



## U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

### Burma

#### International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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Highly repressive, authoritarian military regimes have ruled the country since 1962. Constitutional support for religious freedom has not existed since 1988 after the armed forces brutally suppressed massive prodemocracy demonstrations and abrogated the constitution. In 1990 prodemocracy parties won a majority of seats in a free and fair election, but the junta of senior military officers refused to recognize the results and has ruled the country by decree and without a legislature ever since. The authorities generally permitted most adherents of registered religions to worship as they choose; however, the Government imposes restrictions on certain religious activities and frequently abuses the right to freedom of religion.

There was no change in the limited respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. The Government continued to infiltrate and covertly and overtly monitor meetings and activities of virtually all organizations, including religious organizations. The Government systematically restricted efforts by Buddhist clergy to promote human rights and political freedom and discouraged and prohibited minority religions from constructing new places of worship. The Government also actively promoted Theravada Buddhism over other religions, particularly among members of minority ethnic groups. Christian and Islamic groups continued to have trouble obtaining permission to repair existing places of worship or build new ones in most regions. Anti-Muslim violence continued, as did the close monitoring of Muslims activities. Restrictions on worship of other non-Buddhist minority groups also continued throughout the country. There were no reports of forced conversions of non-Buddhists. Adherence or conversion to Buddhism, however, is generally a prerequisite for promotion to senior government and military ranks.

During the period covered by this report there were persistent social tensions between the Buddhist majority and the Christian and Muslim minorities. Widespread prejudice existed against citizens of South Asian origin, many of whom are Muslims.

The U.S. government advocated religious freedom with all facets of society, including with government officials, religious leaders, private citizens, and scholars, diplomats of other governments, and international business and media representatives. Embassy representatives offered support to local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and religious leaders, and acted as a conduit for information exchanges with otherwise isolated human rights NGOs and religious leaders. Since 1999, the U.S. secretary of state has designated the country as a "Country of Particular Concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. The U.S. government has a wide array of sanctions in place against the country for its violations of human rights.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of approximately 261,970 square miles and a population of more than 54 million. The majority followed Theravada Buddhism, although in practice popular Burmese Buddhism coexisted with astrology, numerology, fortune telling, and veneration of indigenous pre-Buddhist era deities called "nats." Buddhist monks, including novices, numbered more than 400 thousand and depended on the laity for their material needs, including clothing and daily donations of food. The country had a much smaller number of Buddhist nuns. Christian groups (Catholics, Baptists, Anglicans, and an array of other Protestant denominations), Muslims (mostly Sunni), Hindus, and practitioners of traditional Chinese and indigenous religions represented the principal minority faiths. According to official statistics, almost 90 percent of the population practiced Buddhism, 6 percent practiced Christianity, and 4 percent practiced Islam. These statistics almost certainly underestimated the non-Buddhist proportion of the population, which could be as high as 30 percent. Muslim leaders estimated that approximately 20 percent of the population was Muslim. A tiny Jewish community in Rangoon had a synagogue but no resident rabbi to conduct services.

The country was ethnically diverse, with some correlation between ethnicity and religion. Theravada Buddhism was the dominant religion among the majority Burman ethnic group and among the Shan, Arakanese, and Mon ethnic minorities of the eastern, western, and southern regions. Christianity was the dominant religion among the Kachin ethnic group of the northern region and the Chin and Naga ethnic groups of the western region, some of whom continued to practice traditional indigenous religions. Protestant groups reported recent rapid growth among animist communities in Chin State. Christianity was also practiced widely among the Karen and Karenni ethnic groups of the southern and eastern regions, although many Karen and Karenni were Buddhist. In addition, some ethnic Indians were Christian. Hinduism was practiced chiefly by Burmese of Indian origin, who were concentrated in major cities and in the south-central region. Islam was practiced widely in Rakhine State, where it was the dominant religion of the Rohingya minority, and in Rangoon, Ayeyarwady, and Mandalay divisions. Some Burmans, Indians, and ethnic Bengalis also practiced Islam. Chinese ethnic minorities generally practiced traditional Chinese religions. Traditional indigenous religions were practiced widely among smaller ethnic groups in the highland regions. Practices drawn from those indigenous religions persisted widely in popular Buddhist rituals, especially in rural areas.

#### Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

##### Legal/Policy Framework

Highly authoritarian military regimes have ruled the country since 1962. The current military government, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), has governed without a constitution or legislature since 1988. Most adherents of religions that registered with the authorities generally enjoyed the right to worship as they chose; however, the Government imposed restrictions on certain religious activities and frequently abused the right to religious freedom.

