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Editorial

SPDC’S NEW REPORT ON DEVELOPMENT IN CHIN STATE SHOWS PROLIFERATION OF BUDDHIST RELIGIOUS INFRASTRUCTURE

A recent report published by Burma's ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) "Chronicle of National Development" features hundreds of pages detailing infrastructural developments that have been undertaken across the country by the military junta over the past 20 years in Burma. The report, adorned with glossy pictures of bridges, roads and buildings that have been built by the junta boasts the generals’ effort toward a "modern and developed nation." Published by the Ministry of Information, the report compares economic and infrastructure developments in the country between the period before and after 1988 when the Burmese military took over power.

The SPDC has long held the view that the people of Burma can be coaxed into putting off their dreams for freedom and democracy by showing them a few buildings and bridges built with the 'goodwill and generosity' of the Tatamadaw. There is little doubt that the release of the report was carefully timed in order to sway public opinion in favor of the regime ahead of the impending general elections in 2010.

A section of that report, about 18 pages long, was devoted to development initiatives in Chin state, which is neatly entitled “The Changing Scenes of Modernization.” Like other sections in the report, the SPDC boasts its accomplishments in Chin State in various sectors of development. But, not surprisingly, a careful scrutiny reveals that the most significant sector of development in Chin State over the last 20 years was the proliferation of Buddhism and Buddhist religious infrastructures. According to the report, a total of eight new Buddhist pagodas were built, many of them on the very site where a cross was destroyed, while 56 new monasteries were constructed during the period in Chin State. During the same period, the SPDC has outlawed the construction or renovation of churches and Christian religious buildings.

More than 6 Billion Kyats was reportedly spent for the project with funding from the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Border Areas and National Races Development Program. Comparatively, 4 high schools, six hospitals and 2 bridges were built over the same period.

Chin Human Rights Organization has long documented and reported on the state-sanctioned expansion of Buddhism into Chin State and the resulting discrimination and persecution of Christians by Burma’s military junta as part of a policy to Burmanize the Chins. In 2004, CHRO published a report "Religious Persecution: A Campaign of Ethnocide against Chin Christians in Burma," in which it documented in detail the targeted abuse and persecution against Chin Christians by the military regime. It included the destruction of Churches and crosses, the burning of Bibles, the physical abuse of Christian pastors and restrictions on Christian activities. The United States State Department still lists Burma a Country of Particular Concern or CPC, which violates religious freedom, and notes many of the abuses documented by Chin Human Rights Organization.

If the SPDC’s latest report on development in Chin State has accomplished anything, it wouldn’t be a result that the SPDC would want to see - that a grateful Chin people will have a more favorable view of the regime ahead of the planned election in 2010. If anything, the report only gives further proof to what CHRO and other human rights groups have been saying - there is systematic effort by the military junta to promote Buddhism at the expense other religions as part of a long-held policy aimed at making Burma a nation of “One Race, One Language, One Religion” or “Burman, Burmese, Buddhism.”
General Human Rights Situations

OIL WORKERS EXPLOITED BY JUNTA-BACKED PRIVATE COMPANY

23 January 2009: Win Thuza Enterprise, a buyer and seller of crude oil, which is operating under a government license, is exploiting oil workers in Magwe Division by securing oil at exploitatively low rate from local oil producers and workers.

The company has allegedly paid huge sums of money to the authorities to secure the right to be the sole buyer from oil producers and workers at Guan Say oil field, located just one mile away from Guan Say Village, Gangaw Township, Magwe Division. As a result Win Thuza Enterprise is buying crude oil at a 25 percent lower rate. The company is threatening to have the oil field shut if the producers sell their oil to other buying customer.

“They [the company and authorities] warned us that if they discovered that crude oil has been sold to buyers other than Win Thuza Enterprise, they will shut down the oil field,” said U Kyaw Htun, a local oil worker.

“A gallon of crude oil is 1200 Kyats at the market, but we are forced to sell at just 900 Kyats a gallon to the company. There is no profit left for us. We can barely survive under such a circumstance,” he explained.

Guan Say oil field was discovered in 2002 and has been privately operated by four local men.

JUSTICE DENIED

26 January 2009: A District Judge in Gangaw has dismissed complaints by the family of an 18 year-old Chin girl against U Pho Tha, owner of Win Thuza Enterprise, who alleged had impregnated her with promise to marry her, CHRO has learned.

