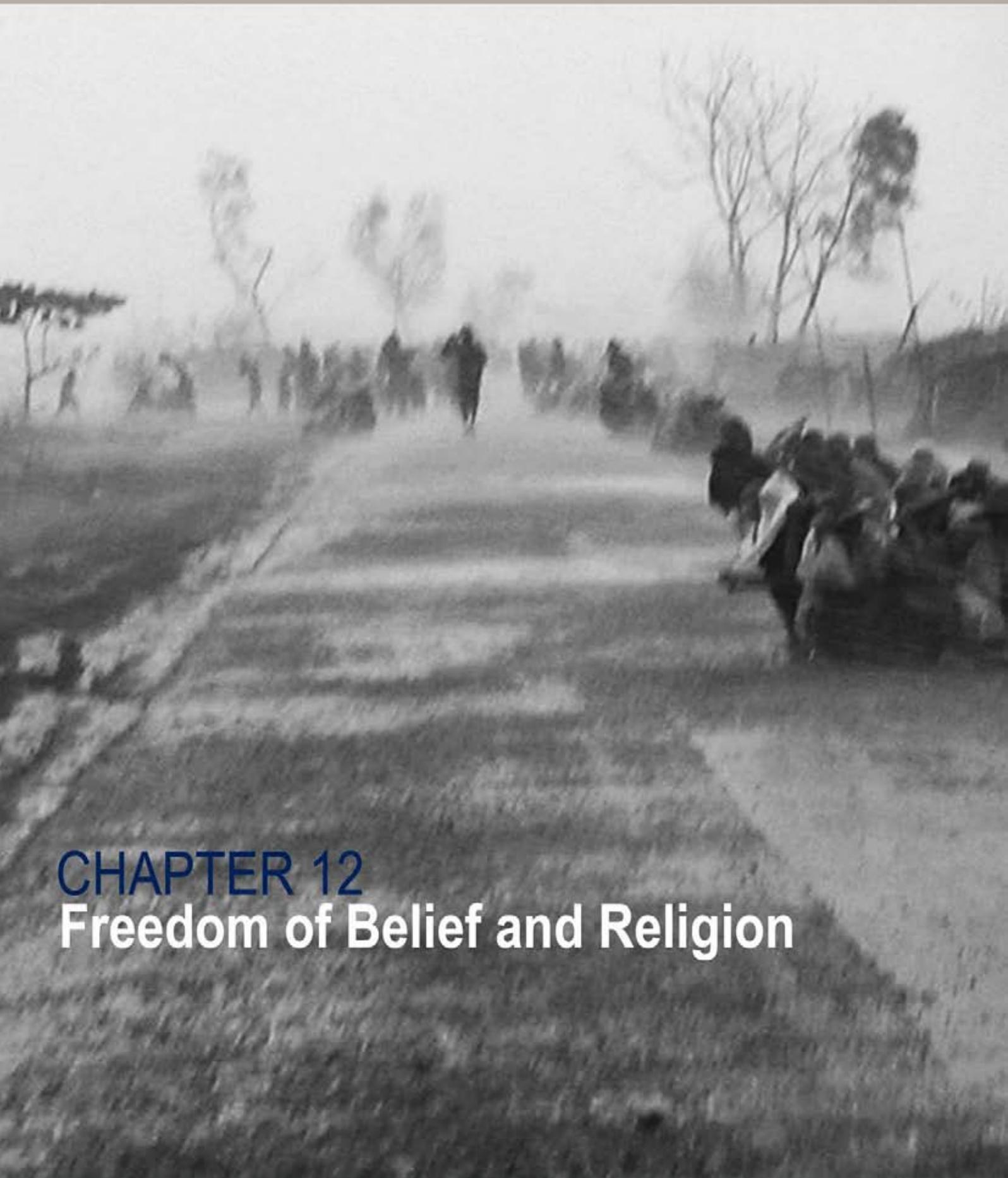


15th Annual Edition

# BURMA

HUMAN RIGHTS YEARBOOK 2008





## CHAPTER 12

# Freedom of Belief and Religion

# BURMA

HUMAN RIGHTS YEARBOOK 2008





## 12.1 Introduction

Burma was again noted in 2008 as one of the 11 nations of “*of particular concern*” by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). Since the establishment of this commission in 1998, Burma has made the list every year. Officially Burma does not have a state religion, although the ruling military junta has continued to promote Theravada Buddhism while marginalizing and alienating other religions. Since the monk led ‘Saffron Revolution’ in September 2007 however, the junta have increased their attacks on the country’s Buddhist population as well.<sup>1</sup>

According to official statistics gathered and released by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), roughly 90 percent of the Burmese population are practicing Buddhists, while Christians and Muslims comprise six and four percent of the population respectively. Contrary to these figures though, independent research has suggested that the non-Buddhist population of the country could be as high as 30 percent. Other religions being practiced in Burma include Hinduism, Animism and even Judaism, which is comprised of a small Jewish community of approximately 25 followers in Rangoon, although there is no resident rabbi to conduct sermons at the local synagogue.<sup>2</sup>

There are many different ethnic groups throughout Burma and there is some correlation between religion and ethnicity. For the Burman ethnic group, along with the Shan, Arakanese and Mon ethnic minority groups, Buddhism remains the dominant religion. Christianity is the practiced religion among the majority of the Kachin, Chin and Naga ethnic groups. Furthermore, Christianity is also very popular among the Karen and Karenni ethnic groups, along side a still prominent Karen and Karenni Buddhist population. Islam is mostly practiced in Arakan State and is the main religion of the Rohingya ethnic minority. There are also smaller Islamic communities comprised of ethnic Burmans, located in Rangoon and Mandalay.<sup>3</sup>

In early 2008, the SPDC announced that there would be a constitutional referendum in May and that most citizens and ethnic minorities would be eligible to vote in the referendum with the exception of those belonging to religious orders and prisoners. The draft constitution, which was released in March 2008, explicitly recognized the “*special position of Buddhism as the faith practiced by the great majority of citizens,*” but merely mentioned Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Animism as ‘existing’ within Burma. The constitution also claims to prohibit religious discrimination and to promote the freedom of religious practices while being “*subject to public order, morality, health, and other provisions of the constitution.*”<sup>4</sup> Moreover, religious orders are denied the opportunity to form parties to vie for political office such that religion can never be abused by serving political ideology.

Despite these promises of religious freedom, in 2008 members of all religions were still abused by the SPDC to varying degrees. Local officials continued to monitor and interrupt religious activities and meetings of all sorts, which in turn resulted in restrictions on freedom of expression, association and assembly. Technically, all religious organisations are supposed to apply for registration with the SPDC; the junta can then choose which organisations are allowed to register. Following this process, only registered organisations can open bank accounts or buy or sell property. Several requests for religious meetings and festivals were denied by the SPDC in 2008, and all religious publications and sermons were under the control of strict censorship. Religious minority groups were also refused permission to build new religious structures and places of worship and in some cases had their religious sites destroyed by the SPDC.<sup>5</sup>

Buddhism has traditionally been synonymous with Burman nationalism. The idea of ultra-Burman nationalism has been used by the military regimes to unite Buddhists in solidarity, and to oppress non-Buddhists. Constant rhetoric, such as the saying 'Buddha Bata, Myanmar Lumyo' meaning, 'To be Myanmar is to be Buddhist' is used by the junta to justify their actions and this ideology remains at the centre of the SPDC's political philosophy. Consequently, the SPDC has maintained efforts to assimilate all ethnic minority groups into the mainstream Burman society to create a single national identity under the policy of 'one race, one language, one religion'. Under this ideology, the SPDC promotes Buddhism over all other religions. Evidence of this is seen in the Ministry of Religious Affairs, which contains the Department for the Protection and Propagation of Sasana (Buddhist teaching). Buddhist doctrine features heavily in the state mandated curriculum for all official elementary schools, where students are required to recite Buddhist prayer daily. Moreover, the SPDC continues to operate two Sangha universities, in Rangoon and Mandalay, to train Buddhist monks under the control of the State Monk Coordination Committee. In 2008, there were no official reports of forced conversion of non-Buddhists, however many students and poor youth were pressured heavily by local authorities to convert to Buddhism. Job placement in the public sector and advancement in the military was largely dependent on whether one was a practicing Buddhist or not. Furthermore, one's religious affiliation was a requirement for all identification cards that citizens and permanent residents were required to be in possession of at all times.<sup>6</sup>



Burma's monastic community was quick to come to the aid of the population in the wake of Cyclone Nargis while the SPDC sat on its hands and even actively hindered the provision of aid. This photograph, taken in May 2008, depicts a patient being comforted by Sitagu Sayadaw in a clinic in Irrawaddy Division. *[Photo: © Irrawaddy]*

In 2008, the military continued to abuse Christians and Muslims and their right to religious freedom. It was reported that members of these religious minority groups were occasionally used for forced labour to serve the military regime. In some cases forced labour was used to destroy mosques, churches or graveyards in order to build Buddhist pagodas.<sup>7</sup> Sometimes these Buddhist pagodas would even be built using forced labour in areas with a low Buddhist population even though, the Religious Affairs Ministry claims to only allow the construction of religious monuments in situations that “*depends upon the population of the location.*” However, this rule seemed to be ignored for the building of Buddhist sites in non-Buddhist areas. Christians and Muslims nonetheless, still experienced trouble when applying for permission to build or repair their own religious sites. In many cases, Christians and Muslims were eventually able to obtain the necessary permits to build, but only when the groups in question had paid bribes to the authorities. There were also occasions when these groups simply had their applications denied for various reasons, such as that the church did not have a proper property permit. At other times, church or mosque leaders were given informal permission to commence construction, only to have SPDC authorities change their mind and destroy the buildings after they had been completed. This raises the question of whether or not in these cases the authorities processed the applications solely in order to collect the bribes required to have the petitions granted.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to oppressing religious minority groups in 2008, the SPDC increased its control over Burma’s Buddhist population. Even though there are approximately 400,000 monks in Burma, there are only nine state-endorsed monastic orders that are permitted to operate under the SPDC sponsored Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee (SMNC). Furthermore, independent monastic orders are illegal since the establishment of the 1990 Sangha Organisation Law. These laws have since been used to control the Sangha and limit its rights to expression and assembly. For example, abbots are not allowed to deliver instruction on any topics which could be related to politics and monks are restricted from joining together in opposition to the government. Violations of this law, as witnessed during the September 2007 ‘Saffron Revolution’, result in grave consequences. Monks who were accused of participating in the protests were defrocked in jail, where they were not allowed to shave their heads or eat their meals in accordance with the monastic codes. Monks were thus treated as laypersons and common criminals; treatment which comprises one of the gravest offences one can commit within the Buddhist religion.<sup>9</sup>

## 12.2 Religious Discrimination against Christians

Under the justification of ‘Burmanization’ in 2008, the SPDC continued to suppress Christians in a perceived move toward the creation of a pure Buddhist country. Thus, throughout Burma, and especially in the heavily Christian populated Chin and Kachin States, there were reports of religious discrimination and persecution. There were reports, for example, that Chin Christians were forced at gun point to destroy religious symbols and to build Buddhist pagodas in their place. In such cases, Christians were abused during the forced labour used in the destruction of religious buildings and symbols, as well as in the replacement of the structures with those of a Buddhist orientation, while they also had to contribute to building costs. Furthermore, children in these villages were reported to have been taken from their homes and sent to all-Buddhist monasteries to become monks. Other children were said to have been forced to celebrate Buddhist holidays at their schools, or were forced to lie about their religion in order to attend primary school. Christian groups, among others, had difficulties purchasing land or gaining permission to build or renovate religious sites.<sup>10</sup>

Again in 2008 it remained illegal to import Bibles into Burma that were translated into an indigenous language. Bibles translated into Burmese that were allowed to enter the country were also subjected to censorship. The SPDC continued to prohibit more than 100 Christian terms because these words are similar to Buddhist terms of Pali origin.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, complete sections of the Old Testament continue to be eliminated because the junta has claimed it teaches violence against non-believers. Aside from importing Bibles for the indigenous community, Christians also had difficulties proselytizing. Christian leaders within Burma were discouraged through intimidation from seeking consensual conversions, while the prohibition against permanent foreign religious missions, which has been in place in Burma for over 40 years, remained in 2008.<sup>12</sup>