Since independence in 1948, many of the ethnic minority areas have served as bases for armed resistance against the Government. Although the Government has negotiated cease-fire agreements with most armed ethnic groups since 1989, active Shan, Karen, and Karenni insurgencies continued during the period covered by this report. Periodic fighting between the army and the leading Karen insurgent group, the Karen National Union (KNU), and multiple army attacks on Karen villages occurred. Successive civilian and military governments have tended to view religious freedom in the context of whether it threatens national unity or central authority.

Since independence, successive governments, civilian and military, have supported and associated themselves conspicuously with Buddhism. The country has no official state religion. In 1961, the Government's push to make Buddhism the state religion failed due to national protests by religious minorities. However, in practice the Government continued to show a preference for Theravada Buddhism through its official propaganda and state-sponsored activities, including government donations to monasteries and support for Buddhist missionary activities. Promotions within the military and the civil service were generally contingent on the candidates being followers of Buddhism. The Ministry of Religious Affairs included the powerful Department for the Promotion and Propagation of Sasana (Buddhist teaching).

Virtually all organizations, religious or otherwise, must register with the Government. A government directive exempts "genuine" religious organizations from official registration; however, in practice only registered organizations can buy or sell property or open bank accounts. These requirements lead most religious organizations to seek registration. Religious organizations register with the Ministry of Home Affairs with the endorsement of the Ministry for Religious Affairs. Leaders of registered religious groups have more freedom to travel than leaders of unrecognized organizations and members of their congregations.

Buddhist doctrine remained part of the state-mandated curriculum in all government-run elementary schools. Students could opt out of instruction in Buddhism and sometimes did. All students of government-run schools are required to recite a Buddhist prayer daily. Some Muslim students are allowed to leave the room during this act, while at some schools non-Buddhists are forced to recite the prayer. The Government continued to fund two state Sangha universities in Rangoon and Mandalay to train Buddhist monks under the control of the state-sponsored State Monk Coordination Committee ("Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee" or SMNC). The Government also funded one university intended to teach noncitizens about Theravada Buddhism.

Official public holidays include numerous Buddhist holy days, as well as a few Christian, Hindu, and Islamic holy days.

The Government made some nominal efforts to promote mutual understanding among practitioners of different religions and maintained multi-religion monuments in Rangoon and other major cities.

In November 2005, the minister of religious affairs called a meeting of leaders of the four main religions in the country. The minister used the meeting to denounce the 2005 State Department International Religious Freedom Report and requested each leader write a letter stating that their religious communities may practice their faith freely in the country, which the ministry would display on its official website. During a discussion that followed, the representative of the Islamic Religious Affairs Council (IRAC) said that while there had been progress on some religious issues, there was room for further improvement. The minister reportedly stopped further discussion and adjourned the meeting abruptly.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government continued to show preference for Theravada Buddhism while controlling the organization and restricting the activities and expression of the Buddhist clergy (Sangha), although some monks have resisted such control. Based on the 1990 Sangha Organization Law, the Government banned any organization of Buddhist monks other than the nine state-recognized monastic orders. These nine orders submit to the authority of the SMNC, which monks indirectly elect. Violations of this law are punishable by immediate public defrocking, and often by criminal penalties.

Authorities defrocked and arrested a group of twenty-six monks in 2003 and sentenced them in 2004 to jail terms of seven years (eighteen years for the leader) for refusing to accept government donations of robes and other items. The authorities released these monks from prison on July 6, 2005. Monks serving sentences of life in prison reportedly included the Venerable U Thondara of Myingyan (arrested during the 1988 anti-government demonstrations). The exile-based Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) estimated that there were eighty-four monks in prison for various charges. The AAPP estimate could not be verified. The number of non-Buddhists in prison for their religious beliefs was unknown.

In 2004, the regime hosted a three-day World Buddhist Summit, despite international criticism and the last-minute withdrawal of the summit's original Japanese sponsors due to political and security concerns following the October 2004 ousting of Prime Minister Khin Nyunt. The summit drew approximately 1,600 attendees from around the world (although most were from within the country). The prime ministers of Thailand and Laos also attended.

State-controlled news media frequently depicted or described government officials paying homage to Buddhist monks' making donations at pagodas throughout the country, officiating at ceremonies to open, improve, restore, or maintain pagodas, and organizing ostensibly voluntary "people's donations" of money, food, and uncompensated labor to build or refurbish Buddhist religious shrines throughout the country. State-owned newspapers routinely featured front-page banner slogans quoting from Buddhist scriptures. The Government has

published books of Buddhist religious instruction. The Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), a government-sponsored mass organization in which participation often is compulsory, organized courses in Buddhist culture attended by millions of persons, according to state-owned media reports. It was not possible to verify this claim independently.

