pu Thuam Hang and his wife, and Pu Pau Suan and his wife converted to Christianity in Thuklai area of northern Chin state. They were the first converts to Christianity among the Chin people in eastern Chinland (present Chin state in Burma). Over the century almost the whole population in Chin state converted to Christianity and it is estimated that about 90 percent of Chins in Chin state are Christians at present.

#### **B. Zomi (Chin) Baptist Convention**

In 1953 Baptist Chins organized themselves as Zomi (Chin) Baptist Convention. At present the total population of Baptists in Chin State is estimated 100,000 baptized and another 100,000 non-baptized members. There are around 1,000 local small churches in the villages.

Because of dialects and regional feelings, the Convention is comprised of 25 associations.

1. Haka Baptist Association
2. Falam Baptist Association

3. Tedim Baptist Association
4. Thantlang Association of Baptist Churches
5. Kale Valley Baptist Association
6. Matu Baptist Association
7. Matu Association of Baptist Churches
8. Senthang Baptist Association
9. Lautu Baptist Association
10. Kabaw Valley Thado Baptist Association
11. Zotung Baptist Association
12. Maram Baptist Association
13. Zophei Baptist Association
14. Tonzang Baptist Association
15. Siyin Region Baptist Association
16. Zo Baptist Association
17. Kuki Chin Baptist Association
18. Tamu Valley Baptist Association
19. Paletwa Baptist Association
20. Gangaw Baptist Association
21. Kanpetlet Baptist Association
22. Mindat Township Baptist Association
23. Chin Baptist Association
24. Kale Zomi Baptist Association
25. Lairawn Baptist Association

### **C. Other Mission & Para-Churches**

There are mission Churches and para-Churches which are established in the Chin society today. These include:

1. Roman Catholic Mission Churches

2. Presbyterian Churches
3. Methodist Churches
4. Gospel Baptist Churches
5. Fundamental Baptist Churches
6. Evangelical Baptist Churches
7. Evangelical Presbyterian Churches
8. United Reform Churches
9. Evangelical Free Church of Burma
10. Church of Jesus Christ
11. Church of God
12. Church on the Rock
13. Assemblies of God
14. Full Gospel Churches
15. United Pentecostal Churches
16. Christian Mission Alliance
17. Four Square Gospel Church
18. Christian Church of Myanmar
19. Seventh Day Baptist Church
20. Seventh Day Adventist Churches
21. Anglican Church
22. Independent Church of Burma
23. Thangzakam baptist Churches
24. Mara Evangelical Baptist Church

Note: These small Churches are part of Christian growth in the State.

#### **D. Future Of Christianity**

The present military government of Burma is implementing its unwritten high policy in the country. This high policy is summed up in three words: Amyo, Batha, Thathana. It can be translated as:

"Only one race = Burman

Only one language = Burmese

Only one religion = Buddhism"

Because of this policy, Chin language is prohibited to teach in public schools. Christianity is suppressed in many ways. Pagodas are constructed on mountains of Chin State with state government funds while churches are destroyed indirectly.

The future of the Churches in Chin State is very unstable at this point of time. It is hoped and prayed that believers in the State continue keeping their faith in the midst of torture and persecution.

[“Church and Christianity in Chin State” is contributed by Rev. Dr. Chum Awi, former principal of Zomi Theological College (ZTC), and General Secretary of Zomi (Chin) Baptist Convention.]

### **PART III**

#### **4. PERSECUTION OF CHIN CHRISTIANS**

The State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) seem relentless in “Burmanizing” the country by systematically destroying significant and symbolic identities of non-Burman ethnic groups. Since the early 1990s, the regime has focused on the northwestern part of the country, particularly the Chin State, to expand its military establishment to gain effective control over the Chin population, which had hitherto remained relatively free from direct Burman control. Although only one army battalion was stationed in Chin State prior to 1988, more than 10 infantry battalions, about five thousand soldiers, are now active in the area.

The junta’s justification was to meet the Chin insurgent threat, a movement which began in 1988 with the formation of the Chin National Front. The movement was founded by a few exiled politicians and Chins students and youths who fled to India in the aftermath of the 1988 nationwide uprising against the military regime. The Chin National Front is fighting for the restoration of democracy in Burma and self-determination for the Chin people. Neither the SLORC nor SPDC have acknowledged the CNF in the state-run media; nor do they mention the CNF when speaking of the “armed groups” that have yet to “return to the legal fold.”<sup>2</sup> Instead, some officials refer to them as “misguided youths” who would sooner or later see the light and would return to the “legal fold.”

Because Chin State has the largest concentration of Christians in the whole of Burma in terms of percentage, the Burmese regime brought in not only a large army of soldiers, but also Buddhist religious forces. In the name of the “Hill Regions Buddhist Mission,” the junta imported an army of Buddhist monks who were then dispatched to various towns and villages across Chin State. Protected by the soldiers, these Buddhist monks have

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<sup>2</sup> Images Asia, *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Chiangmai, Thailand: 1998

considerable power over the Chin population. In many cases, local people have pointed out that the monks are military intelligence operatives who are more powerful than local army commanders. A Chin pastor interviewed by CHRO described the monks stationed around his areas:

*“The monks who live at Zakam, Rezua, Leisen, Vangvai and Tinsi villages rule the communities. Anyone who doesn't abide by the monks' orders are reported to the SLORC/SPDC army and he/she is punished by the army. The monks give judgment on all cases. For those who become Buddhist, they are free from any persecution such as forced labor, portering, extortion of money, etc. Whenever and wherever a monk visits, he is accompanied by the army and they arrange a porter to carry the monk's particulars. The villagers were forced to build a Buddhist monastery and temple. But they refused, insisting, “We are Christians.” Even though the army threatened action against them, they didn't build it yet. Now the monks and army are holding a meeting to discuss this. Nobody knows what will happen.”*

A 40-year-old Chin Christian from Matupi township recounted how he was converted to Buddhism, recruited and trained to be part of a campaign against Christians.

*I was invited to attend social welfare training by the [SLORC (now SPDC)] authority from Matupi on 27/2/95. When I arrived at the place, the authority told us to attend a Buddhist hill tract missionary training run by a Buddhist monk named U Razinn at Mindat. As we are Christian, we said we didn't want to go. But the monk persuaded us saying, ‘It is no problem if you are Christian, it is just religious training.’ So five other persons and I took part in the 10-day training.*

*In the training, we were taught the 17 facts of how to attack and disfigure Christians. (See the translation of the pamphlet below.) The facts were to be spread to the Chin Christian community. And we should not get involved in national politics. We were promised that 1200 kyats per month would be provided to those families who became Buddhist and 800 kyats per month for those individuals who became Buddhist. Furthermore, we would not only be provided with rice and other materials, but we would also be free from portering, forced labor, and extortion of money. And our children would be provided with education by the government.*

*I became a Buddhist because of such privileges rather than because I think Buddhism is better than Christianity. And then I was called by Captain xxx, from Pakuku, and I was trained for 10 days. At the training, the captain taught me to report the activities of the Chin National Front and to create misunderstanding among Christian denominations. He told that now, Buddhism is supported by the government. The monk who lives in Matupi is a captain of Military Intelligence and the monks who live in Zakam, Rezua, Leisen, Vangkai, and Tingsi villages are sergeants in Military Intelligence. He encouraged me not to be afraid and said that whenever I needed assistance, I could ask them and would be helped.*

*After I had become a Buddhist, all the problems we faced in the kitchen, such as how we are going to manage for our daily food, disappeared. However, when I asked for assistance for my son who was studying in a theological college in Rangoon, they rejected my request and also told me not to let him continue his studies. I insisted that if you don't provide for my son, I will quit being a Buddhist. It is in vain, so I informed them that I had left Buddhism. They told me that if I wanted to join again, I could do so at any time and would be provided with more than before.*

*For those who became Buddhist with me, they are provided with whatever they need and get many privileges from the government and now they are very happy. They became like real Buddhists. However, for Christians, the government doesn't allow them to ask for any assistance from foreign countries. As we are very poor and have suffered under forced labor, portering, and the extortion of money, some people are interested in becoming Buddhists.*

The following is translation of the pamphlet entitled:

Missionaries, Honorable Monks, Cleansing Organization

The Facts to Attack Christians

- 1. To attack Christian families and the progress of Christians.*
- 2. To criticize against the sermons which are broadcast from Manila, Philippines.*
- 3. To criticize God as narrow-minded and egotistical who himself claimed that "There is no god except eternal God."*
- 4. To be against corrupted youth and inappropriate fashion.*
- 5. To criticize the preaching of Christians wherever it has penetrated.*
- 6. To criticize Christianity by means of pointing out its delicacy and weakness.*
- 7. To stop the spread of the Christian movement in rural areas.*
- 8. To criticize by means of pointing out "it is not salvation but purchased by blood."*
- 9. To counterattack by means of pointing out Christianity's weakness and overcome this with Buddhism.*
- 10. To counter the Bible after thorough study.*
- 11. To criticize that "God loves only Israel but not all the races."*
- 12. To point out ambiguity between the two testaments.*
- 13. To criticize on the point that Christianity is partisan.*
- 14. To criticize Christianity's concept of the Creator and compare it with the scientific concept.*
- 15. To study and access the amount given in offerings.*
- 16. To criticize the Holy Spirit after thorough study.*
- 17. To attack Christians by means of both non-violence and violence.*

Recopy, Myo Chit, Wah Mah Tah, 2639 True Copy (Sa Win)

Over the past few years, the military junta has ordered the removal of several crosses erected by local Chin Christians on tops of mountains near a number of villages and towns throughout Chin State. The soldiers also disrupted worship services and religious ceremonies and rounded up people going to Church, and forced them to serve as porters. Moreover, the military has tried to coerce people into converting to Buddhism by targeting Christians for forced labor and other abuses. In many instances, Christian pastors have been physically abused and mocked by the Burmese soldiers. The junta has refused to grant permission to construct new church buildings and other Christian religious buildings while it has allocated State funds to construct new Buddhist pagodas in various parts of Chin State.

In many major towns in Chin State, partially completed church buildings are still standing unfinished because the State Peace and Development Council has not granted permission to resume the construction. The Carson Memorial Hall was being built in Hakha, the capital of Chin State, in 1999 by the Hakha Baptist Church. It was to be inaugurated on the occasion of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of the first American missionaries, Arthur and Laura Carson, in the late 1890s. The construction was set to be completed before the start of the Centennial Celebration, scheduled for March 15, 1999. But the junta halted the construction midway, saying that the Church did not obtain authorization from the Ministry of Home and Religious Affairs in Rangoon, although the Hall was constructed on Church property.

## **5. Interview With Rev. Dr. Chum Awi**

### **Former Secretary-General of Zomi (Chin) Baptist Convention and Principal of Zomi Theological College**

*CHRO: Can you tell us a bit about yourself, what you did, and your work among the Chin people?*

**Rev. Dr Chum Awi:** I was born in Tikir, a small village of Thantlang township. My mother told me I was born around the end of Japanese invasion of Burma during World War II. I have a Law degree from Rangoon University and had served as a Grade IV Township Law Officer in Hakha and Thantlang for 4 years. I did my Theological training at the Burma Institute for Theology for two years. I earned my Doctorate degree in the Philippines in 1987.

I worked with the Zomi Theological College for 15 years, first as a teacher and later as its Principal. I left the ZTC in 1992 to receive my new appointment as General Secretary of the Zomi Baptist Convention, the largest religious institution of the Chin living in the Chin State, Sagaing and Magwe Divisions. During this tenure, among others, I was a member of Myanmar Baptist Convention (MBC), its Mission Board, and Development Committee, a member of Myanmar Institute of Theology Board of Trustees, a member of Myanmar Council of Churches (MCC) Executive Committee, member of MCC Communication Department, and MCC Theological Association.

*CHRO: Were the ZBC's works or activities ever interfered with or hindered by the government?*

**Rev. Dr Chum Awi:** Being a Baptist organization, the ZBC firmly believes in the principle of "Separation of Church and State." From the era of the Socialist regime through the times of the SLORC and SPDC, the ZBC has always conducted itself by this principle. Unfortunately, however, the government has always used intelligence to eavesdrop and scrutinize our activities. There were times when we were reported to the authorities. But by God's grace, such attempts by the government never resulted in the failure of our mission or activities. The SPDC, however, was very keen to use the ZBC for its own political ends. They wanted the ZBC to persuade the Chin National Front to surrender their arms to the government. We rejected the proposition to facilitate 'Peace Talk' between the CNF and the SPDC saying that the ZBC would not allow itself to be used for political purposes. This developed into a friction between ZBC and the government.

One of the major hindrances to the work of ZBC has always been the government's policy to promote Buddhism at the expenses of other religions. This is known as "*Amyo, Batha, Thathana*" or 'One Race, One Language, One Religion.' This refers to the creation of a country based on three Bs "Burman, Burmese, Buddhism." We as the ZBC do not have the freedom to freely conduct, attend and speak in all our religious conferences. Intelligence operatives are always present in all gathering to monitor our activities. The government favours Buddhists while Christians are discriminated against. As Christians, it is heart wrenching for us to see the destruction, one after another, of crosses on hilltops of Chin State by the authorities. Inside the church, we console ourselves "God will fix everything and change everything when the time comes."

*CHRO: The United States State Department branded Burma as 'Country of Particular Concern' for violating religious freedom of its citizens. The State Department's report says religious minorities such as Christians and Muslims are discriminated against the country's dominant Buddhist populations. What are your views on these?*

**Rev. Dr Chum Awi:** Besides what I just told you about earlier, preachers and pastors are subject to close scrutiny. The authorities arbitrarily set rules for Christian preachers and pastors to follow. They are often accused of violating these rules even if such violation does not happen. Many preachers have been arrested and incarcerated even though they never violated these so-called rules set by the military. In some areas, pastors and preachers have been even killed. While the proliferation of Christianity is prevented in any possible way, the spread of Buddhism is officially and openly supported by the government. Orphans and other children from poor family backgrounds in rural areas often are targets for conversion into Buddhism. They are lured away from their parents under false pretences only to make them novice Buddhists. Chin Christians have for a long time endured these kinds of injustices. I believe that Burma being designated as 'Country of Particular Concern' by the United States is, in fact, a way of God showing us justice for what we the Chin people have suffered. This kind of acknowledgement and attention by the world to our suffering is because people from both inside and outside of

the country are risking their lives to speak the truth and God is showing them the way to do it. I believe also that God is using the voice of CHRO to make that happen.

***CHRO:** What is your assessment of the result of discrimination and persecution against Chin Christians by the military regime?*

***Rev. Dr Chum Awi:*** I personally have no knowledge of any Chin Christians converting to Buddhism simply out of fear or being unable to endure persecution by the military. On the contrary, I think that there has been stronger unity, determination and cooperation among individuals and among different denomination and churches as a result of these kinds of persecutions. For instance, despite efforts by the SPDC to impede and obstruct the Centennial celebration of Christianity in 1999, the determination and cooperation of Christian churches had made it possible the event to be grander and more successful than the regime's own National Student Sport Festival held in Chin State in 1997.

## **6. SELECTIVE FORCED LABOR**

Although most Chin families have been equally affected by the army's use of forced labor, in many cases, forced labor is specifically directed against Christians in order to coerce them into converting to Buddhism. There are ample evidences that the Burmese military regime is using forced labor as part of its Burmanization program. The apparent theory is that by converting Chin Christians to Buddhism, an important Chin identity will be stripped away, thereby eventually assimilating them into Burman identity. Forced labor has also been used to discourage people from going to church by compelling them to work on Sundays and other Christian religious holidays.

Because the pervasive forced labor programs have left most villagers no time to work for their own living, many people have converted to Buddhism to get exemption from forced labor and various forms of "donations" collected by the army, and to receive state benefits in the form of subsidized rations and monthly allowances. Some Chin villagers have converted to Buddhism simply to avoid forced labor and for cash and other incentives offered by the military regime. In Hriphi village in Thantlang Township alone, at least three Christian families were coerced into converting to Buddhism. These families were provided monthly allowances and were completely exempt from forced labor and other army extortions while Christians are subjected to such abuses.

Forced labor is the most common and consistent among human rights abuses throughout Burma. Almost all Burmese people have been affected in one or another by the systematic use of forced labor by the military regime. A large proportion of forced labor occurrence is often associated with the junta's infrastructural development projects such as construction of roads and railways, bridges, agricultural projects, construction of army camps, tourist sites, etc. However, some of the most serious forms of forced labor occur in remote regions and other areas where the Burmese army is engaged in counter-insurgency programs against ethnic armed groups. The militarization of Chin state since the early 1990s has tremendously accelerated the level of forced labor in the region.

Throughout Chin State, the Burmese army has extensively used civilian forced labor in road constructions, building and maintenance of army camps, building Buddhist pagodas, and portering for the army.

In 1995, Burma ratified the International Labour Organization (ILO) convention prohibiting forced labor. In response to countless allegations of the use of forced labor, the ILO instituted a Commission of Inquiry to investigate allegations of pervasive and systematic use of forced labor in Burma. The Commission's investigation resulted in the adoption in 2000 of an unprecedented resolution, sponsored by the ILO, which imposed a *de facto* sanction against the Burmese regime on account of the widespread and systematic use of forced labor in the country.

In 2001, in response to the ILO resolution, the SPDC had claimed that it had officially outlawed the practice of forced labor. However, despite such claims, numerous reports have revealed a completely different story. In one particularly instance in Falam, civilians are compelled to provide free labor for tea plantation programs under direct order from the SPDC Minister for Agriculture, who visited the town in March 2002. (Report)

In 1995, the regime constructed a Buddhist pagoda in Thantlang, a town with no Buddhist inhabitant except a few Burman families living there temporarily for administrative postings. The pagoda was constructed on a hill above Thantlang town. Since the location was a wooded area, the town's authorities ordered that all the trees be cleared for the pagoda to have a good view from the town. Entire high school students from grades 8 to 10 of Thantlang Basic Education High School were ordered, through the school's headmaster, to clear the woods around the pagoda on a school day. Students were made to bring their own tools such as axes, knives, etc.

Similar incidents have taken place in other parts of Chin State. Rihkhawdar, located beside the legendary heart-shaped Rih Lake, is a twin village in Falam Township. Although literally two separate villages situated side by side, both villages bear the same name. The total population of the twin villages is about 1,400, all Christians. In 1997, the Burmese military regime sent a 43-year-old Buddhist monk, Baddandah Tan Wa Yah, to Rihkhawdar to supervise a construction project for two new Buddhist Pagodas, Aungdawmu (the Pagoda of Victory) and Naga Yung Pagoda (Pagoda of Dragon) to be built near the village.

The regime officially sanctioned five million kyats for the project. However, local army officials and Baddandah Tan Wa Yah forced the villagers of Rihkhawdar and the nearby villages to build the pagodas continuously for months, without paying any wages for their labor. During the construction, the villagers had to supply themselves with their own food, tools, and medicines. Located on the edge of a very steep hill, part of the Aungdawmu pagoda was swept away by landslide during monsoon season. One million kyats were sanctioned for the reconstruction but the money was never used for the project. Baddabda Tan Wa Yah and army authorities forced the villagers to reconstruct the pagoda without paying them any wages.

A local villager who was forced to participate in the reconstruction of the collapsed pagoda told CHRO about his experience.

*There was a landslide near the pagoda of Rihkhuadar during the monsoon season in 1999. The landslide damaged the pagoda. Thus, the company commander of Rihkhawdar army camp, who is a major in the Burmese army Light Infantry Battalion 266, ordered Chin Christian villagers to reconstruct the pagoda in November 1999.*

*Zimte, Zimpi, Haimual (A), Haimual (B), Vuakbuk, Kawimual and Hriangngai villages from Tiddim Township, and Hmunluah, Haileng, Tiau, Saek, Cawhte, Khuahlr, Tuicirh, Surbung, Lianhna, Rihkhawdar (A), Rihkhawdar (B), Phunte, Lianhnabawk villages from Falam Township were compelled to reconstruct the pagoda. There were about two hundred villagers participating in the work.*

*At least ten persons from each village have to work until the reconstruction is finished. As of now (November 15, 1999), we have been working on the pagoda for two weeks and we have completed about only one fourth of the work.*

## **7. PROHIBITION OF CONSTRUCTION OF CHURCH BUILDING AND CHRISTIAN INFRASTRUCTURE**

Even though well over 80% of Chins are Christian in Chin state, it is impossible or very difficult to obtain permission to build Church or Christian infrastructure in their own homeland under the present Burmese military regime, State Peace and Development Council.

Several Chin Christian churches and infrastructure under construction in the 1990s were forced to stop by the military authority. Those who persisted in constructing their church building had been threatened or punished by the army. When the Burmese army ordered to stop construction of Salvation Army Church in Khampat, the pastor of the church ignored the order by resuming construction of the church. He was humiliated and badly beaten up by the army that he was hospitalized for several days.

The military regime reportedly ordered to stop construction of the following churches and Christian infrastructure; Chin Christian centenary building in Hakha – the capital of Chin State; United Pentecostal Church in Hakha; Zomi Theological dining hall in Falam; Church of Jesus Christ in Falam; hostels (both men and women) for Chin Christian College in Haka, Baptist Church in Farhual, Salvation Army church in Khampat, and the Assembly of God's Church in Kalaymyo.

