



Chin Human Rights Organization

P.O. Box 202, Phrasing Post Office, Chiang Mai, Thailand 50205

Tel: +66.53.210.302 Email: info@chro.ca

www.chro.ca

21 January 2014

THEMATIC BRIEFING:

The state of freedom of religion or belief for Chin in Burma/Myanmar 2013

Contents

1. Analysis & recommendations.....	1-3
2. Methodology.....	4
3. Issues of freedom of religion or belief.....	4-10
4. CHRO policy development efforts.....	10-16
a. Chin State level.....	10-11
b. National level.....	11-12
c. International level.....	12-16

1. Analysis and recommendations

Burma'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 in Burma/Myanmar. In the Chin context, this interferes with the basic tenets of freedom of religion or belief as set out in the 1981 UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (the 1981 Declaration) in a number of ways. While State resources continue to be allocated for Buddhist infrastructure, there are ongoing restrictions on land ownership for religious purposes and on building and renovating Christian infrastructure.² This is in spite of claims made in September by Minister for Religious Affairs U Hsan Hsint that his Ministry had already relaxed some regulations, such as the need to obtain step by step permission for maintaining, renovating, rebuilding, and constructing religious buildings. However, he

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

² This violates Article 6a of the 1981 Declaration, "To worship or assemble in connection with a religion or belief, and to establish and maintain places for these purposes".

noted that, "the Ministry will give suggestions" leaving some ambiguity as to how the relaxations would be implemented in practice, or at different levels of government.³

In 2013, senior government officials including President Thein Sein and the Speaker of the Lower House of Parliament Thura Shwe Mann visited Chin State for the first time since the nominally-civilian government took power in March 2011. However, they continued a decades-long pattern of official visits and events held on Sunday mornings in Chin State, with no respect for the right to freedom of religious assembly or the right to observe days of rest in accordance with the precepts of one's religion or belief.⁴ Discrimination on the basis of religious identity continued to be a serious issue throughout 2013. Christian villagers in a remote part of southern Chin State reported threats to burn down their village if they continued to assemble for Christian worship, made by local government officials. Chin Christians continued to express concern about State resources allocated to the promotion of Buddhism, particularly at the State-run Border Areas National Races Youth Development Training schools (known locally as Na Ta La), where CHRO has previously documented coercion to convert to Buddhism.⁵

In a positive development, Chin churches, pastors, Members of Parliament and other key stakeholders have begun to make concerted efforts to challenge the authorities regarding issues of freedom of religion or belief. A panel discussion on freedom of religion or belief at the historic Chin National Conference in Hakha from 12-15 November drew up 12 important recommendations to take forward with the authorities, including calls for the government to grant land ownership rights for religious purposes; guarantee freedom of religious worship, assembly and proselytizing; restore all Christians crosses that were destroyed under various pretexts; and replace the Ministry of Religious Affairs with an independent and impartial religious affairs commission in order to eliminate all kinds of religious discrimination.

Recommendations to the Government of Burma/Myanmar

1. Adopt legislation that prohibits direct or indirect discrimination against persons from religious minority backgrounds. Such measures should include lifting the restrictions on land ownership for religious purposes and requirements to seek prior permission for building or renovating religious infrastructure at all levels of government.

³ Minister U Hsan Hsint made the claims in a Burmese-language interview published in 7 Day News, 18 September 2013. The Minister also noted that permission from the Ministry of Religious Affairs is no longer required for religious events and festivals; instead permission must be obtained from local administrative offices.

⁴ See Articles 6a and 6h of the 1981 Declaration.

⁵ See Chapter 5 of CHRO's September 2012 report, "*Threats to Our Existence*": *Persecution of Ethnic Chin Christians in Burma*: <http://www.chro.ca/index.php/publications/73-special-reports/411-threats-to-our-existence>

2. Replace the Ministry of Religious Affairs with an independent and impartial commission on religious freedom, with a mandate to include measures to address deep-rooted discrimination on the basis of religious identity.
3. Guarantee freedom of religious worship, assembly and proselytizing for all religions.
4. Abolish Na Ta La (Border Areas National Races Youth Development Training) schools and institute a single education system under the Ministry of Education where all students are treated in accordance with principles of equality and non-discrimination.
5. Provide redress for violations of freedom of religion or belief in Chin State, including (but not limited to) the restoration of all Christians crosses previously destroyed under various pretexts.
6. Issue a standing invitation to the UN Special Rapporteur for the Freedom of Religion or Belief, to travel to the country to investigate reports of violations of religious freedom, and to be granted unhindered access to all parts of the country, including Chin State.