The Department for the Perpetuation and Propagation of the Sasana handles the Government's relations with Buddhist monks and Buddhist schools. The Government-funded International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University (ITBMU) in Rangoon, which opened in 1998, has as its stated purpose "to share the country's knowledge of Buddhism with the people of the world." The main language of instruction is English. There are reports that the ITBMU, while in principle open to the public, accepted only candidates who were approved by government authorities or recommended by a senior, progovernment abbot.

The Government infiltrated or monitored the meetings and activities of virtually all organizations, including religious organizations. Religious activities and organizations of all faiths also were subject to broad government restrictions on freedom of expression and association. The Government subjected all media, including religious publications, and on occasion sermons, to control and censorship.

Authorities refused to approve requests for gatherings to celebrate traditional Christian and Islamic holidays and restricted the number of Muslims that could gather in one place. For instance, after repeatedly postponing the fiftieth anniversary celebration of the Islamic Religious Affairs Council and its sixteenth Islam Religious Assembly in Myitkyina, Kachin State, local authorities agreed to allow the convocation from May 30 to 31. On May 29, the authorities asked IRAC leaders to postpone the meeting again, but later the Kachin PDC chairman agreed to allow the nearly 400 delegates who had gathered in Myitkyina after traveling from all over the country to meet for just one and a half hours on May 31. The Muslim delegates found this unacceptable and returned home without convening. In April 2006, Mandalay authorities refused permission for area churches to hold a joint Easter program. When permission was granted to hold a general meeting, Christian leaders reported that authorities often required them to submit details in advance of the meeting, including the name of the pianist and what songs they would play. Islamic groups reported that authorities authorized only remote sites for their annual Eid al-Adha sacrifices within Rangoon. Muslims had to travel long distances to participate. Muslims also reported that the Eid al-Adha ceremonies were restricted to three hours in length. Some Buddhists complained that the animal sacrifices during Islamic religious festivals offended their sensitivities. In 2004, the Government revoked permission at the last moment for the Methodist Church of Lower Burma to hold its one hundred twenty-fifth anniversary gala event.

In 1995, the Government prohibited any opposition political party member from being ordained as a monk or religious leader. Although this measure remained in effect, it was not strictly enforced.

The Government continued to discriminate against members of minority religions, restricting their educational, proselytizing, and church-building activities.

In June 2005, authorities forced a Muslim private tutor in Rangoon to close down his school. Although he was teaching only the public school curriculum, authorities accused him of trying to convert children to Islam because he was offering free courses.

In June 2005, authorities in Shwepyitha Township, Rangoon Division, arrested eight Muslims, including the imam of the community, and charged them with holding group prayers at the imam's house. Authorities also arrested a Muslim cleric in South Dagon Township, Rangoon Division, for holding private Qur'an courses for Muslim children at his house.

In October 2005, a proregime Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) group from Kawkaik District, Karen State, reportedly detained three members of the local IRAC, including the chairman, and kept them in an underground cell. A senior DKBA officer intervened and gained their release after three days. In December 2005, authorities at Three Pagoda Township in the same district reportedly ordered Muslim leaders to stop holding prayers at the local worship hall they had used for many years, located on land owned by the IRAC.

Government authorities continued to prohibit Christian clergy from proselytizing in some areas. Christian groups reported that several times during the period covered by this report, local authorities denied applications for residency permits of known Christian ministers attempting to move into a new township. The groups indicated this was not a widespread practice, but depended on the individual community and local authority. In some instances, local authorities reportedly confiscated National Identity Cards of new converts to Christianity. Despite this, Christian groups reported that church membership grew, even in predominately Buddhist regions of the country.

In general, the Government has not allowed permanent foreign religious missions to operate in the country since the mid-1960s, when it expelled nearly all foreign missionaries and nationalized all private schools and hospitals, which were extensive and affiliated mostly with Christian religious organizations. The Government is not known to have paid any compensation in connection with these extensive confiscations. Christian groups, including Catholics and Protestants, have brought in foreign clergy and religious workers for visits as tourists, but they have been careful to ensure that the Government did not perceive their activities as proselytizing. Some Christian theological seminaries also continued to operate, as did several Bible schools and madrassahs. The Government has allowed some members of foreign religious groups, such as the Mormons, to enter the country to provide humanitarian assistance or English language training to government officials. Some of these groups did not register with the Myanmar Council of Churches, but were able to conduct religious services without government interference.