Of the three million reported Christians in Burma, 700,000 are believed to be Catholic. In 2008, Catholics had their rights violated in similar ways to other Christians. For example, Roman Catholic churches that raised funds and collected donations to aid cyclone survivors had their merchandise confiscated by the SPDC. Furthermore, the Catholic Church was prohibited from providing shelter and education to homeless children and members of the church were arbitrarily arrested.<sup>13</sup> In November 2008, a Burmese clergy member from Karenni State reported on the issue further. The clergy member, known only as David, who had worked in Catholic missions in Danuthphyu in Taninthary, in the Irrawaddy and Tenasserim Divisions respectively, made claims that the SPDC had arrested over 40 teachers from a bible school in Rangoon and sent them to jail for two weeks. Moreover, David claimed that churches, of all kinds, were still being regularly demolished and Catholic run orphanages had been shut down by the junta, while children were sent back to their villages. When referring to the junta’s attitude toward freedom of religion, he said,

*“Myanmar government doesn’t give any chance to do anything. For example regarding either Catholic mission or bringing up the orphans, they give us no right to do on our own. They said there are Social organizations if we want to do, we must be under those organizations. But we firstly have to show the budget if we join those organizations.”<sup>14</sup>*

Regardless of the human rights violations that Christians and Catholics alike have faced in Burma, Pope Benedict XVI recognized the legitimacy of Burma’s ruling military junta in October 2008. This information became known after the Pope was invited to visit Burma by the Burmese archbishop, Charles Maung Bo, in early October. The archbishop then claimed of the Pope that, *“He would be ready to make a short visit to Myanmar [Burma] if he chooses to visit one of the countries in Asia,”*<sup>15</sup> Although the Vatican replied that there were no

immediate plans to make an Asian tour, one Vatican official did report to the Union of Catholic Asia (UCA) News that, *“It should be stated clearly that there is no persecution against Christianity or Catholics in Myanmar.”*<sup>16</sup> Another Vatican official continued to claim that the Catholic Church in Burma possessed complete freedom of worship even though the church cannot work in areas of education and healthcare. *“Nor can it express its position on socio-political questions in accord with the Church’s social teaching,”* the same source maintained.<sup>17</sup>

Christians throughout all of Burma were discriminated against in 2008, though many of the reported acts of persecution came in areas where there were a greater proportion of Christians. Such areas include Kachin and Chin States, where Christianity is practiced by a majority of the population, and in Karen and Karenni States, where there are large Christian communities.

## Kachin Christians

An estimated 90 percent of the Kachin ethnic group identify themselves as Christians. There were frequent reports of forced labour, forced relocation and religious persecution suffered by this group at the hands of the SPDC authorities throughout 2008.<sup>18</sup> In addition to persecution and oppression, the SPDC tried to bribe Christian Kachin leaders, in the form of offering goods and luxuries, in exchange for gaining Christian support for the May referendum. After the referendum, further bribes were also given to the Christian community from the military regime in order to legitimize itself to the religious and ethnic minorities. One such example of this behaviour took place in February within Kachin State. During a meeting at a local Union Solidarity Development Association (USDA) office in Du Mare, Myitkyina Township on 23 February, leaders from the Catholic and Baptist church were promised that they would be allowed to purchase GSM mobile phones. Brigadier-General Thein Zaw, the SPDC’s minister of Telecommunications, Post and Telegraphs, ran the meeting and promised to sell the mobile phones to the church leaders for a fraction of the market price if the two churches would promise to support the draft constitution in the upcoming referendum. The religious leaders agreed to this proposition when Thein Zaw also promised all church employees the chance to buy the phones within three months. Normally, citizens must pay 3,500,000 kyat for a GSM mobile phone, but under this deal the Kachin Catholic and Baptist churches could buy them for 1,500,000 kyat per phone. Negotiating with the junta ultimately upset many Christian villagers, who suspected ulterior motives on the part of the regime officials. Said one disgruntled villager of the deal, a young local Baptist pastor, *“I disagree with what the aged pastors’ say. In fact, the junta is organizing pastors because there are many follower-civilians with them. The junta is trying to garner public support for the ensuing referendum and election.”*<sup>19</sup>

Then on 2 July, once again in Myitkyina Township, Kachin State, the junta attempted to foster the good will of the Kachin Christian community. This time, the SPDC’s new Northern Command (MaPaKha) Commander Major-General Soe Win, held a meeting to introduce himself and donate rice and oil to the local Christian community. Over 300 church members, of both the Baptist and Roman Catholic Church, were in attendance, including church leaders and pastors. At the meeting Major-General Soe Win claimed he wanted to have a stable relationship with community and announced a donation of 80 sacks of rice and cooking oil to the church members in attendance. The Myitkyina District Baptist Convention (MDBC) alone received 15 sacks of rice and 1.6 Kg of groundnut oil to be distributed among the township’s 15 other Baptist churches.<sup>20</sup>

## Chin Christians

Christianity is the dominant religion in Chin State and is observed by around 80 percent of the state's population. In addition to being an ethnic minority, the Chin with their large Christian community, have been seen as a threat by the SPDC and have therefore been regularly victimised for their beliefs. Although there were no reports of actual forced conversion in 2008, Christian Chins were pressured to practice Buddhist rituals, attend Buddhist seminaries and eventually convert willingly to Buddhism. Only Buddhist children have been allowed to attend local schools in Chin State, leaving Christian students no choice but to convert in order to attend. There were also reports in early 2008 of children being taken from their homes without their parents' permission and placed into Buddhist monasteries to learn how to live as monks.<sup>21</sup>

Christians in Chin State did not receive the same treatment as those in Kachin State. On 4 April, the junta's Deputy Minister for Religious Affairs, Brigadier-General Thura Aung Ko, travelled to southern Chin State to gain support for the referendum, however, Chin Christians were not offered cheap mobile phones for their support in the referendum. Instead of offering bribes of value, the Deputy Minister ordered the residents to vote 'yes', as the constitution was the only path to democracy which the minister claimed increased religious rights for the Chin Christians. He also maintained that if the referendum was not approved, the outcome would mean a continuation of the military's harsh rule in the area.<sup>22</sup>

In July, during one of the worst famines in the history of Chin State, the SPDC made no effort to help the starving Christian population and even made getting aid difficult. The famine was the result of the flowering of bamboo, which occurs roughly every fifty years. The flowering produces an abundance of flowers, fruits and seeds which causes an explosion in the local rat population. Unfortunately the flowering does not last long, leaving the rats without a food source, whereupon they turn to human grown crops and food stores, causing famine. The starving population's only access to aid was that smuggled across the Indian border from Mizoram State. It was feared that the crisis had the potential to take the lives of 100,000 Chin residents, or 20 percent of the state's population. The Executive Director of CHRO, Salai Bawi Lian Mang, commented on the junta's response by saying,

*"This is just another example of the regime's extreme disregard for the people of Burma. The regime has done nothing to provide assistance to communities in immediate need of food aid. Rather, they are obstructing relief supplies and hindering humanitarian efforts in western Burma."*<sup>23</sup>

Another source indicated that relief groups were having difficulty accessing the already isolated regions of Chin State because of the authorities' interference. This delay worried some aid groups because the monsoon rains usually made the foot trails that lead to those villages in dire need impassable. It was also reported that local authorities confiscated over 300 bags of rice (over 50 Kg) from the Roman Catholic Church in Paletwa Township, because the church was collecting donations to send to villages in the affected areas.<sup>24</sup>

## Karen Christians

Although not a majority, a large number of the Karen population is Christian. In 2008, it was reported that Christian leaders and communities in Karen State were targeted in attacks by the SPDC. These attacks led to the destruction of 167 villages, which in turn led to the displacement of approximately 76,000 people. Furthermore, after the September 2007 protests, the junta increased their presence in Karen State to intimidate the populace into refraining from any additional demonstrations and to continue with previous offensives. The military now has 10 divisions in the state, compared to nine in previous years.<sup>25</sup>

## Persecution of Christians - Partial list of incidents for 2008

Throughout January 2008, the military junta continued its campaign to restrict the construction of a Kachin Baptist church in Tarang village of the Hukawng Valley, Kachin State. The Regional Operations Command (ROC) of the Danai-based SPDC Army, DaKaSa, first started its campaign to prevent the construction of the church in 2005. The prohibition also banned church members from collecting firewood for the use of baking bricks, which could be used for the church's construction.<sup>26</sup>

In January 2008, the Naga National Democratic Organization (NNDO) issued a statement criticizing the SPDC for religious discrimination against the Naga people. According to the report, approximately 90 percent of the Naga population are Christian. The report maintained that Naga workers were used for forced labour during the New Year Festival and had been pressured by the regime to convert to Buddhism. One Naga representative said that, *"The [Buddha] statues given to the Naga people are not actually gifts, but symbols of a religion forced on the Naga people against the idea of freedom of religion."*<sup>27</sup>

On 26 March 2008, a report released by the *Irrawaddy* claimed that Christians had faced religious discrimination within the military ranks and were ineligible for internal promotions as a result. One SPDC army officer maintained, *"The generals don't want Christians and even a junior officer's wife must be a Buddhist."*<sup>28</sup>

On 17 April 2008, it was reported that officials in Falam Township, Chin State, forced the town's Gospel Baptist Church to celebrate the church's Silver Jubilee ceremony three weeks ahead of schedule. Initially, the event was scheduled for the second week of May, but authorities felt that a religious ceremony could not be held near the 10 May referendum, so the church was forced to change the date. One church member responded, *"The jubilee committee has finally agreed to celebrate on April 25 because the authorities pressurised them."*<sup>29</sup>

On 18 June 2008, it was reported that military authorities began building a pagoda in Zupmayang village, Kachin State, which is an all Christian area. The pagoda was scheduled to take five years to complete and was under constant military surveillance by SPDC Commander Major-General Ohn Myint. Local Christian residents have claimed that this was another attempt by the military to ethnically cleanse the Kachin Christians, under the junta's policy of Burmanisation.<sup>30</sup>

On 10 July 2008, it was reported that the Township Peace and Development Council (TPDC), led by U Kyaw Tu, in Sadung, Kachin State, had confiscated Christian owned land from the Baptist church. The authorities had no permission from the church to take the land, yet they proceeded to build an administration office in the place of the Christian boarding house that had been in existence for 10 years under the Kachin Baptist Convention (KBC). Local Christian leaders claimed to be upset but admitted there was nothing they could do to prevent the land seizure.<sup>31</sup>

On 22 July 2008, it was reported that Christian students in Putao District, Kachin State, were obliged to claim that they were Buddhists in order to attend the free, SPDC operated, school of Development of Border Areas and National Races (NaTaLa). It is mandatory for all students to follow Buddhist laws and actively participate in Buddhist religious ceremonies. Forcing the Christian students to denounce their original religion was seen by the community as another attempt by the junta to curb the religious freedoms of the Christian populations in the country.<sup>32</sup>

On 29 July 2008, it was reported that two Christian pastors in Chibwe, Kachin State, were accused by local authorities of spreading anti-dam propaganda in the region. Each pastor was interrogated individually at the police station then forced to sign an agreement that they would find those responsible for the anti-dam posters. The Chibwe Dam project was begun as a joint venture between the Myanmar-Asia World Company and a Chinese company in early 2008 on the Chibwe River. The project has been linked to land confiscation and environmental abuse.<sup>33</sup>

On 14 October 2008, Burmese military junta officials started the demolition process on a Christian cemetery in Dukathaung Ward, Myitkyina Township, Kachin State. Authorities claimed that the cemetery, which had been in use since 1960, had to be removed to make way for a Physic Nut plantation project. One Kachin resident maintained, *"The local people are disappointed and upset as they are not being allowed to retrieve the sacred remains of their forefathers. These tombs and mortal remains are priceless and sacred for their faith and religion."*<sup>34</sup>

On 17 October 2008, it was reported that residents, whose Christian cemetery was confiscated in Dukathaung Ward, Myitkyina Township, Kachin State, were being forced to pay 200,000 kyat to transfer one of their relatives' tombs to a different cemetery. However, after the bulldozing of the cemetery began on 14 October 2008, under the command of Major-General Soe Win of the Northern Military Command (MaPaKha), it became nearly impossible to identify the individual remains. Chairman Awng Wa, of Kachin Development Networking Group (KDNG), maintained, *"It was an act of discrimination by Burma's ruling junta that the Christian cemetery was confiscated. It is a condemnable act of the regime."*<sup>35</sup>

On 24 November 2008, the Hakha Khuahlun Baptist Church in Hakha, Chin State, burnt down. The fire that destroyed the two-storey church was said to have started from unknown causes in the backroom, while the staff was away at lunch. When local police and fire fighting authorities arrived on the scene there were no efforts made to extinguish the fire until after the building had completely burnt down. Church sources claimed that 50 million kyat worth of goods were destroyed in the fire.<sup>36</sup>