Recommendations to the international community

1. Raise the issue of religious freedom as a key human rights concern yet to be addressed under the current reforms.
2. Provide financial support to key Chin stakeholders in their efforts to protect and promote the right to freedom of religion or belief, and to initiate a multi-faith forum for dialogue on religious freedom in Chin State.
3. In line with the recommendations made by the Chin National Conference and CHRO, urge the Government of Burma/Myanmar to:
 - Adopt legislation that prohibits direct or indirect discrimination against persons from religious minority backgrounds. Such measures should include lifting the restrictions on land ownership for religious purposes and requirements to seek prior permission for building or renovating religious infrastructure at all levels of government.
 - Replace the Ministry of Religious Affairs with an independent and impartial commission on religious freedom, with a mandate to include measures to address deep-rooted discrimination on the basis of religious identity.
 - Guarantee freedom of religious worship, assembly and proselytizing for all religions.
 - Abolish Na Ta La (Border Areas National Races Youth Development Training) schools and to institute a single education system under the Ministry of Education where all students are treated in accordance with principles of equality and non-discrimination.
 - Provide redress for violations of freedom of religion or belief in Chin State, including (but not limited to) the restoration of all Christians crosses previously destroyed under various pretexts.
 - Issue a standing invitation to the UN Special Rapporteur for the Freedom of Religion or Belief, to travel to the country to investigate reports of violations of religious freedom, and to be granted unhindered access to all parts of the country, including Chin State.

2. Methodology

Chin State is a very remote, isolated part of western Burma/Myanmar. Infrastructure there is very poor, with no fully paved roads, making access difficult. Many villages in Chin State are still only accessible on foot, via a network of small tracks. The lack of basic infrastructure in Chin State makes it extremely difficult to collect timely information. As a result, most human rights violations are documented days or weeks after the fact, if at all. In addition, Chin State is heavily militarized. At the time of writing, there are 54 Burma Army camps in the area. Security issues for CHRO's small team of fieldworkers persist, as they are at risk of arrest and detention by the authorities during the course of their work to document the human rights situation in Chin State. Information is collected by CHRO's fieldworkers in accordance with documentation guidelines produced by the Network for Human Rights Documentation – Burma, of which CHRO is a member.⁶ CHRO's documentation is published bi-monthly in *Rhododendron News*, available at <http://www.chro.ca/publications/rhododendron.html>. Due to the challenges and difficulties with human rights documentation, especially in Chin State, this briefing should be viewed as an emblematic rather than comprehensive account of all issues of freedom of religion or belief affecting the Chin.

3. Issues of freedom of religion or belief

In 2013, CHRO has documented 13 incidents relating to the right to freedom of religion or belief. A synopsis of each incident is presented here, in reverse chronological order. To read a full account of each incident, please see the references in the footnotes.

Chin pastor slapped in face by ward admin in Arakan

3 December 2013: Chin pastor Cing Pian Langh was hit in his face for no obvious reason by U Hla Kyaw, a ward administrator of Myebon town in Arakan State. The incident took place around 9:30pm on 9 November 2013 while the 30-year-old missionary was having a telephone conversation, according to the Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO). The pastor said that he had been to the office of the General Administration Department in Myebon to report the case but was told the head was travelling. He added that he had informed the Department of Religious Affairs about the incident and that the head of the department had responded saying: "This is nothing to do with my job." The victim said that the authorities had taken no action regarding the incident. Pastor Cing Pian Langh has been working in

⁶ See <http://www.nd-burma.org/documentation/resources.html>, accessed 5 December 2013.

Myebon town, Myebon Township, Sittwe District of Arakan State as a Christian missionary from the Evangelical Free Church of Myanmar since October 2013.⁷

Religious rights raised to Chin Affairs Minister

27 November 2013: Chin Christians in Magway Region expressed their concerns about issues related to religious purposes during a meeting in Pakkoku town with Salai Hla Tun, Chin Affairs Minister of Magway Region. They said that they still face difficulties in obtaining permission to renovate and construct religious buildings, and seek assistance from the Chin Affairs Minister. A pastor from the Pakkoku Chin Baptist Church said during the meeting: "We would like to request our minister to raise the issues in his power to relevant government authorities so that we are allowed to freely look after our premises." In response, Salai Hla Tun said that he would try his best to put the matter forward as he addressed the meeting attended by leaders and representatives of the Chin community, government employees, churches and university students as well as tutors. Returning from the Chin National Conference (CNC) held in Hakha, Chin State, the Chin Affairs Minister was holding meetings with Chin communities based in Gangaw, Yesagyo and Pakkoku.⁸