Christian groups continued to have trouble obtaining permission to buy land or build new churches in most regions. Sometimes the authorities refused because they claimed the churches did not possess proper property deeds, but access to official land titles was extremely difficult due to the country's complex land laws and government title to most land. In some areas, permission to repair existing places of worship was easier to acquire. During the period of this report, authorities in Mandalay arrested three pastors for building new churches and charged them with land law violations, not for violating any religious regulations. Muslims reported that they essentially were banned from constructing new mosques anywhere in the country, and they had great difficulty obtaining permission to repair or expand their existing structures. Some authorities reportedly destroyed informal houses of worship or unauthorized religious construction they discovered.

Buddhist groups have not experienced similar difficulties in obtaining permission to build new pagodas, monasteries, or community religious halls.

Some Christians in Chin State claimed that authorities have not authorized the construction of any new churches since 1997. In some parts of the state, however, recently built churches are evident. In March 2006, Lt. Col. Hla Maw Oo, director of the Border Trade Department, ordered Kachin Baptists to remove a church from its current location in Mong Yu in northeastern Shan State by April 20 to make way for an economic development zone along the Chinese border. The official reportedly offered \$7,000 (8.7 million kyats) compensation for the church that Christian businessmen built for \$12,070 (15 million kyats) in 2002. The official threatened to involve the military if the members did not comply. This case was still pending at the end of the reporting period. In Chin State, authorities jailed three persons for constructing new churches. In Rangoon, Mandalay, and elsewhere, authorities allowed construction of new community centers by various Christian groups if the groups agreed not to hold services there or erect any Christian signs.

The Religious Affairs Ministry has stipulated in the past that permission to construct new religious buildings "depends upon the population of the location." However, there appeared to be no correlation between the construction of pagodas and the demand for additional places of Buddhist worship. In most regions of the country, Christian and Islamic groups that sought to build small places of worship on side streets or other inconspicuous locations were able to do so only with informal approval from local authorities. However, informal approval from local authorities creates a tenuous legal situation. When local authorities or conditions have changed, informal approvals for construction have been rescinded abruptly and construction halted. In some cases, authorities demolished existing church buildings.

Since the 1960s, Christian and Islamic groups have had difficulty importing religious literature into the country. All publications, religious and secular, remained subjected to control and censorship. It was illegal to import translations of the Bible in indigenous languages. Officials have occasionally allowed local printing or photocopying of limited copies of other religious material (with the notation that they were for internal use only) in indigenous languages without prior approval by government censors.

During the period covered by this report, individuals continued to smuggle Bibles and Qur'ans into the country in small quantities. Some were intercepted at the border and confiscated, frequently ending up for sale on the black market.

State censorship authorities continued to enforce special restrictions on local publication of the Bible, the Qur'an, and Christian and Islamic publications in general. The most onerous restriction was a list of over one hundred prohibited words that the censors would not allow in Christian or Islamic literature because they are "indigenous terms" or derived from the Pali language long used in Buddhist literature. Many of these words have been used and accepted by some of the country's Christian and Islamic groups since the colonial period. Organizations that translate and publish non-Buddhist religious texts were appealing these restrictions. In addition, censors have sometimes objected to passages of the Old Testament and the Qur'an that they believe approve the use of violence against nonbelievers. There have been no reports of arrests or prosecutions for possession of any traditional religious literature in recent years.

The Government allowed members of all religious groups to establish and maintain links with coreligionists in other countries and to travel abroad for religious purposes, subject to the country's restrictive passport and visa-issuance practices, foreign exchange controls, and government monitoring, which extended to all international activities by all citizens regardless of religion. The Government sometimes expedited its burdensome passport issuance procedures for Muslims making the Hajj or Buddhists going on pilgrimage to Bodhgaya, India, although it limited the number of pilgrims. In 2005, authorities allowed only 300 Muslims to participate officially in the Hajj. Consequently, as many as 3 thousand Muslims made their own arrangements, and many more from Rakhine State reportedly crossed over to Bangladesh to obtain Bangladeshi passports in order to participate in the Hajj. During the period covered by this report, immigration and passport office officials continued to use the occasion of the Hajj to extort bribes from would-be travelers. As a result, the cost to official pilgrims was reportedly more expensive than for pilgrims who made their own private arrangements.