On 27 November 2008, local TPDC members in Tayawati Town, Kalaymyo Township, Sagaing Division, destroyed a Christian church which had been under construction. The church was to be the Christian Technology Fellowship Church and was founded by Christian students from Chin State and Sagaing Division who were studying at the local Government Technology Centre. Previously, the students worshipped in hostels and other rented rooms, but they were continually asked to leave once it was known that they were practicing Christians. One student commented, *"We could not rent a room for worship, so we applied to the Kaly Council of Churches (KCC) to build a Church for us. Reverend Cing Lian Sum, Secretary of KCC approved building a Church and bought a place for Kyat 3 lakhs in 2005."*<sup>37</sup>

## 12.3 Religious Discrimination against Muslims

Muslims in Burma, most of whom belong to the Sunni sect of Islam, officially make up 4 percent of Burma's population. However, independent research has suggested that this figure has been underestimated by SPDC officials and the actual number of Muslims in Burma could potentially range from 6 to 10 percent of the population.<sup>38</sup> Most of these Muslims live in northern Arakan State. Within Arakan State there are two main groups of Muslims. Firstly, there are those Muslims from the Rohingya ethnic minority, which comprise a majority of the Muslim population and speak a Bengali dialect. (For more information on the Rohingya see sub-section below) The other Muslim group in Arakan State is referred to as ethnic Burman Muslim. Although both groups are Muslim, the ethnic Burmans receive better treatment from the state and can enjoy the privileges of citizenship, unlike their Rohingya counterparts. Burman Muslims can even obtain National Registration Cards and passports if they are prepared to part with a bribe. However, all of these official documents are required to indicate the owner's religion, in which case authorities have been said to harass Muslim cards holders.<sup>39</sup>

Muslims were still facing obstacles in 2008 when attempting to obtain identification cards. Students, who applied for their identification cards in the middle of 2007, had still not received their cards by the first few months of the year, while students of other religions obtained their cards within a few weeks. Identification cards are needed in order to travel from one village to the next, to obtain further official documents, such as a passport, and even to access and attend higher education. Furthermore, those caught without identification cards are subject to arrest or extortion.<sup>40</sup>

Throughout the year, many Muslim leaders, and even members of the Myanmar Muslim Council (MMC), were arrested arbitrarily. In some instances the arrests were made under suspicions of having links to Muslim insurgent groups abroad, or for conspiring against the referendum. At other times, leaders were arrested for hosting illegal religious functions. This of course forced other Muslim leaders to go into hiding or cease their religious activities altogether for fear of arrest.<sup>41</sup>

Restricting the number of Muslims that can be gathered at one time continued to be a common practice. Muslims were generally allowed to gather for regular prayer services or holidays, but for any other type of congregation, Muslims were subject to arrest. There were also instances in towns outside of Rangoon where Muslims were only allowed to assemble for prayer during the most important religious holidays. However, even to celebrate the major holidays, some Muslims were required to receive advance permission. For example, to celebrate Biswa litema in Dhaka, Bangladesh, many Burmese Muslims paid large sums of money for permission to travel and participate in the holiday. After they returned however, NaSaKa officials arrested and fined them for leaving the country illegally.<sup>42</sup>

Arresting and fining Muslims for gathering during religious functions was just one of many examples of how the SPDC continued to discriminate against Muslims in the country. In 2008, there were also many examples of religious leaders being arrested or fined for renovating, building or extending a mosque. It remained a requirement in 2008 for each mosque's authorities to receive a permit in order to build or alter any religious structure. This permission however, can take months, if not years to be granted. In some documented cases, in which Islamic religious leaders went ahead with renovations without permits, arrests were made and fines of up to 1.3 million kyat were imposed for their actions.<sup>43</sup>

Aside from the visible persecution experienced by Muslims in 2008, the ruling junta also instigated forms of symbolic discrimination against the religious minority groups. There were some cases in which clearly identifiable Muslim bodies were found by NaSaKa guards and

were thus handled inappropriately. Authorities in these cases failed to return the bodies to the local community so the deceased could obtain a proper Muslim burial. Instead, the authorities cremated the bodies in accordance to Buddhist customs and then informed the families of the deceased afterwards. (Note: Normal Muslim custom stipulates that the deceased are usually interred within 24 hours of death, never cremated)<sup>44</sup>

Another form symbolic persecution took place when the SPDC officials began enforcing a new law that required all Muslim men to be clean-shaven when applying for marriage permits. In addition to breaking the traditions of their religion, Muslim men were also required to pay an additional large sum of money, up to 30,000 kyat when applying for the permit. The strenuous process of even applying for a marriage permit deterred many Muslims from having a traditional Muslim wedding.<sup>45</sup>

Despite the abuse Muslims faced at the hands of the SPDC, the military still tried to mobilize the Muslim and Rohingya communities in efforts to garner their support for the referendum. There were reports in April that authorities in Maungdaw Township held specific meetings with local Muslim leaders to gain support. On 25 April 2008, one meeting was organised by district officials with over 500 Muslim leaders in attendance. The district officials, notably District Chairman U Hla and Maungdaw delegate to the National Convention U Mya Maung, were reported to have given speeches in favour of the referendum. A Muslim leader who was in attendance said of the pro-referendum rally:

*“They explained to us how the military government has given the opportunity to the Muslim community in Burma because there is no chance for monks and other religious leaders to cast votes in the upcoming referendum - only Muslim religious leaders will get the chance to cast votes in the upcoming referendum. So, they said Muslim religious leaders need to cast “yes” votes during the referendum.”<sup>46</sup>*

This meeting was just one example among many which depict how SPDC officials continue to manipulate minority groups in order to achieve their own political agenda.

## **Discrimination against the Rohingya**

The Rohingya are a Muslim minority group residing in north-western Arakan State. There are said to be one million Rohingyas living in Arakan State, out of a total state population of approximately three million. Recently, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees estimated that of the 910,000 people living in northern Arakan State, 725,000 are Rohingya. Within northern Arakan State, the Rohingya are concentrated in two major townships. In Maungdaw Township the Rohingya comprise 96 percent of the population and in Buthidaung Township they account for 88 percent of the population. The Rohingya have experienced the most heinous forms of abuse from the SPDC because of their Muslim beliefs and because of the junta’s policy stipulating that the Rohingya are not native to Burma, but rather ‘Bengali intruders’ that entered Burma after British colonialism. Due to this ideology, the SPDC does not refer to the Rohingya by their given name and instead refers to them solely as ‘Muslims’. In contrast, the Rohingya maintain that there is an historical record to confirm that the Rohingya are in fact an indigenous group to Burma since the seventh century. Nonetheless, the junta passed the 1982 Citizenship Act, which excluded the Rohingya from the 135 nationally recognized races. Therefore, the Rohingya are seen and treated as foreigners, who can never obtain citizenship identification and are lucky to receive Foreign Resident Cards (FRC) or Temporary Resident Cards (TRC). This status leaves the Rohingya stateless and thus creates many problems for them that will be discussed further.<sup>47</sup>

In September 2008, Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) published a report elucidating the daily human rights violations occurring in those Muslim Rohingya communities residing near the Bangladesh-Burma border. CSW obtained their information during a five-day fact finding visit to the area. After visiting unofficial refugee camps, CSW was able to confirm that these Muslim groups were still being denied full citizenship rights, the rights to marriage, movement and freedom of religion, and were the victims of forced labour, land confiscation, torture, extortion and arbitrary arrests. A Rohingya leader was quoted in the report as saying, *“The regime is trying to take away our identity. We will not be there in the very near future. Our prime concern is that we must not be eliminated ... We are a people on the brink of extinction.”*<sup>48</sup> The report also documented the testimonies of former NaSaKa officials, who admitted that they acted under orders to harass Muslim minority groups. Furthermore, there were reports of voting corruption during the constitutional referendum on 10 May.<sup>49</sup>

Subsequent reports verified the allegations produced by CSW in September. In October 2008, another report was published that exposed how the Rohingya community was being singled out within Burma’s Muslim population. Since the SPDC continues to claim that members of the Rohingya ethnic group are more ethnically Bengali than Burman, the Rohingya have been labelled ‘temporary residents’ only and are thus denied full citizenship. This lack of citizenship creates many problems for the Rohingya community and allows the junta to perpetually marginalise the group. Non-citizens, or ‘temporary residents’, for example, are required to seek permission to marry, while the SPDC follows a policy of allowing a maximum of three Rohingya marriages per year. Furthermore, obtaining permission for marriage can take several months, if not years, and there have been reports that the permit seekers must be willing to pay large amounts in bribes, break religious codes, or even denounce their religion to receive the permission needed to marry. Aside from obstacles pertaining to marriage, the Rohingya also face severe restrictions to their movement. They can be arrested or fined for just travelling to the next village, in addition to travelling to other regions and states/divisions of the country. These movement restrictions place significant impediments on the ability of the Rohingya ethnic minority’s access to healthcare and greater education. The lack of citizenship in combination with harsh movement restrictions also means that the Rohingya are prohibited from working for the state. Therefore, Rohingya cannot work in the public service, be teachers, nurses or any other type of civil servants. Consequently, in regions of Arakan State where the population is overwhelmingly Muslim, there are Buddhist teachers for Rohingya students. In such cases, it has been noted that teachers will regularly fail to show up for class and that schools will refuse to teach, or let the students speak, in their native Rohingya language.<sup>50</sup>

In 2008, as apart of the SPDC’s efforts to marginalize the Rohingya and Muslim populations, the junta continued to re-populate the heavily Muslim populated northern Arakan State with ethnic Buddhist Burmans, through the establishment of so-called NaTaLa villages. Ethnic Burman citizens were resettled from inland areas into these ‘model villages’, which were created by the previous residents. Rohingyas have typically been used for forced labour to cultivate the lands, and then as soon as the land became fertile, they were confiscated and given to incoming Burman migrants. In some cases Rohingya communities have been forced to grow additional crops for the new villagers, such as peas, pulses or potatoes. However, if Rohingya farmers were not able to keep up to demands or simply refused to grow additional crops, the land would be immediately confiscated and be given to the NaTaLa villagers.<sup>51</sup>

An example of this practice was witnessed throughout August 2008 in Koe Tan Kauk village, Rathedaung Township, Arakan State. Noor Jahan aged 50, the widow of Mohammed Kasim, was told she would have to relocate her house and give her 16 acres of paddy fields, along with a shrimp dam, to the commander of NaSaKa outpost camp No. 21 of NaSaKa area #9. After she took the matter to the local Township Peace and Development Council (TPDC) to delay the NaSaKa’s seizure, the NaSaKa proceeded to destroy her shrimp dam by draining the water and stealing the shrimp therein.<sup>52</sup>

## Persecution of Muslims - Partial list of incidents for 2008

On 27 January 2008, 13 Muslims, of the Tabalique group, were arrested by NaSaKa officials near Taung Bazar, Buthidaung Township, Arakan State, for their participation in Biswa Ijtema in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The Biswa Ijtema is the second largest gathering of Muslims, after the Hajj; it is a three day annual festival that began on 25 January 2008. The 13 people arrested initially had permission to leave their village, but when they returned from Bangladesh they were arrested for not having the correct papers. Once the detainees arrived at NaSaKa area No. 9 camp, officials demanded 500,000 kyat per individual for their release.<sup>53</sup>

On 5 February 2008, Muslims in Arakan State still had not received the identity cards they applied for in August 2007. Identity card applications that were submitted to the Department of Immigration in Sandoway, Arakan State, were sent to higher levels of government for approval if the applicant was Muslim. Those of other religions had their applications approved within a week. Consequently, many Muslims were subjected to arrests whilst the applications were pending because Muslims can be charged and detained for not possessing proper papers when stopped at check points.<sup>54</sup>

On 6 February 2008 it was reported that Muslim students in Thandwe Township, Arakan State, still had not received their identification cards from the local immigration department. One student's father claimed, *"Other students who are Buddhist, Christian, or otherwise have received their national ID card within seven days, but Muslim students have been unable to get their cards in that time period."*<sup>55</sup> In 2007 Burma's education and home ministry ordered all immigration departments to issue ID cards to all high school students within six months but Muslim students were singled out and as of February 2008 they still did not have their cards. It has been speculated that this was an attempt by local authorities to discriminate against Muslims by restricting their movement and access to college because one needs an ID card to travel within the country and attend a university. Another source maintained,

*"A major problem is that the Muslim students in Thandwe will have no chance to attend university because they don't have national ID cards. Many students in Thandwe have not continued to university level education after passing the matriculation exams."*<sup>56</sup>

It was also reported that Muslim students were required to pay 50,000 kyat to immigration officials just to submit their identification papers.