Disappointment over Shwe Mann's meeting schedules in Chin State

19 November 2013: During Shwe Mann's two-day trip to Kalaymyo of Sagaing Region, Tedim and Hakha towns of Chin State, he held meetings with government ministers, officials, parliamentarians, and leaders of civil society organizations and town-elders last Saturday and Sunday respectively. A Hakha resident told Chinland Guardian: "He held a meeting in Tedim in the morning on Sunday and arrived in Hakha in the afternoon. Although it was in the afternoon, some Christians were not able to attend their church services because preparations had to be done in advance."⁹

Questions over State budget to build Buddhist infrastructure in Chin State

11 November 2013: Chin MPs enquired about budget sanctioned separately by the government of Chin State for construction of Buddhist buildings in three townships. They said that they wanted to know the reason why a fund was earmarked only for Buddhists, but not for other religious groups in Burma's western State, with the majority being Christian. The new 2014-15 budget planned by the government of Chin State includes financial allocation to construct Buddhist monasteries, schools and community halls in Paletwa, Mindat and Tedim townships. Pu Lal Mawng Cung an MP from the Chin

⁷ See *Chin pastor slapped in face by ward admin in Arakan*, 3 December 2013, Chinland Guardian:

<http://www.chinlandguardian.com/index.php/chin-news/item/2026-chin-pastor-slapped-in-face-by-govt-officer-in-arakan>

⁸ See *Religious rights raised to Chin Affairs Minister*, 27 November 2013, Chinland Guardian:

<http://www.chinlandguardian.com/index.php/chin-news/item/2019-religious-rights-raised-to-chin-affairs-minister>

⁹ See *Disappointment over Shwe Mann's meeting schedules in Chin State*, 19 November 2013, Chinland Guardian:

<http://www.chinlandguardian.com/index.php/chin-news/item/2011-disappointment-over-shwe-mann-s-meeting-schedules-in-chin-state>

National Party said that he raised a question during the recent parliamentary sessions, asking if a Christian group would be allowed to receive budget allocations. He said that Chief Minister Hung Ngai responded saying a budget could be assigned if the proposal met the requirements, adding: "There is no discrimination against any religious groups."¹⁰

Christians disappointed over Sunday meeting with Chief Minister

25 October 2013: Christians in Matupi Town, Chin State expressed their disappointment over a recent meeting organized last Sunday by Pu Hung Ngai, Chief Minister of the Chin State government. They said that he summoned the meeting of ministers, department heads, district administrators, local government officials, and community and religious leaders between 7:30 and 9:45am in the morning. "Some Christian leaders had to cancel their church programs of leading the congregation and others missed worship services," said one of the Matupi leaders. According to the Hakha Post, about 250 people participated in the meeting in which a session for handing over a donation of 1million Kyats by a Burmese company for the Matupi Na Ta La school was included.¹¹

Christians threatened, ordered to stop holding worship services

20 October 2013: Chin Christians in Pan-awt village of Mindat Township were ordered to stop holding worship services under the directions of a Buddhist monk. Sayadaw U Nandar Thiri, a Buddhist monk based in Pan-awt, sent village administrators on three separate occasions to Christian leaders to discontinue their church services. A local Christian leader, whose name is not revealed for security reasons, told the Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO): "The Buddhist monk sent U Om She, a village administrator responsible for ten households, on 25 August while we were worshipping and he told us to immediately stop our service." He said that another six people including ten-household administrators namely, U Chaing Hman Ki, U Aung Thang, Daw Shwe Yawng, U Ning Hung and Daw Om Ha Yawng were sent on 9 September 2013 as they learned that we held a worship service on Sunday, 8 September. "We were threatened that if we kept on holding our services, the village would be burnt down," he added. On 6 October, another ten-household administrator U Ha Thang was sent to the house of the Christian leader by the Buddhist Sayadaw and said: "If you continued your worship service, your photos would be taken and sent to the authorities."¹²

¹⁰ See *Questions over State budget to build Buddhist infrastructure in Chin State*, 11 November 2013, Chinland Guardian: <http://www.chinlandguardian.com/index.php/chin-news/item/1995-questions-over-state-budget-to-build-buddhist-infrastructure-in-chin-state>

¹¹ See *Christians disappointed over Sunday meeting with Chief Minister*, 25 October 2013, *Rhododendron News*, September-October 2013: http://www.chro.ca/images/stories/files/PDF/Rhododendron/RhododendronNews_Sept-Oct_2013.pdf