Religious affiliation is indicated on government-issued identification cards that citizens and permanent residents of the country are required to carry at all times. Having the term "Muslim" on the cards often led to harassment by police or immigration authorities. Citizens were also required to indicate their religion on official application forms, such as passports.

Non-Buddhists continued to experience employment discrimination at upper levels of the public sector. Few have ever been promoted to the level of director general or higher. There were no non-Buddhists who held flag rank in the armed forces, although a very few Christians reportedly achieved the rank of lieutenant colonel. The Central Executive Committee of the largest opposition group--the National League for Democracy--included no non-Buddhists, although individual members from most religions in the country supported the party. The Government discouraged Muslims from enlisting in the military, and Christian or Muslim military officers who aspired for promotion beyond the rank of major were encouraged by their superiors to convert to Buddhism. Some Muslims who wished to join the military reportedly had to list "Buddhist" as their religion on their application, though they were required to convert. In one instance in 2005, superiors informed a Buddhist officer that his Christian wife must convert to Buddhism or else he would have to resign from the army.

Religious discrimination also occurred in education and cultural activities. In 2005, a high school student named Alexander reached the division level in an intramural sports competition. Mandalay division authorities assumed by his name that he was a Christian and disqualified him. In addition, when a Christian tried to hold a birthday celebration in a Mandalay hotel in 2005, local authorities banned it, claiming it was a religious event that should be held in a church.

Muslims in Rakhine State, on the western coast, and particularly those of the Rohingya minority group, continued to experience the severest forms of legal, economic, educational, and social discrimination. The Government denies citizenship status to Rohingyas because their ancestors allegedly did not reside in the country at the start of British colonial rule, as required by the country's citizenship law. The Muslims assert that their presence in the area predates the British arrival by several centuries. Rohingya Muslims, although essentially treated as illegal foreigners, were not issued Foreigner Registration Cards. Instead, the Government gave some of them "Temporary Registration Cards" (TRC). UNHCR estimates that only 50 percent of the approximately 700 thousand Rohingyas possessed TRCs. Authorities have

insisted that Muslim men applying for TRCs submit photos without beards. The authorities did not allow government employees of the Islamic faith, including village headmen, to grow beards, and dismissed some who already had beards. The authorities also did not consider many non-Rohingya Muslims to be citizens. In order for these Muslims to receive National Registration Cards and passports, they must pay large bribes. Ethnic Burman Muslims pay less than Muslims from ethnic minority groups (primary those of Indian or Bengali descent).

In 1988, the Government permitted only three marriages per year per village in the primarily Rohingya townships of Maungdaw and Buthidaung in northern Rakhine State, and required the approval of the Regional Military Commander. In 2005, the Government extended this edict to Kyauk Pyu and Ramree Townships in central Rakhine State. Following the ouster of Prime Minister Khin Nyunt in October 2004 and the demise of his military intelligence apparatus, marriage restrictions were temporarily lifted but were reportedly reinstated in 2005. After a backlog accumulated of nearly 3 thousand unapproved marriage applications, the Regional Military Commander reportedly agreed to allow some Rohingya Muslims who possessed TRCs to marry.

Muslims in the country had difficulty obtaining birth certificates. A local official in Sittwe, Rakhine State, reportedly issued a verbal order in 2005 prohibiting the issuance of birth certificates to Muslim babies born in the area. In Rangoon, Muslims can usually obtain birth certificates for newborns, but local authorities refused to allow them to place the names of the babies on their household registers.

Muslims across the country, as well as some other ethnic minority groups such as Chinese and Indians, were required to obtain advance permission from the township authorities whenever they wished to leave their hometowns. Authorities generally do not grant permission to Rohingya or Muslim Arakanese to travel from their hometowns for any purpose. However, permission sometimes can be obtained through bribery. Non-Arakanese Muslims are given more freedom to travel; however, they must also seek permission, which is usually granted after a bribe is paid. Muslims residing in Rangoon can visit beach resort areas in Ngapali, Rakhine State, but cannot return to Rangoon without the signature of the Regional Military Commander. Those with money are able to bribe local officials to return. Muslims residing outside of Rakhine State often are barred from return travel to their homes if they visit other parts of Rakhine State.

The Government reserves secondary education for citizens only. Rohingyas do not have access to state-run schools beyond primary education and are unable to obtain employment in any civil service positions. Muslim students from Rakhine State who completed high school were not granted permits to travel outside the state to attend college or university.

Many of the approximately 21,000 Rohingya Muslims remaining in refugee camps in Bangladesh refused to return because they fear human rights abuses, including religious persecution.

