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Chin Human Rights Organization

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CHRO testifying at EU Hearing on freedom of religion or belief before subcommittee on Human Rights

News



Members of the 88 Generation Students in Hakha, Chin State (Photo: Metkhuabo/Jacob Thang)

88 Generation students visit Chin State

09 March 2013: A group of the 88 Generation Students is on tour in Chin State, holding public meetings in the northern major towns.

The 15-member team, led by Min Ko Naing, has received a warm welcome from the Chin public as they make their first trip to Burma's poorest state.

In a public meeting held at the Carson Hall in Hakha today, Min Ko Naing said the purpose of their trip was simply to strengthen relationship and collaboration with the Chin in the peace process.

He also extended his offer for open discussions where people could speak freely and share their concerns and issues as he acknowledged a slight improvement in freedom of expression in the country.

"He said he is Mon and he met many Chin friends while in prison. He talked from his experiences and it was an inspiration," said Salai Thang, who attended the Hakha public gathering.

The group faced restrictions imposed by the authorities on meeting with the public in Falam, which

included a prohibition of gathering with more than 50 people and using a loudspeaker.

Members of the 88 Generation team said they stood together with the Chin for their development as they acknowledged various difficult situation neglected in the past by authorities.

Arriving in Kalay of Sagaing Division on 6 March, the group started their first trip to Chin State the following day, stopping at Tedim, Rihkhuadar, Falam and Hakha.

Founded in 2005, the 88 Generation Students Group is mostly described as a movement consisting of students who were active during the 1988 uprising.#

They faced restrictions imposed by the authorities on meeting with the public in Falam, which included a prohibition of gathering with more than 50 people and using a loudspeaker.

Govt employees extorted money from civilians in Chin State

'Bullied' Chin refugee children scared to go to school in New Delhi

21 March 2013: Twelve Chin refugee boys aged between 7 and 13 refused to continue their study at a government school in fear of bullying in New Delhi, India.

The boys didn't turn up for their recent exams early this month and have since stopped going to school where they face both verbal and physical bullies, according to their parents.

Nang Suan Lian, father of one of the boys, said his 13-year-old son and his son's friend, 10, were beaten up by an Indian student on 6 March 2013, adding: "Father of the Indian boy hit my son's friend outside school and his forehead was bleeding."

The incident was witnessed by other students and one of the mothers of the Chin students, who study at MC Primary School in Hastal Village No. I and II in the evening.

"Now, my son has dizziness and couldn't eat since then. He is afraid and staying inside the room. Not only my son but also his friends refuse to go to school now," added the victim's father.

The principal of Don Bosco Ashalayam Crech School, whose teachers make a visit to the government school twice a month, said he didn't really know what had exactly happened.

"The parents told me that the boy was beaten by the father of the Indian boy. But the teachers and the principal of that school said that the father did not beat him," added the principal.

The Socio-Legal Information Centre (SLIC), an implementing partner of the UNCHR, provided a security guard for the refugee children at school following complaint by parents of the Chin refugee students on 7 March 2013.

"Our children went to school, accompanied by a security officer sent by Don Bosco Ashalayam but they all came back without taking the exams," said Kap Khen Pau, father of three children studying at the same

school.

Lian Khan Mang said the Chin students including his daughter had been wrongly accused of and scolded by teachers for damaging books, which were actually done by local Indian girls.

"My daughter came home crying," added Lian Khan Mang.

"Our girls face discrimination and are sometimes called using racial terms. When they reported the matter to their teachers, the teachers would tell them off rather than addressing the issues," said a Chin father, Suan Khan Do.

Students from Burma do not mingle with their Indian classmates, and if something happens, the students could not demand their rights as they have language problems, according to the principal of Don Bosco Ashalayam Crech School.

Mrs. Niang En Dim said: "Our children are facing physical assaults and discriminations at the government school. I have no idea what to do for my child's education."

Currently, it is reported that there are twelve boys and fifteen girls studying at the MC Primary school.