Ma Yatana (a.k.a.) Ma Chawlay, a first year English Major student, is a daughter of U Tin Ngwe, resident of Myauk Khin Tha village, Gangaw Township of Mawge Division. On January 6, 2009, the 18 year-old girl told U Pho Tha that she was pregnant and asked him to marry her as he had promised. When U Pho Tha told the girl he had a wife and a family and was unable to marry her, parents of the girl lodged a complaint at the Gangaw District Court. But the judge, alleged bought by U Pho Tha, dismissed the case on the ground that it lacked evidence. According to the girl, U Pho Tha had had sex with her at least three times starting on 16 November 2008.

“Justice has been denied. This is just an example that in Burma you can do anything if you have money. You can buy people in high level of authorities,” U Tin Ngwe, a disappointed father said.

Chin Human Rights Organization was told that there are at least a hundred similar cases in Gangaw area where people in authorities have spoiled the life of young girls and then bought their way out of trouble.
CHIN ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICIAL DISMISSED FROM JOB

23 January 2009: The administrative head of Thangtlang Township Peace and Development Council was summarily dismissed from his job during the first week of December 2008 following allegations of misconduct by members of the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), Chin Human Rights Organization has learned.

Pu Khua Hlei Thang’s dismissal came following complaints by the USDA in Naypyidaw. The charges included allegations that Pu Khua Hlei Thang had allowed a “No Vote” to beat the constitutional referendum in Thantlang Township and that he misappropriated Cyclone Nirgis Funds for his personal profits.

According to a Thantlang resident who knew dismissed official, the charges stemmed from an argument Pu Khua Hlei Thang had had with USDA officials when he was accused of letting the “No Vote” win in the Township during the constitutional referendum. “There were two sides that campaigned during the referendum and the public decided to vote against the constitution. What could I have done in that situation?” Pu Khua Hlei Thang was quoted as saying. Another charged involved allegations that Pu Khua Hlei Thang misappropriated 3 million Kyats that was collected from the public at the rate of 1000 Kyats per household in Thantlang for Cyclone Nirgis Funds.

EXTORTION AND FORCED LABOR TO RECONSTRUCT A BRIDGE

19 January 2009: Burmese authorities in Kalay Township of Sagaing Division have been collecting money and free labor from residents in the area to construct a bridge near No. 6 School, Chin Human Rights Organization has learned.

“In November of 2008, the authorities collected 1000 Kyats from each household in the entire area for the reconstruction of the bridge. In addition, they also demanded free human labor for it,” a local resident explained.

He said that the bridge needed to be repaired each year because the authorities allegedly divided up the money they collected from the public among themselves and never spent the money to actually repair the bridge.

EXTORTION AND CONFISCATION OF LIVESTOCK

6 January 2009: Burmese soldiers stationed at Shinletwa Village of Paletwa Township have been engaged in a string of extortion and confiscation of domestic animals from villagers in the area, a local person told Chin Human Rights Organizaiton.

Patrol Column Commander Captain Kyaw Wa and his troops who were patrolling southern Chin State during December of 2008 demanded 100,000 Kyats from each village he visited without any reason given, and shot and killed chickens and other domestic animals in the villages without asking, the local testified.

“People are fed up with these kinds of abuses that have been ongoing in our area,” he said.
FOOTBALL TOURNAMENT TO PROFIT BURMESE SOLDIERS

6 January 2009: Widespread abuses of human rights were committed by Burmese troops in southern Chin State during a regional football tournament sponsored by the army, a local villager told Chin Human Rights Organization.

Started on December 14, 2008, a week-long regional football tournament was held by Burmese troops stationed at Shwe Letwa Village of Paletwa Township where villagers from 10 villages in Shinletwa Village Tracts were asked to participate.

A local villager told Chin Human Rights Organization that during the tournament, the army issued a mandatory order requiring villagers to buy alcohol from them. Every four villagers must buy a bottle of distilled liquor. In addition, the army put a fine of 5000 Kyats on anyone who was drunk and threw them in a pit for one night.

Each participating village was required to bring two to three chickens for the army. For the entire duration of the game, six villagers were forced to do sentry duty each day by the army.

“All the profits made out of the game were to profit commanding officer Bo Kyaw Wa and his troops,” said the local villager.