In the year 2000, the US-based Chin Freedom Coalition reported that construction of the following Churches were ordered to stop. They were; Evangelical Baptist Church in Myoma Quarter, Faith Bible Theological Seminary in Lawibual Quarter, Sakollam Baptist Church, and Lawibual Baptist Church were ordered to stop by the Military Intelligence in Teddim area of northern Chin state. The coalition further reported that

worship services at the Lai Baptist Church at No. 41 U Aung Min Street, Ward 2, Mayangone township in Rangoon, where most of the Chins living in Rangoon area attend worship services, were prohibited by the authority.

Unlike Christians, Buddhists do not need permission from the Army to construct pagodas and monasteries. The Burmese military regime is supporting construction of pagodas and monastery in almost every major town in Chin state where there are little or no Buddhist in the areas. In many occasions, the Chin Christians are forced to donate funds or forced to provide their labors for construction of pagodas and Buddhist monasteries.

### **7.1. SPDC ordered to Stop Construction of Carson Memorial Hall**

In 1999 the State Peace and Development Council ordered to stop construction of Carson Memorial Hall in Haka, the capital of the Chin State, where the Baptist Churches in Haka constructed the hall in honor of the first missionary to Chinland. Construction of the hall was planned for completion before the Chin Christian centennial celebration on March 15, 1999. The Hall was intended to be used to display records of the works of the missionaries and other Chin cultural and historical records during the centennial ceremony. However, as no one dares to defy the SPDC's order to stop construction of the Carson Memorial Hall, the churches could not display cultural and historical records along with the works of early missionaries to Chin state during the Chin Christian centenary celebration.

### **7.2. SPDC Ordered to Stop Construction of United Pentecostal Church In Haka, Chin State**

On June 13, 2000, Chin State authorities of the SPDC in Haka, the capital of Chin State, summoned Rev. Tin Hei, a pastor of the United Pentecostal Church (UPC) and ordered him to stop the construction of the UPC Church building on Cherry Street.

The building is comprised of three floors, one for the church, the other for the Haka UPC District office, and the third for the pastor's quarters. When a Students' Festival was held in Haka on April 25-28, 1998, Chin Christians were forced to construct the bleachers and seats so that SPDC leaders could watch the games in comfort. Chin villagers were forced to manually gather hardwood from the forest to construct the seats.

At the conclusion of the games, the officials sold the hardwood and kept the profit. The UPC Church bought some of the wood from the SPDC to build its building. Since the construction of "church buildings" is not permitted under SPDC regulations, a church has to be built as part of a larger building. But the construction of a Buddhist temple does not require permission from the SPDC.

The UPC met all the SPDC's requirements for the construction of the building and had received permission from the SPDC to proceed. Work on the building began in early 1999 and was nearly complete when the order to discontinue was issued. The SPDC ordered the construction to stop for two years even though the UPC had prior permission to complete the building.

The SPDC did not give any specific reasons why they stopped the construction. Similarly, the SPDC officials in Kalemmyo ordered the Agape Church of the Assembly of God in Pinlong Ward, Kalemmyo in Sagaing Division to stop the construction of their church building.

The church pastor, Rev. Go Za Nang, had obtained prior permission from the military authorities. The order was given without explanation.

### **7.3. Construction of AG Church Ordered to Stop In Kalaymyo**

In 1993, Chin Christians belonging to Assembly of God (AG) in Kalaymyo, Sagaing Division started the construction of a large church in Taung-phi-la block of Kalaymyo. The township authority ordered the minister and church elders to halt the construction, which had been underway since 1997. The construction of the church was halted.

“Even though we made repeated appeals to the ministry of religion to continue construction of our church, we have not received any response from the authority,” said Mr. Pa Tling (name changed for security reasons), a 54 year-old-Chin, who is one of the church elders.

“Since we have not received any response from the higher authorities, we approached district level authorities to get permission to finish construction of our church”, he said.

In order to obtain permission, the AG church had to offer bribes to all level of authorities with varying amount of money. 50000 Kyats to the chairman of Kalaymyo District Peace and Development Council, 50000 Kyats to the chairman of Kalaymyo township Peace and Development Council, 30000 Kyats to the head of department of municipal, 5000 Kyats to Taung-phi-la block Peace and Development Council respectively.

Only after they paid the bribe did they get oral permission to continue construction of the church. However, they were told to cover the building of the church with mats and other materials so that commuters from the street would not see the church building.

### **7.4. Monks And SPDC's Soldiers Unite For One Purpose**

Rev. Biakthang (name changed for security reason) was a missionary who was sent by the Lautu Baptist Association of Thantlang township to Ann town in Arakan State. Rev. Biakthang's wife unfortunately passed away in October 1996. In November 1998, he left the mission center for Thantlang to attend the Lautu Baptist Association mass meeting. While he was away, his house was burglarized by monks and soldiers. They even dug out his wife's gravestone and destroyed the stone inscription. In his letter to a friend in December, he wrote, "Though I was called by the military office, after interrogations I was released without harm." He also mentioned in his letter that some evangelists sent by Church of Jesus Christ who work in the area were beaten badly by Buddhist monks together with soldiers.

## PART III.8

### 8. DESECRATION OF CROSSES, SYMBOLS OF CHRISTIAN FAITH

*“The beautiful mountains and hills of our land  
Where the symbolic crosses used to stand  
Oh my God! Where are they now?  
Let’s ceaselessly pray to the Lord  
The enemy is now shamelessly using them for abode  
But someday they must be the temples of the Lord”<sup>11</sup>*

The song reflects the sentiments of ordinary Chin Christians towards the destruction of crosses that can be found on top of mountains and hills of Chinland. Evidence shows that the Burmese military regime has actively targeted Christian symbols in its campaign of Burmanization and ethnocide against various ethnic groups in the country. Christian crosses erected on the tops of hills throughout Chin State have been destroyed. Since the early 1980s, Chin communities in various villages and towns have erected wooden crosses on mounds and hill tops beside their villages and towns to symbolize their faith in Christianity, and to remind themselves of the fact that Christianity has played an important role in shaping their modern society and culture. In some cases, however, the erection of these crosses were in response to what the Chin regarded was the State-sponsored importation of Buddhism into Chin State with the construction of pagodas and temples in certain urban centers which began in the 1970s.

Destruction of crosses started around the early 1990s with the rapid increase in army battalions established across Chin State. Since then, almost every cross in all major towns in Chin State had been destroyed by the regime. Destruction of crosses is usually ordered by the township authorities or by army battalion commanders. After an order is issued, the church or community responsible for erecting the cross is given a timeframe during which they must dismantle the cross. Failure to do so within the given period often means that the cross is destroyed by the authorities and that Church leaders are arrested for defiance of orders.

The following are cases involving the destruction of crosses in several major townships in Chin State. In addition to cases documented below, there might be more unreported cases of desecration of crosses in other towns and villages where access to information is limited.

#### 8.1. Destruction In Tonzang Township

In 1994, in Tonzang township of northern Chin State, the Township Law and Order Restoration Council (now known as the Township Peace and Development Council) ordered the destruction of a cross erected by the local Catholic church on top of a hill overlooking Tonzang town. The Church refused to pull down the cross, saying that it had been set up with Catholic rituals such as blessing and pouring of the Holy Water by the

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<sup>11</sup> Composed and sung by a noted Chin singer Pi Thong Thluai and translated into English by Pu Thlasui Tluangneh

priest. At midnight on May 16, 1994, the township authorities, along with the local police burnt down the cross. The Church leaders protested the burning of the cross, but the authorities responded by taking them to court, which then declared the case closed. The Church leaders later sent a representative to Rangoon to lodge a formal complaint with the Ministry of Home and Religious Affairs. Colonel Aung Khin, Deputy Minister of the Ministry, responded that unless the township authorities brought the case to him, he would not review it.

Similar orders of destruction of crosses and coercion of Christian communities have been carried out in many townships in Chin State. The consistency and similarity in the nature of incidents, which occurred in various parts of Chin State, suggest that they are both systematic and well planned at a higher level of administration.

## **8.2. Destruction in Matupi Township**

The latest incident of desecration occurred as recently as in March 2002 when a cross erected on hill top overlooking Matupi town was ordered to be removed. Residents of Matupi believed the order originated with SPDC cabinet member, Major-General Ye Myint, Chief of the Bureau of Special Operations, who visited the town earlier that month. The cross was erected in 1984 by Christians in Matupi town. In 2001, it was replaced with a 30-foot tall concrete structure to make it more durable and visually more spectacular. Matupi residents alleged that during his visit, the Major-General was offended by the magnitude of the 30-foot tall Christian cross and thus directed the local authorities to remove it. Soon after the General left the town, the local authorities summoned all Christian leaders to the Township Peace and Development Council office and pressured them to remove the cross. The Church leaders refused, insisting that the authorities to destroy it themselves. Afterwards, a section of Burmese soldiers stationed in the area tried to root out the cross, ostensibly on direction of higher authorities, but were not successful due to the five-foot deep concrete foundation. Christians discovered the partially dug-out foundation of the cross.

As of the writing of this report, authorities are coercing the Matupi Baptist Association (MBA), the largest religious institution in the township, into pulling down the cross by closing down a development project implemented by the MBA and funded by the Japanese Embassy in Rangoon. An independent initiative, the project is intended to improve the town's water supply system by draining a nearby stream. The Association bought water pipes in Mandalay in central Burma that are ready to be shipped to Matupi, but authorities said that permission of the shipment will only be authorized when the cross had been dismantled. The order preventing the shipment was issued by both Matupi and Mindat township authorities because Mindat is located on the road through which the pipes are to be transported. Moreover, about 200 households in Matupi who have applied for telephone connections to their homes and have paid the required fees of 85,000 Kyats per household were also told that until the cross had been dismantled they would not get the connections.

The cross is one of the last remaining crosses erected near a major town in Chin State and Christians are concerned that what little is left of their symbolic identities is being eliminated by the Burmese authorities.

### **8.3. Destruction in Hakha Township**

Hakha is the capital of Chin State. The town is located on the foothill of Mount Rung (Rung Tlang). In the 1980s, Hakha Baptist Church erected a cross on top of the Mount. However, in 1995, the cross was torn down by unknown persons. The remnant of the cross indicated that it was systematically torn down. Christians believe the Burmese soldiers were responsible for the destruction of the cross since no Christian would ever commit such an act as the cross is considered a Holy edifice. The church later attempted to re-erect the cross in the same location, but army authorities ordered them not to, arguing that crosses may only be erected within the Church compound. Church members believe the order against re-erection of the cross is further evidence of the army destroying the cross.

A few years later the SPDC built a statue of the Buddhist monk at the spot where the cross used to stand. The spot where the cross once stood, a place Christians consider a holy site, has now been integrated as part of an army battalion headquarters. The woods covering the ridge of Mount Rung have been entirely stripped bare, and at least three army battalions have occupied the area. For years, Mount Rung had traditionally been a place for various churches and denominations in Hakha to hold youth and other social gatherings on occasions such as Christmas Eve. However, the establishment of army camps in the area has now deprived local Christians of their traditional site of social gathering, since no unauthorized person is allowed to go up to the Mount for “security” reasons.

### **8.4. Destruction in Thantlang Township**

While crosses have been removed in several townships, perhaps the most publicized case so far was the removal of a cross in Thantlang Township in January of 1999. The year 1999 marked the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Christianity among the Chins. The Centennial Celebration was originally planned for March 15 in Hakha, the capital of Chin State where the first American missionaries established their first mission center in 1899. However, before the official celebration in Hakha, advance celebrations were also held locally in various townships under the leadership of local churches. In Thantlang, the celebration was organized jointly by all the different denominations in town for January 1 - 3, 1999.

On January 5, when the celebration was over, the organizers erected a Centennial Memorial Cross on a hilltop on Vuichip ridge, located west of the town. Though the cross was raised primarily in remembrance of the early American missionaries, site of the cross had additional religious and spiritual significance: Before the advent of Christianity,

Thantlang residents had traditionally believed that Vuichip ridge was the dwelling place of evil spirits, and legends told of spirits roaming the ridge. The erection of the cross on that particular location was to signify that evil spirits have been defeated by the crucifixion of Jesus Christ on the cross. The cross was decorated with mirrors so that it would be more recognizable when it glowed with the reflection from the sun.

On the very night the cross was erected, the Township Peace and Development Council ordered the destruction of the cross, compelling the very people who had raised the cross to destroy it. When the people refused, a section of local police were sent to destroy the cross. Six Christian pastors responsible for organizing the Centennial Celebration and the erection of the Memorial cross, Rev. Thawng Kam, Rev. Biak Kam, Rev. Thantu, Rev. Tha Ceu, Cung Bik and Pastor Beauty Lily were arrested and interrogated by the army. In response, on January 6, the whole town staged a silent protest by closing down their businesses and refusing to go to work, and by observing a 24-hour fast and prayer vigil in their local churches and homes. Fearing the news of protest might spread to other towns, the authorities shut down telephone connections of Thantlang and arrested 20 more Church leaders. Nevertheless, on January 9, Churches in the Chin State capital, Hakha, joined the protest, prompting Chairman of the Chin State Peace and Development Council in Hakha to go to Thantlang to end the strike by threatening and intimidating the town people.

### **8.5. Destruction In Falam Township**

Falam town is home to the Zomi (Chin) Baptist Convention ZBC, and the Zomi Theological College. In the late 1980s, Chin Christians from Falam area had planted a giant cross at the mountaintop above the Bridge of Ruun River on the highway Falam-Kalaymyo. Falam-Kalaymyo highway is one of the two highways connecting Chin state and Burma. The scenic view of the landscape around Ruun Bridge attracts travelers passing through to take a rest and enjoy their time in the area. Many Chin travelers found great comfort praying at the foot of the cross.

However, in the mid 1990s the Burmese military government destroyed the cross without any reason. When Chin Christians in the area try to re-erect the cross, the SPDC prevented them. Soon after the destruction, the SPDC constructed a Buddhist pagoda at the very location where they had destroyed the cross.

### **8.6. Destruction Of Church In Tamu Township**

On February 20, 2000, Chairman of Tamu Township Peace and Development Council Captain Khin Maung Myint and his men entered our village on their way to New Tamu Town. It was around 10:00 am in the morning. That morning, members of nine households from our Church and I were putting a finishing touch on the church building, which we had been constructing. As Captain Khin Maung Myint and his men were

driving by, he got out of his vehicle and asked us who had authorized the construction of the church building. Just as he was asking this question, he slapped U Kan Hla, the Chairman of the Village Peace and Development Council, who was standing by him. Two of his men then immediately grabbed both hands of U Kan Hla, and Captain Khin Maung Myint began punching and kicking him. The Captain beat him with a bamboo stick for almost an hour. After that he turned to me, pulled his pistol out and pointed it at my head and said, "I will kill all of you Chin people, you Chin people are nothing but a nuisance to Burma." He then ordered us to immediately destroy the Church building. We were frightened and immediately dismantled the church.

The captain himself angrily pulled down some of the bamboos that were used for the church's wall. What we had built with our time and energy was totally destroyed. We have not had a place to conduct worship service ever since. Local authorities are now making various excuses to prevent us from conducting worship service.

It was with the permission of local Peace and Development Council member U Aung Sein (a Buddhist) that we built our church. He was also the one who gave us Form 105, which entitled us to possess a plot for the Church building. We bought a 150 square foot plot for 70,000 kyats from a local landowner, U Tha Khin, in 1996. After the demolition of the Church, bushes have grown on the site, and it looks like a wilderness. Our church's membership has now grown to 14 households and we are in desperate need of a church building. Due to the growing membership, it is becoming more and more inconvenient for us to conduct services in my house.

Local authorities have objected to the sound of our singing and the drums we play. They said that we are disturbing peace in our village. Now, they have gone so far as to forbid handclapping during the worship service. I pointed out to them that Buddhists are always using loudspeakers whenever they collect donations. I asked them if shouting around the village with loudspeakers hadn't caused any disturbance in the village. They told me that they had been instructed by higher authorities to not permit any kind of disturbance in the village. Only after I told the village authorities that I would also be complaining about the use of loudspeakers to their superiors did they stop saying anything to us.

Up until today, the Village PDC Chairman is making all kinds of excuses to stop us from conducting worship service. But we are still holding the service in my house, and we will not submit to their coercion.

*[The above is an account made by a pastor, name omitted for security reason, to CHRO field monitor]*

### **8.7. Three Churches Destroyed in Ngaphe Township**

In 1996 Haka Baptists Church HBC started to work among their fellow A sho Chin tribe in Ngaphe Township and Rev. Pa Lian (Name change for security reason) was appointed as in-charge of the mission works in the area. Thus the mission team applied permission to construct church at the township level authority and they were granted the permission to

construct two churches at Mahtung and Linte village respectively. Another Church was build by the local resident at Burngbaw village, which is not too far from Ngaphe town.

In 1998 all the three churches were destroyed and by the Burmese military government and the local people were warned not to reconstruct Christian church in the area.

## **Part III.9**

### **9. TARGETING CLERGY**

*“Many pastors, evangelists, and young volunteer missionaries have been arrested while they actively worked. Let me give you one example. In May 1993, 30 young volunteer evangelists, sent by Zomi (Chin) Baptist Convention, were arrested in the town of Paletwa, Southern Chin State. The Chairman of Paletwa Township Law and Order Restoration Council (LORC) was so brutal to the young people. He didn't give them food and they were starved for five days. After that he released them on bond that they should not preach in the township. The young evangelist left the town.”*

Rev. Dr. Chum Awi, a former General Secretary of Zomi Baptist Convention and former Principal of Zomi Theological College in an interview by CHRO in 1998.

*“The (Burmese) army unit arrested several leaders of the community and kept them in the army camp lock-up. On August 2,1993 they interrogated one of the prisoners, Pastor Zang Kho Let. When the Pastor's answers did not please the interrogators, the army personnel beat him with rifle butts or sticks that eventually broke almost all of his bones after two days of interrogation. They cut open his mouth to the neck and told him “We cut open your mouth so that you will no longer preach”.*

**[Excerpt from “How and Why the Burmese Army Murdered Four Chin Christians” by Dr. Vum Son Suantak]**

Church leaders and pastors are often the main target in the regime's crusade against Chin Christians. The followings cases are reports made by CHRO in the past few years.

#### **9.1. A Female Pastor Sentenced For Two Years With Hard Labour In Haka**

**CHRO: Ottawa, July 10, 2001**

The Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO) received a report that a female pastor, Ms. Gracy of Rinpi Baptist Church from central Chin State, was sentenced by Chin State court for two years with hard labor on July 6, 2001, in Haka, the capital of Chin State.

Pastor Gracy was arrested by the Burmese soldiers on February 13 this year. She was accused of supporting the Chin National Front. Since her arrest, she has been detained in Haka army camp, where prison conditions are extremely severe, inadequate and precarious for woman prisoners.

Pastor Gracy will soon be sent to Kalaywa hard labor camp in Sagaing division, where her brother Pu Hoi Mang is now serving two years prison term with hard labor.

In Chin State, the ruling military regime State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) publicly declared that Christian pastors are their primary enemy, accusing them of pro-colonialist white face.

Because about 90 percent of Chins are Christian, religious persecution is a major concern in Chin State. For the past two years, the United States Department of State designated Burma as country of particular concern for violating religious freedom.

## **9.2. Two Pastors Arrested In Thantlang, Chin State**

Chin Human Rights Organization CHRO received the following report on September 20, 1999 from a reliable source.

On June 26, 1999, a soldier of the 266 Light Infantry Battalion, led by 2nd Lieutenant Myo Kyaw, deserted his unit, near Tlangpi village.

The villagers of Tlangpi and of Farrawn, which is one of its neighboring villages, were in no way responsible for his defection, but the chairmen of these villages and other neighboring villages were arrested, taken to Haka, and severely tortured, for it. The chairman of Tlangpi village was given a twelve-year sentence with rigorous imprisonment, and the others received two to three-year sentences. All the chairmen of the villages in Zahnak Tlang area of the Thantlang Township, Chin State viz. of Lungler, Bungkhua, Dawn, Ralpel, Saikah, Fungkah, Thangzang, Sihhmuh, Ruabuk, Ruakhua, have also been arrested by the same Battalion. Also all the chairmen of the "yatkwet" (block) in Thantlang Town, viz Pu No Lal Ling of School "Yatkwet", Pu Van Hnun of Market "Yatkwet", and Pu Ceu Hnin of Thantlang Association of Baptist Church (TABC) "Yatkwet", have been arrested and tortured. One of them, viz Pu Ceu Hnin of TABC "Yatkwet" was so severely tortured that all his front teeth were knocked out. A good civilian in Thantlang town, by the name of Al Bik, was also arrested, taken to the Camp of the Military Intelligence at Rung Tlang in Hakha, and has been kept in isolation. All these arrests were allegedly made on flimsy evidence that they were in sympathy with the Chin National Front CNF.