Chin refugee students go to Don Bosco Ashalayam School in the morning and to a government-run MC Primary School in Hastal Village No. I & II in the evening.

"Now they don't come to my school and have stopped going to that school. It is natural that parents get worried for their children. But I think parents have to take more responsibility in terms of picking their children up from school," said the principal of Don Bosco Ashalayam Crech School.

The Chin refugee families, originally from Tedim Township in Chin State, Burma came to India to seek protection from the UNHCR after having fled Burma between 2010 and 2011. #

Reporting by A Hmun



Joshua (Photo: Pa Thawng)

Chin refugee boy severely injured by truck in Delhi

13 March 2013: New Delhi, India - A Chin refugee boy named Joshua has got a serious injury on his left leg after being run over by a truck full of soil in New Delhi, India yesterday.

The 7-year-old child was hit by the vehicle on a narrow road in Sitapuri Ward around 11am while he was walking home from school.

Mrs Pari, an eyewitness who runs a small shop in the vicinity, said: "I saw a truck passing and in a few seconds, the boy was under its wheel. The boy tried to pull his leg but he couldn't. I started crying at that point only to see a pool of blood all over."

"I could see the bone of his leg with the skin wide open piling on his shin and ankle. I called the police and he was taken to hospital," added Mrs Pari.

Admitted at Deen Dayal Upadhyay Hospital (UDDU), Joshua was released on the same day after having had his leg stitched, according to his father, Pu Thawng Boi.

Pu Thawng Boi said the incident took place while he and his wife were going to Don Bosco Ashalayam Of-

fice to collect their subsistence allowance provided by UNHCR in New Delhi.

"We have got to pay for all the expenses including medicines and local transport costs," said Pu Thawng Boi, who has been unable to work since last November due to his ill health.

The Chin couple, with their five children aged 15, 13, 7, 5 and 1, of which three are girls, live in a small rented room where they cook, eat and sleep.

"Currently, we live on the subsistence allowance we

get for two of our children plus a small amount of wages my wife earns from her work. We don't know how to continue our lives. I hope that the UNHCR will continue to assist us by providing subsistence allowance to my children," added Pu Thawng Boi.

The Socio-Legal Information Centre (SLIC), an implementing partner of the UNHCR, provided assistance in interpretation at the police station yesterday.

"I was told to sign at Dabri Police Station and I did. Today, we went to court and will have to appear again on Monday," said Mrs Thawng Boi.

The truck's driver has been arrested, according to the family.

The family of Pu Thawng Boi, originally from Matupi, Chin State, and his wife, from Tuithim in Kalay Township of Sagaing Division, came to New Delhi, India in 2008 after having fled Burma.

Sources from the Chin community in New Delhi said two Chin refugees were crushed to death by vehicles in February last year but no actions have been taken regarding the cases until today. #

Reporting by A Hmun

CHIN REVOLUTION DAY

Camp Victoria

(Photo: CNF)

Chin revolution is for the Chin people: CNF

22 March 2013: In an event that marked the 25th revolution day, the Chin National Front (CNF) said its decades-long struggle has been and will be for Chinland and her people.

CNF reiterates its commitment to securing the self-determination of the Chin people, restoring democracy and establishing a federal Union of Burma, according to the official website.

The commemorative ceremony held at the new headquarters of CNF called Camp Victoria on Wednesday was joined by members of political parties, religious and community leaders, representatives of women

organizations, and artists.

Leaders of the Young Mizo Association, and chairmen and members of village councils from Mizoram State of India also attended the first Chin revolution day observed freely inside Chin State.

Pu Zing Cung, Secretary General of CNF, said each Chin individual has got a duty toward his or her nation as he urged for strengthening unity in an effort to protect national identity.

The event programme included saluting the Chin national flag and paying tribute to those who sacrificed their lives in the revolution.

It is reported that more than 80 members have lost their lives in the struggle since the formation of CNF on 20 March 1988.

The Chin National Front said it will work persistently to regain the Chin birthright of self-determination, which have been denied by Burma's successive military regimes.