ARMY OFFICER EXTORTS HUGE SUMS OF MONEY FROM TRADERS

6 January 2009: Burmese troops belonging to Light Infantry Battalion 289 stationed at an army camp at Vuangtu village of Thangtlang Township extorted money from cattle traders and confiscated five cows from them, one of the traders told Chin Human Rights Organization.

During the first week of December 2008, three Chin cattle traders with a herd of 30 cows arrived at Phaikhua Village on their way to the Indian border. Laying in wait at the village was a Burmese army captain and five of his men from LIB 289, who asked them half a million Kyats from the traders and confiscate five of their cows with threats to throw them in jail for illegal smuggling.

“We later learned that five of the cows he confiscated from us were sold by the Captain and his men at nearby villages at the rate of 350,000 Kyats per cow,” the victim explained.

PROSTITUTION PROLIFERATE DUE TO ECONOMIC HARDSHIP

4 January 2009: More Chin young girls are driven into prostitution due to growing economic hardship faced by Chin people.

Taking advantage of their economic hardship, Burmese army officers are luring an increasing number of Chin girls into sex work by improperly touching and having sexual intercourse with underage young girls for money, a local person told Chin Human Rights Organization.

“My life has been ruined, and unfortunately, I am what I am doing,” said a girl who is now engaged in the sex profession.
Four young daughters of U Maram living in Ye Poat Ward of Gangaw Town are a classic example. The girls were forced to drop out of school due to survival difficulties in the family. Too young to work and not having enough to support them financially, the four underage girls are now turning into sex profession. They pay the local police from 5,000 to up to 10,000 Kyats a month in return for permission to perform sex services.

“I think that what I am doing is the best option available for me because my life has been ruined and we are struggling for survival, what other option is there? You can probably hide how your life has been ruined, but the fact that you cannot make a survival cannot be hidden. So this [profession] seems to make the best sense for me under the circumstance,” Boh Sung, one of the four girls, was quoted as saying by her closest friend.

MORE CHIN TERRITORY ANNEXED IN RE-DEMARcation OF INTER-STATE BORDER

2 January 2009: A large area with some of the most naturally resourceful land of Chin territory was annexed to Magwe Division through forcible re-demarcation of inter-state borders by Burma’s ruling State Peace and Development Council.

A total of 45,502 acres of land measuring 71 miles in length and one mile in breadth belonging to Chin State since the colonial era was annexed to Magwe Division in a re-demarcation program implemented between 8 and 15 September 2008 by the military junta.

The annexed area is abundant with teakwood and some of the most valuable forest products, CHRO has learned. The re-demarcation resulted in the removal of a historical memorial stone marking the borders of Chin State and Magwe Division that has existed since during the British colonial era, one mile into Chin State.

A native Chin forestry official who cannot be named for his security said, “The orders to re-demarcate [to annex Chin State] came from direct orders of the military’s Northwestern Commander. Nobody, even the highest SPDC officials in Chin State dared to question the decision.”

“Between 2006 and 2007, 15 villages in southern Chin State were already annexed to the Burma Proper. This latest annexation came about because nobody dared to protest the last time around. It is sheer oppression against the Chin people because we don’t have the power,” said another Public Works employee of Chin origin who is working in Burma Proper.

Another Chin working at the Ministry of Forestry office in Kalaymyo said that similar annexation was implemented to annex Chin territory into Sagaing Division in the past years.

15 YEAR-OLD GIRL RAPED BY BURMESE SOLDIER

2 January 2009: A 15 year-old Chin girl from Thayakung village of Kalay Township, Sagaing Division, was raped by corporal Oo Htun of Burma Army Light Infantry Battalion (89) based in Kalay Myo, Chin Human Rights Organization has learned.
“I and some of my friends were having a dance party after church that night on January 1, 2009, when Corporal Oo Htun and some of his men came to the house and gave me 2000 Kyats as a present. Moments later, the corporal asked me to accompany him to the shop for some cigarettes. He was walking behind me for awhile. But a few moments later, he asked me to accompany him to his camp to get a flashlight, which I innocently agreed. But when we got to the camp, he forced himself on me,” the victim whose name is identified only as Pari testified.

“I tried to scream for help but to no avail,” she said. “After he raped me, he threatened me that he would hurt me if I let anybody else know about the incident and promised me to give me another 2000 Kyats if I kept quiet,” she recounted.

