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Overview of the Right to Education for the Chins in Burma

According to 2008 figures from the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), there are 109,334 students in Chin State, making up a fifth of the total population of 533,047 in the State.¹ The same statistics show that there are 4,777 teaching staff in Chin State. This means that in theory there is an average of one teacher for every 22 students. However, this is generally not the case especially in rural areas where up to 200 students share a single teacher.² Understaffing is a major impediment to access to quality education in the rural areas, which comprise the larger portion of Chin State. In many areas, one school is shared by up to four to five villages in the area.

With only 49 high schools, there is no higher learning institution such as college or university in Chin State. High school graduates must continue their higher education outside of Chin State, an added barrier to educational access for Chin students, as well as, a financial burden for parents with one or more students studying in colleges or universities.

1. Banning of the use and teaching of Chin language in official government schools

Since 1990, teaching of Chin language as a separate subject in primary schools has been banned. Prior to 1988, Chin language was allowed to be taught up to the 4th grade as part of the official curriculum. However, only Burmese is allowed as the medium of communication in school since 1990. Informal primary schools set up by communities in the rural areas which provided learning in Chin language have also been banned since 1998.³ The only alternative avenue for learning Chin language is the Christian churches, which discreetly run informal classes for Chin children out of the church buildings. However, these kinds of programs are only possible in major towns where the congregations are big enough to be able to provide volunteer teachers, as well as, financially support such initiatives.⁴ The restrictions on the use and learning of Chin language has meant that a higher percentage of Chin youths are not able to read or write in their own language.⁵ This also means that Chin children are losing part of their culture and traditions that go hand-in-hand with the use and learning of their language.

2. Educational Incentives to Promote Buddhism

The State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) openly use state resources to promote Buddhism through the Ministry for Development of Border Areas and National Races and Municipal Affairs, or *Na- Ta- La*, the commonly used Burmese acronym.

In southern Chin State's Kanpalet Township the ministry is running a school (Border Areas Ethnic Youth Development Training School), which is separate from the regular public school system.

Students wishing to attend the school are required to convert to Buddhism and are accorded free school fees, uniforms and monthly rations.

Since July this year, U Hung Om head of the *Na-Ta-La school*, has been telling young people [high school male students] to change what's written on their identity card from Christian to Buddhism. If they change their religion on their ID card they will get a school uniform for free, a monthly rice and lentil ration.⁶

The SPDC is also providing full scholarships for new Buddhist converts to attend a high school in Mandalay. Graduates of this school are eligible for automatic placement as head or deputy heads of the various government departments at the township level. A senior pastor from Kanpalet recently interviewed by CHRO explains:

They [the SPDC/Na-Ta-La] are basically trying to convert young people to Buddhism. These students who convert are sent to the school and then as soon as they graduate they are given a position with the local authorities. If you carry an ID card that says you are a Christian, it's very difficult to get a job. But Buddhists enjoy all the advantages. Even though the Buddhist and Christian populations are more or less equal in number in our area, they are getting these positions and will dominate all the positions of power in our area. Therefore we will face increasing discrimination.⁷

3. Impediments to Access to Education

(a) Grossly inadequate salary for teachers

In addition to problems with understaffing, teachers are grossly inadequately paid. Teachers must find other alternative means to supplement their income. In Chin State, the monthly salary for a high school headmaster is between 64,000 – 80,000 Kyats (64 – 80 USD), depending on length of service; high school teacher is between 59,000 - 64,000 Kyats (59-64 USD); middle school teachers 53,000 – 59,000 Kyats (53-59 USD); and primary school teachers 47,000 – 53,000 kyats (47-53 USD) respectively. The Township Education Officer, in charge of the education department in a township, earns 100,000 Kyats per month (100 USD).⁸ On the other hand, one 50kg sack of rice costs as much as 35,000 Kyats in the state capital Hakha.⁹ To help meet the teachers' basic needs, some schools resort to collecting compulsory extra fees from students for additional classes after the normal school hours, which usually cover important aspects of the curriculum. In a high school at Rih sub-town of Falam Township, for example, the each student was required to pay 2000 Kyats per month beginning in the 2008-2009 academic calendar year.¹⁰ One parent said:

It is a big extra burden for the parents if they have multiple children attending school. This program has little to do with academic. It is because the teachers need a side income since they cannot survive on their meager salaries.¹¹

In Thantlang Township, arbitrarily-set high admission fees prevented many school students from enrolling. Beginning from the 2006-2007 academic calendar year, the Township Education Officer had imposed an admission fee of 3500 kyats for each high school student, 3000 Kyats for middle

school student and 2000 Kyats for primary level students. When added with the costs of school uniforms and books, each student spent about 20,000 Kyats (20 USD) per year.¹²

Government employees in Chin State, including teachers, also face arbitrary taxation or pay cuts.