Last year, CNF and Burma's government held peace talks at least on three occasions reaching a ceasefire agreement.#

CHRO to meet with US officials on religious freedom

18 March 2013: The Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO) is to hold a series of meetings with senators, congressmen and officials from US State Department in Washington DC this week.

CHRO members will provide testimonies and raise religious issues facing Chin Christians in Burma following their recent report entitled 'Threats to Our Existence': Persecution of Ethnic Chin Christians in Burma.

They will also meet with staff members from the Office of International Religious Freedom, and NGOs during their week-long advocacy trip to the US.

Last month, CHRO delegation briefed Thura Shwe Mann, the Speaker of Pyithu Hluttaw, members of Burma (Myanmar) National Human Rights Commission and other officials in Naypyitaw and Rangoon on ongoing human rights violations in Chin State.

A report by CHRO documented destruction of at least four large Christian crosses under the new government of Burma, restrictions on construction of Christian buildings and churches, and a separate residential school programme where Chin children face coercion to convert to Buddhism.

As part of their last legs of advocacy trips to North America, the CHRO team is scheduled to meet with MPs from all parties, and representatives from the Canadian International Development Agency in Canada next week.

The delegation is also set to share their findings and issues of religious freedom in Burma with Chin churches and communities based in the US.

Separately, CHRO is also set to testify before the European Parliament's Subcommittee on Human Rights on state-sanctioned discrimination against the Chin on the basis of their religion and ethnicity on 19 March in Brussels, Belgium.#



Salai Za Uk Ling, of CHRO, speaking at EU Hearing on freedom of religion or belief before subcommittee on Human Rights

Ethnic rights vital to Burma's democratic transition

23 March 2013: The current government of Burma must stop violating but respect the rights of ethnic and religious minorities in order to achieve its pursuit of transition to democracy, rights groups said.

Serious violations of human rights still continue in ethnic areas, according to recent testimonies by the Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO), Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Human Rights Watch, and Kachin Women's Association Thailand.

Salai Za Uk Ling testified at a hearing on Burma at the Subcommittee on Human Rights at the European Parliament in Brussels last Tuesday, saying: "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," added Salai Za Uk Ling, CHRO's Program Director.

A joint statement by CSW and CHRO 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.

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

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.

Since 1999, the US has designated Burma a 'country of particular concern' for its poor record on freedom of religion or belief.

Incidents reported in January and February this year by CHRO 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.

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."

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.

The panel at Tuesday's hearing in Brussels 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.

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."

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. #

Govt eyes Chin State as tourist destination

10 March 2013: The Ministry of Hotels and Tourism said Chin State would be upgraded for a tourist site as the number of foreign visitors to Burma's poorest area is on the rise.

The official announcement was made on Monday following a visit to Chin State by Union Minister U Htay Aung from 1 to 4 March 2013.

Measures are being taken to develop tourism in Chin State after it saw a surge in number of foreign tourists last year, according to the New Light of Myanmar.

Speaking to Chinland Guardian, Salai Thang, one of community leaders from Hakha, said: "This issue has to be dealt with great caution because it will have both negative and positive impacts."

"We have been cut off from the outside world for decades and now the change is taking place so rapidly. The question is: are we really ready at this point of time to confront the influx of tourists as a society?"

Media reports from inside Burma said tourists are keen to travel to Chin State due to its rich culture and abundant physical attractions.

Chin traditions of facial tattoos and tribal customs, most of which remain 'unexplored and unspoiled', have drawn ecotourists, according to tour agencies.

"With a rapid increase in tourism in a place like Chin State where people are not well-educated and informed, there has been concern that the local community might be negatively affected," said Pastor Shwekey Hoipang, from the southern parts of Chin State.

U Htay Aung also said courses on tourism and hospitality would be given in Chin State in order to help 'start the untapped new business model of tourism for its economic growth.'