According to a relative of the victim, the corporal and three of his men were posted at Thayakung village in September 2008 to collect tolls from vehicles traveling on Kalay-Kangaw highway. He became known to the girl during the Christmas.

CIVILIAN FORCED LABOR EMPLOYED TO RENOVATE SCHOOL

9 February 2009: Civilian forced labor was used to renovate an old high school in disrepair in Khuathar ward of Hakha, the capital of Chin State, a local resident told Chin Human Rights Organization.

Slated for completion before the start of the 2008-2009 academic year, the authorities decided to employ civilian forced labor when they decided that the 75 million Kyats sanctioned for the project was not enough to meet the imposing deadline.

The work is still in progress at the start of 2009 with civilians from Khuathar ward still being engaged in the construction without pay, the source said.

“People are very upset because they are not being paid and they know the money is there for the project,” he said.

CHILDREN FORCIBLY CONSCRIPTED INTO BURMA ARMY

6 February 2009: The Burma Army is forcibly conscripting children into the army in southern Chin State, Chin Human Rights Organization has learned.

On January 18, 2009, three Chin children, age 13 and 14, were forcibly recruited to serve in the army by Sergeant Maung Thant from Burma Army Infantry Battalion (304), operating under Tactical Command II based in Matupi.

Among the three recruited children is Mang Ngwe Htein, an only child of a widow. The mother, devastated about losing her only child, tried to plead with the Battalion commander for her son’s release, but to no avail. The commander ordered the child to be kept in custody.

“Those who tried to plead for the children’s release were just brutalized,” said a local man from Matupi.
Reports from Matupi said that Burmese troops in the southern region have been trying to take advantage of people’s survival difficulty due to the ongoing famine by offering a reward of 50,000 Kyats and one sack of rice to families whose member agreed to join the army.

“One or two people in town have actually joined the army for want of the reward, but people stopped enlisting because those promises of reward were never realized. This is why the arm has resorted to forcibly conscripting people to meet their recruitment quotas” said a Matupi Town resident.

“The forced recruitment of children has parents worried about their children, so in some villages parents have tried to keep their children out of the sight of Burmese soldiers by hiding them in the jungle,” he continued.

At the time of this report, the three conscripted children are still in army custody.

Sergeant Maung Thant of Infantry Battalion (304) has been responsible for the forced recruitment of under age children in the area. In September 2008, he forcibly conscripted three children from Yung village of Matupi Township.

CHIN HISTORICAL RESEARCHER THREATENED BY AUTHORITIES

6 February 2009: Local authorities in Hakha, the capital of Chin State, have warned an independent Chin historical researcher not to continue with his research work or risk facing formal charges against him for treason against the state, a local person reported to CHRO.

On January 17, 2009, Hakha police station chief and five of his men ordered a local Chin historical and cultural researcher to immediately discontinue his research work and threatened him with legal action if he did not comply.

“The came to my house and searched all my research notes, they summoned me to the station and interrogated me about my work, and they even interrogated my wife and children and threatened me with legal action,” said the researcher who is a native of Sakta village.

“Even normal religious and social activities are now increasingly restricted these days. They [the authorities] are deliberately restricting Christian religious activities under the pretext of security preparation for the upcoming elections in 2010,” said one prominent Christian religious leader in Hakha.

TRAVELERS FACE NEW SECURITY REGULATION

2 February 2009: Travelers in Kalay Township, Sagaing Division have been warned by authorities not to carry more than three note books and to be prepared to have the contents of their personal notebooks searched by immigration officials at checkpoints, an unnamed traveler has informed Chin Human Rights Organization.

On January 22, 2009, three immigration personnel assigned at Mile 8, a border crossing point between Chin State and Sagaing Division interrogated travelers bound for Chin State-Mizoram border and warned them against carrying more than three notebooks, one of the travelers reported.
The new measure is believed to be connected with security preparations for the planned election in 2010.

“Each of us, including women passengers, was ordered to get off the vehicle and thoroughly body-searched by the immigration agents. They even went through every page of our personal note books and told us that we were only allowed to carry a maximum of three note books while traveling,” one of the travelers told CHRO on condition of anonymity.

“The new restriction is making things inconvenient for us traders since we need to have at least five different note books for the list of sales, expenses, credits and so on,” said one woman cross-border trader.

STUDENT HOSPITALIZED AFTER ASSAULT BY TWO ARMY OFFICERS

10 February 2009: A tenth grade student was hospitalized for severe bodily injuries after two drunken army officers savagely beat him, a relative of the victim told Chin Human Rights Organization.