On 7 February 2008, the NaSaKa No. 4 commander in Maungdaw Township fined a madrasa in Zibin Chaung Village, Arakan State, 1.3 million kyat. The reason given for the fine was for renovating the madrasa's floor with cement without gaining prior permission from the NaSaKa to do so. Villagers claimed only Rohingya Muslims were required to gain permission to renovate their religious property and other religious groups did not need such permission.<sup>57</sup>

On 8 February 2008, the Sayed Ali Mosque in Maungdaw was fined 200,000 kyat by Maungdaw Township Peace and Development Council (TPDC) Chairman Myint Maung, for renovating the mosque's veranda. Renovating any mosques, religious buildings or icons in the Rohingya community is prohibited without prior consent from local authorities. The villagers were originally denied permission to repair the veranda after it was damaged in 2007; although, they decided to proceed with the renovation regardless. Abdul Amin (36), the son of a mosque committee member, was initially arrested and detained by the TPDC until the 200,000 kyat had been paid.<sup>58</sup>

On 10 February 2008, 12 villagers from Thinn Baw Gwe, Maungdaw Township, were arrested by NaSaKa authorities for renovating a local mosque and Hafez Khana (a Koran memorial centre). Permission was initially granted to the villagers for the renovation by the Commander of NaSaKa area No. 8 of Maungdaw Township, three months previously. However, this commander was transferred and the succeeding Nasaka Commander opposed the renovation to the mosque and Hafez Khana. Upon making the arrest, the NaSaKa Commander ignored the villagers' documents and detained the 12 at a NaSaKa camp for 10 days before sending them to the Maungdaw police station. On 24 February 2008, the 12 arrestees were sentenced to seven years in prison. Seven of those arrested were:

1. Hashim Ullah, male, age 40;
2. Rahamat Ullah, male, age 30;
3. Latif Mistry, age 50;
4. Noor Mohamed, age 50;
5. Sayed Yullag, age 40;
6. Mohammed Rofique, male, age 40; and
7. Nur Islam, age 50.<sup>59</sup>

On 12 February 2008, a policeman from the Maungdaw police station urinated on the floor of the central mosque in Maungdaw Town. Although there was nobody in the mosque because the act took place after Asar prayers, an eye witness reported the incident from just outside the mosque's entrance.<sup>60</sup>

On 22 February 2008, a Rohingya Muslim in Sittwe, Arakan State, was cremated in accordance to Buddhist customs by local police. Zawmir Uddin was tortured and died during a police interrogation session after being arrested by Sergeant Win Kyaw's police squad on 21 February. After Uddin's death, the police took him to the local Buddhist cemetery to proceed with the cremation, failing to acknowledge his religious rights and neglecting to inform his family of the death.<sup>61</sup>

At approximately 11:00 pm on 26 March 2008, NaSaKa personnel raided an Islamic religious function in Maung Nama village of Maungdaw Township. Despite the fact that Abu Sofian had obtained prior consent from local authorities to arrange the religious function, two NaSaKa units invaded the gathering and arrested Maulana Sayedul Amin, a 60 year old local religious leader, while he was preaching to the gathered congregation. The NaSaKa soldiers fired their weapons into the air to disburse the crowd when a number of them had tried to free Maulana Sayedul Amin. Maulana Sayedul Amin was released the following morning.<sup>62</sup>

At 9:00 am on Sunday, 30 March 2008, a squad consisting of local police, military intelligence (SaRaPa), Special Investigation Branch (BSI) and Special Branch of the Police (SB) raided the Myanmar Muslim Council's (MMC) office in Maungdaw, Arakan State. The raid concluded at 4:00 pm with the arrests of 10 local Muslims. Master Shamshu, a senior assistant teacher, and Salim, the Chairman of the Myanmar Muslim Council were among those arrested. An aid to the NaSaKa, Burma's security force, claimed the arrests were made for national security reasons and were ordered by the Military Operation Command (MOC) Commander of Buthidaung Township; although neither the name nor numbers of those to be arrested were addressed in the MOC Commander's order. Many locals speculated that the arrests were made in relation to the upcoming constitutional referendum. If that was indeed the reason, the raid could be seen as an act of intimidation to vote in favour of the constitution.<sup>63</sup>

On 30 March 2008, more arrests of Muslim leaders took place in Maungdaw Township, Arakan State. In all, ten Muslim leaders were arrested when a raid took place at 10:30 am at the office of U Than Tun. U Than Tun, the president of the Maungdaw District Myanmar

Muslim League, was among those arrested. The arrested were taken to NaSaKa headquarters at 4:00 pm and they were not permitted to speak to any family members. The reason for the arrests and raid remains unknown.<sup>64</sup>

On 1 April 2008, further members of the Myanmar Muslim Council (MMC) were arrested in their homes in Maungdaw Township, Arakan State. Those arrested include: Dr. Kamal, Dr. Zahirb, a dentist from Ba Gone Nah village, Nur Khobir, Haji Shamsu, a previous Village Peace and Development Council (VPDC) chairman, and Bahu Du, from Nafati Dil in Maungdaw Township. The arrested were then sent to be interrogated by the Military Intelligence (SaRaPa) for their alleged involvement with Muslim insurgent groups abroad. Following the arrests, more members of the MMC were forced to go into hiding.<sup>65</sup>

On 2 April 2008, additional Muslim leaders were arrested in Maungdaw Township, Arakan State, with no justification offered by authorities. Those arrested were Dr. Kyaw Myint, Dr. Tun Aung and their driver Nur Kobi. One resident commented on the arrests of local Muslim leaders, *"I heard the leaders were severely tortured by intelligence agents during the interrogation and their health has started to deteriorate after the torture in the interrogation cell."*<sup>66</sup> Rumours circulated at the time suggested that the arrests had been made to scare the Muslim community into voting in favour of the referendum.

On 4 April 2008, two Maulanas from Maungdaw Township, Maulana Mohammed Hamid Hussain (45) and Maulana Mohammed Nuzu Meah (43), were arrested after Friday prayers in their local mosque. Following the prayers, the two allegedly spoke to a group of people in the mosque about opposing the ruling regime. NaSaKa claimed to be informed of this and therefore made the arrests. However, other witnesses claimed that the two Maulanas only spoke of religion and faith, in addition to the fact that they had never been involved in any anti-junta activities. After the arrests Mohammed Hamid Hussain and Mohammed Nuzu Meah were interrogated further at the Tactical Operation Command (TOC) in Buthidaung Town.<sup>67</sup>

On 13 May 2008, Abul Khair (45) was arrested in Hatbaga village, Maungdaw Township, Arakan State for building a Hafez Khana in his home. He was arrested by NaSaKa officials for not obtaining permission to build a Muslim place of worship.<sup>68</sup>

On 1 June 2008, junta members in Bandohla Camp, Maungdaw Township, Arakan State cremated two Rohingya Muslims. The two unidentified bodies were found in a bamboo forest near the Burma-Bangladesh border and were said to have been shot dead by border authorities who fired into the forest to scare bamboo cutters on 31 May 2008. One local Muslim commented, *"Bodies of Muslims are not cremated as per traditional Muslim custom, but the army didn't handover the bodies to the nearest Muslim village and cremated them in keeping with Buddhist customs."*<sup>69</sup>

On 10 July 2008, authorities of the Maungdaw District Peace and Development Council (DPDC) in Maungdaw Township, Arakan State, seized Muslim graveyards in Bagonah and Gowyah. Authorities claimed that the land was needed for NaSaKa camps and other military related purposes. Residents in the area claimed there was plenty of available land for the junta to use, yet the DPDC decided to take land that was important to local Muslims.<sup>70</sup>

On 25 July 2008, it was reported that 10 Muslim students who were arrested for their involvement in the Saffron Revolution had been transferred to forced labour camps. The students were each sentenced to two years imprisonment at Kyauktada Township Court, Rangoon Division, and were classified as political prisoners. *"The transferal of those Muslim students to forced labor camps is religious persecution. Those young students are now facing a life-threatening situation,"* replied Tate Naing, the Secretary of the Assistance

Association for Political Prisoners Burma (AAPPB).<sup>71</sup> Tate Naing also maintained that it is extremely rare for political prisoners to ever be transferred to forced labour camps.

The arrested Muslims were identified as:

1. Tun Myint Aung;
2. Tun Tun Naing;
3. Eisud (aka) Thaung Htut;
4. Naing Lin;
5. Nyi Nyi Zaw;
6. Kyaw Hlaing;
7. Myo Thant;
8. Myo Win;
9. Han Thaw Min Aung; and
10. Nay Lin Oo.<sup>72</sup>

On 26 August 2008, NaSaKa commander of NaSaKa Area No. 18 seized 3.5 million kyat worth of Iftar items from mosque committee members in Inn Din village, Maungdaw Township, Arakan State. Iftar items are Muslim foods that are to be eaten at sunset when breaking the fast of Ramadan. The mosque members travelled to Maungdaw to buy these goods for the poor, so they too could participate in their religious ritual; however, upon returning to the village authorities seized all of the goods. Generally Iftar, which is comprised of: chicken, lemon, rice, cucumber and fruits, is distributed from the mosque following the evening prayers.<sup>73</sup>

On 9 September 2008, Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) published a report detailing ways in which NaSaKa defectors had previously used their power to oppress the Muslim minorities. One former NaSaKa official said, *"Throughout my life in the Na Sa Ka, I was used to this system of arresting Muslims, asking for money, torturing them, every day. We only arrested Muslims, not Rakhines (Arakanese)."*<sup>74</sup>

On 17 September 2008, 105 Muslim individuals were sentenced to six months to prison in Sittwe, Arakan State, for attempting to take a bus from Sittwe to Rangoon without permission. One witness claimed that the individuals hoisted a Buddhist flag on the bus to give the appearance that the individuals were all Buddhists and travelling together for a holy pilgrimage. It is a junta policy that all Muslims must seek permission to travel outside of their villages, which is why the travellers were forced to pretend to be Buddhist. Upon arrest authorities also seized 80.5 million kyat from the group.<sup>75</sup>

On 6 October 2008, it was reported that Rohingya Muslims were facing severe discrimination while in Buthidang prison, Arakan State. Prison guards were reportedly forcing the Muslims to do harder labour than others and giving Muslims less food than Arakanese, non-Muslim inmates. Muslim inmates were reportedly used as forced labour for the rebuilding of highways and the growing of rice paddy in the nearby villages.<sup>76</sup>

On 24 October 2008, it was reported that over 100 Rohingya Muslims in Kyauk Pyu and Ramree Townships, Arakan State, had been used as forced labour for the construction of Kyauk Pyu-Maayee Road. It was noted that authorities only demanded Rohingya Muslims for the labour, and members of other religious and ethnic backgrounds were not forced to work. One local student maintained, *"We are facing starvation after my father went to the road construction site where the authorities provide the lowest quality of rice as wages and we have no other source of income for survival."*<sup>77</sup>

On 30 October 2008, NaSaKa authorities, under the command of Aung Mangahla, raided an Islamic ceremony that was taking place at the home of Abu Subayan and a woman identified as Mrs Amina, in Maung Hna Ma village, Maungdaw Township, Arakan State. Many Muslim villagers were in attendance at the ceremony to listen to speeches of the renowned Muslim

leader, Syedul Amin. As Amin was giving his religious speech, NaSaKa authorities, along with village chairman Zubair, entered the home and ordered the ceremony to cease. Following the raid, house owner Abu Subayam was arrested on charges of holding illegal functions in the village and spreading political propaganda through religious teachings.<sup>78</sup>

On 4 November 2008, it was reported that NaSaKa officials in Maungdaw Township, Arakan State, issued a decree that all Rohingya Muslim grooms who applied for marriage licences must be clean-shaven. Many Muslims find it important to their faith to grow out their facial hair. Aside from being clean-shaven, the groom was also obligated to pay authorities 30,000 kyat for permission. In October, Maulavi Abu (22), refused to shave his beard when asked by the authorities. Upon his refusal, the authorities denied his right to marry. Aside from ordering men to shave, NaSaKa officials also ruled that Maulavis (Islamic leaders) were no longer allowed to wear their Kurtas, which are long Islamic traditional shirts that are used to identify the Maulavis.<sup>79</sup>

On 5 November 2008, nine Muslim leaders were sentenced to prison in a Maungdaw Township court, Arakan State. Ko Than Tun was sentenced to 13 years of prison, on three charges of trying to form an illegal organisation and communicating with foreign organisations. The eight others, which included NLD branch founder Ko Kyaw Win, were sentenced to 10 years each on similar charges. The nine Muslim leaders were among a group of 12 Muslims that were arrested arbitrarily in March 2008. Three of the 12 were eventually acquitted; those released were Dr. Hla Myint, Nurl Ko Bi and Dr. Anwa.<sup>80</sup>



