

Kachin

Profile

The Kachin encompass a number of ethnic groups speaking almost a dozen distinct languages belonging to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family who inhabit the same region in the northern part of Burma on the border with China, mainly in Kachin State. Strictly speaking, these languages are not necessarily closely related, and the term Kachin at times is used to refer specifically to the largest of the groups (the Kachin or Jingpho/Jinghpaw) or to the whole grouping of Tibeto-Burman speaking minorities in the region, which include the Maru, Lisu, Lashu, etc.

The exact Kachin population is unknown due to the absence of reliable census in Burma for more than 60 years. Most estimates suggest there may be in the vicinity of 1 million Kachin in the country. The Kachin, as well as the Chin, are one of Burma's largest Christian minorities: though once again difficult to assess, it is generally thought that between two-thirds and 90 per cent of Kachin are Christians, with others following animist practices of Buddhists.

Historical context

It is generally thought that the Kachin gradually moved south from their ancestral land in the Tibetan plateau through Yunnan in southern China to arrive in the northern region of what would become Burma sometime during the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries, making the Kachin relative newcomers.

Their position in this borderland part of South-East Asia meant that the Kachin were often outside of the sphere of influence of Burman kings. Their strength was such by the Third Anglo-Burmese War of 1885 that, while the British were taking Mandalay, the Kachin were getting ready to take advantage of the Burman kingdom's weakness to attack and take over Mandalay themselves. Nevertheless, most Kachin areas were administered by the British as a part of the Frontier Administration rather than Burma proper. Kachin traditional chiefs (duwas) continued to hold sway in their areas under the British administration.

The Kachin were one of the ethnic minorities which participated in and signed the Panglong Agreement of 1947, and as such they received in-principle approval for the creation of a separate Kachin State, which eventuated in the first constitution of newly independent Burma. For a time this was sufficient, and there was no immediate insurgency against the government of Burma.

There were some tensions between ethnic Kachin and the Burman-controlled government, but in the main the Kachin stayed outside of the ethnic insurgencies soon after independence. This was to be dramatically altered after the declaration of Buddhism as the religion of Burma in 1961, which was perceived as an affront by the mainly Christian Kachin, leading directly – with other grievances – to the creation of the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) and its military wing, the Kachin Independent Army (KIA). The final straw seems to have been General Ne Win's military coup in 1962, as the President-elect at the time was a Kachin, Sama Duwa Sinwa Nawng.

The post-1962 period also saw an increased 'Burmanization' of the army and institutions of the state, and with it a stronger sense of ethnic Kachin being discriminated against and excluded by government authorities in areas such as employment and economic opportunities, all of which continued to fuel the insurgency in Kachin areas.

Whereas the KIO initially was able to control much of Kachin State in the early years of the insurgency, this began to change after 1988 as the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) began to conclude ceasefire agreements with neighbouring groups, and subsequently redeployed and concentrated military forces against Kachin rebels. As a result, by 1994 the KIO decided to enter into a ceasefire with the junta, which allowed it some degree of local administrative control in pockets of Kachin State, though all of the land and natural resources remain under the authority of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) government.

Current issues

Events after 1994 are a mixed bag, with some economic projects being initiated in Kachin State and some degree of latitude granted by the SPDC to the KIO – at least initially – which began to permit the emergence of local Kachin NGOs and even the tentative involvement in the area of some international NGOs. However, over the past 13 years, unsustainable and unaccountable logging and mining activities have taken their toll on the natural environment of Kachin State, with reports in 2007 pointing the finger at Burma's military junta which, for example, has given permits for gold-mining in the Hugawng Valley Tiger Reserve in northern Kachin State leading to the displacement of thousands of local inhabitants. These and other similar activities appear to favour selected companies and individuals closely connected to the ruling regime, and at the same time have an ethnic component as ethnic Burman are encouraged to work and settle in some of the areas where the mining and logging activities occur.

Throughout the state, Kachin women and children are being driven by increasing poverty into the sex trade in Yangon (Rangoon) and China.

The Burmese military presence has in fact increased dramatically, from 26 battalions in 1994 to almost 50 in 2007, bringing at the same time an increase in the allegations of human rights violations and atrocities such as land confiscations (with little or no compensation), forced labour and sexual violence. The SPDC appears to be appointing ethnic Burman to almost all administrative positions in towns such as Danai, leading to the virtual elimination of any use of the Kachin language in local affairs. In early 2007, four Kachin schoolgirls who claimed to have been gang raped by Burmese soldiers were found guilty of prostitution and jailed.

In addition to the same type of violations of human rights experienced by many of the country's ethnic minorities, the Kachin still appear to be targeted specifically by Burmese authorities because of their Christian beliefs. There were continuing reports in 2005 and 2006 of Kachin being subjected to conversion activities and discriminatory treatment by authorities because of their religion, such as rewards if they convert to Buddhism or exemption from forced labour, lower prices for basic foodstuffs such as rice and greater educational opportunities. There were also claims in 2006 of Kachin Christian parents being offered free schooling for their children at Buddhist monasteries, and of Burmese soldiers being encouraged by authorities to marry Kachin women to convert them to Buddhism.

There appear to be few Kachin who can be promoted to the higher echelons of the army or government institutions; permission to repair or construct churches is seldom granted (and in some locations Buddhist monasteries are built instead) and many of the more visible signs of Christianity in Kachin areas, such as large crosses in high, visible locations have over the years been destroyed and are not

allowed to be replaced.