"We have heard sad stories about exploitation of the Padaung women for tourist attractions in eastern Burma and Thailand. Promotion of tourism only for the purpose of economic advantages would eventually harm our society," added the Chin pastor.

Chin State still remains a 'restricted' area for tourists who are required to obtain a special permit from relevant authorities to visit the mountainous western region of Burma.

However, tour companies and agencies said services of package they provide include necessary official documents for foreign visitors and tour guides during their trip.

Up to two million tourists are expected to visit Burma this year, according to a source from the Ministry of Hotels and Tourism.#

(Photo: S. Par)



(Photo: Myanmar.net)





Community leader talking to homeless Chin refugees in Malaysia (Photo: Chin refugee community)

Number of 'homeless' Chin refugees rises in Malaysia

02 March 2013: Leaders of Chin communities in Malaysia said more than 40 Chin refugees are estimated to have ended up homeless on the streets in Kuala Lumpur.

The number of 'homeless' refugees, mostly males aged between 17 and 35, staying in various places across the Malaysian capital is believed to be on the rise compared to previous years.

Community leaders said they had seen an increasing number of new faces during their recent visits to Kotaraya, Bukit Bintang and Pudu areas of Kuala Lumpur.

Chin pastor John Ceu Mang, who visited them, told Chinland Guardian: "Every time I go there, there are about ten or more. I was told that there are females too but I haven't met them."

Females can not be seen like males who would walk on the streets asking for money from the passers-by, according to the Chin pastor, adding: "I don't know the reason but they [females] are not around to meet."

Recently, a group of volunteers from Chin refugee communities visited Kotaraya, meeting with 11 home-

less Chins involving 2 from Hakha, 7 from Tedim, and 2 from Falam.

"We get a list of their names, talk to them properly and give them 5 Ringgits each for food. We plan to visit them at least once a week," Salai Kung told Chinland Guardian.

Pu Lal Siam Mawi said most of the homeless Chins they met were new people, apart from the one from Hakha, who has been around Kotaraya for about ten years.

Who they are

The majority of the 'homeless' Chin refugees in Malaysia are of Hakha, Falam, Mizo and Tedim tribal groups from Burma.

Sources from Chin refugee communities confirmed that they are victims of various problems including depression, alcoholism, drug addiction and mental illnesses as well as domestic issues within the families.

"Some ran away from brutalities at work while others got so depressed from unemployment or being unable to get recognised as refugee by the UNHCR for so long," said one of the Chin community leaders.

Several refugees started losing hope due to a range of -

difficulties and barriers during their stay in Malaysia. "Some got separated from their families as they were arrested and detained somewhere else for months," added the leader.

Two years ago, dozens of Chin refugee children aged between 8 and 15 were reported getting involved in drug dealing in Malaysia, mostly ending up with their friends on the streets.

How they survive

Most of the homeless refugees of Chin ethnicity from Burma manage to survive through foods and services given by local churches and charities although a few have lost their lives on the streets.

Those sheltering in the area of Kotaraya can get 'free food' provided by a Roman Catholic church at 12noon from Monday to Friday.

The RC church also has water facilities in its compound where they can clean themselves and do the washing.

There is another place believed to be run by a Chinese charity group offering foods free of charge at night around 10pm four times a week, according to the homeless.

"We don't get hungry too much as foods are available at these places," one of the homeless Chins told community leaders.

Tzu Chi Clinic in the area of Pudu is open to refugees for free medical services. "If one of us is sick, at least another person will accompany him or her to go to the clinic," added the homeless refugee.

Salai Kung, who also met the homeless, told Chinland Guardian that most of them would sleep in the roadside grounds, under the trees, and around the supermarkets when it rains.

Assistance service

In an attempt to combat the homeless situation in Malaysia, the Chin Emergency Relief Group (CERG) was formed early last year.

The community-based organization provided 'rehabilitation' services in a rented apartment to over 15 Chin refugees.

"For them, we had an accommodation and food as well as verbal encouragement from the Christian pastors. We managed to rescuse about six persons who behave well and work properly until now," said Lal Siam Mawi, Director-in-Chief of CERG.