¹² See *Christians threatened, ordered to stop holding worship services*, 20 October 2013, *Rhododendron News*, September-October 2013: http://www.chro.ca/images/stories/files/PDF/Rhododendron/RhododendronNews_Sept-Oct_2013.pdf

Govt gives full support to Na Ta La students in Chin State

30 September 2013: The government of Burma said it provided full assistance for Na Ta La students in Chin State. Na Ta La is a Burmese acronym for the Border Areas National Races Youth Development Training Schools. According to the Burmese version of *the New Light of Myanmar* last Thursday, the government was responsible for all their needs including accommodation, clothes, food, education and health. They receive a monthly grant of 25,000 Kyats per subject and there are five subjects taught at the Na Ta La schools, run by the Ministry for Border Affairs in collaboration with the Department of Educational Planning and Training. The total grant per student for the July to February academic year is currently 1million Kyats. At Na Ta La school No. 2 in Mindat town alone, there are 166 students (115 boys and 51 girls) between Grade -5 and Grade-10, of whom 85 will be sitting for an entrance examination to the University for Development of National Races. Meanwhile, at the mainstream public schools which are chronically underfunded, families have to pay for their children's costs including school materials and annual fees.¹³

Chin Christian govt staff ordered to prepare food for Buddhist offerings

27 September 2013: Chin Christian government employees in Hakha say they have been ordered to prepare food to be offered at Buddhist monasteries during the Uposatha day, known in English as the 'Buddhist Sabbath'. A government staff member in Hakha said that each department had been ordered to do the cooking unpaid, during or after office hours the day before the Buddhist day of observance. "There are few Buddhist staff members in each department but it is an order from the authorities that everyone must partake or make contributions for the offerings," added the Hakha government employee. "Now that we have a new democratic government, we must be given a choice and a chance to freely practice our religion. The authorities know we are Christian but we just have to follow the instructions," said a Chin Christian woman. In the whole of Hakha Township with a population of 52,439, the number of Buddhists is 538, with 8 monasteries and pagodas, according to government statistics.¹⁴

Chin Christian headmistress sacked for no given reasons

13 September 2013: An official letter signed by U Myint Ko, Director of Basic Education Department No. 2, Mandalay, said Daw Thim Dik, who was promoted to Thantlang from Ro Middle School in Mindat Township, was dismissed in accordance with a meeting decision made by committee of educational administration of Minister's Office of Education Ministry. The 53-year-old Christian headmistress

¹³ See *Govt gives full support to Na Ta La students in Chin State*, 30 September 2013, *Rhododendron News*, September-October 2013: http://www.chro.ca/images/stories/files/PDF/Rhododendron/RhododendronNews_Sept-Oct_2013.pdf

¹⁴ See *Chin Christian govt staff ordered to prepare food for Buddhist offerings*, 27 September 2013, *Rhododendron News*, September-October 2013: http://www.chro.ca/images/stories/files/PDF/Rhododendron/RhododendronNews_Sept-Oct_2013.pdf

believed the sudden termination of her work is associated with discriminatory practice and religious issues related to a government-run Na Ta La school in Mindat Township.

Speaking to the Chinland Post, Thim Dik said just before June this year she was ordered by a Buddhist monk to give a list of all the students at Ro Middle School where she worked as a headmistress. Later, she was told through a local messenger to send all the students at Ro to a Buddhist monastery by the Buddhist monk. "All my students are Christian and I don't anticipate them wanting to come to your school," added the Chin headmistress in response to the demand.

Recently, Mrs Thim Dik, whose husband is a Christian pastor, addressed a local congregation in Ro village. "I said parents should not allow poverty to drive them to cause their Christian children to convert into a different religion by leaving them entirely in the hands of Na Ta La schools." She said her message must have reached the Buddhist monk and Burmese teacher Ms Khin Pale Htaik, who works as a school teacher and stays at the Buddhist monks' monastery. Khin Pale Htaik allegedly then appealed to the relevant authorities for Thim Dik's dismissal and informed her that her name had been sent to authorities, even President Thein Sein.

