

Chin

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 the 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 have been closed and religious symbols such as crosses removed from the top of mountains near Chin communities; church services have been disrupted by soldiers and there have been

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 has been all but extinguished in the last few decades. Since 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

The authorities continue to close down Chin private schools without offering any practical alternatives for the education of minority children, for example in Hniarlawn in June 2006. Combined with the difficulty in accessing state schools and the denial of education in their own language, the Chin appear to continue to be severely disadvantaged by the military regime's educational and employment policies.

The repression affecting Christian Chin, though perhaps less dramatic than in previous years, has not disappeared. Visible symbols of this minority's religion, such as crosses on hilltops, are still being torn down by the army, for example in Matupi, apparently the last remaining cross on public display in the country was removed on 3 January 2005.

Perhaps the most positive current development is that Christians such as the Chin living in major cities like Yangon (Rangoon) can practise their faith without harassment, though there are continued restrictions on the construction of places of worship and any other public manifestation of religion.

The living conditions of Chin in Chin State itself are continuing to degrade. Land expropriations – without compensation – for tea and jatropha (*Jatropha curcas*) plantations controlled by the army started in earnest in 2005 and continue unabated. The army continues to force Chin to work against their will and without pay on these plantations.

If anything, the overall situation in Chin State may have become worse as violations of human rights have gone unpunished, despite the State Peace and Development Council's (SPDC) stated goal of abolishing forced labour practices. There has been an increase in troop build-ups in Chin State and a commensurate increase in reported cases of forced labour, land expropriation, closing of Chin schools, summary killings, arbitrary arrest, etc. against local Chin by SPDC security forces.