#### Abuses of Religious Freedom

Military forces have killed religious figures on some occasions. However, during the period covered by this report, there were no reports of such killings. A Karen source reported that Burmese soldiers allowed a Christian pastor near Thandaung, Karen State, to hold a religious ceremony in his village on condition that there was no involvement by the KNU. When fighting broke out between KNU forces and the Burmese Army near the pastor's village, the Burmese soldiers arrested him and released him only after he paid \$400 (500,000 kyats).

Local civilian and military authorities continued to take actions against Christian groups: arresting clergy, closing home churches, and prohibiting religious services. During the period covered by this report, authorities in the Rangoon area closed several house churches because they did not have proper authorization to hold religious meetings. Other Rangoon home churches remained operational only after paying bribes to local officials. At the same time, the authorities made it difficult, although not impossible, to obtain approval for the construction of "authorized" churches. In September 2005, officials in Kyauktada Township, Rangoon, ordered the Full Gospel Assembly church to cease its worship services, as it was located in a residential building. The church had been operating from that location for many years and was listed in the 1999 Rangoon Church Directory.

In early 2005, local authorities in the Chin State capital of Haka notified Baptist leaders that they would be forced to relocate an active, historic cemetery from church property to a remote location outside of town. Religious leaders reported that authorities continued to forcefully relocate cemeteries in many parts of the country.

In September 2005, local authorities of Pabedan Township, Rangoon, ordered Grace Baptist Church and Theology Seminary to close or face confiscation of their land. The church and seminary continued to operate throughout the period of this report. Evangelists in South Dagon and Hlaing Thayar townships near Rangoon were accused of proselytizing and were threatened in 2003 with arrest if they opened house churches and kindergartens.

In November 2005, authorities in Insein Township, Rangoon, pressured evangelical Christians of the twenty-year-old Phawkkhan church to sign "no worship" agreements. Some signed the agreements out of fear, but others refused. In February 2006, the authorities issued an order banning worship at the church. In February 2006, Insein Township authorities ordered a Chin evangelist to stop holding worship services in his house church in Aung San ward.

In February 2006, police at Hpa-an, Karen State, arrested Yeh Zaw, a member of Insein Kanphawt Evangelical Church. Yeh Zaw had earlier written a letter to the regime leader urging him to end the persecution of his church which Rangoon authorities closed in early 2006, banning members from worshipping there. Police charged him with traveling without an identity card.

During the period covered by this report, there were no reports of authorities destroying mosques or of Muslims constructing new mosques. It remained extremely difficult for Muslims to get permission to repair existing mosques, although internal renovations were allowed in some cases. In some parts of Rakhine State, authorities cordoned off mosques and forbade Muslims to worship in them. In 2004, local authorities confiscated a Muslim cemetery in Myeik Township, Tanintharyi Division, and closed the adjacent mosque. Three Muslims were reportedly

imprisoned for a month for violating this closure order. In 2004, authorities in three suburbs of Rangoon ordered the closure of informal "religious community houses" used by local Muslims in lieu of mosques (which have not been built in these townships). After Muslim leaders in Rangoon complained, community houses in two of the three suburbs were allowed to reopen.

In August 2005, authorities in Sittwe, Rakhine State, ordered an Islamic madrassah to close. The school management complied with the order and sent all the students home.

Authorities have attempted to prevent Chin Christians from practicing their religion. In January 2005, the military commander in Matupi Township, Chin State, ordered the destruction of a thirty-foot cross raised on a hillside with government permission in 1999. Reportedly, a more senior military official subsequently told local church authorities that they could get permission to reconstruct the cross. However, the local pastors have thus far refused to ask for such authorization. In the past, these crosses often have been replaced with pagodas, sometimes built with forced labor.

In Kachin State, authorities have constructed Buddhist shrines in Christian communities where few or no Buddhists reside and have tried to coerce Christians into forced labor to carry bricks and other supplies for the shrine's construction. In northern Rakhine State, authorities frequently forced Rohingyas to help construct Buddhist shrines, even though Buddhists there account for approximately 2 percent of the population.

SPDC authorities continued to "dilute" ethnic minority populations by encouraging, or even forcing, Buddhist Burmans to relocate to ethnic areas. In predominantly Muslim northern Rakhine State, authorities established "model villages" to relocate released ethnic Burman criminals from other parts of the country. In January 2006, Muslim Rohingyas from at least ten surrounding villages claimed the military forced them to carry building supplies for three model villages at Padauk Myin, Mala Myin and Thaza Myin in Rathidaung Township. Certain townships in the Rakhine State, such as Thandwe, Gwa, and Taung-gut, were declared "Muslim-free zones" by government decree in 1983. There were still original-resident Muslims living in Thandwe, but newcomers who are Muslim are not allowed to buy property or reside in the township. Muslims were no longer permitted to live in Gwa and Taung-gut.