Despite the scale of the devastation wreaked on the nation by Cyclone Nargis and the enormity of the needs of the population as result, construction on this enormous pagoda (remarkably reminiscent of the Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon) in Naypyidaw continued throughout 2008 at considerable cost. *[Photo: © Min Khet Maung ]*

## 12.4 SPDC Promotion of and Control over Buddhism

In 2008, the SPDC continued to show their support for Buddhism, despite the fact that military generals ordered the attacks on, and jailing of, many Buddhist monks who took to the streets in the September 2007 'Saffron Revolution'. Through the state run media, these generals were seen praying, visiting monasteries, building new pagodas, offering alms and paying homage to Buddhist monks. All of this was done to portray the ruling military as a truly Buddhist entity to the rest of the public. In fact, this propaganda favouring Buddhism was so convincing that even the Thai Prime Minister of the time was quoted saying the SPDC generals were "good Buddhists" because they "meditate."<sup>81</sup>

Although the junta favours Buddhism over all other religions, it still tries to control the religion and manipulate Burma's Buddhist followers to keep them in line with the ideology of the SPDC. For example, even though Burma is said to be home to more than 400,000 monks, the junta forbids any organisation of the Buddhist clergy other than the nine state recognized monastic orders under the Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee (SMNC). Furthermore, under the 1990 Sangha Organisation Law, all independent monastic orders are illegal. In 2008, the SPDC maintained its control over Buddhism by monitoring monasteries that were suspected of being involved in the September uprising, arbitrarily arresting monks who were considered to be in opposition to the junta. Authorities interrupted Buddhist festivities to intimidate the attendees and dissuade them against any type of protest and created barriers restricting monks from allocating aid to the survivors of Cyclone Nargis. All the while, the regime still tried to generate good will among the general population by attempting to portray itself as respectful of Buddhist customs.<sup>82</sup>

The SPDC also created the Department for the Perpetuation and Propagation of the Sasana. This was done in order to establish the correct teachings for the Buddhist monks to propagate in Buddhist schools. Moreover, the junta directly trained Buddhist monks by funding two Sangha universities in Rangoon and Mandalay, which were and continue to be controlled by the state-sponsored SMNC. Additionally, the SPDC operates an International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University (ITBMU) that opened in Rangoon in 1998 to teach the true messages of Buddhism to the rest of the world.<sup>83</sup>

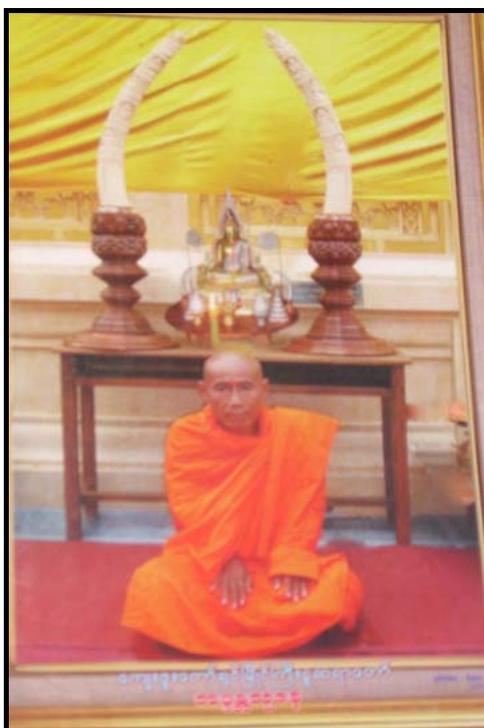
Monks and monasteries that work directly beneath the junta receive beneficial treatment accordingly. For example, in August 2008, it was reported that the military donated over 70 million kyat worth of food to monasteries in Sittwe, Arakan State. The donations consisted of bags of rice, cooking oil and salt. Most monasteries were said to have received donations, with larger monasteries receiving between 120 and 170 bags of rice. However, when comparing the size of donations to particular monasteries, one abbot noticed that state sponsored monasteries were being granted a disproportionately large share of the goods. The abbot went on to note that,

*"All monasteries in Sittwe received the donation of rice and other goods from the Burmese military government, but there was not equal distribution among the monasteries. If a monastery is close to the authority, it received more rice from the government."*<sup>84</sup>

Others in the region said that this behaviour by the junta was simply another attempt to gain the monks' support for the military regime and to prevent any future protest against the state.

The junta also sent state-sponsored monks abroad to gain Buddhist support for the SPDC. In February 2008, five senior monks from the Arakan State Thinga Mahanayaka, which is a junta controlled monk-council, were sent on a mission to Bangladesh during a local religious ceremony to halt a monk led religious boycott against the Burmese military regime. Once it

became known that pro-SPDC monks were attempting to infiltrate a Buddhist ceremony in Bangladesh, the five monks were stopped at the border and ordered to return to Arakan State.<sup>85</sup>



Local villagers from Thaton District in southern Karen State were forced to buy copies of this framed photograph of U Thuzana, the nominal head of the SPDC-allied Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), in September 2008 at a cost of 2,500 baht (approximately US\$70) each. [Photo: © KHRG]

In other attempts to portray the leadership as good Buddhists and to gain goodwill from the independent Buddhist community, the SPDC also created forged documentation from the monk led September uprising. For example, in August 2008, authorities in Sittwe, Arakan State, showed a video to a group of Buddhist leaders that depicted the monks involved in the Saffron Revolution as not actually being monks at all but impostors who were trying to cause trouble. This was seen as an attempt by the authorities to justify their violent actions because according to the Buddhist code, harming a monk is one of the worst offences one can commit. One abbot that was present for the viewing claimed,

*“During the show, the authority explained to us that the arrested monks in Sittwe and other parts of Burma during the Saffron Revolution were not real monks, but were impostors. They also showed some monks sitting with women and collecting money from people for their personal interest.”<sup>86</sup>*

Validity of the video remained suspect, as the abbot later maintained, *“I do not know who took the video documentary of the monks, but I suppose some parts of the documentary are not real, and some show phony facts.”<sup>87</sup>* The authorities also held a food offering ceremony on this date so citizens from the rest of the community could view the video. After the screening, authorities tried to convince the abbots to oppose all who still protested against the junta.<sup>88</sup>

Despite the SPDC's continued efforts in 2008 to show the country that they were not only good Buddhists, but also good people, Buddhists still had their rights to freedom of religion violated. In many cases monks, abbots, regular Buddhist followers and monasteries alike suffered for any type of suspicious link the junta could find to the September protests or to any other type of political opposition. It was common for monasteries to be shut down without any explanation. In June 2008, a popular monastery was shut down outside of Rangoon and all of the residing monks were forced to return to their villages. Former monks from this monastery had been involved in the September 2008 uprising, leading authorities to surmise that it may still be an origin of political dissent. Authorities took the opportunity to follow the evicted monks to see where they would go next, in the hope of uncovering their networks and possible political contacts.<sup>89</sup>

After initially shutting down monasteries, local authorities then started to conduct regular raids. In February 2008, authorities raided any monastery that was said to be overcrowded. It is generally common for monasteries to provide housing for poor travellers but the regime authorities ordered the monasteries to stop providing such hospitality. One monastery was raided in Kawthaung Township, Tenasserim Division. Following the raid, a monk who witnessed the event stated, *"They warned us that the monastery has been very crowded and told us not to accept visitors anymore. This will make it difficult for people to find a place to sleep."*<sup>90</sup>

Furthermore, throughout June, July and August, SPDC officials then limited the number of monks eligible to stay in any given monastery. This idea was conceived to prevent large groups of monks congregating together in order to avoid the organisation of any type of protest or ceremony prior to the 20 year anniversary of the '88 uprising or the one year anniversary of the 'Saffron Revolution'. During these months, authorities restricted monasteries to no more than 10 registered monks and guests per night, while township authorities in Rangoon limited each monastery to hosting a mere five guests per night. Any monastery that was caught hosting more guests or monks than the maximum amount was punished, with the monks being forced to leave.<sup>91</sup>

Sometimes, instead of shutting down or harassing a particular monastery, junta officials suppressed the speech of popular abbots. In February 2008 for example, authorities in Magwe Division cancelled a three-day Dhamma talk being given by Abbot U Thu Mingala. When police summoned the abbot, they ordered him to leave town immediately and for the hosting pavilion to be demolished. Reasons for the raid were said to be because the abbot could have potentially spoken of political ideas that were anti-SPDC.<sup>92</sup>

In other instances, the SPDC limited monastery's ability to help and aid those in need during the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis. On 16 May 2008, a prominent abbot from Mandalay admitted in an interview that military forces had been trying to prevent his groups from collaborating with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in attempts to supply relief aid to those affected by the cyclone. Authorities warned relief organisations not to work with any monks or abbots, while each monastery was told to submit any donated aid to local authorities, so it could then be channelled to those in need via official channels.<sup>93</sup>

However, such threats against the monasteries did not stop the monks from taking donations and giving them directly to the victims. On 14 May 2008, four abbots from Maha Gandaryon monastery in Mandalay drove to the cyclone hit areas of the Rangoon and Irrawaddy Divisions to deliver aid. The abbots were said to have personally joined the relief effort with other volunteers on the ground. They arrived with two vans full of rice, onions, beans, salt, clothing and even cash to give to those in need, vowing to continue with the relief effort for as long as possible.<sup>94</sup>

Then again, on 21 May, it was reported that monks in Pakokku Township, Magwe Division had raised over 10 million kyat along with large amounts of clothing, rice, beans and oil for the local people. Donations were drawn from the town's residents and surpassed any type of expectations for the relief mission. The monks testified that they would not pass on such goods to the military junta regardless of how they were threatened. One of the monks involved explained to the media, *"We told them that we would donate to them personally, and we will keep that promise."*<sup>95</sup>

Although some monks were able to safely provide aid in the aftermath of the cyclone, many were not, and still other Buddhists suffered at the hands of the junta as the year continued. Many monks and nuns who were arrested for participating in anti-SPDC activities were stripped of their robes and humiliated in jail. On one occasion in February 2008, eight monks and seven nuns from North Okkalapa Township, Rangoon Division were forced to wear traditional longyi in court. It is seen as a grave symbolic disgrace to the religion for any monk or nun to be disrobed without going through the proper procedures according to the Buddhist doctrine.<sup>96</sup>

Later in the year, in August 2008, many residents and monks attempted to hold a memorial protest marking the first anniversary of the previous year's monk-led demonstration against commodity prices in Sittwe, Arakan State. The police presence had already been augmented in the area to limit any type of large gatherings, so when it was discovered that there would be a Buddhist memorial; the authorities violently shut down the event before it began. One monk who was in attendance claimed, *"authorities got wind of the plan and so security forces turned up suddenly and aggressively and it didn't happen."*<sup>97</sup>

In all, throughout 2008, followers of Buddhism continued to suffer at the hands of the military junta. All the while, the SPDC still promoted the one religion that undermines their authority; Buddhism. This was done in the attempt to look good in front of the population and maintain their powerful position within the country. In 2008, monks who were arrested for protesting were charged with defamation of Buddhism and in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis, monks and monasteries were limited in the amounts of aid that they could give to the victims because the SPDC wanted to be seen giving aid ceremonially in an attempt to strengthen their image. This contradictory behaviour by the SPDC, favouring while threatening Buddhism, was summed up by Priscilla Clapp, a former U.S diplomat in Burma:

*"They pretend they're traditional Theravada Buddhists, but they really aren't. They indoctrinate their officers especially and also the rank and file soldiers politically. ... So they can justify really outrageous actions on the basis of Buddhism, including attacks on monks and letting people starve. It has everything to do with keeping them in power."*<sup>98</sup>

## **Control and Oppression of Buddhists - Partial list of incidents for 2008**

On 1 February 2008, it was reported that four monasteries in Pakokku City had been under heavy surveillance from local police and USDA members. The monasteries listed were A-Shay-Taik (East Monastery), Nar-Yi-Sin A-Lel Taik (Middle Yard Monastery), Mandalay Taik and Baw-Di-Man-Dai Taik, as these were all schools that were believed by the junta to have had participated in the September 2007 protests. To effectively monitor the monks, authorities followed and questioned guests who went to the monasteries, eavesdropped on phone conversations and even disbanded some of the monasteries' telephone lines. When asked about the authorities' surveillance methods, one monk from Mandalay Monastery mentioned that the authorities, *"eavesdrop whenever we talk on a telephone at the telecom exchange office,"* and added, *"We can't say anything controversial."* Pakokku City is located

75 miles southwest of Mandalay and is home to the second largest student-monk population in Burma, after Mandalay.<sup>99</sup>

On 5 February 2008, Ngway Kyar Yan Monastery, in South Okkalapa Township, Rangoon, had its free school closed by local junta officials. The monastery has traditionally provided free education for 2,000 to 3,000 students per year, for the last 14 years, to students in the surrounding 10 townships. Speculation suggested that the classes were cancelled because of the participation of monks from Ngway Kyar Yan Monastery in the September 2007 uprising.<sup>100</sup>

On 12 February 2008, officials surrounded and closed all entries to Phaung Taw Oo Pagoda, in Taungup Township, Arakan State, while locking the resident monks inside. This denied entry to many Taungkok National League for Democracy (NLD) members, along with others, who had travelled to the pagoda to give the monks food on the 61<sup>st</sup> anniversary of Union Day. Upon arriving at the pagoda, U Than Pe, Taungkok NLD Deputy Chairman, claimed, *“There were about 30 government security troops, armed with shields, batons and other lethal weapons, and about 20 people in civilian clothing, led by township police chief Win Aung Ne, waiting at the east entrance gates of the pagoda.”*<sup>101</sup> The authorities then followed the group and harassed them as the NLD members were trying to give the food to other monks outside of the pagoda.