Some of the 'rescued' refugees confessed that the services and assistance provided by the community were very helpful and that they would want their friends on the streets were reached, too.

Unfortunately, CERG had to stop functioning after six months as the neighbourhood reported to Malaysian authorities due to the Christian worship and prayer services held in the rented apartment, according to the organization.

Lal Siam Mawi said a new place would be rented within the year of 2013 where the assistance activity could be continued with aims of bringing back lives of several 'homeless' Chin refugees in Malaysia.

Hope for the homeless

Despite possession of no legal documents or status, the homeless Chin refugees said the Malaysian police or relevant authorities didn't take any action against them.

One of the Chin community leaders said: "If they are not rescued, they have no hope and choice but to keep on living on the streets."

"It is important that we, the Chin community worldwide, take this issue into serious consideration so that these people can get back into a normal life."

As of today, the Chin community leaders said no local nor international NGOs including the UNHCR have made any attempts to reach out to the homeless.

Until recently, Chin refugees came to Malaysia and India in search of refuge and safety after having fled various forms of repression and persecution committed against them by Burma's military soldiers in Chin State.

There are still over an estimated 45,000 Chin refugees and asylum seekers stranded in Malaysia, according to sources.#



Border Post # 8, Near Latza- Photo Credit - RANIB

Jan 2012 - Dec 2012

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(Photo: ND-Burma)

Rights violations persist despite changes in Burma

05 March 2013: Civilians, especially in ethnic areas, still face human rights abuses and violations although Burma has seen rapid changes toward democracy, a report by ND-Burma revealed.

The report, which covered the period from December 2011 till January 2013, said human rights violations continue to occur largely unabated.

While government reforms, it said, are evident on the surface, the underlying human rights situation remains bleak in all 16 of ND-Burma's categories and in each state.

It also stressed killing, land confiscation, forced labor, child soldiers, forced relocation, torture and ill treatment have all persisted in 2012.

The report documented a total of 310 incidents, with 91, 57, and 37 cases of human rights violations being reported in Shan, Karen and Chin States respectively.

Salai Lian Bawi Thang said: "Our report's evidences clearly confirmed that the people are still suffering from the

hands of the authorities. This must be stopped."

Findings compiled by ND-Burma show that human rights violations not only remain a daily reality for the people of Burma, but that the abuses perpetrated by the military-backed government of Burma are systematic and widespread.

"Among several indicators, the condition of human rights is the key to judging the degree of changes in Burma," added Salai Lian Bawi Thang.

Unsurprisingly, the highest incidences of abuse occurred in ethnic areas that remain in open conflict with the Burma Army, the Tatmawdaw, or are the grounds for controversial development projects, according to the report.

Last year, a total of 67 cases related to land confiscation and destruction of property were reported in connection with development projects.

Formed in 2004, the Network for Human Rights Documentation – Burma (ND-Burma) is committed to providing a way for Burma human rights organizations to collaborate on the human rights documentation process.#

"Our report's evidences clearly confirmed that the people are still suffering from the hands of the authorities. This must be stopped."

- Salai Lian Bawi Thang



(Photo: CHRO)

My observation of the Union-level peace talk between CNF and Government

12 March 2013: It was my first return trip to my native Burma (Myanmar) after 14 years of life in exile. I had two things on my agenda. I wanted to find out how I could support the much-needed democratic reform process; and second, I wanted to provide technical assistance – instant interpretation for international observers – for the second round of the Union-level peace talks between the Chin National Front (CNF) and the peace committee of Burma's government.

I was honoured to observe the peace negotiation talk first-hand, allowing me to witness the behind-the-scene drama of former adversarial parties sitting across the table from one another. The talk was quite intense (as it should be), and sometimes confrontational, and yet passionately conciliatory at the end. To me, this indicated that both parties had a willingness to find a solution to the protracted political conflict facing the Union of Burma since independence in 1948. After three days of negotiation, which was originally scheduled only for two days, the talk resulted in the signing of a ceasefire agreement that contains 27 provisions.