In February 2006, violent clashes broke out between Muslims and Buddhists in Magway Division. Responding to rumors that Muslim men had raped a Burman woman near Sinbyukyun town, ethnic Burmans attacked and torched Muslim and ethnic Indian homes, shops, and mosques. Rioting and looting spread to surrounding towns, including Chauk and Salin. Local security forces did not intervene at first, but as violence spread authorities imposed a strict curfew in several towns to prevent the violence from spreading further. Reliable sources said the authorities arrested seventeen people in Sinbyukyun and another fifty-five persons in Chauk, mostly Muslims. Unofficial sources claimed that three people died and another ten were injured in the riots. Three mosques in Yenangyaung, Chauk, and Saku were reportedly destroyed in the violence. Authorities sealed off the mosques and did not permit Muslims to rebuild them by the end of the period of this report, nor did authorities conduct inquiries into the attacks. Christians reported that an entire Muslim village fled to the monastery of a trusted Buddhist abbot near Shwe Settaw to seek refuge during the riots.

These recent attacks follow earlier communal violence in Kyauk Pyu, Arakan State, in January 2005. During several days of violence, two Muslims were killed and one Buddhist monk was severely injured. Some Islamic groups blamed the Government for trying to increase tensions between Buddhists and Muslims as part of a "divide and rule" strategy. In 2004, local Buddhist villagers in Kyun Su Township, Tanintharyi Division, attacked and destroyed the properties of fourteen Muslim families. Despite a complaint from Muslim leaders, the Government has taken no action.

In 2003, there were several violent incidents involving Muslims and Buddhists. There were unverified reports that USDA members incited anti-Muslim violence in Ayeyarwady Division. Authorities had not investigated the incidents by the end of the reporting period.

In the aftermath of these 2003 attacks, the authorities paid some compensation to the affected Muslims and gave permission to the Kyaukse Muslims to rebuild the two mosques destroyed in the violence. The reconstruction had not occurred because most Muslims had not returned to their previous neighborhoods. In addition, the Government arrested and defrocked forty-four monks and twenty-six other Buddhists suspected of participation in the Kyaukse and Rangoon violence. There were unverified reports that one senior monk received a death sentence; it was not known what sentences the other monks received. These measures caused some tension between the Government and the usually favored Buddhist monkhood, leading to some localized demonstrations inside Rangoon monasteries. Seventy Muslims were arrested and thirty-one Kyaukse Muslims were sentenced in December 2003 (one received the death penalty) for their involvement in the violence, including the alleged murder of a senior Buddhist monk. Muslim leaders called the trials a mockery of justice, but they did not address the veracity of the charges.

There were no known arrests of Buddhist monks during the period covered by this report. A Buddhist nun, Daw Thissawarddy, got into a dispute with the SMNC when she tried to use the honorific title "bikkhu" for nuns. Authorities detained her in May 2005, but reportedly released her when she agreed to exile in a foreign country. In 2003, troops reportedly fired on monks protesting the arrest of a local abbot and killed two of them.

Muslim leaders reported that military intelligence officials arrested several Muslim religious teachers in Maungdaw Township, Rakhine State, in 2004 following a fatwa issued against individuals who had allegedly raped a Muslim girl. One of the teachers reportedly was tortured to death in detention. The others were subsequently released.

There continued to be credible reports from diverse regions of the country that government officials compelled persons, Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike, especially in rural areas, to contribute money, food, or materials to state-sponsored projects to build, renovate, or maintain Buddhist religious shrines or monuments. The Government denied that it used coercion and called these contributions "voluntary donations" consistent with Buddhist ideas of meritmaking. In April 2006, authorities in Lashio reportedly tried to coerce merchants to contribute large sums to construct a Buddhist shrine. Christian merchants refused to participate and the funds raised were well below the authorities' target.

In the past, pagodas or government buildings often have been built on confiscated Muslim land. In 2003, authorities in Kyun Su Township, Tanintharyi division, seized Muslim religious land on which they planned to build a pagoda. Despite complaints by Muslim leaders to the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the regional military commander, the Government took no action in this case.

Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD), has been in prison or house arrest since forces allied with the Government attacked her and her convoy, which included several NLD-allied monks, while traveling in Sagaing Division in the northwestern region of the country in 2003. The Government reportedly used criminals dressed in monks' robes in the ambush.

