



Chin Human Rights Organization

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United Nations Human Rights Council

Forum on Minority Issues

Sixth Session

26-27 November 2013

At its sixth session, the Forum on Minority Issues in Geneva gave targeted attention to religious minorities. While the Forum addressed respect for the right to freedom of religion or belief, it also went further, addressing the full range of minority rights. The following is the text of an intervention made at the Forum by Rosalinn Zahau of the Chin Human Rights Organization.

INTERVENTION

Rosalinn Zahau, Myanmar

AGENDA ITEM # 4: Promotion and protection of the identity of religious minorities

Thank you Madame Chair.

My name is Rosalinn Zahau. I am with the Chin Human Rights Organization, an NGO working for the protection and promotion of human rights for the Chin people in Myanmar.

As noted in recommendations 18, 19 and 22, it is the responsibility of States to fully comply with Article 18 of the UDHR and the Declaration on Religious Freedom, to take special measures for religious minorities, and to adopt legislation that prohibits discrimination against persons belonging to religious minorities.

Myanmar is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious country. Almost 90 percent of people in my homeland of Chin State are Chin Christians. Myanmar's 2008 Constitution notes the 'special position' of Buddhism as the faith practiced by the majority, while Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Animism merely 'exist'.¹

In practice, Buddhism is treated as the de facto State religion. Myanmar's Ministry of Religious Affairs uses State resources to promote and propagate Buddhism.² Actors from non-Buddhist religious backgrounds must seek permission to build, to renovate or own land for religious infrastructure.

Over the past two decades, the State's policies and practices have given rise to a wide range of violations of freedom of religion or belief for the Chin, such as the destruction of large-scale Christian crosses by State actors, using the forced labor of Chin Christians to build Buddhist infrastructure, and forced relocation to give way for Buddhist infrastructure.³ Today Chin churches are seeking permission from the Government to replace several of those fallen crosses.⁴

Chin people continue to face intersecting forms of discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, religion, and language. One impact of such discrimination is extreme poverty. 73 percent of Chin live below the poverty line, compared with the national average of 25 percent as per the United Nations Development Program 'Poverty Profile'.⁵ Another impact is on the right to effective participation in public and economic life, with very few Chin Christians holding senior positions in Chin State.⁶ Chin Christian women are effectively excluded from all decision-making levels of government in Chin State.

¹ Articles 361 and 362 of Myanmar's 2008 Constitution.

² For an overview of the workings of Myanmar's Ministry of Religious Affairs, please see <http://www.mora.gov.mm/> and also "Threats to Our Existence": Persecution of Ethnic Chin Christians in Burma, pp.10, September 2012, Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO), available at www.chro.ca

³ For an overview of violations of freedom of religion or belief perpetrated against the Chin, please see "Threats to Our Existence": Persecution of Ethnic Chin Christians in Burma, September 2012, Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO), available at www.chro.ca

⁴ See *Matupi churches ask permission to erect Christian cross*, 24 August 2013, in CHRO's *Rhododendron News*, July – August 2013 edition, available at www.chro.ca

⁵ Another impact of such discrimination is extreme poverty. 73 percent of Chin people live below the poverty line, compared with the national average of 25 percent. United Nations Development Programme *Poverty Profile*, a joint undertaking with the Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development: Integrated Household Living Conditions Survey in Myanmar (2009-2010), June 2011, pp.12. Chin State is the poorest by a wide margin. The next poorest state is Rakhine, at 44 percent. In his August 2013 report to the UN General Assembly, the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism highlighted the inextricable link between racism and poverty, and the historical legacy of state-sponsored discrimination [A/68/333].

⁶ Only 14% of department head positions within the civil service at the Chin State level and 25% of township administrative officer positions at the township level are held by Christians. Only one such position is held by a

We therefore urge this Forum to include a recommendation which urges all States to form independent and impartial commissions on religious freedom to ensure people of all religious backgrounds have full enjoyment of the right to freedom.

We also urge this Forum to call on the Government of Myanmar to take concrete measures to fully comply with Article 18 of the UDHR and the Declaration on Religious Freedom, and to adopt legislation that prohibits direct or indirect discrimination against persons from religious minority backgrounds. This should include lifting the restrictions on land ownership for non-Buddhist organizations for religious purposes and requirements to seek prior permission for building or renovating religious infrastructure at all levels of government. The Ministry of Religious Affairs should be replaced with an independent and impartial commission on religious freedom. Its mandate should include measures to address deep-rooted discrimination on the basis of religious identity.

Chin Christian woman. There are no Chin women in the Chin State executive. See the October 2013 report to the UN General Assembly by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar [A/68/397], where the Special Rapporteur called on the Government of Myanmar to 'address institutionalized discrimination against Chin Christians'.