



**CHRISTIAN
SOLIDARITY
WORLDWIDE**
VOICE FOR THE VOICELESS

For Immediate Release

22 March 2013

CSW, CHRO IN MAJOR PUSH FOR ETHNIC RIGHTS IN BURMA

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) and the Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO) today called on the international community to push ethnic and religious minority rights higher up the reforms agenda for Burma, while wrapping up a week of advocacy in both Brussels and Washington DC.

On Tuesday this week, representatives from CSW, CHRO, Human Rights Watch, and the Kachin Women's Association Thailand testified at a hearing on Burma at the Subcommittee on Human Rights at the European Parliament in Brussels, which focused on the situation in ethnic areas.

During his testimony, CHRO's Program Director Salai Za Uk Ling described how Chin Christian children and youth are coerced to convert to Buddhism at military-run 'youth development training schools'. Salai Za Uk Ling said: "Discrimination on grounds of religion and ethnicity is both deep-rooted and institutionalized. Current reforms in Burma should focus on dismantling the institutional structures and policies that enable continued discrimination and forced assimilation against ethnic and religious minorities."

CSW's Senior Advocate UK/UN Matthew Jones said: "We see considerable challenges in Burma's ethnic regions including in the Burmese Army's offensives against civilians in Kachin State, the conflict and suffering of the Rohingya in Rakhine State, and continuing violations of religious freedom and other human rights in Chin State... There is a need to encourage clear benchmarks and timelines for reform, and to maintain pressure on Burma to take steps to address human rights violations and engage in a meaningful nationwide peace process and political dialogue."

The panel strongly condemned grave human rights violations in Rakhine and Kachin States, and called on the European Union (EU) to urge President Thein Sein's government to allow immediate unrestricted humanitarian access to those areas.

CHRO released information this week about human rights abuses in Burma's remote and impoverished Chin State in January and February of this year. Incidents include the sexual assault of a 13 year-old girl by a Burma Army soldier in the Paletwa area of southern Chin State, and portering for the Burma Army in the Tonzang area of northern Chin State. A ceasefire agreement between the Chin National Front and the government has been in place since January last year, but Chin State remains heavily militarized with more than 54 Burma Army camps, according to CHRO.

CHRO's Executive Director Salai Bawi Lian Mang said, "Discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities runs deep within the Burma Army. These latest incidents once again show the direct correlation between the presence of Burma Army soldiers in Chin State, and human rights abuses. We welcome the ceasefire agreement, but the international community must recognize that this is only a first step. So far, there has been no discussion about troop withdrawal from Chin State. As long as there is a heavy military presence, we expect human rights abuses to continue."

In a parallel set of meetings in Washington, DC this week, a CHRO and CSW delegation addressed the problem of ethno-religious based discrimination in Burma. Since 1999, the US has designated Burma a 'country of particular concern' for its poor record on freedom of religion or belief. In meetings with lawmakers, US State Department officials, staff from the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, and the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, CHRO and CSW emphasized the need for strong international support on the issue, which is very sensitive in Burma. Next week, the CHRO delegation will be in Ottawa to meet with MPs, Senators, government officials, and staff at Canada's newly-established Office of Religious Freedom, to deliver the same message.

Salai Bawi Lian Mang, part of CHRO's delegation to the US and Canada, added, "We strongly believe that without respect for ethnic and religious minority rights, there can be no lasting peace or stability in our country."

Andrew Johnston, CSW's Advocacy Director, said, "Burma is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious society. Ensuring equal rights for Burma's ethnic and religious minorities is a key step on the road to Burma's transition to democracy, freedom and lasting peace."

-ENDS-

For media interviews, please contact:

In the UK:

Kiri Kankhwende, Press Officer at Christian Solidarity Worldwide on +44 (0)20 8329 0045 / +44 (0) 78 2332 9663, email kiri@csw.org.uk

In Thailand:

Salai Lian Bawi Thang, Project Officer at Chin Human Rights Organization on +66 (0)826578965 (Burmese and Lai-Chin)

Rachel Fleming, Advocacy Director at Chin Human Rights Organization on +66 (0)862110732 (English)

In the USA:

Khaipi, Researcher at Chin Human Rights Organization on +1-510-332-0983 (English, Burmese, Lai, Tedim, and Lautu Chin languages)

Notes to Editors

1. In DC the delegation met with Senator Barrasso, Congressman Franks, staff from the offices of Senators Rubio and Feinstein, as well as staff from the offices of Congressmen Pitts, Wolf, and Smith.
2. CHRO's visit to Ottawa will be facilitated by Canadian NGO InterPares. CHRO delegates will be available for media interviews in Ottawa from 24 – 30 March. For further information or to arrange an interview, please contact Rebecca Wolsak: rwolsak@interpares.ca or toll-free on +1-866-563-4801.
3. Porterage for the Burma Army involves being forced to carry soldiers' rations, military equipment, ammunition, or other supplies without pay and under threat of penalty for refusal. A 2011 report by US-based organization Physicians for Human Rights found that 92 percent of Chin people had been subjected to forced labour, including porterage, in 2009 – 2010.
4. More information about coerced conversion of Chin Christian children and youth at Burma's Ministry for Border Affairs-run "Border Areas National Races Youth Development Training Schools" is in CHRO's September 2012 report 'Threats to Our Existence: Persecution of Ethnic Chin Christians in Burma', available at www.chro.ca
5. Salai Za Uk Ling's full testimony to the Subcommittee on Human Rights at the European Parliament is available at www.chro.ca

6. CHRO publishes a bi-monthly human rights documentation publication called Rhododendron News. The incidents outlined above are detailed in the Jan-Feb 2013 edition, available at www.chro.ca