#### Forced Religious Conversion

Muslim and Christian community leaders reported that during the period covered by this report, authorities had moved away from a campaign of forced conversion to Buddhism and instead focused on enticing non-Buddhists to convert to Buddhism by offering charity or bribery. Conversion of non-Buddhists, coerced or otherwise, is part of a longstanding government campaign to "Burmanize" ethnic minority regions. This campaign has coincided with increased military presence and pressure. In 2004, in northwestern Shan State, a local government-backed abbot reportedly pressured local Christians to convert to Buddhism, using threats and bribery. Also during the period, there was a single, unverified report of forced conversions at gunpoint in Chin State. However, Christian groups reported that these types of violent cases were less frequent than in earlier years.

There were no reports of forced religious conversion of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to return to the United States.

#### Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

Preferential treatment for Buddhists and widespread prejudice against ethnic Indians, particularly ethnic Rohingya Muslims were key sources of social tensions between the Buddhist majority and Christian and Muslim minorities.

Since 1994, when Buddhist members split away from the KNU to organize the progovernment Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), there have been armed conflicts between the DKBA and the predominately Christian antigovernment KNU. Although the DKBA reportedly includes some Christians and there are some Buddhists in the KNU, the armed conflict between the two Karen groups has had strong religious overtones. In 2004, according to a reliable report, DKBA authorities forced villagers near Hpa-an, Karen State, to provide "volunteer" labor and money to build Buddhist pagodas. Despite a complaint by the local pastor, senior government authorities refused to take any action. There were also unverified reports that DKBA authorities continued to expel villagers who converted to Christianity. In 2003, there was an unverified report that local DKBA commanders forced the local Sangha council to order the demolition of six monasteries in Myawaddy whose abbots had been critical of the DKBA.

According to Shan Herald Agency for News, in April 2006 a local warlord in the Wa Special Region of eastern Shan State detained thirty-eight local Christians in the town of Mong Mai. He charged them with preaching sermons and distributing religious pamphlets without official permission. The Wa authorities sent them to work in labor camps. Subsequently, they released nineteen young people, but the rest reportedly remained in custody at the end of this reporting period.

#### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Government restrictions on speech, press, assembly, and movement, including diplomatic travel, made it difficult to obtain timely and accurate information on human rights in the country, including on freedom of religion. Information about abuses often becomes available only months or years after the events and frequently is difficult or impossible to verify. Officials of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, while criticizing the U.S. Government in 2004 for its "lack of basic knowledge and misperceptions regarding the situation and concept of religions" in the country, have declined to meet with U.S. embassy officials to discuss the content of the previous year's report.

The U.S. government continued to promote religious freedom in its contacts with all sectors of society, as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. During the period covered by this report, embassy officials discussed the importance of improved religious freedom with government and military officials, private citizens, scholars, representatives of other governments, and international business and media representatives. Embassy representatives met regularly with leaders of Buddhist, Christian, and Islamic religious groups, including ethnic minority religious leaders, members of the faculties of schools of theology, and other religious-affiliated organizations and NGOs. The Chargé d'Affaires hosted members of Catholic, Protestant, and Islamic organizations at her residence.

Through outreach and traveling, when not blocked by regime officials, embassy representatives offered support to local NGOs and religious leaders and exchanged information with many otherwise isolated human rights NGOs and religious leaders. Representatives of the Rohingya minority participated in English language and current events studies at the embassy's American Center. The American Center regularly translated statements and reports by the U.S. government and various NGOs on violations of religious freedom in the country and distributed them via its frequently visited library. In addition, the embassy worked closely with Islamic and Christian NGOs involved in teacher training.

Since 1999, the secretary of state has designated the country as a "Country of Particular Concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. Because of the country's poor human rights situation, including its abuses of religious freedom, the United States imposed extensive sanctions on the regime. These sanctions include a ban on imports from the country, a ban on the export of financial services to the country, a ban on bilateral aid to the Government, a ban on the export of arms to the country, and a suspension of General System of Preferences (GSP) benefits and Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) and the U.S. Export-Import Bank (EXIM) financial services in support of U.S. investment and exports to the country. The U.S. government also ended

active promotion of trade with the country, limited the issuance of visas to high-ranking government and military officials and their immediate family members, and froze SPDC assets in the United States. It also has opposed all assistance to the Government by international financial institutions and urged the Governments of other countries to take similar actions. New investment in the country by U.S. citizens has been prohibited since May 1997.

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