



# Chin Human Rights Organization

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Statement of the Chin Human Rights Organization on the human rights situation of the  
Chin, an ethnic and religious minority in Burma  
to the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights

Tuesday 19 March 2013, 15:30 – 19:00

Brussels

Room: Paul-Henri Spaak (5B001)

Madam Chair,

Thank you for holding this important event to discuss the situation of human rights in Burma at this important juncture, and giving us a chance to present the human rights situation facing our people before the Subcommittee. I know that many here in the Parliament were also involved in making this event happen, and our heartfelt thanks go to each and every one of them.

We are especially grateful because of the emphasis being placed on the situation of Burma's ethnic and religious minorities as the topic of this discussion. As most people here well know, the situation of ethnic and religious minorities has often been overlooked, and sometimes simply dismissed by both domestic and international players as something of less important concern in the democratization process. But we believe that respect for ethnic and religious minorities underpins the foundation of a stable, prosperous, unified and peaceful Burma.

Madam Chair,

For nearly twenty years, our organization has been involved in monitoring and documenting the human rights situation of the Chin people, an ethnic and religious minority in the west of the country, which is geographically the most isolated, most impoverished, neglected, as well as, one of the most heavily militarized regions of Burma. For many decades, our people have suffered institutionalized discrimination and persecution on the dual basis of our ethnicity and religion.

In September 2012, the Chin Human Rights Organization released a report focusing on the status of religious freedom for Chin Christians, who constitute 90 percent of the population in Chin State, and found that severe violations of religious freedom still continue even as the new government under President Thein Sein is undertaking reforms on many fronts. I would like to share with you some of the findings from this report.

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Ongoing violations of religious freedom include; widespread restrictions on constructing and renovating Christian infrastructure; destruction of Christian crosses, violations of freedom of religious assembly; induced or coerced conversion by state actors of Chin Christian children, and threats, intimidation, and harassment of pastors and missionaries.

In preparing the report, we also documented

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- The destruction of 13 large Christian crosses, four of which happened under President Thein Sein's administration
  - 15 Buddhist pagodas or monasteries built with forced labor exacted from Christians
  - More than 40 separate incidents of torture or ill-treatment, targeted at the Chins on the dual basis of their ethnicity and religion
  - 24 official complaints of severe violations of religion freedom (including rape and extra-judicial killing) lodged by Chin Christians at various levels of government, where no action was ever taken
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However, of paramount concern to the Chin people is ongoing government's program under the Ministry of Border Affairs, which is overwhelmingly dominated by the military, where Chin children are being recruited to study at the Ministry-run Border Areas National Races Youth Development Training Schools (locally known as its Burmese acronym Natala), and is operating outside of the mainstream state education system. Chin Christian youth who attended these residential schools told us they have been coerced or forced to convert to Buddhism, primarily via the threat of military conscription. Our documentation shows that monks from the Hill Regions Buddhist Mission under the Ministry of Religious Affairs are involved in recruitment to the Natala schools, as well as teaching in the schools. Chin Christian attendees told CHRO that in the schools they are prevented from practicing Christianity, where they face punishment if they fail to recite Buddhist scriptures. They are also forced to shave their heads to become Buddhist novice monks or nuns. These schools now effectively operate as a front for the forced assimilation policy under the guise of development in ethnic areas.

Madam Chair,

I would like to draw the Committee's attention to the fact that the issues of forced religious conversion and forced assimilation of Chin Christians, as well as, other severe violations of religious freedom have also been raised by Burma's country Special Rapporteur Mr. Tomas Ojea Quintana in his two reports to the UN Human Rights Council, [March 2011](#) (A/HRC/16/59) and [March 2013](#) (A/HRC/16/59) reports respectively. This was also raised in a [letter dated 16 January 2013](#) to Baroness Catherine Ashton by a group of 14 Members of the European Parliament. Moreover, five different Mandate Holders of the Special Procedures under the UN Human Rights Council also separately raised the same issue in their 9-page long [letter dated 22](#)

[October 2012](#) (REFERENCE: AL Assembly & Association (2010-1) G/SO 214 (56-23) Minorities (2005-4) G/SO 214/62-11 G/SO 214 (78-15)MMR 7/2012) to President Thein Sein's Government.

Madam Chair,

A CHRO delegation recently returned from a trip to Burma where we met with a range of local and national stakeholders, including, among others, Thura U Shwe Mann, the Speaker of Pyithu Hluttaw (the Lower House of Parliament), Members of the Myanmar National Human Rights Commission, a group of 17 Chin Members of Parliament in the Union Parliament from across the political spectrum, prominent Chin Christian religious leaders, student and youth groups. In all the meetings with the Chin stakeholders, they expressed particular concern about the way Natala schools operate in Chin State, which they also view as an assimilation program initiated by the previous junta but still is being carried on by the new government under the same policy objective. To put it in context, 9 out of 29 schools across the country are in Chin State, with one third of the trainees or students in all the 29 schools being from Chin, meaning that the Chin are particularly targeted for recruitment.

Madam Chair,

We welcome many of the reforms measures being implemented by President Thein Sein Government. But unfortunately, these reforms have not extended to religious freedom in the country. Discrimination on grounds of religion and ethnicity is both deep-rooted and institutionalized, and premised on the longstanding unwritten policy of successive governments: 'to be a Burmese citizen is to be a Burman and Buddhist.' This must change if the current reforms are to lead to a true and peaceful democratic Burma. To this end, we believe that current reforms should focus on dismantling the institutional structure and policies that enable continued discrimination and forced assimilation against ethnic and religious minorities. We believe that a good way to start this would be for the government to immediately revise the National Registration Card so that it no longer identifies the bearer's religion or ethnicity. In terms of government institutions, no genuine democracy with plural societies should have a ministry or department devoted to promoting one particular religion at the expense of other minority religions; or one whose sole mandate is to force-assimilate minorities into mainstream cultures. Unfortunately, such two ministries exist in Burma today: the Ministry of Religious Affairs and military-dominated Ministry for Border Affairs.

Madam Chair,

In light of its upcoming visit to Burma, we would like to recommend that the delegation seek to prioritize meeting with as many ethnic and religious minorities stakeholders as they can, including ordinary citizens, religious leaders, ethnic-based parties and ethnic MPs. Moreover, the delegation should try and visit ethnic areas, and not just confine themselves to Nay Pyi Taw or Rangoon to meet with high level officials and high profile opposition figures, so that they can gain a better sense and more accurate picture of the situation facing the most vulnerable groups in the country. Thank you.