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Ethnic Chin Christians from Burma denied religious freedom, coerced to convert to Buddhism

[5 September 2012 Bangkok, Thailand] Christian Chin from western Burma are denied religious freedom and face coercion to convert to Buddhism as a result of state policy, according to a new report by the Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO).

The 160-page report, entitled “‘*Threats to Our Existence*’: Persecution of Ethnic Chin Christians in Burma” draws on more than 100 in-depth interviews conducted over the past two years. The report exposes a decades-long pattern of religious freedom violations that persist today, and documents other serious human rights abuses such as forced labour, torture, and other cruel and inhuman treatment, forcing thousands of Chin to flee their homeland.

The report reveals ongoing violations of religious freedom in Burma’s Chin State under the new government led by President Thein Sein, including violations of the right to freedom of religious assembly; coercion to convert to Buddhism, the religion of the majority ethnic Burman population; and the destruction of Christian crosses in Chin State.

“President Thein Sein’s government claims that religious freedom is protected by law but in reality Buddhism is treated as the de-facto state religion,” said CHRO Program Director Salai Ling. “The discriminatory state institutions and ministries of previous military regimes continue to operate in the same way today. Few reforms have reached Chin State.”

Burma’s Ministry of Religious Affairs imposes discriminatory regulations on constructing and renovating Christian infrastructure, making it difficult for Chin Christians to exercise freedom of religion. According to the report, since Thein Sein’s government came to power in March 2011 four large Christian crosses have been dismantled or destroyed on the orders of the authorities.

The report is the first to expose human rights abuses at the government’s little-known ‘Border Areas National Races Youth Development Training Schools’ (known locally as ‘Na Ta La’ schools: Na Ta La is the Burmese acronym for the Progress of the Border Areas and National Races Development Affairs Program). According to CHRO’s research, there are 29 such residential schools across the country, primarily targeting ethnic and religious minorities like the Chin; one-third of the trainees in the 29 schools are ethnic Chin. Chin students are prevented from practising Christianity while at the schools and have been coerced to convert to Buddhism, primarily via the threat of military conscription. Students are often forced to shave their heads and wear monks’ or nuns’ robes, CHRO said.

Operated by the military-dominated Ministry for Border Affairs in collaboration with the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the schools function as an education system outside of the mainstream state system. The mainstream education system in Burma is chronically underfunded, and families typically struggle to fill the gap, paying costs such as annual fees, school materials, and supplementary income for underpaid teachers. These economic barriers to education leave impoverished Chin vulnerable to targeted recruitment to the Na Ta La schools. Monks and Buddhist laymen from the Ministry of Religious Affairs are involved in recruitment to the schools. Entry to the schools is usually free and trainees are offered the incentive of a guaranteed local government position after graduation. According to CHRO, the Na Ta La schools effectively function as a front for a State-sanctioned indoctrination program.

Union Border Affairs Minister Lt.-Gen. Thein Htay has said, "Subject on Union spirit is mainly lectured at the training schools....By inculcating Union Spirit into them, youth forces equipped with strong Union Spirit that [sic] could safeguard Our Three Main National Causes at the risk of their lives..."

A 20-year old Chin woman who ran away from one such school in May 2011 told CHRO, "As a Christian girl it was not appropriate for me to carry on living at that school so I took off my nuns' robes and left them there. I ran to a village, 20 miles away. The monks from the school came there with soldiers from Light Infantry Battalion 274, looking for me. They told me, 'You have to come back to the school or else you will be forced to join the army.' "

CHRO Advocacy Director Rachel Fleming added, "These schools are designed to facilitate a forced assimilation policy under the guise of development. The schools appear to offer a way out of poverty but there is a high price to pay for Chin students. They are given a stark choice between abandoning their identity and converting to Buddhism, or joining the military to comply with the authorities' vision of a 'patriotic citizen'."

Salai Ling said, "The government must end the policies and practices which amount to persecution of Chin Christians. Thein Sein's government must then radically overhaul State institutions, to protect ethnic and religious minority rights."

CHRO urged the government to abolish the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the military-controlled Education and Training Department under the Ministry for Border Affairs. CHRO also called on the government to reallocate those resources to education and to include ethnic minority languages in the national curriculum.

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Background

Around 500,000 ethnic Chin live in the northwestern area of Chin State in Burma. The Chin are ethnically very diverse, speaking 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. Today the Chin are approximately 90 percent Christian, in a country that is predominantly Buddhist, and Christianity is largely viewed as an integral part of the Chin identity. The denial of religious freedom in Burma today, particularly for minority groups like Chin Christians, is rooted in discrimination on the dual basis of ethnicity and religion. This endemic discrimination is arguably a product of extreme Burman nationalism based on a distorted version of Buddhism characterized by the State Law and Order Restoration Council / State Peace and Development Council (SLORC/SPDC) regime. Widespread restrictions on freedom of religion were a central pillar of SLORC/SPDC's drive to ethnically, culturally, linguistically, and religiously homogenize the ethnic minority areas of the Union of Burma as part of an unwritten forced assimilation policy known as "Burmanization". As part of this drive, monks loyal to military rule were dispatched to Chin State by SLORC in the 1990s under the Hill Regions Buddhist Mission within the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and many cooperated closely with the military. Burma Army soldiers exacted forced labour from Chin Christians to build pagodas, and monasteries for the monks.

Notes to editors:

1. A full copy of the report, the Executive Summary, high-resolution images and graphics used in the report are available for download at www.chro.ca or by emailing info@chro.ca Please credit CHRO for any images or graphics used.
2. 73 percent of Chin live below the poverty line, rising to 80 percent in rural areas. While the national average of 25 percent has fallen by six percentage points since 2005, in Chin State it has remained the same. Source: *Poverty Profile*, Integrated Household Living Conditions Survey in Myanmar (2009-2010), June 2011, UNDP.
3. See page 97-98 of the report for the full quote from Union Border Affairs Minister Lt.-Gen. Thein Htay. Source: *The New Light Of Myanmar*, Wednesday 14 September 2011.
4. The report by numbers:
 - a. 24 incidents where permission to construct or renovate a church or other Christian building was effectively blocked by the Ministry of Religious Affairs.
 - b. The destruction of 13 Christian crosses, many of them large structures over 20 feet tall.
 - c. 15 Buddhist pagodas or monasteries built with forced labour exacted from Chin Christians.
 - d. More than 40 separate incidents of torture or ill-treatment, targeted at Chin on the dual basis of their ethnicity and religion.
 - e. 24 official complaints of violations of religious freedom and other human rights abuses (including rape and extra-judicial killing) lodged by Chin Christians at various levels of government, where no action was taken against the alleged perpetrators.