When all these arrests and atrocities were taking place, the senior pastor of the Thantlang Baptist Church, the Rev. Biak Kam, who is over 60 years old, and the General Secretary of the Thantlang Association of Baptist Churches, the Rev. Thawng Kam, called a meeting to determine how to negotiate with the military authorities in charge of the area and how to make a request for their release. But before they could meet with the military authorities, they were arrested at night on September 7, 1999 and accused of calling a meeting without the authorities' knowledge or permission. They were sent away hastily and secretly by night the same night, on foot, 30 miles away, to the military outpost in Lungler village. They have been kept there. Nothing has been heard about them, as no one has been allowed to see them; hopefully they have not been tortured. These two Baptist pastors were arrested once before, for raising a cross on a hill west of Thantlang in January 1999. It could very well be that they were secretly observed and shadowed.

Thantlang Baptist Church is the biggest church in Thantlang Township, with a membership of over 3,000. Thantlang Association of Baptist Churches(TABC) is a full-fledged association, with a membership of 44 village churches, under the Zomi Baptist Convention, which in turn is a full-fledged convention under the Myanmar Baptist Convention, the national convention of all the Baptist Churches in Burma. There is a great fear that church members could be tortured and their lives be in danger. All the men in Thantlang town have relocated for fear of being arrested by the military.

### **9.3. Church Leaders Tortured In Lautu Tract**

The Lautu Baptist Churches Conference [under the Zomi (Chin) Baptist Convention] was scheduled to be held on February 22, 1998 in Thantlang township. The church leaders went to Hakha to get permission from SPDC office. They got no reply. Shortly after, Burmese Army troops from IB 266 and IB 50 came with 100 soldiers to the Lautu village tract. In every village of the Lautu tract, they arrested all the Church leaders. The soldiers accused Churches leaders of supporting CNF insurgents. Church leaders were forced to lie down under the sun at noon and ordered to look at the sun by the soldiers. Those who closed their eyes were beaten. The army ordered them not to hold that conference. All the villagers felt so upset because the Army had prevented them from holding the Church Conference.

### **9.4. SPDC Stormed Chin Christian Church**

Source: National League for Democracy Central Executive Committee Press release

On the July 7, 2000, the Chairman of the Tamu township authority, Captain Khin Maung Myint, and his group went to the Seventh Day Adventist Church in the village of Tin-ka-ya, which is about six miles from Tamu (Sagaing Division). He summoned the village chairman, U Htaung Kho Yan, and other leaders, including U Htan Lein (a Mission School teacher) to a meeting. Captain Khin Maung Myint stepped up on to the pulpit with his army boots, a place that is regarded with great reverence by the Christians who normally take their shoes off as a mark of respect. He shouted, "With whose permission was this school opened. Where is the permit?" The church elders very courteously explained that in 1976, the school opened to teach religious teachings as well as basic reading and writing skills.

Captain Khin Maung Myint refused to accept any explanation given by Church elders. He ordered U Htaung Kho Yan and U Htan Lein to stand up in front of him, and he beat them both on their backs and faces with the special offertory bags used by the church. He drew his revolver out and pointed it at their heads one after the other. Then he took two bullets out and said "These bullets are for you Chins." He went on punching and kicking them. He smashed the chairs and tables and other paraphernalia (bibles and a sound system) on the pulpit and spat out expletives against the Chin people and Christians. The expressions he used are so strong that they cannot be repeated. He then had both U Htaung Kho Yan and U Htan Lein arrested and locked up at the Tamu police station.

On July 10, 2000, the Captain ordered the closure of all the Christian schools in the township. News of this was published in the foreign media on July 15. This caused him to

fly into a rage. U Pa Jya Kin, the pastor of the church was arrested and locked up in the police station where the torture and persecution could be compared to the fascist torture chambers. In addition, as a punishment, all the villagers of Tin-ka-ya were made to plough the ten acres of land on the Captain's private property.

The military dictators are constantly proclaiming that there is freedom of worship, but the above clearly proves that this is not so. It also reflects their attitude towards the ethnic minority groups. Moreover, every kind of pressure is applied to non-Buddhists, and the right to freedom of worship is denied to them.

The National League for Democracy vigorously and emphatically denounces this behavior and attitude of the military dictators in the treatment of the national groups, in the bullying tactics to bind them with fear and terror, in their disregard for the provisions of Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 18 on "freedom of religion." We urge them to take effective action as required by law against those who have no qualms about flouting the law and cavalierly brutalize others.

Source: Central Executive Committee  
National League for Democracy  
No: (97/B)  
West Shwegonedine Road  
Bahan Township  
Rangoon , 7 August 2000

### **9.5. Burma's Junta Arrested Two Prominent Chin Christian Ministers**

#### **CHRO April 10, 2002**

In a renewed effort to curb Christian activity, Burmese military junta arrested two highly respected Christian ministers on Friday April 5, 2002, a reliable source in Rangoon told the Chin Human Rights Organization yesterday.

Rev. Htat Gyi/That Ci and his son-in-law Pastor Lian Za Dal, alias Saya Tun Lin, were arrested on Friday night in a midnight raid conducted by local officials in their residence at 49th Dagon North, in the outskirts of Rangoon city. Local officials also took eight other extended family members into custody, the source said.

Rev. That Ci was arrested shortly after he returned home from the Block Peace and Development Council office to file guest registration for his daughter and son-in-law who were visiting him in his Dagon North residence. According to the source, the local authority turned down the Reverend's petition for guest registration, saying the Township authority would first review his request after which they would inform him of the result. "He returned home believing that he would be informed of whether he was allowed to have visitors over or not," said the source.

But at around midnight, the local authority raided the residence of Rev. That Ci and arrested all family members in the house on account of failing to file the guest registration.

The source noted that although the cause of the arrest is described as "failure to file guest report," in the interrogation center Rev. That Ci was asked if he would stop holding worship service.

A member of ethnic Chin, Rev. That Ci worked as a middle school headmaster and also worked extensively with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) before joining Myanmar Evangelical Gospel School of Theology where he later earned a Masters in Divinity.

That Ci is known for his evangelical works among Burman Buddhists in Dagon North area, and Township and District authorities warned him several times to stop proselytizing. "Having drawn many Buddhists into his church, the authorities had also warned him not to construct a church building in the local area. However, Rev. That Ci always defiantly ignored the warnings, saying he did nothing detrimental to the stability of the state," added the source.

Independent verification of the report by CHRO confirmed that Rev. That Ci and Pastor Lian Za Dal, who is also known among the Burmese as Saya Tun Lin, were detained at Dagon North police station for one night, and the next two nights at a location on Barr Street before they were sent to Insein Prison on Monday, April 8, 2002. The whereabouts of the other family member detainees could not be verified. However, the source further suggests that the two ministers could have been released during their initial detention on the condition that they stop preaching, but it was likely that they refused the offer in exchange for their release given the fact that they have now been sent to Insein Prison.

Ethnic and religious minorities have been the targets of persecution in Burma under the military junta, the State Peace and Development Council, largely dominated Burman Buddhists. Christians make up only a small percent among the predominantly Buddhist populations in Burma.

The United States State Department's Annual Report on International Religious Freedom, designated Burma as Country of Particular Concern two years in a row, for violating religious freedom. The reports specifically cited persecutions suffered by ethnic Chin Christians in Chin State in the western borderland of Burma.

### **9.6. A Chin Pastor Killed In Paletwa Township**

Rev. Luai Thang graduated from Matupi Theological School in 1989. Shortly after he finished his studies in Matupi Theological School, he was appointed by Zomi Baptist Convention to serve as an evangelist pastor in Paletwas area of Southern Chin state. In Paletwa region, the Chin people predominantly were animists and some are Buddhists. Because almost all the Chin people profess Christianity, the Chin State is marked as the only Christian State in Burma. However, some parts of the Chin State have not been

reached and they still remain as remote regions in the view of Christianity. Among them was Paletwa region in Southern Chin State.

Rev. Luai Thang was the first evangelist pastor sent to Paletwa township in Southern Chin State from Northern Chin State under the big project launched as Chins for Christ in One Century (CCOC) by Zomi Baptist Convention. The aim of CCOC, which was started in 1983, was to evangelize all the Chin people by the year 2000.

Thus, Rev. Luai Thang arrived at Pyichaung village, some 12 miles west of Paletwa and served as missionary pastor.

On June 7, 1993 while he was officiating his local associate Mr. Pek Thong's wedding ceremony at Suilaipi village, Sergeant Tun Myint ("kah-pah" private number/459663) and soldiers of other ranks from Minpya "kha-mah-yah" Light Infantry Battalion LIB 379, Company 3 arrived at the village. As soon as they arrived, Sergeant Tun Myint vigorously entered into the house and bluntly kicked, punched and beaten Rev. Luai Thang several times with his riffle butt, citing that he (Luai Thang) was holding a Christian service without obtaining permission of the army. After the Burmese soldiers had humiliated and badly beaten up Rev. Luai Thang in front of the congregation and the wedding ceremony being officiated by him, the soldiers warned him that they will not tolerate the presence of any Chin Christian pastor in the area.

Rev. Luai Thang has suffered serious injury and pain that he has written in his diary, which his family member has found out after his death, for several weeks until his dead body was found after two months of the beating.

On August 14, 1993, the dead body of Rev. Luai Thang was found in a river near the village, with his arms broken and the cuts by assumed long knife or sword at his shirt, one at his chest and the other one at his back. How he got that wounds had become a mystery.

He left his wife Ngun Hlei Sung and daughter Raisy just over one year old at that time. He also left his unfinished church building that was being under construction.

### **9.7. How And Why The Burmese Army Murdered Four Chin Christians**

A Burma Army battalion (Kha-lah-yah unit) Light Infantry Battalion 89, Commanded by Lt.Col. Thurah Sein Win was stationed in Phailen, a border village at the Burma-India border, in the Homalin district. In July 1993 a soldier from the Army unit disappeared with four rifles, leaving behind a letter saying that he was leaving because he was unhappy with life in the Burmese Army.

Subsequently, the Army unit accused the Christian community of Phailen of buying the arms from the soldier with church funds, to help the anti-Burmese State Law and Order Restoration Council SLORC resistance movement, the Kuki National Army. The Kuki are Chin, who live in the Indo-Burma border areas (in the Kale –Kabaw Valley extending to Tamu (Sagaing Division).

The army unit arrested several leaders of the community and kept them in the army camp lock-up. On August 2, 1993 they interrogated one of the prisoners, Pastor Zang Kho Let. When the Pastor's answers did not please the interrogators, the army personnel beat him with rifle butts or sticks that eventually broke almost all of his bones after two days of interrogation. They cut open his mouth to the neck and told him "We cut open your mouth so that you will no longer preach". In the two days that they tortured him, Pastor Zang Kho Let never admitted to using the church fund to help the resistance movement or that he was involved in helping the armed resistance. The soldiers, Non Commissioner Officer NCO's, and officers tortured the pastor with the intent to kill but he was still alive after two days of their inhuman brutality. When the torturers reported to their Commanding officer, Colonel Thura Sein Win, on the condition of the pastor, the colonel ordered them to tighten a plastic bag over his head. (Thura is an award given for bravery, like the torture of the preacher.)

After Pastor Zang Kho Let died, they dragged his lifeless body out of the school building and shot him. With a bullet wound in his body, the Burmese army unit claimed that they shot the pastor because he was trying to escape. The soldiers brought the dead body of Pastor Zang Kho Let back in the school building and placed together with the leaders of the village community, who were arrested to witness the gruesome state of the body. They were told to feel the bones, which were all broken. They were told, "If you do not tell us the truth and if you do not admit that you helped the KNA, you will face the same fate."

The headman of the village, Zang Kho Ngam, farmers Ngam Khai, and Thawng Kho Lun admitted to helping the resistance movement in order to escape torture and death. Nonetheless, they were tortured. It took seven days for the three of them to die; they died a slow death. The soldiers cut and burned their skin. They poured salt directly into their open sores. The soldiers zealously repeated the torture that they had just meted out to Pastor Zang Kho Let. When the two farmers died, the soldiers again dragged the bodies outside of the school building and shot. The Burmese Army buried the headman Zang Kho Ngam alive.

Burmese officers ordered seven ethnic Naga soldiers to carry out the torture of the villagers under their supervision. At that time, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) and the Chin (Kuki) community in the neighboring Manipur of India, were at war against each other. The NSCN was an insurgent group, fighting for the independence of the Naga in India. When the NSCN demanded taxes from the Kuki communities in Manipur to support their movement, the Chin refused to support the NSCN. The Chin and Naga were both Baptist Christians. Their quarrel escalated to mass killings during the early 1990s when they competed to control the drug road (Tamu-Imphal Highway). The Chin took control of Mohree, the town opposite Tamu on the Burma side, the main gate of the drug coming from Burma to India. It was a war in which Chin innocent children including babies, women and older people were slaughtered, whole villagers were shot and their throats slashed. Villages were burnt, and leaders of the Chin community were murdered. The Indian government could not control the killings because the Naga had the upper hand and by 1995 over 2000 Chin had been murdered.

The Burmese use Naga soldiers in Burma army to torture the Chin village leaders purposefully exploiting the ethnic conflict between the Chin and the Naga, and the Burmese Army achieved their goal of bringing hatred between the three Union citizens, Burman, Chin and Naga. This is the Burmese way to national unity. The soldiers placed the rest of the village men, whom they arrested, in jail for two years, during which they plundered the village, killing all the domestic animals they could find, including chickens, pigs, and cows. They robbed the church of its fund of over two hundred thousand Kyats.

The Burmese Army's Project was to settle or force relocate ethnic Burman to the Tamu area because Tamu area had a Chin majority. With these kind of scary and brutal tactics they forced the Chin to leave the area. They created new Burmese villages such as Aungzeya and Bandoola. Chin villagers from the area were forced to build new houses for the Burman, who were relocated from the Monywa and Mandalay areas. They were allotted farmlands that previously belonged to the Chin. The Chin were then forced to leave the area.

### **The Reasons Behind the Killings**

The force relocation and killings are a part of SLORC's Secretary I General Khin Nyunt's " Border Area Development Project," which is implemented by intimidation, forced labor, forced relocation, and murder. Khin Nyunt, who is Chinese by birth, seeks approval of his own Burmanization by promoting the cause of the Burman through cruel treatment of the non-burman nationalities in the border region. These methods were common practice by General Ne Win, a Sino-Burman, by mistreating the Karens and Arakanese during the Japanese occupation when he was a high ranking officer of the Burma Independence army.

The Burma Army's brutality in the Shan State during the early days of independence (starting in 1950) was also Ne Win's attempt to gain the approval of the Burman of his standing in the Burman society. The shan members of parliament protested in parliament but they were hopelessly outnumbered in parliament by Burman members of parliament and Ne Win could carry on his atrocities against the frontier people- the tradition is very well preserved until today.

Other officers of Chinese descent "prove" their loyalty to the Burman by oppressing the non-Burmans. Dr. Nyi Nyi, a Chinese, as minister for education under the BSPP, systematically discriminated against the students from the border regions. Knowing full well that access to education, facilities, and teachers were bad in the border areas, he raised qualification (matriculation) scores for university entrance exam. The higher standards effectively barred students with lower scores from the more prestigious professions such as medicine and engineering. Without making an effort to raise the quality of education in the border areas, the people from the border areas were left with fewer doctors and engineers due to the education system introduced by Dr.Nyi Nyi.

Qualified teachers assigned in the remote areas resigned from their posts and moved to Burmese cities to open tuition schools to prepare students from the cities and towns for the matriculation examination. Less qualified teachers then replaced the teachers in the border regions. The students in Burman towns and cities therefore command even higher scores. Dr. Nyi Nti launched the education system in his search for approval by the ethnic Burman of his programs against the non-Burman, thereby successfully disadvantaging the people of the border regions, which are populated the no-Burman nationalities.

The Chin (Kuki) in the Tamu areas thought that the Border Region Development Project launched by General Khin Nyunt was a genuine project. Thus they sent an emissary to Rangoon, and approached the father-in-law of Khin Ntunt's daughter. He was to give Khin Nyunt the message that his men (the Burmese Army had murdered their people and terrorized the Chin. Finding his Border Development Project implementing exactly what he had wished, Khin Nyunt quietly transferred Col. Thura Sein Win. There was no redress for the people killed. Khin Ntunt, of course, received the approval of his boss General Ne Win and his contemporaries, the generals who are all ethnic Burman.

The process to Burmanize the people at the border regions and Buddhistization of Christians is one of the main target of the Border Development Project. Such killing of village elders was the tradition of Burmese Army. They calculate that at least a few angry youth would join the armed resistance groups thereby making sure that resistance movement against the Burmese Army is continued and subsequently giving the Burmese Army a freehand to terrorize the people and thus prolong the military dictatorship. It must be added that the Burman power holders since independence had been instrumental in creating systematic force assimilation by forced Burmanization of the non-Burman nationalities.

The actions of General Ne Win, General Khin Nyunt, and Dr. Nyi Nyi against the non Burman nationalities to gain the approval of the Burman of their Burmanization, were extremely effective in creating suspicion, animosity, and hatred between Burman and other nationalities. This does not mean that the Chinese community is to be blamed for the destruction of national unity. The hard working Chinese and Sino-Burman are the backbone of Burmese economy and Burma needs their drive and energy for Burma's future development. It is unfortunate that a few bad people could so effective in thoroughly destroying the unity of the whole country.

*["How and why the Burmese Army Murdered Four Chin Christians" is provided by Dr. Vum Son Suantak. This reports was published by Chin National Journal in 1998]*

### **9.8. 100 Civilian Men Detained In The Church**

On 26 June 1999 a Burmese soldier disappeared from a patrolling army unit enroute to Tlangpi village from Lung Ding village of Thantlang Township, Chin State.

The disappeared soldier was among the 34 soldiers from Light Infantry Battalion 266 led by 2nd Lieutenant Kyaw Soe, based at Lungler army camp located north of Thantlang

town near the Indian border. The soldier who was extremely exhausted due to hunger was left behind half way during the patrolling.

Upon noticing the disappearance on arrival at the destination village, the commander 2nd Lt. Kyaw Soe ordered a section of army to search for the lost soldier overnight. However, instead of searching for the soldier, the assigned soldiers met on the way with smugglers who herded cattle to be sold in Mizoram State of India and extorted 50,000 kyats from them. The next day, the commander with his soldiers vainly headed for Farrawn village to find the soldier. They returned to Tlangpi and ordered the villagers to find the soldier. However, the attempt too proved to be futile. They returned to Lungler camp to report the matter to Captain Phyu Win, LIB 266 Second Battalion Commander and temporary camp Commander, who had just arrived to the camp ahead of him.

Under the Command of Captain Phyu Win, the soldiers again immediately went back to Tlangpi village. On 1 July 1999, the Captain forcibly ordered a total of more than 100 villagers, 40 villagers each from Lung Ding and Tlangpi villages, members of Village PDC of Tahtlang village and another 15 villagers from the same village to search for the lost soldier. Some villagers who were afraid of being forced to find the soldier had to go on hiding in the farm. Worried that those already taken to search the soldier would escape, the soldier kept them in a Church in Tlangpi and strictly guarded them.

The arrested villagers had to sleep without blankets and had to be fed by Tlangpi villagers. Despairing of the search, the Captain finally ordered his inferiors to arrest every male in the village indiscriminately at midnight to clear trees and bushes around the cart way linking Lungding-Tlangpi-Farrawn. The villagers however dared not defy the order. The lost soldier is still yet to be found and the villagers are facing immense difficulty as the incident coincided with the cultivation season by which they make their living.

## **PART III.10**

### **10. RESTRICTION ON FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY AND WORSHIP**

Like all other freedoms, freedom of assembly is subject to severe restriction in Burma. This restriction does not exempt freedom of assembly in religious contexts.

All gatherings and conferences, including celebrations of religious festivals, require prior authorization by the military regime. However, it is usually extremely difficult, if not impossible, to obtain such authorization for occasions with potentially large turnout. Citing the risk of security associated with such events, the regime arbitrarily limits the number of people who can attend an event. Moreover, organizations must apply directly to the Ministry of Home and Religious Affairs in Rangoon for permission, a process which involves a long waiting period. This time-consuming bureaucratic procedure creates uncertainties, and it often results in the event having to be cancelled or postponed. People suspect such kind of procedure is deliberately used to prevent Christians from conducting their religious affairs.

In rural areas, local army commanders often issue direct orders forbidding worship services, as well as Christmas and New Year celebrations. The following is transcript of radio broadcast by the Oslo-based Democratic Voice of Burma on December 23, 2002.

The SPDC frontline troops summoned people from Haka and Thangtlang Townships in Chin State and told them they were not allowed to hold any Christmas ceremonies and prayer meetings. They went from village to village and told them if they wanted to hold any ceremony they were to hold it in a simple and discrete manner at their homes. Although the chairmen of the village Peace and Development Councils and pastors argued that Christmas is a very auspicious feast for Christians and requested them to allow Christmas celebrations, the column commander of the SPDC forces refused and said that if they hold any such ceremonies, rebels from the Chin National Front, CNF, could infiltrate and that is the reason such ceremonies are not allowed.

