



Chin Human Rights Organization

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Burma Army Soldiers Disrupt Christian Conference; Threaten MP at Gunpoint in Burma's Chin State

[Chiang Mai, Thailand] Burma Army soldiers disrupted a Christian conference and threatened an MP at gunpoint in western Burma's Chin State, the Chin Human Rights Organization has learned.

The incident took place on 10 March during a gathering of more than 1,000 delegates from 80 local branches of the Mara (Chin) Evangelical Church at Sabawngte village in a remote area of Matupi township, southern Chin State, close to Burma's border with India. Organizers of the event had obtained prior permission for the event from the Matupi Township General Administrative Office, in accordance with tight controls in place in Chin State over Christian gatherings.

Eyewitnesses reported to CHRO that several Burma Army soldiers including Captain Aung Zaw Hteik and Captain Myo Min Hteik from Matupi-based Light Infantry Battalion 140, who are stationed at an army camp in the village, disrupted the gathering and rebuked the village headman for not reporting the event to the army camp.

Pu Van Cin, a Member of Parliament from the Ethnic National Development Party elected to the Chin State parliament in Burma's November 2010 elections, saw the soldiers confronting the village headman. He tried to intervene and introduced himself as an MP to the officers. According to witnesses, Captain Aung Zaw Hteik was in uniform but Captain Myo Min Hteik, who is in charge of Sabawngte army camp, was only wearing civilian clothes. Captain Myo Min Hteik pointed a gun at Pu Van Cin's stomach and said, "I don't give a [expletive] about you being a Member of Parliament. We are not under the control of the Chin State authorities. We take orders from the North Western Regional Command."

The soldiers continued to disrupt the conference for the rest of the day by patrolling in the village. At night-time, they stepped up their intimidation. Captain Myo Min Hteik, this time in full military uniform and carrying his gun, entered the makeshift church as the worship service was about to begin. 10 other soldiers stood guard around the church. The soldiers spent the night in the village and returned to their camp the next day. The conference then continued without further disruption.

CHRO's Program Director Salai Za Uk Ling said, "It is very difficult for Chin Christians to hold large gatherings without harassment and disruption. As far as we know, no legal or disciplinary action has been taken against these soldiers from LIB140. They violated the right to freedom of religious assembly and

threatened a Chin MP in front of dozens of witnesses, and clearly believe they are above the law. This incident highlights the problem of impunity in Burma, especially for members of the armed forces.”

The ethnic Chin from Burma are estimated to be 90 percent Christian. Religious freedom violations – often cross-cutting with other human rights abuses, including the torture and ill-treatment of Chin Christians at the hands of Burma Army soldiers – have been well-documented by CHRO and other human rights groups. The 2011 report *Life Under the Junta: Evidence of Crimes against Humanity in Burma’s Chin State* by US-based Physicians for Human Rights found that 14 percent of households surveyed had experienced group persecution on the basis of their ethnicity (Chin) and/or religion (Christian). The US State Department has designated Burma a country of particular concern since 1999 for its poor record on religious freedom.

Although armed resistance group the Chin National Front signed a preliminary ceasefire agreement with the Chin State government in January this year, Chin State remains heavily militarized, with 54 Burma Army camps stationed in all nine main township areas of the state.

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Notes to editors:

1. The conference took place from 8-13 March 2012 in Sabawngte village, Matupi township, southern Chin State.
2. The Ethnic National Development Party has one MP, Pu Van Cin, elected from the Mara area of Matupi township (Matupi-2 constituency) to the Chin State parliament in the November 2010 elections.
3. The definition of ‘group persecution’ used by Physicians for Human Rights in their 2011 report is drawn from article 7.2(g) of the 2002 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court: “ ‘Persecution’ means the intentional and severe deprivation of fundamental rights contrary to international law by reason of the identity of the group or collectivity”.

About the Chin Human Rights Organization

The Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO) is a non-governmental, non-profit advocacy organization legally registered in Canada. It was formed in 1995 on the India-Burma border by a group of Chin activists committed to promoting democracy in Burma, and documenting previously unreported human rights abuses being perpetrated against the Chin people by the Burma Army and local authorities, instruments of the State. CHRO is the primary rights-based advocacy organization for the Chin.

About the Chin people of Burma

Around 500,000 ethnic Chin live in the northwestern area of Chin State in Burma. The Chin are ethnically very diverse. The six main tribes of Aso, Cho (Sho), Khuami (M’ro), Laimi, Mizo (Lushai), and Zomi (Kuki) can be further broken up into at least 60 different sub-tribal categories, including the Mara. The Chin speak more than 20 mutually distinct languages. Despite such diversity, the Chin are unified through a common history, geographical homeland, traditional practices, ethnic identity and religion.