This photograph, taken on 17 December 2008 on Mayan Hill in northern Arakan State, depicts a Traditional Buddhist Noviciation Ceremony in which these young men entered the monkhood as novices. [Photo: © Burma Digest]

On 16 February 2008, local authorities in Pwintbyu Township, Magwe Division cancelled a Dhamma talk that was being given by Abbot U Thu Mingala, from Mogok Wipathana Monastery in Mandalay. The Abbot was conducting a three day talk and had spoke the previous two days before local police chief, U Sein Win, intruded on the third day and claimed that U Thu Mingala had been banned from giving Dhamma talks and that he would have to leave town. Aside from forcing the monk to leave immediately, U Sein Win also ordered the pavilion, where the talks were being held, to be demolished. The police gave no reason for their actions and showed no documentation to legitimise the raid. Many felt however, that it was the result of the monk’s reputation for speaking on controversial topics. For example, the first talks were titled *“Time for a change of leader”* and *“Do not take the easy path.”* However, the Abbot maintained, *“I did not say anything damaging towards [the government], in fact everything I said came from Buddhist teachings.”*<sup>102</sup>

On 19 February 2008, a prominent monk's traditional funeral cremation ceremony in Miwa village, Paletwa Township, Chin State, was abruptly ended after two intoxicated soldiers fired their guns into the air during a drama troupe's performance. The soldiers fired their weapons in response to a monk's requests for the soldiers to leave the stage upon which the troupe had been performing and to respect the funeral's rituals. Immediately following the incident, the large crowd panicked and fled, injuring many children in the process.<sup>103</sup>

On 21 February 2008, it was reported that five senior monks working for the Burmese junta were sent to the Bangladeshi border town of Cox's Bazaar in an attempt to organise monks in Bangladesh to support the current military regime in Burma. Democratic protests by Bangladeshi activists and Burmese refugees ensued after news of the five monks' intentions was made known.<sup>104</sup>

On 25 February 2008, it was reported that an SPDC owned cement factory, Myaingkalay, had destroyed ancient Buddha statues and votive tablets in Kawgun cave, near Hpa-an. Myaingkalay routinely blasted the mountains surrounding Kawgun cave in order to extract resources, even though mining and excavating is prohibited near religious sites by Burma's Ministry of Culture.<sup>105</sup>

In March 2008, a Buddhist abbot reported to a Bangladeshi newspaper that his monastery was set on fire and later bulldozed by the junta shortly after the Saffron Revolution in September 2007. The monastery, located in Theik Thapon Khami village in Kyauk Taw Township, Arakan State was targeted for destruction following allegations that the abbot and a number of the resident monks were involved in the September 2007 protests. The abbot fled to Bangladesh fearing that he would be arrested by authorities.<sup>106</sup>

On 21 March 2008, during the Ta Paung full moon festival, many Buddhist worshipers were restricted from entering the Lawkanaanda Pagoda in Sittwe, Arakan State, by the local security forces. Consequently, a clash ensued between the Buddhist devotees and security forces and then proceeded to spread throughout the rest of Sittwe. The security forces were able to maintain control by forcing the Buddhists home from worship, and imposing a curfew in the local area between 6:00 pm and midnight. Increased security forces were present to enforce the curfew and to prevent any Buddhists from going to any of the nearby pagodas for the next few days.<sup>107</sup>



As in other times of crisis in Burma, the *Sangha* (Buddhist monastic community) came out in force to assist local communities in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis. Monasteries opened their doors to IDPs displaced by the storm and provided them with refuge and food. This photograph shows a group of monks moving a downed tree away from railway tracks. [Photo: © AP]

On 21 March 2008, a report indicated that increased security measures were taken at Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon for the Buddhist Ta Paung full moon festival. Security was tightened around the country during the festival in the junta's effort to discourage any further political protests after the mass demonstrations of September 2007. Shwedagon Pagoda has traditionally been a centre of political activity. SPDC army personnel were stationed at all of the pagoda's entrances and all approaches were blockaded with barbed wire barricades, effectively limiting the rights of Buddhist citizens to pay homage and worship on their religious holiday.<sup>108</sup>

On 29 March 2008, Two Lions Monastery in Lamadaw Taung Ward, Sittwe, Arakan State, was raided by Inspector San Shwe Maung and local police. Although there were no arrests made, the authorities claimed to be looking for monks involved in the September protests of the previous year.<sup>109</sup>

In April 2008, junta authorities were claimed to have closely monitored the Zawtanarama monastery in Rangoon. One Rangoon resident in Alone Township noted that from 24 April 2008, up to 17 police vehicles, accompanied by military officers, had been placed in front of the monastery on Thittaw Street to monitor the monks. Zawtanarama monastery was home to more than 130 monks before the September protests, but after the many raids that followed, the monastery was host to approximately 40 monks.<sup>110</sup>

On 1 April 2008, a late night raid occurred in Hpa-an Township, Karen State, at Thamanya Hill. Three trucks, filled with armed uniformed men, entered the temple by force, detained the lay attendants and stole the enshrined body of Abbot Sayadaw Winiya from his glass coffin. The abbot had been placed in the temple as a holy relic since his death at age 93 in 2003. Buddhists from all over the country had previously journeyed to Thamanya Hill to pay homage to the former social worker, spiritual leader and advisor to Aung Sun Suu Kyi. It remains unclear why the abbot's body was stolen and who was responsible.<sup>111</sup>

On 2 April 2008, it was reported that only 1,000 Arakanese monks would be participating in the annual monks' exam in Sittwe. This represented a decrease of 2,000 monks, after 3,000 Arakanese monks participated in the exam in 2007. Two possible reasons for the decrease were posited. Firstly, many monks were forced to leave Sittwe in the aftermath of September 2007 uprising and these monks feared that if they returned to Sittwe they would be arrested. Secondly, many monks wanted to boycott the junta-sponsored exams, as the military had been responsible for deaths, arrests and disappearances of countless monks following the uprising.<sup>112</sup>

On 9 April 2008, U Gambira, the prominent leader of the All-Burmese Monks Alliance (ABMA) who was arrested in November 2007 for his role in instigating the September protests, publicly denounced Insein Prison authorities for reducing detained monks to lay status. Prison authorities were also issuing the monks lay identity cards, so they could vote in the upcoming referendum, as monks and other religious figures were barred from the vote. U Gambira claimed that he would report this to international organisations if the authorities continued to force the monks into accepting lay status, which is a degrading and humiliating offence in Buddhist culture.<sup>113</sup>

On 21 May 2008, police in Taungup, Arakan State, interrupted the Buddhist holiday which celebrates the day Buddha attained enlightenment, to discourage any type of political protest. As local residents marched to a monastery in Kaingshay village to fulfil the holiday's ritual of pouring water onto a banyan tree, police followed in a threatening manner with sticks and shields. One resident, who was upset because the police presence was a nuisance to the ceremony claimed, *"It wasn't a rally. NLD members and residents from nearby villages just went to a monastery together to pour water onto a banyan tree."*<sup>114</sup>

On 27 May 2008, it was reported that the roof of Sasana Gonye Monastery, in Bahan Township, Rangoon Division had been torn off during Cyclone Nargis on 2 May 2008, leaving many valuable scriptures at risk of further damage. Sasana Gonye Monastery was one of many monasteries that were shut down by authorities following the Saffron Revolution and local officials refused to re-open the monastery to the abbot, U Zawana, or to its other supporters to repair the damage to the building and scriptures.<sup>115</sup>

On 13 June 2008, Sasana Theikpan Monastery, in Bahan Township, Rangoon Division, was closed indefinitely by the township chairman and local security forces. Sasana Theikpan Monastery gained a reputation as a pro-opposition monastery after dozens of pro-democracy activists attended the funeral of the monastery's head monk on 7 June 2008, which was heavily monitored by local authorities. After the closure of the monastery, three monks were forced to take temporary shelter in nearby monasteries.<sup>116</sup>

On 21 July 2008, Burmese migrant labourers in India's Aizawl District, Mizoram State, stated that their employers, along with local pastors, threatened Buddhist migrants with losing their jobs or being reported to the police for being in the country illegally if they did not convert to Christianity. One worker claimed that they were forced to attend a mass gathering for four days, from 17 to 20 July, without being allowed to leave. The employers claimed they only wanted to teach the employees more about the Christian God; however, one Buddhist employee, who had no intentions of converting, claimed, *"We told them we don't [want] to become Christians. We have been given these badges with different colours for those who have agreed to convert to Christianity and those who have not."*<sup>117</sup>

On 5 August 2008, it was reported that known monks who had accepted alms from National League for Democracy (NLD) members had come under pressure from local authorities. These authorities raided local monasteries to obtain further information about the monks who accepted alms from the NLD. In Buddhism, it is customary for monks to accept alms and donations from a cross-section of society.<sup>118</sup>

On 8 August 2008, police in Sittwe, Arakan State, raided two local monasteries in search of monks who were under suspicion of preparing a demonstration on the anniversary of the 8-8-88 uprising. The two monasteries were Kyin The Nat Kong Monastery in Sittwe's Ta Rar Thi Su Ward, and Say Gri Monastery in Sittwe's Bauk Thi Ward.<sup>119</sup>

On 21 August 2008, authorities in Katha Township, Sagaing Division, ordered 10 monks to lead 10 local residents in chanting incantations for a period of 10 consecutive days. The chanting of incantations is a traditional Burmese ritual that is to be done when there are two new moons in the same month, in order to avoid bad luck. Although the authorities claimed the ordered chanting was to protect all of Katha Township's residents, one monk noted that the particular incantations were written to only protect the leaders from any bad luck.<sup>120</sup>

On 21 August 2008, it was reported that Ashin Gambira, leader of the All Burma Monks' Alliance (ABMA), was disrobed in Insein Prison for his role in organising the mass uprising in September 2007. Gambira's lawyer, Aung Thein, claimed that the monk was not disrobed in accordance traditional Buddhist customs, and refusing to follow the traditional procedures or consult other monks' organisations in this regard constituted a great offence to the religion.<sup>121</sup>

On 23 August 2008, two monks, Damathara and Nandara, were arrested at Thardu Monastery in Kyimyindaing Township, Rangoon. Following the arrest by local authorities, the two monks were taken to Insein Prison to face interrogation. It was unknown what the direct charges were against the monks but speculation at the time suggested that the monks may have been arrested for illegal communication with foreign media outlets.<sup>122</sup>

On 25 August 2008, it was reported that the Maggin Abbot U Nandiya (70), in Myothit Town, Taungdwingyi Township, Magwe Division, refused to collect alms offered by local authorities. Authorities initially drove the abbot out of town and left him in a guarded and isolated location. Furthermore, he was not allowed to collect alms and regular food and was denied healthcare.<sup>123</sup>

On 26 August 2008, authorities in Kemmendine Township, Rangoon Division, raided Sardu monastery and arrested two student monks. One of the two monks, Ashin Damah Tharya (25), was arrested while in the middle of his studies at the monastery however, the reason for the arrest remains unknown.<sup>124</sup>

On 29 August 2008, it was reported that authorities had begun taking detailed information of each monk that was residing in local monasteries in the four Dagon townships of South Okkalapa, Thaketa, Dawbon and Shwepyitha, in Rangoon. Although it is common for authorities to take the names of all monks living in a monastery, in 2008 the authorities gathered more thorough information than usual. One resident confirmed, *“They are making profiles of each monk with details such as where their families live and what they do and if they have any political background.”*<sup>125</sup> This was seen as an attempt to intimidate the monks into avoiding any type of protest gathering on the one year anniversary of the Saffron Revolution.