He also said that if the chairmen and pastors deliberately held any such Christmas feast in defiance of the order, the village chairmen and pastors would all be arrested and recruited as porters. They also threatened to dislocate people: people from southern Chin State would work as porters in the north, and people from northern Chin State would work as porters in the south. A villager from Lungler village in Thangtlang Township, who arrived recently in India, said that the Chin Christians are angered by the junta's threat, and they are now undecided whether to hold the Christmas celebrations. They also worry about what will happen to them if they are forcibly taken as porters for celebrating the feast. The SPDC has ordered only low-key celebrations in Haka, Falam, and Tiddim in Chin State.

**Below is a report made by CHRO in 1999**

### **10.1. Uncertainty To Celebrate Centenary**

The uncertainty of celebrating the Chin Christian Centenary to be held in Haka, the capital of Chin State, is reported from inside Burma to CHRO as follows: "It is likely that we are not going to have the Centenary Celebration" Rev. Tialkap said. The military personnel in Haka said, as Tialkap quoted, "Your celebrating seems like it is going to be very elaborate. We cannot give you permission to have the celebration because some foreign guests are also invited. You have to seek the permission from the Ministry of Home and Internal Affairs." Rev. Tialkap told CHRO yesterday (3rd of February, 1999) that a request is being made to the Ministry of Home and Internal Affairs. If the application is turned down, they will proceed by approaching the General Secretary-1 of State Peace and Development Council Gen. Khin Ngunt. If the General Secretary-1 persists in refusing them, there's no prospect of celebrating the Centenary.

Although the Centennial Celebration Committee tried to negotiate with military personnel in Haka before approaching the Ministry of Home and Internal Affairs, to see if they would consider not inviting the foreign guests, their attempts were in vain.

## **PART III. 11**

### **11. CENSORSHIP ON CHRISTIAN LITERATURE AND PUBLICATIONS**

Since the military government came to power in 1962, the Christians in Burma, especially non-Burman nationalities have mostly been unable to print the Holy Bible in their own language inside Burma. Chin Christians, for instance, printed the Bible in the Chin language in India, and smuggled it into Burma in the 1970s and 1980s. Even the Holy Bible in Burmese, which was translated by Rev. Judson in the 1820s, never received permission to be reprinted from the Censor Board of the BSPP, or at least the Old Testament never did. Only the New Testament, together with Psalms and Proverbs, once received permission to be printed during the entire period of BSPP administrations, that is, from 1962 to 1988.

The CHRO received a report in the year 2000 that, in the month of June 2000, the SPDC officials in Tamu ordered 16,000 copies of the Bible to be burned in Tamu, Sagaing Division that borders India. These Bibles, which were seized in 1999 by the Burmese Army, are in Chin, Karen and other ethnic languages. Leaders of Christians in Tamu area have made an appeal to the Burmese military regime not to burn the Bibles. An appeal was also made by the biggest Baptist convention in Burma (Myanmar Baptist Convention) to the SPDC officials in Rangoon. However, they received no reply from the Army. In early 1999, the Burmese army also seized 30,000 copies of the Bible written in Chinese language and kept it in the military storerooms in Kaley Wa, Sagaing Division. No one dare to claim these Bibles.

## **PART IV**

### **DISCRIMINATION AGAINST CHIN CHRISTIANS**

#### **12. DISCRIMINATION BASED ON ETHNICITY AND RELIGION**

*“In the army, A, B and C are categories designated for those who can not be promoted in rank. A stands for AIDS symptom, B stands for Hepatitis B and C stands for Christians. Under these categories, those who are carrying AIDS disease are discharged from the military and those who have Hepatitis B are transferred to civil service. And all those belonging to category C (Christians) are not given promotion.”*

*Major Thawng Za Lian*

Burma has not signed or acceded to most of the major international human rights treaties, much less Convention on Elimination of all kinds of Racial Discrimination (CERD) and International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), both of which contain specific provisions relating to the rights of minorities. It is not, therefore, surprising that discrimination based on ethnicity and religious identity is not a new phenomenon in Burma. Since independence in 1948, non-Burman ethnic nationalities and

other minority groups who profess religions other than Buddhism have faced systematic discriminations in various social and political settings.

Under successive Burmese governments, people of non-Burman ethnic and non-Buddhist background find themselves discriminated against their Burman Buddhist counterparts in education, employment and various levels of civil service. Even those in the army and police serving successive governments were systematically denied promotions in rank on the sole basis of their ethnicity and religion.

Since the 1980s, the new Burmese citizenship law required that every citizen of Union of Burma register for a national identity card on which all particulars including the bearer's ethnic and religious backgrounds should be provided. Although the initial intention was to exclude "foreigners" such as Indian and Chinese immigrants from citizenship, the introduction of the identity card has had a far-reaching impact on ethnic and religious minority groups. Because the card is essential for travel, employment, health care and higher education, people of non-Burman and non-Buddhist background could be easily denied for employment as well as promotion in civil service on the basis of the particulars provided on the national identity card. In many instances, for Christians and other religious minorities, promotion in civil service is conditioned by their conversion into Buddhism. Many Christian civil servants with outstanding service records have been blatantly denied promotion while their Buddhist peers with less qualification and less seniority quickly rose to high ranking positions. Even a few exceptional non-Buddhist individuals securing high ranking positions were sacked or forced to retire from their positions.

Biak To, a Chin Christian who had served in the Burmese army from 1973 to 1990 as a Captain and later became a Lieutenant Colonel in the police explains how he was sacked for no apparent reasons in 2000:

*"At the time of my dismissal, I was the only person holding a B.A degree among officers of my rank in the entire nine Police Regiments in Burma. In fact, I should have been the first one to be considered for promotions. Obviously, the authorities did not want to see a Chin Christian holding high position that they made a pre-emptive move to dismiss me without any apparent charges."*

Although there is no official state religion in Burma, successive Burmese regimes, including a democratic government of the then Prime Minister U Nu, have glorified Buddhism over all other religions. In spite of the fact that both the 1947 and 1974 Constitutions guarantee a degree of religious freedoms to all religions including Christianity, non-Buddhist religious groups have faced restrictions and strict regulations on their activities. The state of Burma has, in fact, been intimately associated with Buddhism. Such discriminatory practices have resulted in major dissatisfaction against the central government, triggering off ethnic armed revolts in the years following Burma's independence. For example, armed rebellions in the 1960s by the Kachins and Chins who are largely Christians were seen as direct results of the adoption of Buddhism as the state religion by U Nu's government.

While blatant discrimination against non-Burman and non-Buddhist communities have existed for decades, it developed into an extreme form under the current ruling junta, State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC)/State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) which views religion as a potential threat to its rule. Under the SLORC and SPDC, the age-old discrimination became institutionalized state machinery. In fact, the primary pre-occupation of successive governments have been to maintain “national unity” through the policy of “Burmanization,” a policy aimed at assimilating all non-Burman nationalities into mainstream Burman culture. Burmanization, in fact, manifests itself in twofold. Since Burman ethnic group or even the very term Burma has been closely associated with Buddhism, the Burmanization policy also becomes an instrument to not only assimilate other cultures but also other religions. Unfortunately, the state has been trying to implement this policy through force, intimidation and coercion.

The following interviews with two ranking ex-army officers show how the SPDC practices discrimination on non-Burman and non-Buddhist members of the Burma Army.

### **13. Interview with Major Thawng Za Lian**

**CHRO:** Can you give us a description of your personal as well as career background?

**Major Thawng Za Lian:** I am the second of five siblings born to parents Pu (Major) Za Hup and Pi Sun Doi. Because my father was a professional soldier, we lived in different parts of the country, mostly in plain areas. I was born on April 2, 1956 in Lashio of Shan State. I first started attending school in Mandalay. I went to at least 5 different schools before I graduated from high school in 1974. I enlisted in the military in April 1975 to take the officer training course in May Myo. Upon my successful completion of the course in 1977, I was sent to field to serve as an Apprentice officer in 106 Light Infantry Battalion. The very next year in 1978, I was promoted to the rank of a second lieutenant. Again in 1979, I got promoted to a lieutenant and in 1982 I became a captain in the battalion. I got married in January of 1983, and I became a Major in 1993. So I was in the army from April 1975 to January 1997.

**CHRO:** Did you hold any other civilian positions other than the military?

**Major Thawng Za Lian:** When I was a captain, I worked in the Township People Council of Hakha from 1985 to 1988. Again during my post as a captain, I worked as a secretary of Township Law and Order Restoration Council in Eame in Irrawaddy Division from 1988 to 1989. From 1990 to 1991, I worked as chairman of Township Law and Order Restoration Council at Zalun. Following my retirement from military service, I worked in Myanmar Railway from 1997 to 1999.

**CHRO:** Looking back at your military as well as non-military careers, how do you feel about them?

**Major Thawng Za Lian:** As you could easily imagine, being in the army means to be in the battlefield almost all the time. So we were always walking on the thin line between

life and dead. What is even worse is that the non-Burman ethnic soldiers such as me were always asked to go to the frontline and other zones that are considered more dangerous. What I hated most in the army was the need to comply with orders from above regardless of whether you think they are right or wrong. These kinds of situations do not exist in civil service. Moreover, in the civil service, we have the opportunity to work for other people, which I found it satisfactory and rewarding.

**CHRO:** Where in the country were you based mostly during your military service?

**Major Thawng Za Lian:** Mostly I was in the Shan State. I was there for about 9 years. A single trip in the frontline would usually take anywhere from 6 months to one year. Also, I was in the delta region and Tavoy for a few years.

**CHRO:** As an army veteran, do you know or have close working relationship with any of the well known members of the State Peace and Development Council?

**Major Thawng Za Lian:** General Tin Oo, the former Secretary 2 of SPDC (Now deceased) was a close colleague of mine. I've worked together with him when he was a Major, and had a very good personal relationship with him even after he became a General. I've also worked under the command of General Maung Aye (Now SPDC Vice Chairman) when he was a Colonel.

**CHRO:** It has frequently been claimed that there is a power struggle among some of the top SPDC officials? What is your view on these claims?

**Major Thawng Za Lian:** Each official of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) seems to be trying to entrench their position by seeking a base support and loyalty within the army. My observation is that none of the top-ranking SPDC members trusts one another. Just before I quit the army, they made a new rule within the army top ranks who could or could not have lunch inside the War Office in Rangoon. This new rule only permits Brigadier Generals and higher ranks to enter the War Office with their lunch pack. All people below the ranks of Colonel must eat their lunch outside of the War Office, which means they have to go out to eat every mealtime. Moreover, nobody is allowed to use the telephone during lunch time. This new rule was implemented for fear that people might smuggle in bombs and explosives. As for top members of the SPDC, they locked themselves up inside their office with their personal security guards, which is also new because security guards used to be only posted outside of their doors. It was due to these security measures that the posting of all officers above Major to Rangoon need to be authorized by General Than Shwe, who runs background check on these officers.

What this means to us, the non-Burman ethnic officers, is that we became automatically disqualified for considerations for posting in Rangoon. It was for the same reason that even those ordinary officers who are assigned in Rangoon for security are not allowed to carry ammunitions. Only commanding officers are given ammunitions at their disposal for emergency situations. In spite of all the mistrust that exists within the military, the SPDC leaders are nevertheless cooperative and working together when it comes to their collective survival as military dictators.

**CHRO:** Why did you quit the army?

**Major Thanwg Za Lian:** I had waited for at least four years for the order of my promotion to come and I realized that nothing had happened in those four years. Then I decided to ask to my superiors about it. But they told me outright that I would get promotion within a week if I converted to Buddhism from Christianity. It was then that I realized that the rank of Major is the highest position I could ever get in the military and decided to quit the army. One interesting fact I should tell you is that at the time of my leaving the army, all of my peer officers were already promoted to either Lieutenant Colonel or Colonel.

**CHRO:** You have mentioned that you faced discrimination on the ground of your religious identity as a Christian. Do you think that the Generals would still have placed the same level of trust on you like all other Burman officers had you converted into Buddhism? Or do you think you would still experience discrimination for you not being a Burman?

**Major Thawng Za Lian:** I believe I might have been promoted if I had converted to Buddhism, at least to the position of a Colonel. However, I am sure this wouldn't have worked in a long run because there would still be certain limitations as to how high a rank I could get due to my ethnic background as a Chin national. This is nothing new for me throughout my military career, and the Burman military officials have never trusted their non-Burman ethnic counterparts.

**CHRO:** You mentioned that non-Buddhist officers can not be promoted to a position higher than a Major. But there are two well-known Christian Generals who made it to the top of the SPDC leadership. How would you explain about General Kyaw Ba and Brigadier General Abel?

**Major Thawng Za Lian:** It's true. General Kyaw Ba is a Christian but he never minded bowing and kneeling down before Buddhist monks or Buddhist pagodas. In essence, we could say that his devotion to Christianity is not all that deep-rooted. During the BSPP era following the assassination of Brigadier General L. Hkun Hpa (A Christian ethnic Kachin), General Ne Win felt the need to have a Christian commander in the Northern Command to replace L. Hkun Hpa. Thus, Kyaw Ba was then picked up for Commander of the Northern Command in Kachin State. He was later promoted to the rank of Brigadier General by the SPDC. And he was actually made a Minister of SPDC. But what happened to him in the end? He was eventually humiliated by the SPDC and dismissed in shame.

In the case of General Abel, he was exceptionally skilled and competent in his job as Chief of Army Supply Unit and there were just no one who could run the job like he did. Moreover, SLOR/SPDC needed him very badly because of his exceptional fluency in English. This was why the SPDC had promoted him to Brigadier General. But in the end, he too was booted from the army and SPDC in the last reshuffle of the junta.

**CHRO:** At the time of Burma's independence, the most well-known and high-ranking soldiers in the national army were from Karen, Kachin and Chin etc. Obviously, there are no ethnic people in the top circle of present day's Burmese army. Is it because the non-

Burman people are less qualified or educated or less brave compared to their Burman counterparts?

**Major Thawng Za Lian:** When Burma became newly independent, the British administrators handed over 5 Karen battalions, 5 Kachin battalions, 1 Shan battalion, 4 Chin battalions, 1 Karenni battalion, 6 Burman battalions and 1 Korkha battalion to the succeeding Burmese government. At that time, there were more non-ethnic soldiers than Burma soldiers within the entire national army. There were also quite a number of Generals who are from the non-Burma ethnic background. Once the above Battalions were handed over to the Burmese government, Burman people started to take over all high positions in the military. This was one of the reasons why the Karen Battalion mutinied and started fighting against the Burmese government.

In fact, this was the start of the Burmans dominating all facets of political power. You can see that at present, there are no non-Burma ethnic people in the Burmese military whose position are higher than the rank of a Major. However, there are exceptions; those who are in legal and medical profession within the military do enjoy the chance of being promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel because they do not wield weapons and therefore are not a part of the political hierarchy. However, during the Ne Win era, one Kachin and one Chin national did become Generals, most apparently as a showoff by the Socialist government that there is national unity in the country. These two Generals were indeed deserving of these honors. Under the SPDC, however a person is qualified in his professional military career; unless he is a Burman or a Buddhist he can't have the rank higher than a Major. The fact is there are the same numbers of qualified non-Burman professional soldiers within the present day's Burmese army as that of the immediate post-independent era.

**CHRO:** Could you tell us about your personal relationship with the local people in the areas where you have participated in military operations?

**Major Thawng Za Lian:** I would describe my personal relationship with the local populations during the operations as very good. In all the places that I have been, the local people [who are ethnic people] knew me as a good and kind person and had attachment with me. I had once helped a group of Lahu ethnic tribe who were displaced by war to establish a new settlement besides Namkar River in the vicinity of Maishu. Now I am very happy to learn that these people have made themselves a well developed and sufficient village.

**CHRO:** You have been in the Burmese military from the time of Burma Socialist Program Party to the era of State Peace and Development Council. From your experience, what, if anything, is the difference between the BSSP and the SPDC?

**Major Thawng Za Lian:** During the BSPP era, discrimination on religious and ethnic grounds did exist. But their desire to demonstrate that such discrimination didn't exist forced them to avoid blatant discrimination. At least one or two people were actually put in high position of authority during this period. Moreover, there were no restrictions on the ground of ethnicity and religion in applying for military officer training in those days. Now, although unofficial, eligibility for officer training is that one has to be a Buddhist

and a Burman. General Maung Aye has on his table four criteria on which to deny promotion of army officers.

These include criteria for those who are Christians, non-Burman ethnic nationals, Burmans married to Christians and those who are Burman but are married to Christians or Muslim girls. Even during the era of State Peace and Development Council (Especially during Than Shwe-Maung Aye era), things have dramatically changed. Blatant discriminations for ethnic and religious identities have become more common.

In the military, A, B and C are categories designated for those who can not be promoted in rank. A stands for AIDS symptom, B stands for Hepatitis B and C stands for Christians. Under these categories, those who are carrying AIDS disease are discharged from the military and those who have Hepatitis B are transferred to civil service. And all those belonging to category C (Christians) are not given promotion. For all these factors, the present SPDC regime is worse than the BSPP government, or any other government for this matter.

#### **14. Interview With Lieutenant Colonel Biak To**

**CHRO:** How was your life during your service in the Burmese Army and Police?

**Lt. Col. Biak To:** My father was Rev. Lal Hnin. He was one of the first Chin converts into Christianity. So, I was grown up in a good Christian family. I finished high school from Haka State High School and graduated from Mandalay University in 1972.

I was a weight lifter and healthy young man. I would like to become an army officer. Therefore, after my graduation from university, I applied for Military Officer Training School. However, because I am a Chin ethnic nationality, my application was not considered. So, I joined the army as a private on November 17, 1973. I tried very hard to please my superiors in performing my duties. I was promoted to Lance corporal in February 1976 and corporal in October of the same year in 1976. Because of my work performance, I was allowed to join Officer Training School in 1979 in service. Then I became second Lieutenant in April 1980. That means it took me almost 8 years to reach this level while other Burmese Buddhist graduates could attain this level of rank just one year after their graduation from a university.

The vast majority of the ranking officers in the Burmese Army are Burman Buddhists. As a result, I was always discriminated against the dominant Buddhists for my being an ethnic Chin Christian. For example, the non-Burman soldiers were selectively assigned in the front line to fight against the Karen rebels, saying that we were brave and loyal. The ethnic soldiers were, in fact, respected as the most brave and hardy fighters in the Burmese Army. As ethnic minority soldiers, we enjoyed virtually no rest time and were never given permission or leave to visit our relatives. The most frustrating thing was when we returned from a successful operation or captured enemy positions, the Burman soldiers who remained in the rear all the while and did not participate in the actual combat got promoted, while we, the actual fighters were neglected for promotions. A

Burman officer with less educational background and service experience would become a Colonel while I remained as a Captain. Our superiors would always encourage us to become Buddhists so as to be considered for promotions, but we always chose not to be promoted than abandoning our faith. An ethnic soldier would not be promoted to a position higher than Major regardless of his service years and how many times he had been transferred.

There is no difference in the Police either. We were repeatedly told to convert to Buddhism if we really aspired for promotions. This also tended to be a mere deception. A close friend of mine, Thein Lwin, an ethnic Shan Christian converted to Buddhism for want of promotions but was never promoted. He just ended up being cheated of his faith.

On July 10, 2000, I gave a speech to the police parade mentioning my being a Chin Christian and son of a pastor that from childhood, I never wanted to tell lies, steal or misbehave and that I wanted everyone to do likewise. Four days later, on July 14, I received an order saying that I have been dismissed from the police.

**CHRO:** Do you know the reason why you were laid off?

**Lt.Co. Biak To:** I still have no idea on what exact account I was dismissed. The order came all of a sudden without any formal procedures. Under normal circumstances either a preliminary inquiry or departmental inquiry should have been conducted before a government servant could be tried for any misconduct or violations of rules. There was no such thing happening in my case. At the time of my dismissal, I was the only person holding a B.A degree among officers of my rank in the entire nine Police Regiments in Burma. In fact, I should have been the first one to be considered for promotions. Obviously, the authorities did not want to see a Chin Christian holding high position that they made a pre-emptive move to dismiss me without any apparent charges. It just did not end with my dismissal. In an attempt to prevent me from leaving the country, the authorities disqualified me from being eligible for a passport in seven years. However, I was able to obtain a passport under a fake name and secretly managed to sneak out of the country. I have a wife and three children remaining in Burma. I am constantly worried about them because if the authorities found out my absence, my family would be subject to harassment and persecution.

**CHRO:** As a ranking police officer, can you tell us about the prison conditions in Burma? Under what conditions do the prisoners commonly live?

**Lt.Col. Biak To:** Prison conditions differ from one another. In a major prison like Insein prison, different inmates receive different treatment depending on the severity and importance of their case. Inmates serving political sentence would receive better treatments in terms of food and facilities so as to look good before foreign agencies that might come to assess the prison conditions. All the prisoners in general, are not adequately receiving food and medical attention. In some cases, prisoners mostly depend on their relatives who brought them food from outside. Prisoners having no relatives

around have to stay hungry. There are nine hard labor camps across Burma in which inmates have to work on government's agricultural projects and road construction etc. This usually happened under serious conditions and beyond the prisoners can endure. There is no medical treatment available for them unless their relatives can send them money to buy medicines. But then jail officials would always take the money for themselves. The number of death in prisons is dramatically increasing everywhere. People are so much afraid of being ended up in the country's prison that they are fleeing the county each day.