Pu Ning Naing, Chin Minister for Development Affairs and Major Aung Shwe Oo, Deputy Director of State Education Department, conducted an investigation following receipt of the allegations, which accused Thim Dik of getting involved in beating up Chin Christian children studying at Na Ta La schools. When asked about the allegations, the students said they were never beaten up by the Chin headmistress. According to the Chinland Post, Major Aung Shwe Oo said he was not in a position to make any comments regarding the matter.¹⁵

School teachers forced to attend Sunday meeting in Hakha

07 September 2013: School teachers in Hakha, Chin State have been forced to turn up at a ceremony on Sunday to mark International Literacy Day. A source from Hakha said the State government officials ordered school teachers, most of them Christian, to sign a document saying that they would come to a meeting at 9am on Sunday, which coincides with Christian church services. One of the teachers, who asked not to be named, said failing to turn up at the event would result in a deduction of 5,000 kyats from their salary. "We were also informed that a certain amount of money would be taken away to buy school materials if we didn't participate," added the Chin school teacher, who attended the Sunday

¹⁵ See *Chin Christian headmistress sacked for no given reasons*, 13 September 2013, *Rhododendron News*, September-October 2013: http://www.chro.ca/images/stories/files/PDF/Rhododendron/RhododendronNews_Sept-Oct_2013.pdf

event. The ceremony was also attended by Pu Hung Ngai, Chief Minister of Chin State government and other ministers as well as government officials.¹⁶

High school students forced to go to class at weekends

31 August 2013: Parents and teachers from Christian families in Chin State complain about their children having to go to school on Saturdays and sometimes, Sundays. High school students go to school mostly on Saturdays in substitution of Uposatha, a Buddhist day of observance which falls during the weekdays. A parent in Hakha, from the Seventh-day Adventist Church, said: "We feel really concerned that our children have missed several church services as we worship on Saturday."¹⁷

Matupi churches ask permission to erect Christian cross

24 August 2013: The Matupi Township Council of Churches (MTCC) said it has asked permission from the government of Chin State to plant a new Christian cross on the mountain of Cangtak in Matupi township next year. Rev. Victor Lai Lian, MTCC's General Secretary, said a letter requesting permission to construct the cross has been sent to Pu Hung Ngai, Chief Minister of the Chin State government. The attempts by churches in Matupi township aim to plant a new Christian cross as a substitute for Boltlang's 30-ft high cross, which was destroyed by Burma's authorities in 2005. After demolition of the Boltlang cross, which was erected in 1987 under the leadership of MTCC, the authorities confiscated the area and built a military camp in 2005 for Burma Army Light Infantry Battalion No. 304. Similarly, an organization of Christian pastors from different churches in Hakha has decided to erect a cross in the capital city in 2014 as a symbol indicating Chin State as a Christian state. The group said they are working hard on finding the location and how to deal with the cross construction in accordance with official procedures under the new government.¹⁸

Thein Sein met Chin officials, leaders on Sunday

18 February 2013: During his first visit to Chin State as the President of the country, U Thein Sein held a meeting with Chin State government, officials and town-elders in Hakha in the morning on Sunday. "The meeting took place from 10am to 2pm. Normally, church services in Hakha start at 10am till 12 noon. So, Chin Christians who had to attend the meeting could not go to church," a community leader from Hakha told Chinland Guardian. Accompanied by Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Vice-Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, the President visited Thanthayar Aye Pagoda at Zetawun Meditation

¹⁶ See *School teachers forced to attend Sunday meeting in Hakha*, 7 September 2013, and *School teachers threatened with salary deduction in Hakha*, 8 September 2013, *Rhododendron News*, September-October 2013:

http://www.chro.ca/images/stories/files/PDF/Rhododendron/RhododendronNews_Sept-Oct_2013.pdf

¹⁷ See *High school students forced to go to class at weekends*, 31 August 2013, *Rhododendron News*, July – August 2013:

http://www.chro.ca/images/stories/files/PDF/Rhododendron/RhododendronNews_Jul-Aug_2013.pdf

¹⁸ See *Matupi churches ask permission to erect Christian cross*, 24 August 2013, *Rhododendron News*, July – August 2013:

http://www.chro.ca/images/stories/files/PDF/Rhododendron/RhododendronNews_Jul-Aug_2013.pdf

Centre in Hakha yesterday, making donations to the Members of the Sangha led by Sayadaw Dr Bhaddanta Tejosara.¹⁹

4. CHRO policy development efforts

a. Chin State level

CHRO facilitates panel discussion on freedom of religion or belief at the Chin National Conference

12-15 November 2013: Staff from the Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO) facilitated a 3-day panel discussion on freedom of religion or belief at the historic Chin National Conference in Hakha in November. The conference was the first of its kind for over 60 years in Chin State. Participants in the panel discussion were from different faith backgrounds. They agreed on 12 recommendations, which have been fully incorporated into the formal Conference resolutions. A 40-plus member Steering Committee consisting of different Chin stakeholders has been tasked to oversee the formation of relevant working groups to implement the resolutions from the Chin National Conference. The 12 recommendations on freedom of religion or belief are:

- Strongly calls on the concerned authorities to restore all Christians crosses that were destroyed under various pretexts
- To grant land ownership rights for religious purposes, and to allow faith-based civil society organizations to freely form, function and to entitle them to receive funding from both domestic and international donors, as well as to grant them legal status without unnecessary bureaucratic red tape
- Calls for the immediate recognition of the validity of identity cards issued by Christian religious organizations, which identify the bearer as a Christian religious worker
- Calls for the removal of all references to religious teachings from the education curricula in the government / public school system
- Calls for the abolition of Na Ta La (Border Areas National Races Youth Development Training) schools and to institute a single education system under the Ministry of Education where all students are treated equally and without discrimination on the basis of religious and ethnic identity
- To give equal broadcast time for all religions in State broadcast media such as TV and Radio

¹⁹ See *Thein Sein met Chin officials, leaders on Sunday*, 18 February 2013, *Rhododendron News*, January – February 2013: http://www.chro.ca/images/stories/files/PDF/Rhododendron/RhododendronNews_Jan-Feb_2013.pdf

- Calls for the replacement of the Ministry of Religious Affairs with an independent and impartial religious affairs commission in order to eliminate all kinds of religious discrimination in the Union of Myanmar
- To review and appropriately revise/remove provisions in the 2008 Constitution which provide for religious discrimination
- To enact new legislation protecting the rights of religious minorities
- Calls for the State to maintain a neutral role in all matters relating to religion
- To eliminate the identification of a person's religious affiliation on the National Registration Card (NRC), and for the Chin, to identify any Chin person only as a Chin on the NRC
- To guarantee freedom of religious worship, assembly and proselytizing
- Requests the Chin Baptist Convention and Chin Human Rights Organization to jointly initiate the organizing of a multi-faith forum for dialogue.

b. National level

CHRO briefing with Chin political parties and MPs in Rangoon & Naypyidaw

21 & 26 February 2013: In separate meetings in Rangoon and Naypyidaw, CHRO briefed Chin political parties and MPs on the findings of CHRO's September 2012 report *"Threats to Our Existence": Persecution of Ethnic Chin Christians in Burma*. In Napyidaw, CHRO's briefing event brought together 17 Chin MPs from across the political spectrum (Chin National Party, Chin Progressive Party, and Union Solidarity Development Party) for the very first time. The theme of freedom of religion or belief provided common ground for MPs to share concerns which cut across party lines.

Chin delegation raised issue of religious freedom with Speaker of Burmese Parliament

26 February 2013 - Nay Pyi Taw: A delegation of the Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO) yesterday met with Thura Shwe Mann, the Speaker of Pyithu Hluttaw, the Burmese Lower House of Parliament, to convey their concerns regarding the ongoing violations of human rights in Chin State. Meeting in Nay Pyi Taw, the CHRO delegation told the Speaker that despite the ongoing reforms, the Chin people are still concerned about the lack of religious freedom in Burma's poorest State. CHRO Executive Director Salai Bawi Lian told the Speaker, "We continue to be concerned about the ongoing human rights abuses, especially violations of religious freedom in Chin State. As Burma makes transition to democracy, we hope that the new Parliament will provide better protection for the human rights of Chin people." Responding to the Chin concerns, Thura Shwe Mann said that he is

aware of 'past wrongs' against the Chin. "We should learn from past lessons to rectify the mistakes," the Speaker told the CHRO delegation.²⁰

c. International level

CHRO testified at UN forum on Minority Issues

29 November 2013: Ms. Rosalinn Zahau, of the Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO), told the sixth session of the UN Forum on Minority Issues that discrimination against religious minorities still continues in Burma. She said that the Chin still face intersecting forms of discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, religion, and language, adding: "One impact of such discrimination is extreme poverty and another is on the right to effective participation in public and economic life. Chin Christian women are effectively excluded from all decision-making levels of government in Chin State." CHRO urged the Forum to call on the Burmese government to take concrete measures to fully comply with Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on the right to freedom of religion or belief, and to adopt legislation that prohibits direct or indirect discrimination against persons from religious minority backgrounds. CHRO also called for Burma's Ministry of Religious Affairs to be replaced with an independent and impartial commission on religious freedom, with a mandate to address deep-rooted discrimination on the basis of religious identity.²¹