The assault took place on January 15 when two army officers became intoxicated after a dinner meeting and asked Maung Mai Pacia, a tenth grade student from Lailenpi village to borrow a guitar from a local church and to entertain them with songs. When the student told the officers he didn’t know how to sing or play guitar, the drunken officers became enraged and beat him mercilessly with the guitar and their pistols.

They continued to assault him on the head and torso until the guitar was all smashed up, leaving him with serious head injuries and dislocated bones in one of the arms. The victim was treated at a village clinic at Lailenpi for one night, but was later taken to a hospital in Matupi where he remains.

The two army captains belong to Infantry Battalion 304 stationed at Satu village and Lailenpi Village of Matupi Township respectively.

“The final exams are getting close and he is still in the hospital. All that he had studied hard for the whole year is going to be for nothing. We struggled hard to pay for his education and now all of this will be for nothing,” said a devastated father of the assault victim.

PAY MONEY OR GO TO JAIL

11 February 2009: A Hakha Township judge has threatened to impose a one-year jail sentence on a local girl accused of being responsible for negligently starting a fire that burned down three houses if she failed to give to the judge 300,000 Kyats (300 US Dollars) in bribe money, according to a relative of the accused girl.

On February 10, 2009, three houses at the government quarters in Hakha, the capital of Chin State, burned to the ground after a female high school student living in one of the houses allegedly dumped hot ashes from a cooking stove into the garbage bin. The hot ashes apparently smoldered and caught fire.
Local police later arrested the girl and charged her with criminal negligence causing fire. Before her court appearance on February 11, Township Judge U Myint Wai told the accused girl that he would dismiss her case if she paid him 300,000 Kyats or she would face a one-year jail sentence.

“The family is in a financial crisis right now because the girl is just a high school student and her father U Lian Uk is currently being hospitalized,” said a relative.

Money is an important factor in influencing courts’ decision here in Chin State and elsewhere in the county, the chief of the Hakha Township Police was quoted as saying.

CHIN STUDENTS FACE DISCRIMINATION IN EDUCATION

24 February 2009: Students in Chin State are paying 800 Kyats per person every month for extra classes at school, compared with their peers from lowland Burma who are not required to pay anything for the same program, Chin Human Rights Organization has learned.

According to a high school student who could not be named, students in Chin State are required to pay various fees, including fees for mandatory extra classes that are offered after the regular school hours. He said that despite a government order saying education should be free, only students in Chin State are required to pay money, while students in the adjacent Magwe and Sagain Division of lowland Burma enjoy free education.

Sayama Sui Zi, a teacher in Chin State told Chin Human Rights Organization that the practice of having the students to pay for their education is an arrangement made by the Chin State Education Officer with schools so that the teachers can earn a side income to supplement their meager and grossly insufficient salaries.

“I don’t care much about the 800 Kyats that we have to pay for extra classes. But what I have a problem with is the teachers not giving us lessons properly at school. This is why we have a very low success rate at high school,” said Ngun Tin Par, a tenth-grade female student.

Abuse of Religious Freedom

PARTIALLY CONSTRUCTED CHURCH BUILDING ORDERED SHUT

19 February 2009: Municipal authorities have ordered local Christians not to continue with the construction of a partially constructed church building in Gangaw Town of Magwe Division, while allowing a Buddhist monastery under construction in a nearby village of Kan to continue without restriction, a local source has told Chin Human Rights Organization.

An official order issued by the Township Municipal Office on November 18, 2008 prohibited the continuance of construction of a church building belonging to Gangaw Evangelical Baptist Church. At the same time the Municipal authorities gave official permission for the construction of a Buddhist monastery in a nearby village and donated a 10-acre plot for the project. The permission also includes the right to freely solicit donations from residents in the area.
“We are in a dilemma because if we go ahead with the construction, they could lay charges for defiance of official order but then they still denied us permission when we tried to go through official procedures,” said a local Chin resident.

Similar orders were in place in Kalay Township of Magwe Division. A church under construction in Tharawaddy village was recently dismantled by local authorities.

The Gangaw Town Evangelical Baptist Church was established in 1985 with official permission is set to celebrate its Silver Jubilee or 25th anniversary in 2010. But the members are now uncertain whether they would be allowed to go ahead with the celebration.