**CHRO:** What is the nexus between the military regime and drug?

**Lt. Col. Biak To:** I do not know much about the drug. Drugs come mostly from the area controlled by Wa militants, which had signed cease-fire agreement with the SPDC. This drug involved mostly stimulant tablets and fewer amount of cocaine. There are more than 50 such refineries operating in Wa area. These drugs are transported and smuggled out to Thailand from where they are transported again to other countries.

**CHRO:** How would you describe your views with regards to the present military regime and the country's problems in general?

**Lt. Col. Biak To:** What appears to be the main problem with the present military regime is a notion that they can stay in power as long as they can cheat the people. They do not seem to care about what is going on around the world other than their own ideological belief. They have sold off all the country's natural resources including teaks and gemstones and pocketed it for themselves. Huge amount of money is spent on military hard wares and equipments. They projected some money on building bridges and dams, which they boasted them in the State-controlled Television broadcast and newspapers as the unprecedented achievements that ever happened only under their reign. They believe that no one including the UN can interfere with the internal matters and that they will run the country as they like.

What military regime has in mind is only the benefits and welfare of their own families while the people at large are being pushed to the point of starvation. Prices are skyrocketing day after day and year after year. A person could live easily on 3.15 kyats a day earning in the 1960s. But today, kyats 300 cannot even survive a person. Inflation rate is fast becoming high because the government had allowed former Drug lord Khunsa and his associates to launder their drug money in the country, which involved large scale buying of properties and land across the country.

The question of democracy seems to be still far away. The military officials have enjoyed very much the taste of being in power that they will never want cede it again. They do not even attempt to understand what democracy really is. The cry of ethnic minority for self-determination and federalism means some sort of separatism or independence movement to the military junta. All their intention and attempts are only to suppress any kind of elements they deem a threat to them. Their targets have constantly been the NLD and Aungsan Suukyi. They are now trying to expand the arm force on a daily basis. More than thrice the numbers of normal recruits are now in the Defense Studies Academy in

Maymyo. Because the junta has held everything so tight without any assistance or effective pressure from abroad, I think the question of democracy is still not within reach.

## **PART V**

### **GOVERNMENT'S POLICY ON STATE RELIGION**

#### **15. State-Sponsored Expansion Of Buddhism In Chin State**

“Through the 1990's, the Government increasingly has made special efforts to link itself with Buddhism as a means of asserting its own popular legitimacy. State-controlled news media frequently depicted or described SPDC officials paying homage to Buddhist monks, making donations at pagodas throughout the country, officiating at ceremonies to open, improve, restore or maintain pagodas, and organizing ostensibly voluntary "people's donations" of money, food, and uncompensated labor to build or refurbish Buddhist religious shrines throughout the country. State-owned newspapers have routinely featured, as front-page banner slogans, quotations from the Buddhist scriptures. Buddhist doctrine is part of the state-mandated curriculum in all elementary schools.....

.....Government security forces continued efforts to induce members of the Chin ethnic minority to convert to Buddhism and prevent Christian Chin from proselytizing by highly coercive means, including religiously selective exemptions from forced labor, and by arresting, detaining, interrogating, and physically abusing Christian clergy. Authorities in Chin State continued to remove Christian religious monuments.....”

*[U.S. Department of State Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999]*

Since 1990 the military regime State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) [SLORC was renamed as State Peace and Development Council in 1997], have promoted Buddhism over Christianity among the Chin. Until the 1890s the Chin generally practiced either Christianity or traditional indigenous religions. The Chins were the only major ethnic minority in the country that did not largely support any significant armed organization in active rebellion against the Government or in an armed cease-fire with the Government. Since 1990 the Burmese military regime State Peace and Development Council, with assistance from monks of the Hill Regions Buddhist Missions, coercively have sought to induce Chins to convert to Theravada Buddhism and to prevent Christian Chins from proselytizing Chins who practice traditional indigenous religions. This campaign, reportedly accompanied by other efforts to "Burmanize" the Chin, has involved a large increase in military units stationed in Chin State and other predominately Chin areas, state-sponsored immigration of Buddhist Burman monks from other regions,

and construction of Buddhist monasteries and shrines in Chin communities with few or no Buddhists, often by means of forced "donations" of money or labor.

In many occasions Buddhist pagodas replace the Crosses planted by Chin Christians. In every major town in Chin state, the military regime and the Hill Region Buddhist Missions have built pagodas by using Chin Christians as forced laborers. The two most publicized aggressive construction of pagodas occurred in Falam and Haka two of the biggest towns in northern Chin state; in Falam township, the cross planted by Chin Christians at the mountain top near the Ruun river was destroyed by the Burmese army and replaced with Buddhist pagoda. Likewise, the Cross planted by Chin Christians from Haka at mount Rung was toppled by the Burmese army and replaced with the statue of a Buddhist monk from Lungpi, which the Chins in Lungpi area named him as “*Kawl Thiam Zing pa*”.

## **16. COERCED CONVERSION**

*“We were promised that 1200 kyats per month would be provided to those families who became Buddhist and 800 kyats per month for those individuals who became Buddhist. Furthermore, we would not only be provided with rice and other materials, but we would also be free from portering, forced labour, and extortion of money. And our children would be provided with their education by the government.”*

CHRO Interview with a Chin farmer in his 40s from Matupi Township, in December 1996

Along with other methods to Burmanize the Chin, the SPDC has converted many Chin Christian families through coercion. The SPDC rewards people who convert to Buddhism by exempting them from forced labor, giving them ration and monthly allowance. The SPDC also tries to entice Chin Christian children by offering them government scholarship as part of the “Border Areas Development Program”. Parents often entrust their children and enrolled them in the program. However, children are later found to be in Buddhist monasteries with their head shaven to become novice Buddhist monks.

On 30 May 1994, copies of the following letter from the Thantlang township LORC were distributed in both Burmese and Chin languages throughout Thantlang town and to all villages in Than Tlang Township:

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### **16.1. ORDER TRANSLATION**

Township Law & Order Restoration Council  
Thantlang Township

Letter No. 01/3-1/TLORC (Than Tlang)

Date: 1994 May 30

To:

Chairmen

Quarter / Village Law & Order Restoration Council Groups

\_\_\_\_\_ town / village

Subject: Announcing the provision of higher education to children

1) Regarding the above subject, with the purpose of giving higher education to the children for the development of areas in the state, those below the age of 14 years are to be provided with food and clothing, provided education, and trained to be refined individuals without any racial or religious discrimination.

2) Therefore, nationals should send their children either to Rangoon or to Than Tlang town in order that they may be educated. Bearing in mind the well-being of their children, they should announce the giving of higher education to the villages.

Remarks

(1) The State will provide lodging, board, clothes and all other necessities for the children who enrol for higher education.

(2) These children should bring with them all their particulars: date of birth, names of parents, National Registration Card number, name of village, and religion.

(3) These children should be sent to Than Tlang town before the end of July 1994.

(4) They will be allowed to worship and practice their own religion.

Attached is a copy of a translation in Chin language

**[Sd.]**

(for) Chairman

(Cin Za Pum, Secretary)

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Some of the Christian Chin in the township believed the announcement, and at least nine children were entrusted into the care of the Township LORC. They were taken first to Thantlang town, then to Rangoon. They were completely cut off from their parents, who learned that all of the children were living at Kaba Aye Buddhist monastery in Rangoon. In December 1994, the parents went to the abbot of the monastery to see their children, but permission was refused.

Two weeks later, Dr. Hmuh Thang, a Member of Parliament for Thantlang township elected in the 1990 election, went down to Rangoon to attend the National Convention and learned about the Chin children. He asked for authorisation to see them and was granted permission. He found that the boys had had their heads shaved in order to become novice Buddhist monks, while the girls had been pressured repeatedly to have their heads shaved to become novice Buddhist nuns, but had thus far refused. All of the children cried and begged to be taken home.

**A similar report was received In February 2003 as follow;**

## **16.2. Five Chin Christian Children Escaped From Buddhist Monastery**

5 February 2003

**Aizawl:** Five of several Christian children who had been placed in various Buddhist monasteries after they were recruited by Buddhist monks from Matupi Township in Chin State during the last two years, ran away from the monastery in the last week of January 2003, a local man who just arrived to Mizoram said. He added that two children still are still remaining in the monastery.

Salai Val Thang was placed at Rangoon Hill Buddhist Mission Center, located at *Thit Seih Kan* ward, Theinkan village of Mingladon township in Rangoon, while Salai San De Thang, Salai Se Ki and Salai Aung Naing Myo were placed at Yuamah Pari Gati Buddhist school. Salai Lai Thang still remains at Rangoon Hill Buddhist Mission Center and Salai Kam Lian Thawng, son of Pu Ri Sang in Matupi, is still being placed at Sule Thein Daw Kyi school in Rangoon. They are all between the ages of 8 and 17.

Most of the children are from poor family backgrounds, and they were lured away from their parents with the pretext of giving them education in bigger cities. However, the children were instead placed in Buddhist monasteries where they were made to put on robes. The children have since attempted to run away.

All Children were placed in different monasteries, making it difficult for their parents to make contact with them. The parents are now very worried because neither can they afford to travel down to the monasteries nor can they ascertain the location of their children. Even conditions about the two children who are known to be remaining at a monastery in Rangoon are difficult to be followed up on.

The five children, now back to Matupi, say they refused to learn lessons taught in the monasteries not only because all the lessons were about Buddhist percepts and principles but they were made to put on robes and follow strict monastic disciplines.

The children were recruited at various times in Matupi area since 1998 by Buddhist monk Sayadaw U Sein Da who is in charge of a Buddhist temple in Matupi. Placements of the children were arranged by another monk who is second in charge of the temple, and U Za-Wanna from Rangoon Hill Buddhist Mission Center. Moreover, a Burmese school teacher working in Matupi Township by the name of U Htun Pe had played an instrumental role in enticing most of the children.

Since 1997, Burma's ruling military junta, State Peace and Development Council had imposed various restrictions on the activities of Christians in Chin State who constitute more than 90 percent of the population of the State. Buddhist monks in Matupi Township started recruiting children in 1998.

## **PART V. 17**

### **17. CONSTRUCTION OF NEW BUDDHIST PAGODAS**

While the SLORC/SPDC have cease to give permission to construct Christian church and infrastructure since the early 1990s, the military junta has construct monasteries and pagodas in every major town, and army battalion headquarters in Chin state. Every construction was carry out by using excessive forced labor of Chin Christians. In some occasion cross and Christian monument planted by Chin Christians were destroyed and replace with Buddhist pagodas. The following is a report made by CHRO in the year 2002. This kind of incident is reported to be happening in all over Chin state throughout 1990s continue to this date.

#### **17.1. New Buddhist Pagoda Being Built In Chin State with Forced Labor**

November 20, 2002

Chin Human Rights Organization

A small Christian village in northern Chin State is the site for a new Buddhist pagoda being built by the Burmese military regime, State Peace and Development Council SPDC, as part of a program to promote Buddhism in a region where the inhabitants are predominantly Christians. Construction of the new pagoda is ongoing at Lentlang, a small village in Tiddim Township, which is located on a major trade route between India and Burma. Authorities are forcing all commercial vehicles mostly operated by Christians passing through the route to carry sand, bricks and other materials needed for building the pagoda at Lentlang.

At least about 10 to 20 small trucks are passing through the border trade route every day, and the trucks are made to transport construction materials from nearby villages of Haimual, Rihkhawdar and Malsawm, without any compensation for their services.

The pagoda construction project was initially supervised by Lieutenant Moe Kyaw Hein from Burmese army Light Infantry Battalion 269, jointly with officers from the local immigration and police forces. However, since the beginning of 2002, the task was taken over by Light Infantry Battalion 266 after they failed to meet the projected date of completion. The officers in charge of the project were reportedly severely reprimanded by higher SPDC authorities.

Residents of Lentlang village, according to available information, are all Christians.

The construction of a new pagoda in Lentlang is among several Buddhist pagodas the military regime has built across Chin State since early 1990s. In 1997, the regime constructed a pagoda at Rih Khawdar village, just eight miles away from Lentlang village. Christians were forced to build and contribute money for the construction of the pagoda. Upon completion of the current construction, the pagoda is expected to stand much taller and larger in size than the one that was built at Rih Khawdar five years ago.

While building new Buddhist pagodas in various parts of Chin State often by using Christians as forced laborers, since 1997 the Burmese military regime has ceased to give Christians permits for building any new church buildings in Chin state.

## **PART VI**

### **CONSEQUENCE**

#### **18. A People and Culture at Stake**

The SPDC's campaign of ethnocide against Chin people has had serious effect on the lives of the people of Chin State. The physiological dimension is rather profound. Many Chin Christians are convinced that their religious faith is making them targets for abuse, and conversion to Buddhism not only provides them a sense of security but also eases their economic hardships. Yet, there are also people who think that persecution because of their faiths makes their spiritual commitments even stronger.

However, it is already apparent that the ethnocide campaign is taking a toll on the Chin society. Families are increasingly separated and more people are feeling the Chinland to seek safety elsewhere. More than 50,000 Chin refugees have fled to India since the 1990s when the military junta began sending thousands of troops to Chinland. Thousands of Chin families have made their way to Rangoon and elsewhere to escape conditions at home, becoming internally displaced persons or IDPs. However, life is no better for those fleeing the country or those trying to find security elsewhere inside Burma. Fifty thousands Chin refugees living in Mizoram are not recognized as refugees by the Indian government and are considered 'illegal immigrants.' Thousands of them have been arrested and forcibly returned to Burma.

The prohibition of Chin language in schools and restriction on publication of Chin literatures has effectively deprived younger generations of the chance to learn their own language. Many Chin children today cannot write in their own language. It is exacerbated by the fact that many Chin children look down upon their own language and instead choose Burmese. Although some Christian churches are independently making efforts to promote Chin literature and language through religious publication, workshop and seminars, the efforts are making little impacts because of limited capacities and inadequate resources.

More Chin people are increasingly cognizant of the urgency for taking serious action to prevent the loss of their culture, language and religion. At the same time, they are also increasingly feeling powerless as a result of continuing occupation of their homeland by Burmese forces who are ruling them at gunpoint. For the Chin people to be able to effectively preserve and protect their identity, the creation of an environment conducive

to human rights is a prerequisite. And unless the SPDC abandon its efforts to 'Burmanize' the Chin, there is no doubt that over the next few decades the Chin will be entirely assimilated into Burman culture.

### **19. Myanmar Christians flee to India alleging persecution**

GUWAHATI, India, Aug 20 (AFP)

More than 1,000 Christian tribals in Myanmar have fled across the border into India this month, alleging persecution by the military junta and Buddhist monks, church leaders said Friday. The Naga tribals, mostly from eight villages in the Sagaing district of northern Myanmar, crossed into the far northeastern Indian state of Nagaland, according to Reverend Zhabu Terhuja, general secretary of the Nagaland Baptist Church Council.

"Buddhist monks aided by Myanmar soldiers have been forcing the Christian Nagas residing in that country to convert to Buddhism," Terhuja told AFP by telephone from the Naga capital Kohima. There are an estimated 20,000 Naga tribals in Myanmar. "Some Myanmarese Nagas are taking shelter in a border village called Pangsa following alleged persecution by the army," said local police chief L.T. Lotha.

"But there is no law and order as such due to the exodus," Lotha said, Church leaders said the Naga Christians were being forced to close down their churches, which had then been desecrated or used as kitchens by the Myanmar army. Reverend Bonny Resu, secretary general of the Asian Baptist Federation said the issue had been taken up with the Myanmar Baptist Convention "so that they can apprise the government about the reports of persecution."

However, Buddhist leaders here questioned the validity of the reports. "Even if your father or mother accepts another religion, being a son you cannot force them to reconvert to Buddhism. So the question of converting Christians to Buddhism by force does not arise," said Gyanpal Bhiku, a Buddhist monk and member of the Northeast Buddhist Federation.

## **Part VII**

### **Historical and Theoretical Analysis on Religious Persecution**

## 20. HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AND THE DENIAL OF MINORITY RIGHTS IN BURMA<sup>♦</sup>

By Lian H. Sakhong

Burma's thuggish ruling elite traffics in drugs and in people--in forced labor, child labor, slave labor. It throws people into medieval torture chambers at the slightest pretext: for owning a fax machine, for making jokes about the regime, for listening to foreign broadcasts. There are some 1,800 political prisoners. Universities have been shuttered for much of the past decade, and poverty has deepened.

*The Washington Post, July 16, 2001*

### Introduction

When the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted in 1948, Burma was one of the first newly independent countries, which enthusiastically endorsed the Declaration.<sup>12</sup> In fact, the smaller countries in the third world like Burma were very enthusiastic about the Declaration because this was the first international agreement that recognises the equality and dignity of all peoples, regardless of the size of their country, regardless of their geographic or ethnic origin. U Thant, the Burmese Ambassador to UN and who later became the Secretary General of the UN in 1962-1971, said that "the Universal Declaration is the Magna Carta of humankind," for its provisions constitute "a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations."<sup>13</sup>

Today, however, we have a military regime in Burma, claiming that the provisions of Universal Declaration of Human Rights are based on Western concepts of government and human nature, that it is a tool of Western cultural imperialism imposed on us, and that it ignores the distinctive cultural values of the Burmese people. General Saw Maung, Chairman of the SLORC, for example, said, "I tell you if anyone wants to enjoy the human rights they have in the US, England and India, provided the country accepts; I will permit them to leave. But in Myanmar [Burma], I can only grant human rights suitable for Myanmar [Burmese] people."<sup>14</sup> As the regime rule the country under the Martial Law, he also said, "Martial Law is no law at all, but the use of force."<sup>15</sup>

Present military junta in Burma can best be described as one of the most repressive regimes in the world. After the bloody coup in 1988, gross violations of human rights, including the draconian suppression of political freedoms, arbitrary detention, torture, rape, disappearances, extra-judicial killings, oppression of ethnic and religious minorities, and use of forced labour are continuously increasing. The Index on Human Misery in 1992, therefore, ranked Burma as one of the world's most miserable countries, estimating that over 16 million of 46 million inhabitants were under the poverty line, and living under insufferable conditions. The year 2003 represented no

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<sup>♦</sup> This paper is presented at the 6<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Human Rights, "Human Rights, Ethnic Minorities and Religions: An Asia-Europe Dialogue on the Impact of Multinational Institutions", on 10-11 November 2003, at the Mandarin Oriental Makati, Manila, Philippines.

<sup>12</sup> . In 1948, the UN had fifty-six member countries; forty-eight countries voted for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and eight countries abstained. Among the eight countries that abstained, six were from the Soviet Bloc, and the other two were Saudi Arabia and South Africa.

<sup>13</sup> . Harn Yawngwe, "The UN Declaration of Human Rights and Its Impact on Asian Values and Democratic Principles" in Jeffrey Hopkins (ed.), *The Art of Peace: Nobel Peace Laureates Discuss Human Rights, Conflict and Reconciliation*, (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publication, 2000), pp.145-146. On that occasion, Harn Yawngwe spoke on behalf of Aung San Suu Kyi.

<sup>14</sup> . Human Rights Year Book 1994: Burma, pp.

<sup>15</sup> . Ibid.

improvements in human rights in Burma; in fact, the situation of the common people is continuing to worsen. Systematic abuses of economic, social and cultural rights by the regime and army has been continuing to grow as the ruling military junta called the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) consolidates its power at all costs.<sup>16</sup>

Since 1991, the United Nations General Assembly and the United Nations Commission on Human Rights have for 12 consecutive years adopted consensus resolutions condemning the military's systematic gross abuse of human rights and its refusal to accept the will of the Burmese people as expressed in the 1990 general elections. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has in effect, expelled Burma from the ILO for the regime's widespread use of forced labour.

Political crisis, civil war and human rights violations in Burma are always related with notorious golden triangle drug trade. Since the 1950's, unable to repel the Chinese Kuomintang troops and unable to pay local defence forces, the Burma Army authorised militia to trade in opium to finance their operations. In the 1960's more militia to fight Shan nationalists were raised and again they were paid by allowing them to trade in opium. Worse yet, in 1989, fearing that some ethnic armies would join the democracy movement; the military signed cease-fires with them. In exchange for not joining the democracy movement, some of the ethnic armies, among them is the United Wa State Army (UWSA), were given the right to 'trade' without any restrictions. So, until recently, Burma was the biggest producer of opium and heroin. The current level of annual production is about 2,000 tons. However, the drug lords in Burma are now switching from heroin to the production of amphetamines which is more lucrative. The fact that cash can be deposited in Burmese banks with no questions asked and the fact that Burma's drug lords are now known as successful 'entrepreneurs' in Burma's new economy and live in Rangoon, all point to the fact that the regime benefits from the drug trade.

In addition to drugs, Burma is a major source of HIV/AIDS infection, which will in the long run affect regional stability. Burma after India and Thailand has the highest incidence of HIV/AIDS in Asia. It is understandable that India with a population of 1 billion has the highest number. Thailand's HIV/AIDS problem is caused by its rampant sex trade. But through public education and good policies, the situation is slowly being brought under control. Burma's HIV/AIDS epidemic is mainly caused by drug addiction. It is illegal in Burma to own a needle. Addicts, therefore, share needles. In testing drug addicts in northern Burma over 90% tested positive. The problem is compounded by contaminated blood. When the military requires blood transfusion, the blood is taken from prisoners. There is no screening. The next factor is the fact that more and more Burmese women and girls are being sold into the sex trade in Thailand. When they test positive, they are shipped home without any explanation and the military sends them back to their home villages. There is no information, education or treatment program. The military in Burma is still denying that HIV/AIDs is a problem. The World Health Organisation and other independent sources estimated at least 500,000 HIV/AIDs positive cases in Burma.