For the full text of Ms. Rosalinn Zahau's intervention at the UN Forum on Minority Issues in Geneva on 26-27 November 2013, please visit: http://edit.chro.ca/images/CHRO_News/2013/CHRO-Intervention_UNForum-on-Minority-Issues.pdf

Poverty linked to discrimination: UN racism expert

06 October 2013: A new UN report highlights how poverty affecting minority groups around the world is closely linked to discrimination and racism. In his report to the UN General Assembly (UNGA) yesterday, Mutuma Ruteere, United Nations Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, explained, "Discrimination based on racial, religious, ethnic, linguistic and also socio-economic factors exacerbates vulnerability. The lack of participation of vulnerable groups in decision-making processes is also often the result of historical legacies."

With more than 70% of its population living under the poverty line according to the 2011 UNDP Poverty Profile, Chin State remains the poorest of all the 14 States and Regions in Burma by a wide

²⁰ See *Chin delegation raised issue of religious freedom with Speaker of Burmese Parliament*, 26 February 2013, *Rhododendron News*, January – February 2013:

http://www.chro.ca/images/stories/files/PDF/Rhododendron/RhododendronNews_Jan-Feb_2013.pdf

²¹ See *CHRO testified at UN forum on Minority Issues*, 29 November 2013, *Chinland Guardian*:

<http://www.chinlandguardian.com/index.php/component/k2/itemlist/date/2013/11/29>

margin. In an interview with the Chinland Guardian, Rachel Fleming, Advocacy Director of the Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO), said: "Mr. Ruteere's report is very relevant for understanding the Chin situation. There have been many impacts of state-sanctioned discrimination against the Chin on the basis of their ethnicity and religion. One is the long-lasting impact of decades of human rights abuses such as widespread forced labour and land confiscation, which have directly contributed to poverty. Those human rights violations have directly interfered with people's ability to farm their land, which is the main source of food for most Chin families. Another impact is government neglect and lack of political will to provide even the most basic services for Chin people: adequate healthcare services, clean drinking water, electricity, adequate schools, and road and communication infrastructure."²²

Govt urged to address discrimination against Christians in Chin State

24 October 2013: Tomás Ojea Quintana, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Burma, said that the government of Burma should address 'institutionalized discrimination' against Christians in Chin State. "This includes discrimination in access to jobs, especially senior positions, within the civil service," said Mr. Quintana, who made his first visit to Chin State in August 2013. In Chin State where about 90% of the population are Christian with 11% Buddhist, only 14% of department head positions at the Chin State level and 25% of township administrative officer positions at the township level are held by Christians, according to the report. He indicated that Christians in Burma's least developed state still face difficulties in securing permission to build and renovate religious infrastructures due to local planning regulations and administrative requirements.

During his trip to Mindat, Chin State, Mr. Quintana visited government- run Na Ta La schools, which are under the authority of the Ministry for Border Affairs and the Ministry of Religious Affairs. He urged the government to ensure that the cultural and religious rights of the students are fully respected and protected in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Burma is a party. Contrary to this, Colonel Zaw Min Oo, Minister of Security and Border Affairs in Chin State, has previously denied that there was discrimination against Christian students at the schools, saying the programme was established to help educate orphans and children from poor families. In response to a question raised by Chin MP Ki Thang Lon of the Chin Progressive Party during the Chin State parliamentary sessions, he said that the Na Ta La students were trained to become patriotic and good citizens, according to the Chinland Post. According to the Chin State government's statistics, there are 484 Buddhist and 290 Christian students in nine Na Ta La schools across Chin State, with 18 Christian and 114 Buddhist teachers.²³

²² See *Poverty linked to discrimination: UN racism expert*, 6 October 2013, Chinland Guardian:

<http://www.chinlandguardian.com/index.php/national-news/item/1989-poverty-linked-to-discrimination-un-racism-expert>

²³ See *Govt urged to address discrimination against Christians in Chin State*, 24 October 2013, , *Rhododendron News*, September-October 2013: http://www.chro.ca/images/stories/files/PDF/Rhododendron/RhododendronNews_Sept-Oct_2013.pdf

Religious freedom still restricted in Burma: USCIRF

26 August 2013: The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) said people from religious and ethnic minorities still express fears and face restrictions in Burma. In its report of August 2013 following the recent visit to Burma, USCIRF noted religious freedom conditions remain problematic. Scott Flipse, USCIRF Deputy Director for Policy and Research, made a trip to Burma visiting various parts of the country including Chin State to assess conditions of religious freedom on the ground under the new government. Religious communities continue to have difficulties getting permissions to build, renovate, and conduct activities, particularly in Chin and Rakhine (Arakan) States, according to the report. Earlier this year, the Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO) met with officials from USCIRF during an advocacy trip to the US following its report on religious persecution against ethnic Chin Christian in Burma.²⁴