Hundreds of small statues of Sakyamuni Buddha were donated at the Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon by Buddhist pilgrims in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis. Fearing further tragedy, the population turned to their faith in religion for salvation as rumours spread through the city of a second catastrophe that would strike and the floodwaters would reach the Shwedagon Pagoda.

[Photo: © AP]

On 4 September 2008, two monks, Sayadaw U Panna Wontha and U Thuta Nyanna from Shwe Taung Monastery in Mingalar Taungnyunt Township, Rangoon, were respectively sentenced to between 5 and 10 years in prison. They were charged on acts of religious defamation, under section 295 of the Penal Code, for their role in the 2007 September uprising.<sup>126</sup>

On 7 September 2008, it was reported that a monk, Ashin Kawvida, had been disrobed and severely tortured for refusing to appear in court in Burma's Insein Prison. Kawvida initially refused to attend his court hearings because he believed his arrest and subsequent disrobing were in violation of Buddhist customs. Authorities, however, tied him to a rope and dragged him into the courtroom for the hearing. Kawida later said he would only obey judgments from the State Monk Coordination Committee.<sup>127</sup>

On 9 September 2008, it was reported that military officials in Sittwe, Arakan State, increased their presence on the streets to prevent the local Buddhist community from celebrating the 69<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of praised Arakanese monk, Ashin Ottama. Witnesses claimed that soldiers and riot police were sent to local monasteries and landmarks around the city to prevent any festivities. Locations that forces were deployed to included Payagyi Temple and Ottama Hall. One student maintained, *"The authorities deployed security forces in several areas, because they are worried that people will hold ceremonies. Also, teachers have been told to closely monitor their students."*<sup>128</sup>

On 13 September 2008, authorities from the junta's Southeast Command interrupted the annual Buddhist festival, Long Bebin Kaloin or Suan Kyi Laung festival, that was taking place near the villages of Bha-Out and Rogo in Moulmein Township, Mon State. The annual festival is meant to be celebrated by supplying mass donations to local monks. When asked to let the festival proceed in peace, the authorities responded that they were ordered to stay for the duration of the event to provide security to the families of military personnel that were present. However, this was the first time authorities had ever interrupted this ceremony and the head monk maintained, *"The troops made people afraid, like they were doing something wrong. But they were only donating to make merit. We hold this festival every year, it concerns our religion. It is just a religious observance, there is no need to show security like this."*<sup>129</sup>

On 19 September 2008, it was reported that riot police had been deployed at all of Rangoon's most popular monasteries in an attempt to prevent another monk uprising. Furthermore, it was noted that there had been a presence of plainclothes policemen and Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) members at other important Buddhist sites in the region. One monk that had witnessed the undercover police presence claimed, *"The plainclothes security forces are carefully observing the monks' daily routines. They are watching for any signs of anti-government activity, or to see if monks are sending information to the exiled media."*<sup>130</sup> Another monk from Shwedagon commented on the authorities' attempt to prevent pilgrims from worshipping at a local pagoda by saying, *"They are guarding it like it's a prison camp."*<sup>131</sup>

On 14 October 2008, hundreds of monks in Sittwe, Arakan State, were denied access to the annual Buddhist full moon festival. Traditionally, the festival takes place on the full moon day of Wa Kyut and is celebrated at the Winkabar grounds in Sittwe with over 1,000 monks present. However, in 2008 only 100 monks (two monks per monastery) were allowed to attend the festival and the traditional performance by an artist's troupe was cancelled by local authorities due to security reasons.<sup>132</sup>

On 14 October 2008, it was reported that village authorities in Yenanyaung Township, Magwe Division, had scratched off five billion kyat worth of gold coating from four historic Buddha statues in Pin Skkalanpa pagoda compound in Pin Phayagon village. The statues were built by King Anarwahta, of the Bagan dynasty over 950 years ago and consequently have been coated by Buddhist followers since. One witness to the destruction maintained, *"They said they were only doing that to re-coat the gold on the statues [as in a maintenance process] but normally they would have to get permission from the township authorities and the 13 Sanga Nayaka monks."*<sup>133</sup> None of the monks were aware of the gold theft until after the act was committed.

On 20 and 21 October 2008, three monasteries: Larawan, Daw Pu Pu and Myoma, were raided in the middle of the night in Sittwe, Arakan State. No monks or abbots were arrested and it is thought that the authorities were looking for individuals that were believed to be involved in a recent bombing in Rangoon.<sup>134</sup>

On 29 November 2008, it was reported that Ashin Seinaya (30), a monk from Ah-Naut Taik Monastery in Pakokku Township, Magwe Division, was arrested in Nyaungcho Town, Shan State, while visiting his relatives. Residents claimed that the monastery had been under surveillance and the police guard at the time was punished for allowing Seinaya to leave the monastery. Seinaya was a monk for 10 years and was studying Dammah Sayira at the time of his arrest. The arrest was viewed by the local community as an attempt to oppress the monk community in Pakokku Township.<sup>135</sup>

On 5 November 2008, it was reported that a military training school (Training School No.4) in Thanbyuzayat Township, Mon State, had confiscated about 140 acres of land from a local monastery. The confiscated land had previously been designated as an animal habitat over 20 years ago by the local abbot. Following the confiscation, the military operated school sold the land at 500,000 kyat per acre, while not giving any money back to the monastery. The junta justified the seizure by claiming monasteries were only allowed to own five acres of land.<sup>136</sup>

On 11 November 2008, six monks from Ngwe Kyar Yan Monastery in South Okkalapa Township, Rangoon, were disrobed and sentenced to serve eight and half years in Insein Prison after being charged under Section 505(b) of the penal code in relation to their actions during the uprising in September 2007. Then, on the following day, 12 November 2008, two more monks from Ngwe Kyar Yan Monastery were also disrobed and sentenced to four and a half years in Insein Prison on similar charges. One court witness said all of the monks appeared in court wearing blue uniforms. The eight disrobed and sentenced monks were identified as follows:

1. U Zarnaya;
2. U Eikhthariya;
3. U Wila;
4. U Sekka;
5. U Nada;
6. U Egga Damma;
7. U Gawthita; and
8. U Zadila.<sup>137</sup>

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Source: *USCIRF Annual Report 2008 - Burma*, United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), 1 May 2008.
- <sup>2</sup> Source: *Ibid.*
- <sup>3</sup> Source: *Ibid.*
- <sup>4</sup> Source: *International Religious Freedom Report 2007: Burma*, Bureau of Human Rights, Democracy and Labor, U.S. Department of State, 19 September 2008.
- <sup>5</sup> Source: *Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2007 – Burma*, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, US Department of State, 11 March 2008.
- <sup>6</sup> Source: *International Religious Freedom Report 2007: Burma*, Bureau of Human Rights, Democracy and Labor, U.S. Department of State, 19 September 2008.
- <sup>7</sup> Source: *USCIRF Annual Report 2008 - Burma*, United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), 1 May 2008.
- <sup>8</sup> Source: *International Religious Freedom Report 2007: Burma*, Bureau of Human Rights, Democracy and Labor, U.S. Department of State, 19 September 2008.
- <sup>9</sup> Source: *Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2007 – Burma*, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, US Department of State, 11 March 2008.
- <sup>10</sup> Source: “Burma’s Generals-Blending Nazi-like Thought, Astrology, Brutality and Greed,” *The Cutting Edge News*, 12 May 2008.
- <sup>11</sup> Source: *International Religious Freedom Report 2007: Burma*, Bureau of Human Rights, Democracy and Labor, U.S. Department of State, 19 September 2008.
- <sup>12</sup> Source: *Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2007 – Burma*, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, U.S. Department of State, 11 March 2008.
- <sup>13</sup> Source: “Pope to Visit Burma,” UCAN, 3 November 2008.
- <sup>14</sup> Source: “Christians in Myanmar Are Oppressed,” *Kantarawaddy Times*, 14 November, 2008.
- <sup>15</sup> Source: “Pope Not Averse To Visit Burma,” *Mizzima News*, 5 November 2008.
- <sup>16</sup> Source: “Pope to Visit Burma,” UCAN, 3 November 2008.
- <sup>17</sup> Source: *Ibid.*
- <sup>18</sup> Source: “Briefing: Burma: Visit to the Thailand-Burma Border 16-28 November 2007,” CSW, November 2007.
- <sup>19</sup> Source: “Brig-Gen Thein Zaw Promises More GSM Phones to Kachin Churches,” KNG, 25 February 2008.
- <sup>20</sup> Source: “Kachin commander greets religious organizations with staple food,” KNG, 04 July 2008.
- <sup>21</sup> Source: *Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2007 – Burma*, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, U.S. Department of State, 11 March 2008.
- <sup>22</sup> Source: “Thura Aung Ko Campaigns For Referendum in Western Burma,” *Khonumthung*, 21 April 2008.
- <sup>23</sup> Source: “Severe Food Shortage Looms over Burma’s Chin State,” *Chinland Guardian*, 9 July 2008.
- <sup>24</sup> Source: “Relief Group to Deliver Aid for Famine Victims in Northwest Burma,” *Khonumthung*, 23 May 2008.
- <sup>25</sup> Source: *USCIRF Annual Report 2008 - Burma*, United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), 1 May 2008.
- <sup>26</sup> Source: “Construction of Kachin Baptist Church in Tarung Prohibited,” KNG, 17 January 2008.
- <sup>27</sup> Source: “Naga Group Calls for Boycott of Junta-backed Naga Festival,” *Irrawaddy*, 15 January 2008.
- <sup>28</sup> Source: “Burmese Armed Forces Day to Mark Decades of Military Rule,” *Irrawaddy*, 26 March 2008.
- <sup>29</sup> Source: “Gospel Baptist Church’s Silver Jubilee Postponed,” *Khonumthung*, 17 April 2008.
- <sup>30</sup> Source: “Junta Constructs Pagoda in Christian Stronghold,” KNG, 18 June 2008.
- <sup>31</sup> Source: “Junta Confiscates Christian Owned Land in Sadung, Kachin State,” KNG, 10 July 2008.
- <sup>32</sup> Source: “Non-Buddhist Students Must Accept Buddhism in Na-Ta-La School in Putao,” KNG, 22 July 2008.
- <sup>33</sup> Source: “Christian Leaders Questioned Over Anti-Dam Campaign,” DVB, 29 July 2008.
- <sup>34</sup> Source: “Christian Cemetery Being Razed In Myitkyinar,” *Mizzima News*, 17 October 2008.
- <sup>35</sup> Source: “Junta Starts To Clear Confiscated Christian Cemetery,” KNG, 17 October, 2008.
- <sup>36</sup> Source: “Blaze Destroys Church in Chin State,” *Mizzima News*, 26 November 2008.
- <sup>37</sup> Source: “New Church Destroyed In Sagaing Division,” *Khonumthung News*, 10 December, 2008.
- <sup>38</sup> Source: *International Religious Freedom Report 2007: Burma*, Bureau of Human Rights, Democracy and Labor, U.S. Department of State, 19 September 2008.
- <sup>39</sup> Source: *Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2007 – Burma*, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, US Department of State, 11 March 2008.
- <sup>40</sup> Source: “Muslim Students National ID Cards Delayed,” *Narinjara News*, 6 February 2008.
- <sup>41</sup> Source: “More MMC Members Arrested in Maungdaw,” *Kaladan News*, 2 April 2008.
- <sup>42</sup> Source: “Tabalique Group Arrested by Burma’s Security Forces,” *Kaladan News*, 12 February 2008.
- <sup>43</sup> Source: “Harassment by police, Nasaka and Sarapa in northern Arakan,” *Kaladan News*, 23 February 2008.
- <sup>44</sup> Source: “Burma Army Cremates Rohingya Muslims,” *Kaladan News*, 4 June 2008.