Another major problem, which has a bearing on the matter, is the fact that education in Burma has virtually become non-existent. In the past 14 years, universities have been closed for about 9 nine years. This means that Burma does not now have educated people who can help develop the country. Unable to win the allegiance of students, the military has opted for keeping the universities closed and students scattered rather than provide them with an education for fear that they will organise anti-regime demonstrations which could spark nation-wide unrest. In addition to university closures, an even more disturbing trend was reported by the World Bank recently.

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<sup>16</sup>. Military regime has changed its name from "State Law and Order Restoration Council" (SLORC) to "State Peace and Development Council" (SPDC) in 1996.

According to statistics provided by the regime, in 1989 the education budget was Kyat 1,200 per child per year. In 1999, this figure had decreased to Kyat 100 per child per year! The World Bank also reported that half of the primary school-aged children are malnourished and on average it takes a Burmese child 9.5 years to complete 5 years of primary school. This means that Burma is facing an enormous crisis. Without an educated population, how can anyone build a nation? The statistics take on an even more disturbing aspect when it is realised that this neglect of education is a deliberate policy and not an oversight. During the period that the education budget has been declining, the regime has more than doubled the size of its army from 180,000 men to 450,000 men and purchased US\$ 1.8 billion worth of arms from China. The question is why because Burma has no external enemies. The only possible answer is that the regime intends to remain in power at all cost even to the extent of sacrificing the future of Burma's children.<sup>17</sup>

In this paper, I will investigate the political root of human rights violations and the denial of minority rights in Burma. Instead of compiling detail accounts of human rights violations, I will argue from historical point of view that human rights violations in Burma began with the denial of minority rights by the successive governments of the Union of Burma—even during the so called parliamentary democracy period—in the name of maintaining national sovereignty. Though a certain level of individual rights were guaranteed constitutionally during the parliamentary democracy period, minority rights on the other hand was violated, which in turn became the main source of political crisis as well as gross violations of human rights in present Burma.

While human rights are mainly concerned with individual rights, minority rights are particularly concerned, as a Swedish scholar Alf Tergel points out, with the collective rights “with a view to preserving and developing their specific character and the people's right to self-determination.”<sup>18</sup> The central argument of this paper, therefore, will be the issue of “self-determination”; and try to point out that when the rights of self-determination for minority groups in the country are abused by the power holders of the state, the state itself became a mechanism by which the people's rights area abused, instead of maintaining its fundamental ideal of being an instrument for ensuring civil, political, social and cultural rights.

The main objective of this paper, therefore, is to investigate how the successive governments of the Union of Burma have violated minority rights, including collective rights of self-determination, in the name of “nation-building”, how they abused the rights of minority religious groups in the name of “national integration”, and how the basic human rights are denied in the name of maintaining “national sovereignty”.

### **Human Rights vs. Traditional Burmese Political Values**

In his article “Traditional Values and Universal Rights”, Jack Donnelly argues that every society possesses a perception of human dignity, a particular view of the inner natural and worth of the human person and his or her personal relations to society, perceptions that are reflected in its institutions and practices. He nevertheless maintains that the idea that a person is entitled to equal concerned, respect and a wide range of inalienable personal rights is alien to most of non-Western societies, where social structures and the underlying social visions of human dignity rest mainly

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<sup>17</sup>.Cf. Harn Yawnghe, “Current political situation in Burma”, a paper presented at the South-East Asia Seminar of the Committee of 100, Rauhanasema, Helsinki, Finland, on 13-14 May 2000

<sup>18</sup>. Alf Tergel, *Human Rights in Cultural and Religious Traditions*, (Uppsala University, 1998), pp. 22-23

on social status, hierarchies and duties, not on rights. And he concludes his argument, saying that “persons are not seen as bearers of rights but rather as bearers of duties.”<sup>19</sup>

The concept of human persons as the bearers of duties, not as the bearer of rights, was well developed under the absolute monarchy of traditional Burmese authoritarianism and it is still practiced by General Ne Win and his successors, including current military junta, State Peace Development Council. Maung Maung Gyi, therefore, argues in his *Burmese Political Values: the Socio-Political Roots of Authoritarianism*, that the military coup of 1962 and its consequences of authoritarianism under General Ne Win were “the culmination of a political process”; stemming from a pre-colonial “authoritarian system of native Burmese monarchical rules.”<sup>20</sup> As Maung Maung Gyi observes, “from 1044 to 1885, for over 800 years, the Burmese lived under an absolute monarchy. Its authority was never challenged by any liberal forces during these years until it was overthrown by alien power in 1885.”<sup>21</sup> The Burman pattern of thought on the government was therefore moulded during these 800 years, and “the nature of kingship largely determined the pattern of thought.”<sup>22</sup> Though the “British conquest of Burma in 1885 laid the foundations for a significant change in the infrastructure of Burmese political culture”, he argues, “the impact of British administration was not such as to bring about a revolutionary change in the medieval Burmese mind.”<sup>23</sup> Another way of putting it is to say that the British administration destroyed “the old Burmese officialdom”, but its “ethos was never broken.” And Maung Maung Gyi concludes his argument by saying:

Suffice it to say that the medieval mind underwent no essential change after being ruled by the British over 60 years (in upper Burma) to over 100 years (in lower Burma). One should not, therefore, have serious doubts as to whether the reversion to a one-man-dominated authoritarian rule pattern in 1962 was not an atavistic trends, a return to the age-old Burmese political system with modern trappings of communist genre, which itself is an offshoot of authoritarianism.<sup>24</sup>

In a society where “one-man-dominated rule” is practiced, “duty” becomes a mechanism of power relations between the ruler and the subjects; for the ruler it is his power tools through which his wills are imposed upon the society, and for the people or the subjects on the other hands, “duty” is the mechanism through which they response the ruler by obeying his order. Thus, a society based on “duties” does not recognize “rights”; for “rights are legal recognition of individual will [not the will of the ruler].”<sup>25</sup> Another way of putting the same idea, as Costas Douzinas argues, is that “a society based on rights does not recognize duties; it acknowledges only responsibilities arising from the reciprocal nature of rights in the form of limits on rights for the protection of the rights of others.”<sup>26</sup>

“Human Rights” is a combined term. They refer to “the human, to the humanity or human nature” and the reference to “rights” refer to the concept that “all human being are entitled to the same basic rights”, which are indissolubly linked with the movement of humanism and its legal reform. In this sense, human rights are “both creations and creators of modernity”; originated from classical Greek philosophy, continue via the Magna Carta of 1215, to the 1689 Bills of

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<sup>19</sup> . Jack Donnelly, “Traditional Values and Universal Rights: Caste in India” in Claude E. Welch Jr. and Virginia A. Leary (eds.): *Asian Perspectives on Human Rights* (Oxford University Press, 1990), pp.55-90

<sup>14</sup> Maung Maung Gyi, *Burmese Political Values: The Socio-Political Roots of Authoritarianism* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1983), p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> . *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14

<sup>16</sup> . *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> . *Ibid.*, p. 10

<sup>18</sup> . *Ibid.*, p. 13

<sup>25</sup> . Costas Douzinas, *The End of Human Rights* (Oxford, 2000), p. 12

<sup>26</sup> . *Ibid.*, p. 10

Rights and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen of 1789, and ending with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Thus, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as Douzinas claims, is “the greatest political and legal invention of modern political philosophy and jurisprudence; First, they mark a profound turn in political thought from “duty” to “rights”, from *civitas* and *communitas* to civilization and humanity; Secondly, they reverse the traditional priority between the individual and society.”<sup>27</sup>

It is, therefore, no need to build a foundation for human rights on any particular traditional values; not even on “natural human dignity”. It may be tempting to relate, as Michael Ignatieff observes, “the idea of human rights to propositions like the following: that human being have an innate or natural dignity, that they have a natural and intrinsic self-worth, that they are sacred.”<sup>28</sup> However, “these ideas about dignity, worth, and human sacredness appear to confused what is with what ought to be, they are controversial, and because they are controversial, they are likely to fragment commitment to the practical responsibilities entailed by human rights instead of strengthening them.” Michael Ignatieff, therefore, suggests:

We must work out a belief in human rights on the basis of human beings as they are, working on assumptions about the worst we can do, instead of hopeful expectations of the best. In other words, we do not build foundations on human nature but on human history, on what we know is likely to happen when human being do not have the protection of rights. We build on the testimony of fear, rather than on the expectations of hope. This...is how human rights consciousness has been built since the Holocaust.<sup>29</sup>

The struggle for human rights in Burma, therefore, needs no reference to Burmese traditional political culture or religious value. Human rights—in terms of both idea and practice—is not a subjective value but objective truth, and the creation of human history; it is not account of what is good but what is right, which can be applied universally.

### **Human Rights and Self-determination**

The concept of self-determination has been advanced since the time of the French Revolution, with the idea of the “nation” as the whole people, as the object of ultimate political loyalty, and as endowed with an alienable right to self-determination and separate statehood. When the League of Nations was founded after the First World War, the right to self-determination had become an international phenomenon. The “minority protection” scheme under the League of Nations was in particular a formulation of “the principles of national self-determination”; as Woodrow Wilson put it, “Every people have a right to choose the sovereignty under which they shall live.”<sup>30</sup>

However, the League of Nations’ scheme for “minority protection” was seriously abused by the Nazis, who encouraged German minorities in Czechoslovakia and Poland to escalate their demands for minority rights. When the Czechoslovak and Polish governments were unable to meet these demands, the Nazis used this as a pretext for invasion. Consequently, when the United Nations adopted its Universal Declaration of Human Rights, all references to the rights of ethnic minorities were deleted. The hope was that the new emphasis on “human rights” and the principle of non-discrimination would resolve minority conflicts. Rather than protecting vulnerable groups directly, through special rights for the members of particular groups, cultural minorities would be

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<sup>27</sup> . Ibid., p. 18

<sup>28</sup> . Michael Ignatieff, *Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), p.54

<sup>29</sup> . Ibid., p. 80

<sup>30</sup> Cited in Vernon Van Dyke, “The Individual, the State, and Ethnic Communities in Political Theory”, in Will Kymlicka (ed.), *The Rights of Minority Cultures* (Oxford University Press: 1995), pp. 31–56.

protected indirectly, by guaranteeing basic civil and political rights to all individuals, regardless of group membership.<sup>31</sup>

During the cold war, from 1948 to 1989, both camps of Liberal West and Socialist East put greater emphasis on territorial integrity than on national self-determination. The consensus among the major powers, as Wallensteen explains, was “to describe anti-colonial conflicts as a particular category of conflict”, mainly due to the fact that “the anti-colonial movements provided a potential dilemma and challenge as they argued in term of self-determination”. And he argues:

The goal in the decolonization process was the creation of new states from the territories legally and militarily held by colonial powers. Thus, the issue was control over territory within what was, formally speaking, one state. Some colonial territories were highly integrated into the colonial “motherland”, even with representation in the National Assembly.<sup>32</sup>

The neglect of minority cultures, as Vernon Van Dyke argues, is not a new phenomenon arising during the cold war, but has deep roots in the Western political tradition.<sup>33</sup> In liberal tradition, as Van Dyke explains, the fundamental issue for political theory is the proper relationship between the individual and the state. He argues that the relentless individualism of the traditional liberal approach makes it incapable of explaining some inherently collective features of political life, including the formation of the state itself, “which suggest in principle that liberalism cannot be trusted to deal adequately with the question of status and rights for ethnic communities, most of which are minorities within the state”.<sup>34</sup> Liberalism, in Van Dyke’s view, cannot and does not offer a clear basis for the right of nations or peoples to self-determination, as a right accruing to groups. The liberal tradition, with its individual conception, is he says “unduly limited”, and “it is not enough to think in terms of two-level relations, with the individual at one level and the state at another”.<sup>35</sup>

The problem with the liberal tradition, according to Van Dyke, is that “its theorists have often taken for granted that citizens feel themselves to constitute a distinct group, sharing a common language and a common desire to live together”, and that this community has organized itself into a state through some form of social “contract”. Contrary to this assumption, only in very few countries in the world do all citizens share the same language, or belong to the same ethno-national group. In many countries, he argues, there are two or more ethno-cultural communities living together in a single state. Since liberalism ignores the group basis for political life, “it is blind to the injustices suffered by minority cultures, which can only be rectified by supplementing liberalism with a theory of collective rights”. The flaw of liberalism, in a nutshell, is “its individualism, which cannot accord any status to groups between the individual and the state”.<sup>36</sup>

In the name of “internationalism”, Marxist tradition, on the other hand, ignored the right of self-determination for ethnic minorities during the cold war. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx mentioned that the proletariat have no nationality—they are workers of the world. Marxist tradition therefore views cultural and national divisions as temporary stopping points, whether it is a question of language rights or national autonomy.<sup>37</sup> Thus, in their understanding of national

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. Will Kymlicka (ed.), *The Rights of Minority Cultures* (Oxford University Press: 1995), see especially the introduction.

<sup>32</sup> Peter Wallensteen, *Understanding Conflict Resolution* (2002), op. cit., p. 165.

<sup>33</sup> Vernon Van Dyke, “The Individual, the State, and Ethnic Communities in Political Theory”, in Will Kymlicka (ed.), *The Rights of Minority Cultures* (Oxford University Press: 1995), pp. 31–56.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32; see also Kymlicka’s introduction.

<sup>37</sup> Will Kymlicka (ed.), *The Rights of Minority Cultures* (1995), p. 5.

questions, Marxists define their theory in terms of “historical vs. non-historical nations”. For Marx and Engels, “historical nations” or “modern nations” came into existence “through the embryonic capitalist economy in transition from feudalism to capitalism. As a direct result of this process, the feudal society was slowly united under the structure of the embryonic modern state.”<sup>38</sup> The concept of “non-historical nations”, on the other hand, implied “the people (*Völker*) who had proved to be unable to build a state over a period of time”.<sup>39</sup> Marx and Engels repeatedly argued that “national communities incapable of constituting ‘proper national states’ should vanish by being assimilated into more ‘progressive’ and ‘vital’ nations.”<sup>40</sup> They therefore accepted the right of “the great national subdivisions of Europe” to independence, and hence supported the unification of France, Italy, Poland and Germany, and the independence of England, Hungary, Spain and Russia. But they rejected the idea that the smaller “nationalities” had any such rights, such as the Czechs, Basques, Welsh, Bulgarians, Romanians and Slovenes. These smaller nationalities were expected to assimilate to one of the “greater nations”, without the benefits of any minority rights, whether it be language rights or national autonomy.

During the cold war, the socialist bloc, led by the Soviet Union, strongly supported non-interference and territorial integrity rather than the rights to self-determination. One of the reasons, as Wallenstein observes, is that “the Soviet Union was the country that had made the largest territorial gains as a result of the Second World War. This included the annexation of the Baltic States, the incorporation of territory which formerly was part of Eastern Poland and Germany, and taking over Bessarabia from Romania.”<sup>41</sup> Thus, the Soviet Union and the eastern bloc became a strong defender of the territorial *status quo*. However, during the cold war, the Soviet Union applied double standards in their international relations: on the one hand, its concern for secure borders and political influence in Europe made it a strong defender of territorial integrity; on the other, anti-colonial movements in the Third World, which were very much anti-Western and anti-capitalist, made it a supporter of self-determination. However, as Wallenstein points out, “Soviet support for [self-determination] applied only to colonial situations”.<sup>42</sup>

As we have seen, both liberal individualism and socialist internationalism clearly led to a denial of the rights of minority cultures, especially the right to self-determination, during the cold war. International communities and bodies, including the United Nations, followed the lead given by the two superpowers. Moreover, there is relatively little recognition in international law for substantive minority rights, such as the right to self-determination, although it has been based primarily on the non-discrimination model.<sup>43</sup> Rather than protecting collective rights directly, the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights focuses only on basic civil and political rights for individuals, regardless of group membership.

However, it has become increasingly clear, as Kymlicka argues, that existing human rights standards are simply unable to resolve some of the most important and controversial questions relating to cultural minorities.

The right to free speech does not tell us what an appropriate language policy is; the right to vote doesn’t tell us how political boundaries should be drawn, or how powers should be distributed

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<sup>38</sup> Ephraim Nimni, “Marx, Engels, and the National Question”, in Will Kymlicka (ed.), *The Rights of Minority Cultures* (1995), pp. 57–75.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>41</sup> Peter Wallenstein, *Understanding Conflict Resolution* (2002), p. 168.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Will Kymlicka (ed.), *The Rights of Minority Cultures* (Oxford University Press: 1995), see especially the introduction.

between levels of government; the right to mobility doesn't tell us what an appropriate immigration and naturalization policy is. These questions have been left to the usual process of majoritarian decision-making within each state. The result has been to render cultural minorities vulnerable to significant injustice at the hands of the majority, and to exacerbate ethno-cultural conflict.<sup>44</sup>

Since the end of the cold war, there has been increasing interest at the international level in supplementing traditional human rights principles with a theory of minority rights. For example, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe adopted a declaration on the Rights of National Minorities in 1991, and established a High Commissioner on National Minorities in 1993. The United Nations has debated both a Declaration on Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (1993) and a Draft Universal Declaration on Indigenous Rights (1988). In 1992, the Council of Europe adopted a declaration on minority language rights (the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages).<sup>45</sup> This new development, after the collapsed of Soviet, is the most encouraging sign for our struggle for democracy and human rights in Burma.

During the cold war, however, ethnic nationalities in Burma did not receive enough support, internally or internationally, in their struggle for the right of self-determination, including greater autonomous status for their national states within the Union. Instead, most of the international community, especially the UN and neighbouring countries such as India, supported the territorial integrity of the newly independent Burma. Thus, in the 1950s and 1960s, the newly independent Burmese government's efforts towards "nation building", "national integration" etc. were directly and consciously influenced by historical developments in the West, and also by the anti-colonial movements in their fellow developing countries.

Thus, human rights violation and denial of minority rights in Burma should be analysed within the historical context of "state formation conflict" which began soon after gained her independence in Burma. State formation conflict in Burma is a vertical conflict between a Burman military-monopolized "state" and ethnic nationalities whose rights have for so long been suppressed by the "state"; not a horizontal ethnic conflict between different segments of the country's population. The political crisis in Burma is therefore a constitutional problem stemming from the reversal of Aung San's policy of federalism and the principle of "unity in diversity" on which the historic Panglong Agreement was based. We therefore need to take a closer look at how Aung San's policy, particularly his policy relating to the Panglong Agreement, was constitutionally reversed by his successor, U Nu.

### **Human Rights, Religion and Nation Building**

Aung San, who persuaded the Chin, Kachin, Shan and other ethnic nationalities to join the Union, had a clear policy of "nation building" based on the principles of "equality" and "unity in diversity". He criticized the notion of religious-oriented traditional Burmese nationalism of "our race, our religion, our language", which he said "have gone obsolete now". And he clearly states "religion is a matter of individual conscience, while politics is social science. We must see to it that the individual enjoys his rights, including the right to freedom of religious belief and

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

worship. We must draw clear lines between politics and religion because the two are not the same thing. If we mix religion with politics, then we offend the spirit of religion itself.”<sup>46</sup>

However, after Aung San was assassinated, U Nu adopted the state religion of Buddhism as a means of “national integration”. Buddhism, indeed, had been inseparably intertwined with the Myanmar national identity, as an old saying so clearly put it: *Buddha bata, Myanmar Lumyo* (“To be a Myanmar is to be a Buddhist”). Thus, it was quite reasonable for leaders like U Nu to believe that Buddhism could make a significant contribution to some aspects of national integration. Historically, Buddhism had played a most important role in binding together diverse ethnic groups such as the Burman, Mon, Shan and Rakhine (Arakanese).<sup>47</sup>

Although Buddhism had been a powerful integrative force in traditional Burman/Myanmar society, the modern, multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural nation-state of the Union of Burma was a very different country from the pre-colonial Myanmar Kingdom. Thus, the fundamental question for the Union of Burma is: Can Buddhism, a vital source of political legitimacy for traditional Burmese kingship, provides equally effective support for the present democratic regime? The question of legitimacy is closely related to the psychological problem of identity. The concomitant questions are therefore: Can Buddhism provides the values needed to create a modern Burmese national identity? In an attempt to solve the problems of political legitimacy and national identity through religion, what happens to religious minorities and the delicate fabric of national unity?