UN rights envoy awestruck by levels of poverty in Chin State

22 August 2013: Mr. Quintana said in his statement yesterday that the Chin communities have suffered from neglect from the central government over the years. During his 8th trip to Burma, Mr. Quintana travelled to Mindat and Kanpetlet towns in southern Chin State, also visiting Christian churches and government -controlled Na Ta La schools. He stressed the situation on 'bureaucratic obstacles' towards opening spaces for Christian worship. Salai Za Uk Ling, Program Director of the Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO), said: "Graduates of the Na Ta La schools have guaranteed government positions, but only if they are Buddhists. This is a clear reflection that discrimination on the ground of religious identity is entrenched within the Na Ta La school system. This is why we have been calling for the abolition of these schools and to instead properly finance the state education system where everyone can enjoy equal access to good education." A CHRO delegation provided a briefing to Mr. Quintana last week in Rangoon, on the eve of his visit to Chin State.²⁵

Burma: Ethnic Chin in historic hearing at the European Parliament

Tuesday 9 July: A public hearing on the situation of the ethnic Chin in Burma took place at the European Parliament in Brussels for the first time ever today. The event, "The struggle of ethnic Chins in a changing Burma/Myanmar" - hosted by a member of the European Parliament Working Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief, László Tokés MEP – examined some of the key challenges facing the predominantly Christian Chin people, including ongoing human rights abuses. Salai Za Uk Ling, Program Director at the Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO) who testified at the hearing said, "We welcome the reforms that President Thein Sein's government has introduced, but there is still a long way to go. In a sense, what is happening in Chin State is a barometer for the rest of the country. There

²⁴ See *Religious freedom still restricted in Burma: USCIRF*, 26 August 2013, *Rhododendron News*, July-August 2013: http://www.chro.ca/images/stories/files/PDF/Rhododendron/RhododendronNews_Jul-Aug_2013.pdf

²⁵ See *UN rights envoy awestruck by levels of poverty in Chin State*, 22 August 2013, *Rhododendron News*, July-August 2013: http://www.chro.ca/images/stories/files/PDF/Rhododendron/RhododendronNews_Jul-Aug_2013.pdf

is a ceasefire agreement in place, and it is holding. Despite this positive development, serious human rights abuses by the Burma Army continue with impunity, including sexual violence. We want to shine a light on the root causes, such as ethnic and religious discrimination, and the urgent need to deepen the reforms."²⁶

Ethnic rights vital to Burma's democratic transition

23 March 2013: Serious violations of human rights still continue in ethnic areas. 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."

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. 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."²⁷

For the full text of Salai Za Uk Ling's testimony to the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights in Brussels on 19 March 2013, please visit:

http://www.chro.ca/images/stories/files/PDF/CHRO_EU_testimony.pdf

²⁶ See *Burma: Ethnic Chin in historic hearing at the European Parliament*, 9 July 2013, *Rhododendron News*, July-August 2013: http://www.chro.ca/images/stories/files/PDF/Rhododendron/RhododendronNews_Jul-Aug_2013.pdf

²⁷ See *Ethnic Rights Vital to Burma's democratic transition*, 23 March 2013, *Chinland Guardian*: <http://www.chinlandguardian.com/index.php/news/ethnic-news/item/1837-ethnic-rights-vital-to-burma-s-democratic-transition>

Current reforms have not extended to freedom of religion in Burma: MEPs

2 February 2013: Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) said the changes in Burma have not reached out to people of different religious and ethnic backgrounds in the country. In a letter sent to Baroness Catherine Ashton, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, MEPs said: "Current reforms have not yet extended to freedom of religion or belief, which will be key to long term peace and stability in the country." The letter, signed by 14 MEPs, also highlighted problems with the current State policy of segregation of Buddhist and Muslim communities in Rakhine State, and the destruction of large Christian crosses in Chin State. The Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO) and Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) expressed deep concerns over the ongoing human rights violations and conflicts against ethnic nationalities in Burma as they welcomed the statement by MEPs.²⁸

²⁸ See *Current reforms have not extended to freedom of religion in Burma: MEPs*, 2 February 2013, *Rhododendron News*, January - February 2013: http://www.chro.ca/images/stories/files/PDF/Rhododendron/RhododendronNews_Jan-Feb_2013.pdf