- <sup>45</sup> Source: “Nasaka Director Orders Maulavi Bridegrooms to Be Clean-Shaven,” *Kaladan News*, 4 November 2008.
- <sup>46</sup> Source: “Authority Invites Muslim Religious Leaders for Referendum,” *Narinjara News*, 26 April 2008.
- <sup>47</sup> Source: “Burma: Visit to the Bangladesh-Burma Border,” *Christian Solidarity Worldwide*, 26-31 August 2008.
- <sup>48</sup> Source: “CSW Visits Bangladesh-Burma Border, Interview Rohingya Refugees, Saffron Revolution Monks and SPDC Defectors,” CSW, 9 September 2008.
- <sup>49</sup> Source: *Ibid.*
- <sup>50</sup> Source: “Burma’s Muslim Rohingya Minority Dwell at the “Brink of Extermination”,” *Kaladan News*, 6 October 2008.
- <sup>51</sup> Source: “TPDC Chairman Goes To Loung Don Village for Inquiry,” *Kaladan News*, 6 October 2008.
- <sup>52</sup> Source: “Nasaka Bent on Seizing 16 Acres from Widow in Rathedaung,” *Kaladan News*, 8 September 2008.
- <sup>53</sup> Source: “Tabalique Group Arrested by Burma’s Security Forces,” *Kaladan News*, 12 February 2008.
- <sup>54</sup> Source: “Arakan Muslims Denied ID Cards,” DVB, 5 February 2008.
- <sup>55</sup> Source: “Muslim Students National ID Cards Delayed,” *Narinjara News*, 6 February 2008.
- <sup>56</sup> Source: *Ibid.*
- <sup>57</sup> Source: “Harassment by police, Nasaka and Sarapa in northern Arakan,” *Kaladan News*, 23 February 2008.
- <sup>58</sup> Source: “Fined for Renovation of Mosque in Maungdaw,” *Kaladan News*, 19 March 2008.
- <sup>59</sup> Source: “Twelve Sentenced To Seven Years in Jail for Renovation of Mosque,” *Kaladan News*, 28 February 2008.
- <sup>60</sup> Source: “Policeman Urinates in Central Mosque in Maungdaw,” *Kaladan News*, 16 February 2008.
- <sup>61</sup> Source: “Rohingya Cremated According to Buddhist Rites in Akyab,” *Kaladan News*, 23 February 2008.
- <sup>62</sup> Source: “Religious Function Ransacked By Security Force,” *Kaladan News*, 27 March 2008.
- <sup>63</sup> Source: “Myanmar Muslim Council’s Office Raided in Maungdaw,” *Kaladan News*, 31 March 2008.
- <sup>64</sup> Source: “10 Muslim Community Leaders Arrested in Arakan,” *Narinjara News*, 1 April 2008.
- <sup>65</sup> Source: “More MMC Members Arrested in Maungdaw,” *Kaladan News*, 2 April 2008.
- <sup>66</sup> Source: “More Arrested, Others Hiding in Maungdaw,” *Narinjara News*, 3 April 2008.
- <sup>67</sup> Source: “Two Maulanas Arrested in Maungdaw,” *Kaladan News*, 5 April 2008.
- <sup>68</sup> Source: “Villager Arrested for Building Hafez Khana,” *Kaladan News*, 21 May 2008.
- <sup>69</sup> Source: “Burma Army Cremates Rohingya Muslims,” *Kaladan News*, 4 June 2008.
- <sup>70</sup> Source: “DPDC Seizes Muslim Graveyard in Maungdaw Township,” *Kaladan News*, 10 July 2008.
- <sup>71</sup> Source: “Ten Students Sentenced to Hard Labour,” *Irrawaddy*, 25 July 2008.
- <sup>72</sup> Source: *Ibid.*
- <sup>73</sup> Source: “3. 5 Million Kyat Iftar Items Seized By Nasaka in Maungdaw,” *Kaladan News*, 4 September 2008.
- <sup>74</sup> Source: “CSW Visits Bangladesh-Burma Border, Interview Rohingya Refugees, Saffron Revolution Monks and SPDC Defectors,” CSW, 9 September 2008.
- <sup>75</sup> Source: “105 Sittwe Muslims Imprisoned For Traveling,” *Narinjara News*, 20 September 2008.
- <sup>76</sup> Source: “Prison Labour for Extra Income in Buthidaung Jail,” *Kaladan News*, 6 October 2008.
- <sup>77</sup> Source: “Rohingya Muslims Work in Kyaukpru–Maayee New Road,” *Kaladan News*, 24 October 2008.
- <sup>78</sup> Source: “Authorities Attack Religious Ceremony in Maungdaw,” *Kaladan News*, 1 November 2008.
- <sup>79</sup> Source: “Nasaka Director Orders Maulavi Bridegrooms to Be Clean-Shaven,” *Kaladan News*, 4 November 2008.
- <sup>80</sup> Source: “9 Muslim Leaders Sentenced To Over 10 Years in Arakan,” *Narinjara News*, 11 November, 2008.
- <sup>81</sup> Source: “Burma’s Generals-Blending Nazi-like Thought, Astrology, Brutality and Greed,” *The Cutting Edge News*, 12 May 2008.
- <sup>82</sup> Source: *International Religious Freedom Report 2007: Burma*, Bureau of Human Rights, Democracy and Labor, U.S. Department of State, 19 September 2008.
- <sup>83</sup> Source: *Ibid.*
- <sup>84</sup> Source: “Military Authority Donates 70 Million Kyat of Food to Sittwe Monasteries,” *Narinjara News*, 1 August 2008.
- <sup>85</sup> Source: “Senior Burmese Monks Barred from Bangladesh Town,” *Narinjara News*, 20 February 2008.
- <sup>86</sup> Source: “Authority Claims Monks from Saffron Revolution Are Impostors,” *Narinjara News*, 20 August 2008.
- <sup>87</sup> Source: “Sasana Theikpan Monastery Closed Without Warning,” DVB, 17 June 2008.
- <sup>88</sup> Source: *Ibid.*
- <sup>89</sup> Source: *Ibid.*
- <sup>90</sup> Source: “Monastery Warned Not To Accept Visitors,” DVB, 7 February 2008.
- <sup>91</sup> Source: “Monks Forced Home From Rangoon,” *Kaowao News*, 3 July 2008.
- <sup>92</sup> Source: “Authorities Ban Dhamma Talk in Magwe,” DVB, 18 February 2008.
- <sup>93</sup> Source: “Monks Prevented from Working with Other Donors,” DVB, 16 May 2008.
- <sup>94</sup> Source: “Mandalay Abbots Reach Rangoon with Relief Supplies,” DVB, 14 May 2008.
- <sup>95</sup> Source: “Pakokku Monks Collect Aid for Cyclone Victims,” DVB, 21 May 2008.
- <sup>96</sup> Source: “Monks and Nuns in Court over September Protests,” *Irrawaddy*, 29 February 2008.
- <sup>97</sup> Source: “Sittwe Monks’ Protest Disrupted By Authorities,” DVB, 26 August 2008.

- <sup>98</sup> Source: "Burmese Junta Stonewalling On Aid; Buddhism's Influence, The Government Wants to Be Seen As Agency Distributing Relief to Show Its Legitimacy, Experts Say," *Inside Burma*, 14 May 2008.
- <sup>99</sup> Source: "Subdued but Unbowed," *Irrawaddy*, 1 February 2008.
- <sup>100</sup> Source: "Monastery Stops Free Education Service," DVB, 5 February 2008.
- <sup>101</sup> Source: "Pagoda Closed To Taunggok NLD Members," DVB, 12 February 2008.
- <sup>102</sup> Source: "Authorities Ban Dhamma Talk in Magwe," DVB, 18 February 2008.
- <sup>103</sup> Source: "Buddhist Monk Funeral Disturbed by Army Gunfire," *Narinjara News*, 26 February 2008.
- <sup>104</sup> Source: "Demonstration against Senior Burmese Monks in Bangladesh," *Narinjara News*, 21 February 2008.
- <sup>105</sup> Source: "Cement Factory Accused of Destroying Antiquities," *Irrawaddy*, 25 February 2008.
- <sup>106</sup> Source: "Monastery Set Ablaze after Bulldozing," *Narinjara News*, 13 March 2008.
- <sup>107</sup> Source: "Curfew Imposed in Akyab after Thapound Full Moon Day," *Kaladan News*, 25 March 2008.
- <sup>108</sup> Source: "Junta Increases Security at Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon," *Irrawaddy*, 21 March 2008.
- <sup>109</sup> Source: "Monastery, Home Raided in Sittwe," *Narinjara News*, 2 April 2008.
- <sup>110</sup> Source: "Authorities Keep Rangoon Monks under Close Watch," DVB, 30 April 2008.
- <sup>111</sup> Source: "Enshrined Body of Abbot Stolen from Temple," *Irrawaddy*, 2 April 2008.
- <sup>112</sup> Source: "Senior Abbots Request Security during Monk Exams," *Mizzima News*, 2 April 2008.
- <sup>113</sup> Source: "Detained Monks to Be Given Lay Identity Cards," DVB, 9 April 2008.
- <sup>114</sup> Source: "Buddhist Ceremony Disrupted in Taunggok," DVB, 21 May 2008.
- <sup>115</sup> Source: "Buddhist Scriptures at Risk of Rain Damage," DVB, 27 May 2008.
- <sup>116</sup> Source: "Junta Shuts Down Pro-Opposition Monastery," *Mizzima News*, 14 June 2008.
- <sup>117</sup> Source: "Buddhist Migrants Pressured To Convert To Christianity," DVB, 21 July 2008.
- <sup>118</sup> Source: "Monks Pressured For Accepting NLD Offering," DVB, 5 August 2008.
- <sup>119</sup> Source: "Police Raid Two Monasteries in Sittwe," *Narinjara News*, 9 August 2008.
- <sup>120</sup> Source: "Authorities Order Chanting to Ward off Bad Luck," DVB, 21 August 2008.
- <sup>121</sup> Source: "Junta Disrobes, Charges Leading Monk," *Irrawaddy*, 21 August 2008.
- <sup>122</sup> Source: "Arrested Monks Held in Rangoon Detention Center," *Irrawaddy*, 27 August 2008.
- <sup>123</sup> Source: "The Maggin Abbot Who Was Driven Out From the Monastery," DVB, 25 August 2008, Translation by HRDU.
- <sup>124</sup> Source: "Two Monks Are Arrested from Sardu Monastery," DVB, 26 August 2008, Translation by HRDU.
- <sup>125</sup> Source: "Rangoon Authorities Collect Monks' Personal Data," DVB, 29 August 2008.
- <sup>126</sup> Source: "Two Monks Who Were Arrested In September, Were Sentenced," DVB, 5 September 2008, Translation by HRDU.
- <sup>127</sup> Source: "Monk Was Disrobed For Court Hearing," DVB, 7 September 2008, Translation by HRDU.
- <sup>128</sup> Source: "Commemoration of Monk's Death Muted in Arakan State," *Irrawaddy*, 9 September 2008.
- <sup>129</sup> Source: "Burmese Army Provides 'Security', Intimidates People At Large Buddhist Festival," KNG, 20 September 2008.
- <sup>130</sup> Source: "Where are Burma's Monks?" *Irrawaddy*, 19 September 2008.
- <sup>131</sup> Source: *Ibid.*
- <sup>132</sup> Source: "Monks Banned From Religious Festival," *Narinjara News*, 15 October, 2008.
- <sup>133</sup> Source: "Officials Scratch off Gold from Buddha Statues," DVB, 14 October 2008.
- <sup>134</sup> Source: "Raid on Monasteries in Akyab," *Kaladan News*, 23 October 2008.
- <sup>135</sup> Source: "A Monk from Pakokku Was Arrested In Shan State," DVB, 29 November 2008, Translation by HRDU.
- <sup>136</sup> Source: "Army Training School Seizes, Resells Monastery Land in Northern Mon State," IMNA, 5 November, 2008.
- <sup>137</sup> Source: "Two Monks Sentenced," DVB, 13 November 2008, Translation by HRDU.





The Human Rights Documentation Unit (HRDU) is the research and documentation division of Burma's government in exile; the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB). The HRDU was formed in 1994 to document the human rights crisis confronting the many and varied peoples of Burma, and to defend and promote those internationally recognised human rights that are inherent and inalienable for all persons irrespective of race, colour, creed, ethnicity or religion. To this end, the HRDU published the first *Burma Human Rights Yearbook* in 1995 to comprehensively document the systematic and egregious nature of the human rights abuses being perpetrated in Burma throughout the previous year. This report, the *Burma Human Rights Yearbook 2008*, represents the 15<sup>th</sup> annual edition of the *Burma Human Rights Yearbook*, which, combined with all previous editions collectively comprise well over 10,000 pages of documentation and provide an unbroken historical record spanning the past one and a half decades.

All editions of the *Burma Human Rights Yearbook* and all other reports published by the HRDU can be viewed online on the NCGUB website at <http://www.ncgub.net> as well as on the Online Burma Library at <http://www.burmalibrary.org>. Any questions, comments or requests for further information can be forwarded to the HRDU via email at [enquiries.hrdu@gmail.com](mailto:enquiries.hrdu@gmail.com).

**Human Rights Documentation Unit**

NATIONAL COALITION GOVERNMENT OF THE UNION OF BURMA