It seemed that that answer for U Nu was “Yes”; and when he became the leader of the Burmese independence movement and Prime Minister of the newly independent Burma, he reversed Aung San’s version of Union Constitution, particularly the clause of separation between religion and politics, declaring: “In the marrow of my bones there is a belief that government should enter into the sphere of religion.”<sup>48</sup> U Nu’s government, therefore, adopted state religion of Buddhism as a means of “national integration”; that is, an attempt was made to achieve homogeneity by imposing religious and cultural assimilation into the predominant group of Myanmar Buddhists. In so doing, Ministry of Religious and Cultural Affairs was created to promote the process of assimilation, even before Buddhism was promulgated as a state religion.<sup>49</sup> The official view, as John Cady observes, was that:

A unity of culture existed among the people of the Union and those existing differences are only expressions of the same culture at different stages of development. The Burman and Pyu peoples had long since been amalgamated; the Mon had almost been absorbed, the Shan assimilation was in progress. The Karens, Kachins, and Chins were also mainly Tibeto-Burman, and all were allegedly suitable for becoming parts of a closely knit cultural organism.<sup>50</sup>

U Nu’s official government policy of “unity in culture” was oversimplified. The Chin, for instance, never accepted Buddhism either as a culture or as a religion. In contrast to the government’s view, the amalgamation of the Burman and Pyu, or the extinction of the Pyu, was a

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<sup>46</sup> Aung San’s speech entitled “Problems for Burma’s Freedom”, delivered on January 20, 1946, in Josef Silverstein (ed.), *Political Legacy of Aung San* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 96.

<sup>47</sup> Burmese political history from the Pagan Dynasty (1044–1287) to the British conquest (1824–86) was characterized by endless struggle between the Burman, Mon, Rakhine (Arakan) and Shan. However, by adopting Buddhism from each other during their long struggles for power and domination, these four ethnic groups shared common values with regard to political systems, customary law and culture, stemming from their common religion of Buddhism.

<sup>48</sup> Jerold Schector, *The New Face of Buddha* (1967), p. 106.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. John F. Cady, *A History of Modern Burma* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1960), p. 638.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 639, footnote 31.

historical reminder which served to awaken the Chin people's self-awareness of a separate national identity, without which they might one day cease to exist as the Pyu people had once done. The Chin therefore, far from accepting assimilation, took the view that U Nu's confessional policy of religion, or what the government called "unity in culture", must be resisted at all costs; and they took arms to defend themselves from assimilation in 1964.

The revision of Aung San's version of the Union Constitution thus proved to be the end of his policy for a secular state and pluralism in Burma, which eventually led to the promulgation of Buddhism as the state religion of the Union of Burma in 1961.

For the Chin and other non-Burman nationalities, the promulgation of Buddhism as the "state religion of the Union of Burma" in 1961 was the greatest violation of the Panglong Agreement in which U Aung San and the leaders of the non-Burman nationalities agreed to form a Union based on the principle of equality. They therefore viewed the passage of the state religion bill not only as religious issue, but also as a constitutional problem, in that this had been allowed to happen. In other words, they now viewed the Union Constitution as an instrument for imposing "a tyranny of majority", not as their protector. Thus, the promulgation of Buddhism as the state religion of Burma became not a pious deed, but a symbol of the tyranny of the majority under the semi-unitary system of the Union Constitution.

There were two different kinds of reactions to the state religion reform from different non-Burman nationalities. The first reaction came from more radical groups who opted for an armed rebellion against the central government in order to gain their political autonomy and self-determination. The most serious armed rebellion as a direct result of the adoption of Buddhism as state religion was that of the Kachin Independence Army, which emerged soon after the state religion of Buddhism was promulgated in 1961. The "Christian Kachin", as Graver observes, "saw the proposal for Buddhism to be the state religion as further evidence of the Burmanization [*Myanmarization*] of the country,"<sup>51</sup> which they had to prevent by any means, including an armed rebellion. The Chin rebellion, led by Hrang Nawl, was also related to the promulgation of Buddhism as the state religion, but the uprising was delayed until 1964 owing to tactical problems. Thus, the Chin rebellion was mostly seen as the result of the 1962 military coup, rather than the result of the promulgation of Buddhism as the state religion in 1961.

The second reaction came from more moderate groups, who opted for constitutional means of solving their problems, rather than an armed rebellion. The most outstanding leader among these moderate groups was Sao Shwe Thaik of Yawngghwe, a prominent Shan Sawbwa who was elected as the first President of the Union of Burma. Although a devout Buddhist, he strongly opposed the state religion bill because he saw it as a violation of the Panglong Agreement. As a president of the Supreme Council of United Hills People (SCOUHP), formed during the Panglong Conference, he invited leaders of not only the Chin, Kachin and Shan, the original members of the SCOUHP, but also other non-Burman nationalities—the Karen, Kayah, Mon, and Rakhine (Arakan)—to Taunggyi, the capital of Shan State, to discuss constitutional problems. Unfortunately, these problems still remain unsolved. The conference was attended by 226 delegates and came to be known as the 1961 Taunggyi Conference, and the movement itself was known later as the Federal Movement.

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<sup>6</sup>. Mikael Graver, *Nationalism as Political Paranoia in Burma* (Copenhagen: NIAS, 1993), p. 56 (Emphasis added!)

At the Taunggyi Conference, all delegates, except three who belonged to U Nu's party,<sup>52</sup> agreed to amend the Union Constitution based on the Panglong Agreement of 1947, that is—the principles of political equality for all member states of the Union, the rights of self-determination for all ethnic nationalities in the country and democratic rights for all citizens of Burma. In short, they wanted to amend the Union constitution in accordance with the principles of federalism and democratic decentralization

In response to the demand of the 1961 Taunggyi Conference, U Nu had no choice but to invite all the political leaders and legal experts from both Burman and non-Burman nationalities to what became known as the Federal Seminar at which “the issues of federalism and the problems of minorities would be discussed with a view to finding a peaceful solution.”<sup>53</sup> The meeting opened on 24 February, 1962 in Rangoon while the parliament was meeting also in regular session. But before the seminar was concluded and just before U Nu was scheduled to speak, the military led by General Ne Win seized state power in the name of the Revolutionary Council in the early morning of 2 March, arresting all the non-Burman participants of the Federal Seminar and legally elected cabinet members, including U Nu himself, dissolving the parliament, suspending the constitution and ending all the debate on federal issues.

In the final analysis, U Nu's greatest hope was “that Buddhism would be the unifying identity in which all Burmese [Burman and non-Burman alike] could discover their nationhood, but in the end it proved one of the decisive dividing factors that led to his defeat and the end of the parliamentary experiment in Burma.”<sup>54</sup> Thus, it was obvious now that Buddhism, which used to be a vital source of political legitimacy for traditional Burmese kingship, could no longer provide the values needed to create a modern Burmese national identity in the multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-cultural plural society of the Union of Burma.

### **Denial of Religious and Cultural Rights under Ne Win's Dictatorship**

As mentioned above, U Nu adopted state religion of Buddhism as a means of national integration. In this section, I will analyse the nature of General Ne Win's dictatorship, and how the *de facto* government of the military regime legitimized itself through traditional Burmese political concepts. As David Steinberg observes, “there have been five foci for the legitimization of Burmese governments or pretenders to power in the twentieth century: nationalism, Buddhism, socialism, military leadership and election”.<sup>55</sup> Since the independence movement, nationalism had been an enduring element of the Burmese concept of political legitimacy, the “*sine qua non* of political life”, as Steinberg so aptly puts it. As we have seen earlier, U Nu apparently mixed nationalism with Buddhism in his attempt to legitimize his government. General Ne Win, on the other hand, mixed nationalism with socialism, and he also used military leadership as a means to introduce national integration to achieve homogeneity in the country.

Nationalism, for both U Nu and Ne Win, was simply based on the notion of “one race, one language and one religion”—that is to say, the Burman or Myanmar race, *Myanmar-sa* and Buddhism. Although their approaches to “national integration” were different, U Nu and Ne Win both had the same goal of creating a homogeneous people in the country. While U Nu opted for

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<sup>7</sup> Those three delegates who did not agree to the idea of a federal Union were Za Hre Lian (Chin), Aye Soe Myint (Karen), and Sama Duwa Sinwanaung (Kachin).

<sup>13</sup> Josef Silverstein in Lehman (1981), op. cit., p. 53.

<sup>54</sup> Jerold Schector, *The New Face of Buddha* (1967), p. 110.

<sup>55</sup> David Steinberg, “The State, Power, and Civil Society in Burma-Myanmar: The Status and Prospects for Pluralism”, in Morten Pedersen, Emily Rudland and R. J. May (eds.), *Burma-Myanmar: Strong Regime, Weak State* (London: Crawford House Publishing, 2000), pp. 91–122.

cultural and religious assimilation into Buddhism as a means of integration, Ne Win removed the rights of the country's religious and cultural minorities, including all civil and basic human rights, as a means of creating a homogeneous unitary state. U Nu and Ne Win thus complemented each other, although their approaches in depriving cultural and religious minorities of their rights were different in nature.

In his campaign against the rights of minority cultures and religions in the country, General Ne Win targeted Christianity as an unwanted foreign religion, while viewing Christian missionaries as people who kept "imperialism alive". Consequently, he expelled all foreign missionaries from Burma in 1966. Until 1966 when the missionaries were expelled, non-Christian Burman nationalists like General Ne Win viewed and understood the existence of Christians in Burma merely in terms of the church's social missions, such as schools and hospitals, and the presence of foreign missionaries in the country. Without these two factors, they thought that "the church will soon weaken and die".<sup>56</sup>

Thus, in order to suppress both Christian movements and different ethnic nationalist movements, General Ne Win's government not only expelled foreign missionaries, but also nationalized all the missionary schools and hospitals in the country. At the same time, the government intensified its military campaign against the Chin, Kachin, Karen and other ethnic nationalist movements. Ironically, when the government suppressed the military aspects of the Chin nationalist movements, the *indigenous form of Christianity*, that is, the church without foreign missionaries became a more valid expression of the Chin national identity in Burma.

#### Restriction on Religious Freedom

The nationalisation of private Christian schools and hospitals had made it clear that the so called "religious freedom" under General Ne Win's regime did not include permission to maintain such Christian institutions.<sup>57</sup> Likewise, the expulsion of foreign missionaries from the country in 1966 indicated that, under the military regime of the Revolutionary Council, religious freedom did not include the right of Christians in Burma (mainly Chin, Kachin and Karen) to invite missionaries from abroad to assist the churches within the country. In addition, the continuing inability of Christians to secure Burmese passports to enable them to attend international Christian conferences was an indication of a further limitation in their freedom of religion.

It was in the area of Christian publications that the increased governmental control was felt very keenly. In 1965, the Revolutionary Council issued the "Censor Law", requiring four copies of any manuscript of a religious nature to be submitted for approval before it could be published. This order included magazines, tracts, and Sunday school materials, as well as books. No arrangements had been made to read or pass on such manuscripts unless they were written in either the Burmese or the English language. Along with manuscripts written in any language other than these two, four copies of a translation into Burmese or English had to be submitted along with the originals. Although a considerable amount of Christian publishing was done in Burmese, nevertheless there was a very great demand for Sunday school materials, hymnals, etc. in the languages of the Chin, Kachin, Karen, and others who constituted the overwhelming majority of the Christians in the country. As can well be imagined, having to translate

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<sup>56</sup> See Herman Tegenfeldt, *Through the Deep Water: The Final Hours of Christian Mission in Burma* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1968), pp. 13-14.

<sup>57</sup> General Ne Win's regime under Revolutionary Council (1962-74) and the Burma Socialist Program Party (1974-1988), officially claimed that "Religious Freedom" is protected by law but it was merely "Freedom of Worship".

manuscripts from these languages into Burmese or English entailed a great deal of work, increased time for preparation, and extra expense.

Once the application to the government had been made, after a period of three weeks as minimum and perhaps several months as a maximum, one could expect information as to whether or not the government had approved the manuscript. Upon receipt of approval, an order could then be given to a printer to do the work. The printer, on the basis of the order, then applied for permission to purchase from the government the paper needed for the job. When that permission finally came through, the printer very often found that he had been granted less paper than requested, and often of a different size and of poorer quality! Average and better qualities of paper were reserved for government printing; only the cheaper qualities were available for the general public, including religious organisations. Thus, in the printing of any piece of religious material it was always necessary to anticipate a delay of a number of months, even years. It was obvious how difficult and trying this could be, especially in publishing materials which have a time limit such as Sunday School lessons.<sup>58</sup>

The 1962 Printers and Publishers Registration Law and the 1965 Censor Law immediately hit not only the publication of Christian literature, but also all the literature of non-Burman nationalities. Following the nationalisation of schools, which used to be the centre of learning for the literatures of non-Burman Christian nationalities, such as the Chin, Kachin and Karen, “successive BSPP administrations embarked on what ethnic minority leaders allege was a straightforward policy of Burmanization” or *Myanmarnization*. Since then, as Martin Smith correctly observes:

Minority language area rarely taught or used beyond the fourth grade in school; ethnic minority publications are restricted to little more than folksy, housewife magazines, such as the Karen *Our Home* and *Go Forward*. The distribution of religious literature, including the Bible, has been restricted and BSPP officials and censors have complained to Christian pastors about the militant language of the Old Testament, which they claim, is incitement to rebellion.<sup>59</sup>

Since the military government came to power in 1962, as Martin Smith point out, the Christians in Burma, especially non-Burman nationalities have mostly been unable to print the Holy Bible in their own language inside Burma. Chin Christians, for instance, printed the Bile in the Chin language in India, and smuggled it into Burma in the 1970s and 1980s. Even the Holy Bible in Burmese, which was translated by Rev. Judson in the 1820s, never received permission to be reprinted from the Censor Board of the BSPP, or at least the Old Testament never did. Only the New Testament, together with Psalms and Proverbs, once received permission to be printed during the entire period of BSPP administrations, that is, from 1962 to 1988.

#### *Restriction on Freedom of Expression*

As far as social change under the military regime was concerned, the most drastic change took place in the realm of the press and other publications. The RC imposed the strongest ever restrictions and pressures, not only on the press but also on libraries and publishing companies. Newspapers were operated either by the government, which had founded *The Working People's Daily*, or else completely under government control. All news from abroad was channelled to the papers through the *News Agency, Burma* (NAB), a government news office. In this way, “Burma’s previously lively press was effectively brought under state control within a few years of

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., pp.18-19

<sup>59</sup> .Martin Smith (1996), op.cit., p. 205

the coup.”<sup>60</sup> Prior to the military take-over, Burma had had more than thirty newspapers. Apart from the leading ones in Burmese and English, there were also five in Chinese, two in Hindi and one each in Urdu, Tamil, Telegu and Gujarati. Moreover, there were many locally run newspapers in non-Burmese languages, such as in Karen, Kachin and Chin. A well-known weekly newsmagazine in Chin, *Hruaituthar* (literally: New Leaders), run by Rev. James Sang Awi, was also banned by the military government.

The same restrictions were placed, as indicated above, on libraries and publishing companies. The RC promulgated the “Printers and Publishers Regulation Law” in 1962, which scrutinised not only “the text, language and subject of new books and journals but even the number of copies printed.” This resulted, as Martin Smith observes, “in a plethora of privately-owned magazines containing only short stories, for these were easier to replace if rejected. All were for entertainment; no news periodicals were permitted. Over the years the same laws were extended to film, music and video companies.”<sup>61</sup>

In short, the 1962 Press Act and the 1965 Censor Act nullified the rights to freedom of opinion and expression, which have been guaranteed to all the people by Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, for the people of Burma.

### **Religious Persecution under Current Military Junta (A Case of the Chin Christians)**

Since the military coup in 1988, the distinction between the army and state ceased to exist, and gross violations of human rights become part of everyday life in Burma. In addition to gross violation of human rights, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) has launching relentlessly the campaign of “Myanmarnization” or “Burmanizing” the country by systematically destroying significant and symbolic identities of non-Burman ethnic groups.

Since the early 1990, the regime has turned its attention to the north-western part of the country, particularly the Chin State, to expand its military establishment there in an effort to gain effective control over the Chin population, who had hitherto remained relatively free from direct Burman control. Although only one army battalion was stationed in Chin State prior to 1988, more than 10 infantry battalions, about five thousand soldiers, are now active in the area. The junta’s justification was to meet Chin insurgent threat, a movement which began in 1988 with the formation of the Chin National Front by a few exiled politicians and members of Chins students and youths who fled to India in the aftermath of the 1988 nation-wide democracy uprising. The Chin National Front is fighting for the restoration of democracy in Burma and self-determination for the Chin people. Neither the SLORC nor SPDC have acknowledged the CNF in the state-run media; nor do they mention the CNF when speaking of the “armed groups” that have yet to “return to the legal fold.”<sup>2</sup> In stead, some officials refer to them as “misguided youths” who would sooner or later see the light and would return to the “legal fold”.

Because the Chin State has the largest concentration of Christians in the whole of Burma in terms percentage, it was not only a large army of soldiers that was brought into by the Burmese regime. In the name of “Hill Regions Buddhist Mission” the junta brought in an army of Buddhist monks who were then dispatched to various towns and villages across Chin State. Protected by the soldiers, these Buddhist monks have considerable powers over the Chin population. In many

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<sup>60</sup> . Bertil Lintner (1994), op. cit., 179.

<sup>61</sup> . Ibid, p.205.

<sup>2</sup> . Chin Human Rights Organization’s report : “All Quiet on the Western Front?”

cases, local people have pointed out that the monks are military intelligence operatives who are more powerful than local army commanders. The Chin Human Rights Organization reported about the monks stationed around Matupi Township as follow:

The monks who live at Zakam, Rezua, Leisen, Vangvai and Tinsi villages rule the communities. Anyone who doesn't abide by the monks orders is reported to the SLORC/SPDC army and he/she is punished by the army. The monks give judgment on all cases. For those who become Buddhist, they are free from any persecution such as forced labour, portering, extortion of money, etc. Whenever and wherever a monk visits, he is accompanied by the army and they arrange a porter to carry the monk's particulars. The villagers were forced to build a Buddhist monastery and temple. But they refused, insisting "we are Christians". Even though the army threatened action against them, they didn't build it yet. Now the monks and army are holding a meeting to discuss this. Nobody knows what will happen.<sup>62</sup>

According to the Chin Human Rights Organization report, the method that the "Hills Regions Buddhists Mission" is applying is as follows:

1. To attack Christian families and the progress of Christians.
2. To criticize against the sermons which are broadcast from Manila, Philippines.
3. To criticize God as narrow-minded and egotistical who himself claimed that "There is no god except eternal God".
4. To criticize Christian ways of life as corrupted and inappropriate culture in Burma.
5. To criticize the preaching of Christians wherever it has penetrated.
6. To criticize Christianity by means of pointing out its delicacy and weakness.
7. To stop the spread of the Christian movement in rural areas.
8. To criticize by means of pointing out "there is no salvation without purchased by the blood of Christ".
9. To counterattack by means of pointing out Christianity's weakness and overcome this with Buddhism.
10. To counter the Bible after thorough study.
11. To criticize that "God loves only Israel but not all the races".
12. To point out ambiguity between the two testaments.
13. To criticize on the point that Christianity is partisan religion.
14. To criticize Christianity's concept of the Creator and compare it with the scientific concept.
15. To study and access the amount given in offerings.
16. To criticize the Holy Bible after thorough study.
17. To attack Christians by means of both non-violence and violence.<sup>63</sup>

A 40-year-old Chin Christian from Matupi Township recounted how he was converted to Buddhism, recruited and trained to be part of a campaign against Christians, as follows:

I was invited to attend social welfare training by the [SLORC (now SPDC)] authority from Matupi on 27/2/95. When I arrived at the place, the authority told us that it is to attend Buddhist hill tract missionary training run by a Buddhist monk named U Razinn at Mindat. As we are Christian, we said we didn't want to go. But the monk persuaded us saying, 'it is no problem if

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<sup>62</sup> . Chin Human Rights Organization's Report: "Religious Persecution: A Campaign of Ethnicide against Chin Christians in Burma" (2003), p.5

<sup>63</sup> . Ibid.

you are Christian, it is just religious training'. So 5 other persons and I took part in the 10 day training. In the training, we were taught the 17 facts of how to attack and disfigure Christians.<sup>64</sup>

Since they came into power, the military junta has ordered the removal of several crosses erected by local Chin Christians on tops of mountains beside a number of villages and towns throughout Chin State. Since early 1980s, Chin communities in various villages and towns have erected wooden crosses on mounds and hill tops beside their villages and towns to symbolize their faith in Christianity, and to remind themselves of the fact that Christianity has played an important role in shaping their modern society and culture. In some cases, however, the erection of these crosses were in response to what the Chin regarded was the State-sponsored importation of Buddhism into Chin State with the construction of pagodas and temples in certain urban areas in Chin State which began in the 1970s.

Destruction of crosses and churches started around early 1990's with the rapid increase in army battalions being established across of Chin State. Since then, almost every cross in all the nine townships in Chin State had been destroyed by the regime. Destruction is usually ordered by the township authorities or by army battalion commanders in whose jurisdiction the cross is erected. After an order is issued, the church or community responsible for erecting the cross is given a timeframe during which they must dismantle the cross. Failure to do so within the given period often meant the cross being destroyed by the authorities and Church leaders being arrested for defiance of order.