Substantively speaking, there are six basic provisions in the agreement. The six basic provisions would

stand as both the basic framework and the foundation for any ensuing political negotiations in Burma. They also constitute the non-negotiable provisions upon which a future constitution of the Union of Burma will be based. The first three are the three national causes, which have long been safeguarded and championed by the successive military governments, and the latter three are the ones proposed by the Chin National Front.

The six provisions that both parties signed into their historic agreement are:

1. Non-disintegration of the Union, meaning no secession for any constituent member state from the future Union of Burma;
2. Non-disintegration of the national solidarity, ensuring racial harmony among diverse ethnic nationalities in the Union;
3. The perpetuation of sovereignty, safeguarding the Union of Burma's inherent right to sovereignty;
4. The right to self-determination within the Union for ethnicity-based member states, guaranteeing that any constituent member state of the Union exercises the three essential political powers: administrative, legislative, and judicial;
5. Ethnic equality, ensuring that all territorial-based ethnic nationalities, regardless of their ethnic background, are entitled to the same rights and are treated equal; and,
6. (Democratization of the country.

Setting aside what can happen in future, the signing of these six provisions into their agreement is a politically significant achievement and essential step in the right direction for all who long for national reconciliation, peace, equality, and freedom under a democratic government in the Union of Burma.

Throughout the history of military rule in Burma, safeguarding the three national causes has been the justification for their firm grip on power since 1962. The generals always claim they took control of power to save the Union from disintegration. The CNF's embrace of the three national causes demonstrates their commitment to safeguarding the integration of the Union, though it could also be interpreted as a dismissal of the military government's longstanding charge that the ethnicity-based armed groups represent secessionist groups plotting to break up the Union.

By the same token, the government representatives' adoption of the CNF's three basic principles for future Union – equality, self-determination, and democracy – exhibits their recognition of the fact that no negotiation can be meaningful without recognizing the legitimate claims to pre-colonial and self-governing territories of non-Burma ethnic nationalities. In fact, securing such provisions in the agreement meant the recognition of the CNF's legitimate claim for internal autonomy within the Union of Burma.

While the Burma government deserves appreciation for spearheading the democratic reform process and striking ceasefire deals with the 10 of 11 major armed resistance groups, the ongoing warfare between the Burma army and Kachin Independence Army (KIA) raises questions about the real intentions of the government. The KIA leadership insists, “they will not agree to any ceasefire deal with the government unless the provisions of the proposed ceasefire agreement

contain the terms and conditions guaranteeing that there must be a political dialogue to find a negotiated settlement of the political conflict.” If securing lasting peace and fostering national reconciliation under a democratic government is the goal of the government's ongoing peace process, the government should not have any hesitancy to accept the KIA's proposal. Time will surely tell us about the delay, but in the meantime, one cannot be silent about the military confrontation between the two parties. Recognizing that bullets are not solutions, it is critical that members of the international community responsibly pressure the Burma government to find a peaceful solution to this unresolved crisis.

To complete Burma's transition to democracy, the country is also in dire need of thriving and vibrant civil society organizations (non-state actors), to provide civic education for the citizenry and promote democratic principles such as transparency, accountability, freedom, and human rights. International organizations and donor countries must support new capacity-building programs in the country for both government and non-governmental organizations. At the same time, the Burma government needs to create a working environment in which civil society organizations can prosper and carry out their activities to champion their respective causes.

I am neither trying to paint a rosy picture of Burma, nor portray the country's leadership unfairly. I simply believe there must be a rational, fair path forward to foster lasting solutions in Burma. We're getting closer to democracy now than ever before; it would be a shame to turn back now.

Salai Za Ceu Lian

Note by the author: *My writing does not reflect the view of any organization nor any other person, but me.*

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.

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

- 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

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 Nataala), 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 Nataala 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/HCR/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 Nataala 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 long-standing 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.#

**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.”

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

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