

Myanmar/Burma - Chin

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June 19, 2015

Burma has over 100 ethnic groups, languages and dialects and is said to have the richest ethnic diversity in Asia. Such diversity is attributed to the country's geographic location on a strategic crossroads, where historically it had acted as a buffer between the neighbouring powers of India, China and Thailand. Over 2,000 years of cross border migrations and intermingling between cultures has led to the development of diverse ethnic settlements and communities residing both in mountainous frontier zones and lowland plains areas of the country.

There is no reliable census data available on Burma's ethnic minorities, although the government claims that there are 135 'national races'. Kachin, Karen, Kayah (Karen), Shan, Chin, Mon and Rakhine (Arakan) states take on the names of the seven minority groups who historically were able to negotiate state/territorial boundaries with the government. However, in themselves these states are not ethnically homogeneous.

Of a population of 56 million people, the majority Burman constitute around two thirds. The largest minorities are Shan (9 per cent) and Karen (7 per cent) groups, and Mon, Rakhine, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Kayah, Chinese, Indian, Dava, Akha, Kokang, Lahu, Naga, Palaung, Pao, Romying, Teyoyan, and Wa peoples each constitute 5 per cent or less of the population.¹



Chin men wait in Tamu Kani Point in Karenni State, having escaped from the Burmese army. Forced at gunpoint to carry munitions to the frontlines, they had been away from their homes for two months.
Dean Chapman/Photo Pictures

In 1947 General Aung San, leader of the Burma Independence Army, was able to negotiate a plan for independence with the British colonial authorities and

Profile

The Chin are of Sino-Tibetan origin and inhabit a mountain chain which roughly covers western Burma through to Mizoram in north-east India (where they are related to the Mizos, Kuki and others) and small parts of Bangladesh. They are not a single group, but are in fact composed of a number of ethnic groups such as the Asho, Cho, Khumi, Kuki, Laimi, Lushai and Zomi, each with their language belonging to the Tibeto-Burman language branch. A mountain people by tradition, though this has been changing, perhaps 80 per cent of the Chin are Christians, while most of the remaining population are mainly Buddhists or animists, and according to some, a very small Jewish sect.

As with other minorities, their numbers in Burma are subject to uncertainty because of the absence of reliable demographic statistics since before the Second World War, though most current estimates suggest there may be between 0.5 and 1.5 million Chin living in Chin State and Sagaing in the north-west of Burma.

Historical context

The Chin was one of the ethnic groups that signed the Panglong Agreement of 1947, with its promise of a federal structure in the new independent Burma. This was never fully implemented and contributed subsequently to the slide into civil war between the state and some of these groups within a decade, and particularly after the 1962 coup d'état by General Ne Win.

While initially not among the main ethnic groups in rebellion against central authorities, a Chin insurgency did emerge after the 1988 crackdown on the democratic movement. The brief hope offered during the 1990 elections, which saw a number of Chins elected, was quickly smashed by the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) with the arrest of Chin MPs and banning of all Chin political parties such as the Chin National League for Democracy, the Mara People's Party and the Zomi National Congress.

The presence of the army after 1990 exploded exponentially in Chin State from one to ten battalions, accompanied by massive loss of traditional lands and the fleeing of many Chin to India and other countries to escape slave labour and other violations of their rights at the hands of the military.

Until 1990 Chin could generally practise their non-Buddhist beliefs with little interference; since then the military regime appears to be involved in attempts to coerce some Chin to convert to Buddhism and to prevent proselytizing by Christians by, among other things, destroying churches, harassing, arresting and even abusing pastors.

The Chin appear to have been particularly targeted for severe measures because most of them are Christians. Churches were closed and religious symbols such as crosses removed from the top of mountains near Chin communities; church services were disrupted by soldiers and there were physical attacks on pastors.

The use of forced labour by the army affected many Chin in the north-west part of the country, but it appears that in the 1990s forced labour was specifically targeted against Christian Chin in order to coerce them to convert to Buddhism. Local authorities have also recruited Chin children to receive formal education in cities, but these (Christian) Chin would be sent to monasteries where they received Buddhist teachings against their will.

While the Chin language had been used for the purposes of education to some degree in the past, this had been all but extinguished in the last few decades. From the mid-1990s, all teachers in high schools have been instructed to use only Burmese as language of instruction. Private elementary schools teaching in Chin had existed in many areas because of the limited number of state schools available for the Chin population in Chin State, but the military regime started to ban these schools in 1998.

Current issues

There have been consistent reports of Chin people being recruited as forced labour, arrested arbitrarily and tortured. The forced labour is particularly problematic as it takes farmers away from their fields, leaving residents unable to afford food, healthcare or education. They may then be obliged to take out loans, incurring personal debt to pay for basic services.

The Chin Human Rights Organization has reported that Chin Christians continue to face discrimination and persecution by the government, including forced evictions, threats of arson, bans on religious gatherings and assaults.

They have also reported funding disparities between Buddhist-centric schools, Na Ta La, that are supported by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and other public schools that are seriously underfunded. Chin Christians attending such Buddhist schools will face direct and indirect pressure to convert.

The Chin National Front signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in October 2015. Representatives said that the situation facing ethnic Chin in Chin State had improved since the

initiation of the peace process.