2 March 2009: Government employees in Chin State have their meager monthly salary cut for as much as 7000 to 8000 Kyats each month. Although unofficial, the cut in salary is affecting all public employees in the State, making it even more difficult for families of government employees to make ends meet. Not practiced in any other States or Divisions within Burma, the monthly salary cut in Chin State is meant to cover the costs of 'entertainment activities' for visiting 'junta dignitaries' as well as to cover the cost of procuring Jatropha [a type of bio-fuel] and tea seedlings.¹³

(b) Use of students as forced laborers/porters

One of the major impediments to access to education is the Burma Army's total disregard for students' educational welfare. Burma army units have regularly used students and children as young as those still in primary school for portering and other forms of forced labor. This typically happens at harvest time, when villagers are away working in their fields and no adults are available to fulfill forced labour demands.

September 2008: Students studying at a Government High School of Rih sub-town are regularly forced to fence an army camp or work at government-run Jatropha plantations. The forced labor practice using the students started since September of 2008 and happens on every weekend since. Students are threatened with failing their exams for failure to show up at work, and are caned by the headmaster of the school at the school assembly on every Monday.¹⁴

On 15 July 2005, Sergeant Tin Soe, Burma army stationary camp commander of Lailenpi army camp, Matupit Township from Light Infantry Battalion 305, conscripted 10 primary school students and five government employees to carry army ration supplies for a 12-mile distance. They were forced to carry 10 tins of rice, 10 bottles of cooking oil, 15 Kg of fish paste and 7 Kg of dried chili.¹⁵

On 2 August, 2005, Sergeant Thein Win, commander of Sabawngte army outpost from Matupi-based Light Infantry Battalion (304) ordered 18 Sabawngte villagers including 5 teenage girls to transport army goods.¹⁶

On July 24, 2004, Captain Myo Min Naing of Burma army Light Infantry Battalion 274 forced 21 high school students, including several girls from Sabawngpi High School in Matupi Township to carry army goods and supplies between Sabawngpi and Sabawngte village.¹⁷

While the Burmese soldiers are mainly responsible for compelling students to perform forced labor, the regime's township level administrations have also been directly involved in exacting involuntary labor involving students.

An order by U Sai Maung, Chairman of the Tedim Township Peace and Development Council in July 2005 compelled students to perform forced labor to work at government-run tea plantation. Those students who failed to perform the forced labor duty were fined 500 Kyats.¹⁸

(c) Conscription into the Burma army & militia service

The Burma Army often targets youths and high school students for conscription into the army, as well as, the civilian militia or ‘voluntary firemen.’

In June 2010, CHRO received information about three underage soldiers and several soldiers who are now aged 18, but were underage at the time of their recruitment, currently serving in Light Infantry Battalion 268 based in the Falam area.¹⁹

In April 2010, a 16 year-old child soldier from a village in Kalay township area, Sagaing Division, now based in Tiddim township, Chin State, described how he was lured into the army with the promise of lucrative financial rewards. He testified that during his training, he met three other child recruits from other Kalay villages who were also enlisted under similar circumstances.²⁰

On January 18 2009, three Chin children, age 13 and 14, were forcibly recruited to serve in the army by Sergeant Maung Thant from Burma Army Infantry Battalion (304), operating under Tactical Operations Command II based in Matupi.²¹

Starting from October 2007, by orders of Colonel Zaw Myint Oo, the Burmese soldiers initiated a recruitment drive in which high school students were targeted. Light Infantry Battalion 140 arrested three high school students for conscription into the army during the first week of November 2007.²²

According to one tenth grade student from Matupi Town who had just finished his final exams in March of 2007, over 20 of his fellow students were arrested on March 22, for recruitment into the Burma Army on direct orders of then Lt. Col. San Aung, Tactical Operations Commander based in Matupi.²³

(d) Food Crisis

A severe food crisis hit Chin State in late 2006 with the onset of a new cycle of bamboo flowering, which occurs every half a century in the area. It triggered a massive infestation of rats, which destroyed crops and other local food sources, and pushed approximately 20 percent of Chin people to the point of starvation.²⁴ The regime did nothing to respond to the food crisis, and in some cases, even confiscated relief aid provided by private and church groups.²⁵ The food crisis resulting from

the massive rat infestation, which started in northern Chin State in late 2006, is now continuing in southern Chin State where the communities are struggling for their daily survival.

Children's education has been greatly compromised by the ongoing food crisis. School enrollment rate is at an all time low, with attendance levels in 2009 averaging 50 percent less than the previous year's enrollment in towns and less than 40 percent in rural areas. High drop-out rates have been reported in affected areas of Thantlang, Matupi, and Paletwa Townships. In Thantlang Township, schools reported a loss of over 680 students in 2008.²⁶ A teacher in Matupi said:

Parents can simply no longer afford to send their children to school when there is no food left to eat at home.²⁷

According to the recent report by the World Food Programme (WFP) released in October 2010, school enrolment rate for primary schools in Chin State is only 59 percent. The report found that on average it costs 17,000 Kyats to send one child to school for one year. The report concluded that the high costs of education are one of the main reasons for the low enrolment rates.