While crosses have been removed in several townships, perhaps the most publicized case so far was the removal of a cross in Thantlang Township in January of 1999. The year 1999 marked one hundredth year of Christianity among the Chins. The Centennial Celebration was originally planned for March 15 in Haka, the capital of Chin State where the first American missionaries established their first mission centre in 1899. However, before the official celebration in Haka, advance celebrations were also held locally in various townships under the leadership of local churches. In Thantlang, the celebration was organized jointly by all the different denominations in town from January 1 to 3, 1999. The CHRO reported the accident as follows:

On January 5, when the celebration was over, the organizers erected a Centennial Memorial Cross on a hilltop on Vuichip ridge, located west of the town. Though primarily in remembrance of the early American missionaries, selection of the location for the cross had other significance. In addition to its good view from town, the spot has a spiritual and religious dimension to it. Before the advent of Christianity, Thantlang residents had traditionally believed that Vuichip ridge was the dwelling place of evil spirits and there had been legends surrounding the spirits roaming the ridge. The erection of the cross on that particular location was to signify that evil spirits have been defeated by the crucifixion of Jesus Christ on the cross. The cross was decorated with looking glasses so that it would be more recognizable when it glows with the reflection from the sun.

On the very night the cross was erected, the Township Peace and Development Council ordered the destruction of the cross, compelling the very people who had erected the cross to destroy it. When the people refused, a section of local police were sent to destroy the cross. Six Christian pastors responsible for organizing the Centennial Celebration and the erection of the Memorial cross, Rev. Thawng Kam, Rev. Biak Kam, Rev. Thantu, Rev. Tha Ceu, Rev. Cung Bik and Pastor Beauty Lily were arrested and interrogated by the army. In response, on January 6, the whole town stage a silent protest by closing down their businesses and refusing to go to work, and by

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<sup>64</sup> . Ibid., p. 6

observing a 24-hour fast and prayer vigil in their local churches and homes. Fearing the news of protest might spread to other towns; the authorities shut down telephone connections of Thantlang and arrested 20 more Church leaders. Nevertheless, on January 9, Churches in the Chin State capital, Haka, joined the protest, prompting Chairman of the Chin State Peace and Development Council in Haka to go to Thantlang to end the strike by threatening and intimidating them.<sup>65</sup>

The leaders of the Church, Rev. Thawng Kam and Rev. Biak Kam were arrested, and put into jail without trail.

In addition to destruction of the Chin Christian symbol of cross, the soldiers also disrupted worship services and religious ceremonies, and rounded up people going to Church for forced porters. Moreover, the military has tried to coerce people into converting into Buddhism by targeting Christians for forced labour and other abuses. In many instances, Christian pastors have been physically abused and mocked by the Burmese soldiers. The junta has refused to grant permission to construct new Church buildings and other Christian religious buildings while it has allocated State funds to construct new Buddhist pagodas in various parts of Chin State.

In many major towns in Chin State, partially completed church buildings are still standing unfinished because the State Peace and Development Council does not granted permission to resume the construction. The Carson Memorial Hall was being built in Haka, the capital of Chin State in 1999 by the Haka Baptist Church to be inaugurated on the occasion of one-hundredth anniversary of Christianity among the Chins since the first arrival of American missionaries, Arthur and Laura Carson in late 1890s. The construction was set to be completed before the start of the Centennial Celebration which was scheduled for March 15, 1999. But the junta halted the construction half-way saying that the Church did not obtain authorization from the Ministry of Home and Religious Affairs in Rangoon, although the Hall was constructed within the parameters of Church properties.

As many evidences have pointed out, the Burmese military regime has actively sought after symbolic targets in its campaign of Burmanization and ethnocide against various ethnic groups in the country, and use religious persecution as a means of destroying religious and ethnic identity in the country.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have investigated the root cause of human rights violation and the denial of the rights of religious and cultural minorities, instead of compiling detail account of human rights violations and the denial of democracy in Burma. I have argued that total denial of human rights in Burma began with the rejection of the right of self-determination for non-Burma ethnic nationalities, who joined the Union of Burma voluntarily as equal partner in 1947.

In so doing, I have explored how successive governments of the Union of Burma have abused the rights of religious and cultural minority groups, including the collective rights of self-determination, in the names of “national-building”, “national integration” and maintaining “national sovereignty”. I argued that during parliamentary democracy era, U Nu’s government has adopted state religion of Buddhism as a means of “national integration” by imposing cultural and religious assimilation into the predominant group of Burman/Myanmar Buddhists, as occurred with the promulgation of Buddhism as State Religion in 1961.

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<sup>65</sup> . Ibid., p. 11

While U Nu opted for cultural and religious assimilation into Buddhism as a means of integration, Ne Win removed the rights of the country's religious and cultural minorities, including all civil and basic human rights, as a means of creating a homogeneous unitary state. U Nu and Ne Win thus complemented each other, although their approaches in depriving cultural and religious minorities of their rights were different in nature. Current military regime also shares the same goal but with slightly different approach; they apply the method religious persecution as a means of destroying ethnic identity, especially against the Chin Christians. In short, ever since General Ne Win took over the state power in 1962, the distinction between the army and state ceased to exist, and gross violations human rights become part of everyday life in Burma.

I maintain, in this paper, that the root of human rights violations in Burma related with constitutional crisis and it must therefore be solved through constitutional means of establishing a democratic federal system of government. A democratic federal system—based on the principle of equality for all member states of the Union, the right of self-determination for all ethnic nationalities, and the democratic rights for all citizens of the Union—is the best means to restore the Union of Burma. Thus, for all the democratic forces and ethnic nationalities in Burma, the ultimate goal of democracy movement is to establish a genuine democratic federal union, where various ethnic nationalities from different religious, racial, cultural and historical backgrounds can live peacefully together.

Lian H Sakhong  
Manila

## PART VIII CONCLUSION

*“As Christianity and Chin-ness became inseparable phenomena in a new Chin society, Christianity or the church also played a very important role in the people's social and political lives, not just their religious lives, as they adapted to multi-ethnic/multi-religious environments which the Chin had never faced before. In other words, Chin self-awareness and common identity, especially after the colonial period, mirrored Chin political identification with Christianity”*

(Dr.Lian Sakhong, *Religion and Politics among the Chin People in Burma (1896-1949)*, Uppsala University, Sweden: Studia Missionalia Upsaliensia LXX, 2000, p. 358)

*“Political identification with Christianity, with the Church, gave the Chin a basis for treating the Burman on more or less equal footing.*

(F.K Lehman, *The Structure of Chin Society, Urbana*: Illinois University Press, 1954)

For the Chin today, Christianity or the church has become not only the central pillar of their society but it has also taken root as part of their cultural identity. Burma's ruling military regime's relentless attack on Christianity in Chinland thus constitutes a direct assault on the survival of the Chin people as a distinct cultural society. In other words, by persecuting Chin Christians, the Burmese military regime is committing an act of ethnocide or cultural genocide against the Chin people. As this report demonstrates, persecution of Chin Christians is both systematic in nature and widespread in scope. The consistent nature of persecution of Chin Christians occurring in different parts of Chinland further demonstrates that such efforts are well-planned.

There is abundance evidence that army officers and officials of the State Peace and Development Council are responsible for ordering the physical destruction of Christian church buildings, the burning of Bibles and the removal of Christian crosses that had been planted by local churches on hilltops and mountains. And as this report attests, such orders usually originated with high ranking junta officials. The order to destroy a 30-foot tall cross near Matupi town, according to Matupi residents, for instance, came from an SPDC cabinet member who visited the town in March of 2001.

Since the 1990s, more than a dozen new army battalions have established stations in the Chinland. Accompanying these army battalions are hundreds of Buddhist monks or missionaries under the name of Hill Buddhist Missionary Program, financed and sponsored by the regime. The increased militarization and expanded Buddhist missionary program in Chinland increase the suffering of Chin Christians, subjecting them to arbitrary taxation or 'donation' and forced labour to support construction of Buddhist pagodas and army camps.

The Chin people remain a relatively homogenous society despite cross-cultural interaction represented by the multi-ethnic environments in Burma, and until very recently they remained relatively free from direct Burman control. However, efforts by the ruling military regime to assert control over the Chin population through the deployment of troops and Buddhist missionary programs have now placed them on the verge of losing their cultural identity. It is exacerbated by the regime's restriction on the use and teaching of Chin language in school. The regime only permits Chin language to be taught until grade 2 while banning the use of Chin language as a medium of instruction in high school. The regime also encourages Burman soldiers stationed in Chinland to marry Chin girls and to convert them to Buddhism, using rank promotion as an incentive.

The SPDC is obliged under the articles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) to respect the human right of children to freedom of conscience, thought and religion. In order to achieve this, the SPDC must abandon the practice of taking away Chin Christian children from their parents and converting them to Buddhism against their wishes. In its 2003 report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the SPDC claimed that children of non-Buddhist faith enjoy "full freedom of worship". The SPDC further claimed that "In Myanmar, a child who has Buddhist parents relies on Buddhism traditionally, and a child of Christian or Hindu or Muslim parents also relies on his or her

parents' religion." However, this has not been the case with several Chin Christian children who had been taken away to monasteries in Rangoon and had their heads shaven to become Buddhist monk novices, all without the knowledge of the parents and against the wishes of the children.

Militarization of Chin State has created untenable conditions for the people of Chin State. The widespread and unceasing demands for forced labour for military and Buddhist religious purposes have consumed villagers' most productive times to work for their own survival. In many cases, Christians are specifically targeted for forced labour, creating an increasing sense among many Chin Christians that conversion to Buddhism is the only way to improve their conditions.

Widespread human rights violations and religious persecution that accompanied militarization of Chin State have forced tens of thousands of Chin Christians to flee to India, Bangladesh, Malaysia and elsewhere in the neighbouring countries. Over 50,000 Chin refugees have crossed into Mizoram of northeast India since 1990. India has no national legislation on refugee protection nor is a signatory to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees or to its related protocol. Chin refugees find themselves at risk of being identified as illegal immigrant and deportation to Burma. There is virtually no humanitarian supports for over 50,000 Chin refugees in Mizoram and they must survive by seeking jobs, increasing the chances of being labelled as 'economic or illegal migrants', and thus risking arrest and deportation to Burma.

There is increasing concerns among Chin Christians about the uncertainties of the future. While the regime's campaign of ethnocide is starting to take a toll on the Chin society, it seems likely that more Chin people will flee their homeland to escape human rights abuses there, increasing a threat of their cultures being eroded at an even fast rate. As one Chin pastor puts it "Chinland has become uninhabitable."

The international community has an important role to play in putting to a stop the campaign of ethnocide against Chin Christians, by demanding that the SPDC comply with internationally accepted human rights standards, including with the CRC. The SPDC should also be encouraged to accede to such human rights treaties as Convention on the Elimination of all kinds of Racial Discrimination (CERD), International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Continued pressure needs to be brought to bear to demand that the SPDC respect the rights of all its citizens including religious and racial minorities in Burma.

## APPENDIXES

### 1. The Burmese Military Government's Attitude Towards Christianity

**[Just after Chin Christian Centennial celebration in Haka in April 1999, the CHRO's monitor met one of the most respected Chin Christian leaders, and the following is a survey of the military government's attitude towards Christianity in Chin state. The name of the Reverend is withheld for security reason]**

1. The effort of the military government not to allow crosses being put up on the top of any hill in Chin State by Christians is well known by now. What is so unfair, to my mind, is that the military government did allow the Buddhist group from setting up Pagoda on hills in Chin state without any interference from any body. This is pure injustice.
2. The military government literally forbade the Zomi ( Chin) Baptist Convention's (ZBC) Chin for Christ in One Century (CCOC) evangelists from preaching in Paletwa area; the military "house arrested" (so to speak) seventy of them in their headquarters in Paletwa (one of the major town in Southern Chin state) for six months, while they allow the Buddhist monks to assault Christians in the Paletwa district without any restraint from the military police. The ZBC later withdrew these evangelists since they were not allowed to preach in Paletwa.
3. In all of Burma the Buddhist could build any number of Pagodas anywhere with full Military government's support, whereas Christians are not allowed to build Churches. During the last many years, no Church building has been build officially permitted by the military government. The only permission granted occasionally is to allow to build "a prayer Center" or "mission center" but not Churches.
4. In all Burma armed forces, no Christian has been promoted rank higher than Major. The few colonels are the ones promoted ten or fifteen years ago. Since 1990 many of the Chin officers could go only up to Captain, and not beyond.
5. In Magwe township, many evangelists were sent by the Churches from Chin state, and at least 8 of them are now ordered by the military government to return Chin state, forbidding them to preach anywhere in the district.
6. When the "Chin Evangelical Centenary" festival was about to take place in Haka (the capital of Chin state), the military government officially called it, we have nothing to do with the "white face" arrival in Chin state. They did not openly and strongly oppose the celebration all the way, simply because the military government realized that the Chins would go on and celebrate, with or without military government's permission. Even when the ZBC drew worship service programs, the military government objected to a number items in the program, and the ZBC had to revise the program four or five times before finally giving approval. Why should a government had a say in the service program of the Christian worship service?

7. The military government played delaying tactic as long as they can: when the Chin held worship serviced in Yangon for the celebration, on March 13 & 14- 1999, the Chins did not get permission to worship for days and weeks. The permission came only 30 minutes just before the worship service began. The ZBC applied for permission for Centenary Permission 10 months ahead of time. The military government granted them just 5 days before the celebration started, they did it only when they saw that not granting them permission would be more riskier.

8. The military government allowed only 4,500 guests to attend the centenary celebration in Haka. What they said was, “accept only 4,500 guest or you get no celebration”. That was ultimatum! However obviously more people attended more than allowed.

9. Them military used all types of means to spy on the activities of the Chin Christians, including Buddhist monks. Monks often came to worship service, not because of their interest in Christians’ message, but for other reason and the Christians know it well.

10. The military government did not permit the Carson hall in Haka to be completed. They may say many excuses but the fact remains: they did not allow to be completed. When the military government wanted to have students’ festival in 1998, the military government asked for and received all cooperation from Christians in Haka, including all stones the Christians had collected for their Carson hall, but when Christians wanted to have their centenary celebration, help was not coming; the military government would rather try to prevent the celebration to take place. There is a lot of injustices, and they had the guns. Those who shouted about their suffering are simply silenced either by threat or by imprisonment.

11. Last, the military government kept large armies and those who are stationed in Chin state did not behave like professional soldiers. They would steal and take by force whatever belongs to the citizens without payment: their stealing is well known throughout the length and breadth of the state. I have talked a good number of people whose grocery items have been taken by force or stolen, by the soldiers, including chickens and pigs.

## **2. Burmese Soldiers Stole A Church’s Solar Plate**

Burmese soldiers led by Lt. Kyaw Min of Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) 266 in Vuangtu camp, Thantlang township, Chin State stole a solar plate and a 12-volt battery from Lawngtlang (B) village on October 13, 2000. The soldiers, who said they were running out of batteries, asked the headman of the village to find a solar plate. The headman, Lian Rem (name changed), told the officer that the village didn’t have a solar plate, but unfortunately, the officer saw one that was being charged in the sunlight, and he told the headman to take it. The headman explained that that was the property of a Church. The officer threatened him and forced him to take the solar plate, which he then took for nothing.

The villagers expected that they would get it back the next day, but the platoon commander, Lt. Kyaw Min, asked them to send two porters to carry the solar plate and

the battery to his camp to be his property. It is worth over 100,000 kyats, including the labor charge. The solar plate was donated to the Church by Lawngtlang natives working in Malaysia. Vuangtu and Lawngtlang are villages in Thantlang township, Chin State.

The soldiers in Vuangtu camp had been reported to take property from traders who come and go through Hlamphei, Khuabung 'A' and Lawngtlang 'A'.

### **3. US Says Burma Guilty Of Continued Religious Repression**

**New York, Sept 5, 2000 (AFP)**

The United States claims in a new report issued Tuesday that Myanmar's junta shows no sign of diverting from a long trend of discriminating against religious minorities.

The report on International Religious Freedom accuses junta troops of destroying holy sites in areas populated by some of the country's myriad ethnic minorities. "Security forces have destroyed or looted Buddhist temples, churches and mosques in ethnic minority areas," said the report. "Government security forces continued efforts to induce members of the Chin ethnic minority to convert to Buddhism and prevent Christian Chin from proselytizing by highly coercive means."

The report also says there is "credible evidence" that officials and security forces compelled people to donate labour, or money to build, renovate or maintain Buddhist monuments. "The Government calls these contributions voluntary donations and imposes them on Buddhists and non-Buddhists," the report said. Evidence also existed of severe legal, social and economic discrimination against the Muslim Rohingya minority in the western state of Arakan, the report said.

"There were credible reports that Muslims in Arakan state continue to be compelled to build Buddhist pagodas as part of the country's forced labour program. These pagodas are often built on confiscated Muslim land." The United States is a constant critic of Myanmar's military government and a strong supporter of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Myanmar was one of five countries slapped with symbolic US sanctions for alleged religious intolerance late last year.

### **4. An Appeal To The State Peace And Development Council From Myanmar Catholic Bishops And The Myanmar Council Of Churches**

September 24, 1999

Yangon, Myanmar

May the Peace and Grace of Jesus Christ and God be with you!

A. The Myanmar Catholic Bishops Conference and the Myanmar Council of Churches were formed with the objectives of all Christians in Myanmar to work for Christ's Mission.

B. The Myanmar Catholic Bishops Conference, an organization comprised of 13 Bishops, has been working hard leading 12 Catholic regions.

C. The Myanmar Council of Churches, a leading national Christian ministry, is comprised of 13 members of national Christian denominations that are affiliated with 9 other prominent Christian organizations such as the Young Women Christian and the Young Men Christian Association. The leaders, as well as the members of these organizations, under the above two major organizations are all citizens of Myanmar.

D. Although both of the two major organizations are cooperating with other organizations around the world, they are freely operating in their own cause.

E. The Myanmar Catholic Bishops Conference and the Myanmar Council of Churches are working for human developments for the benefit of the mission and the country. They establish hospitals, clinics, and schools that are basic necessities for a peaceful society; and selfless doctors and teachers are sacrificing in the good cause. Until today, they have established such things as a hospital for leprosy, school for the deaf, school for the blind, school for elderly care, school for orphans and are providing their best possible care for the abandoned and refugees.

F. They are also working with their best possible efforts for better environments, efficient transportation, welfare and developments of the lives of young people, women, and children.

H. To be able to undertake the above mentioned mission responsibilities, the Myanmar Catholic Bishops Conference has formed the "Peace and Justice Commission" and the Myanmar Council of Churches has formed the "Reconciliation and Peace Commission." The basic Biblical principle of the Commission is as follows:

I. Being faithful believers of the peaceful God, who governs with everlasting love, we believe that as we are responsible to build and prosper the virtues that will end conflicts and promote justice and peace, which has always been desired by the people, we will carry out this task so long as we are alive. (Biblical References: Hosea 2:4; Matthew 5:9; Ephesians 2:14-16).

II. We would like to present the hardships and obstacles we have faced while undertaking these tasks in recent years to the national heads. Prohibition of Christian evangelical works in some states and townships, expulsion of mission workers, prohibition of worship services, arrests and persecutions, forced renunciation of Christian faith, and destroying of Christian crosses have been encountered. In some states, repairing of Christian buildings was not allowed. Permission for building was not allowed or permission was delayed. For Christians, crosses are very important because they are the symbols of sacrifice and service for human beings. Therefore, a place for worship and a place for erecting Christian crosses are of prime importance. In publication of Christian literature, some words and vocabularies were not allowed or were restricted by the

censorship board. This restriction can consequently lessen the warm relationship among religious organizations.

Due to the above obstacles, Christians have no peace of mind. Therefore, with the aims of building a new developed and modern country by joining hands in unity with all ethnic nationalities and Burmese, we would like to request and present to the national leaders to solve the above mentioned obstacles. Also, in the future, we will present the needs and difficulties to you as necessary. The Myanmar Catholic Bishops Conference and the Myanmar Council of Churches would also like to state that on the basis of love and justice, we would always try to build a long lasting reconciliation and peace.

May the grace and peace of the ever-lasting God bestow upon our national leaders and our motherland! Amen!

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### ABBREVIATIONS & ACRONYMS

ABM	American Baptist Missionary
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CCC	Chin Christian College
BSPP	Burma Socialist Program Party
CCOC	Chin for Christ in One Century
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women
CERD	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination
CHBA	Chin Hill Baptist Association
CHRO	Chin Human Rights Organization
CNF	Chin National Front
CNLD	Chin National League for Democracy
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CYO	Chin Youth Organization
DVB	Democratic Voice of Burma
EU	European Union
ICSECR	International Covenant on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights
Kyat	Burmese Currency: \$1=800 Kyats
Lai	A sub-group of the Chin ethnic group
LIB	Light Infantry Battalion
MBC	Myanmar Baptist Convention
MCC	Myanmar Council of Churches
MIS	Military Intelligence Service
MP	Member of Parliament
MPP	Mara People Party
NGOs	Non Governmental Organizations
NLD	National League for Democracy
RC	Revolutionary Council
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
TABC	Thangtlang Association of Baptist Church
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN	United Nations

UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee
YMA	Young Mizo Association
ZBC	Zomi Baptist Convention
ZNC	Zomi National Congress
Zo	A sub-group of the Chin ethnic group
ZTC	Zomi Theological College

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