Conclusion

Ethnic Chin face significant barriers to accessing education, and are denied their rights to study and use their own language, and practice their own cultural traditions. This is in breach of Articles 28-30, 32 and 36 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and articles 10 and 14 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), both acceded to by the SPDC. The policies and practices of the SPDC are also in breach of the State's obligations under the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, in particular articles 8, 11-15 and 38, which the SPDC voted in favour of at the UN General Assembly in 2007. The provisions in the 2008 Constitution relating to language, culture and religion do not effectively protect those rights, as they are subject to "the laws, enacted for Union security, prevalence of law and order, community peace and tranquility or public order and morality".²⁸

ENDNOTES

¹ National Development Official Report 1988-31-12-2008

² A typical example of this is Kamone Chaung Village, Wai Bu Lah Tract of Falam Township where only two teachers have taught nearly 200 students from Kindergarten to Grade 4 since 1992. See CHRO, "Request for additional elementary school teachers ignore," Rhododendron News Volume XII, No II. March – April 2009. <http://www.chro.ca/publications/rhododendron/68-rhododendron-2009/163-rhododendron-news-volume-xii-no-ii-march--april-2009.html>

³ See a translated copy of SPDC order at Rhododendron VOL.I No. VI December 1998 <http://www.chro.ca/publications/rhododendron/57-rhododendron-1998/105-voli-no-vi-december-1998-.html>

⁴ CHRO Interview with KH, volunteer teacher at Chin Student Organization's informal community school servicing Chin refugees in Malaysia, 14 December 2010.

⁵ Ibid.,

⁶ CHRO Interview with a Chin pastor from Kanpalet, 29 November 2010.

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- 7 Ibid.,
- 8 Figures obtained by CHRO, January 2011.
- 9 In Hakha, lower quality rice costs 28,000 kyats for a 50kg sack, and 35,000 kyats for higher quality rice. Prices across Chin State vary according to various factors such as availability, harvest, transportation costs etc.
- 10 Ibid.,
- 11 Ibid.,
- 12 CHRO, "Unfair tuition fees demanded," Rhododendron News Volume IX. No. IV. July-August 2006 <http://www.chro.ca/publications/rhododendron/65-rhododendron-2006/148-rhododendron-news-volume-ix-no-iii-july-august-2006.html>
- 13 CHRO, "Unfair salary cut for government employees in Chin State", Rhododendron News Volume XII. No. II. March – April 2009 <http://www.chro.ca/publications/rhododendron/68-rhododendron-2009/163-rhododendron-news-volume-xii-no-ii-march--april-2009.html>
- 14 CHRO, "Students regularly forced to perform forced labour duty", Rhododendron News Volume XI. No. VI. November – December 2008 <http://www.chro.ca/publications/rhododendron/67-rhododendron-2008/157-rhododendron-news-november-december-2008.html>
- 15 CHRO, "SPDC forced primary school children to porter," Rhododendron News Volume VIII. No. IV. July-August 2005 <http://www.chro.ca/publications/rhododendron/64-rhododendron-2005/141-rhododendron-news-volume-viii-no-iv-july-august-2005.html>
- 16 CHRO, "5 Teenage Girls Among 18 Porters Forced to Carry Army Supplies," Rhododendron News Volume VIII. No. V. September-October 2005 <http://www.chro.ca/publications/rhododendron/64-rhododendron-2005/140-rhododendron-news-volume-viii-no-v-september-october-2005.html>
- 17 CHRO, "High School Students Forced as Porter," Rhododendron News Volume VI. No.V. September-October 2004 <http://www.chro.ca/publications/rhododendron/63-rhododendron-2004/134-volume-vi-nov-september-october-2004.html>
- 18 CHRO, "SPDC Forced School Children and Civilians to Labor at Government's Tea Plantation," Rhododendron News Volume VIII. No. IV. July-August 2005 <http://www.chro.ca/publications/rhododendron/64-rhododendron-2005/141-rhododendron-news-volume-viii-no-iv-july-august-2005.html>
- 19 CHRO, "SPDC Still Uses Child Soldiers", Rhododendron News Volume XIII. No. III, May-June 2010 <http://www.chro.ca/publications/rhododendron/76-rhododendron-2010/359-rhododendron-news-vol-xiii-no-iii-may-june-2010.html>
- 20 CHRO, "Child Soldier Frustrated By Life in the Burma Army", Rhododendron News Vol. XIII. No. II March-April 2010 <http://www.chro.ca/publications/rhododendron/76-rhododendron-2010/358-rhododendron-news-vol-xiii-no-iii-may-june-2010.html>
- 21 CHRO, "Children forcibly conscripted into Burma Army," Rhododendron News Volume XI, No VI. November – December 2008 <http://www.chro.ca/publications/rhododendron/67-rhododendron-2008/157-rhododendron-news-november-december-2008.html>
- 22 CHRO, "New recruitment drive targets high school students," Rhododendron News Volume XI, No. I, January – February 2008 <http://www.chro.ca/publications/rhododendron/67-rhododendron-2008/162-rhododendron-news-volume-xi-no-i-january--february-2008.html>
- 23 CHRO, "Class ten students arrested for forcible conscription into the Burma Army," Rhododendron News Volume X. No. II. March-April 2007 <http://www.chro.ca/publications/rhododendron/66-rhododendron-2007/155-rhododendron-news-volume-x-no-ii-march-april-2007.html>
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Article 354, Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2008.