**CHIN CHURCH IN RANGOON CLOSED DOWN BY AUTHORITIES**

Van Biak Thang
Chinland Guardian

07 January, 2009: SPDC's local authorities have locked a Chin church in South Dagon township of Rangoon – former capital city of Burma - on 22 December 2008, accusing the church was built without permission.

Mr. Ko Ko Hlaing of Township Peace and Development Committee and his men came to the church in the evening around 6 pm and shut the door, according to the church pastor Joy whose full name remains anonymous for security reasons.

The Chin pastor and his church members were not able to celebrate Christmas and New Year.

"Our church has been running for two years and we have ten thousands unreached people in our neighborhood. The church is closed down now. We need your prayer and supports urgently so the building is re-opened and can run our ministries continuously," said the church pastor, 36, a Matu-Chin from Southern Chin State.

The church has applied for building permission several times but it has never been granted and it is not strange to hear that religious persecution is still happening in our country, according to Chin activist and pastor Shwekey Hoipang, a close friend of Pastor Joy.

**MORE CHURCHES LOCKED UP BY AUTHORITIES**

Van Biak Thang
Chinland Guardian

14 January, 2009: Three churches based in South Dagon township, Rangoon have been locked up and sealed without any specific reasons since late December 2008 by Township Peace and Development Council Officer and local authorities.
The authorities came mostly in the evening or at night and shut down the churches including Evangelical Baptist Church, Karen Baptist Church and Dagon Joshua Church according to a Chin witness whose name is not revealed for security reasons.

A 25-year-old Dai-Chin said: “I visited this church [Evangelical Baptist Church] two times and met with the pastor's wife. According to her, the church was closed at 6 pm on 29 December by Township Peace and Development Council officer, accompanied by many local authorities.”

“She said the officer did not give any reason for doing this and that the church members were not allowed to worship anymore. The pastor showed the Legal Registration Certificate for the church issued by Ministry of Home Affair and Religion but in vain.”

Members of the Karen Baptist Church are said to have been banned from worshipping and going to church for about three weeks.

A private English teacher from Southern Chin State, who visited the church and did not happen to meet with the church pastor, said he tried to talk to the neighbours but nobody dared to speak about what had happened to the church.

The Dagon Joshua Church was sealed at night on 22 December 2008 and the church pastor was said to have been summoned and interrogated a few times by the local SPDC’s authorities. Bags of cement, planks of wood and zinc for roofing that belong to the church were reported missing after the closure.

The church pastor was accused of using ‘defrauded money’ for helping victims of Nargis Cyclone, buying a plot of land to build the church, persuading local people to join in worship services on Sundays and intending to celebrate Christmas without permission.

Sources reportedly said that some other churches and private houses where home cell services are conducted were also closed down in parts of Rangoon. These ‘ruthless and uncivilised’ actions are believed to be SPDC’s responses to Christian communities, both local and international, that help victims of Nargis Cyclone by donating foods and other supplies.

Pastors and church members as well as Christians in the country send out a prayer request for an end to this kind of religious repression as Burma’s military regime is planning to hunt down more houses, flats and churches in the former capital to stop Christian gathering and activities.

BRITISH MPS EXPRESSED DEEP CONCERN OVER CHURCH SHUTDOWNS IN RANGOON

Van Biak Thang
Chinland Guardian

12 February, 2009: In response to recent forcible church closures in Rangoon, at least 33 British Members of Parliament expressed their grave concern by signing an Early Day Motion (EDM) in the House of Commons, according to Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) on Tuesday.

At least 100 churches in Burma's former capital city, Rangoon, have been closed down and 50 pastors forced to sign documents promising to stop holding church services, under threat of imprisonment if failure to act in accordance with a command, CSW's reports said.
The EDM, proposed by John Bercow MP, Co-Chair of the All Parliamentary Group for Democracy in Burma, called on the UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion and Belief to investigate violations of religious freedom in Burma.

CSW’s Advocacy Director, Tina Lambert said: “This recent crackdown on Christian activity in Rangoon is a worrying development and a serious violation of religious freedom. I am delighted that John Bercow and other MPs have taken this step to call for respect for religious freedom in Burma, and for the regime to stop its policies of discrimination and persecution of religious minorities, particularly Christians and Muslims. CSW welcomes the MPs’ call for the United Nations Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion and Belief, Asma Jahangir, to investigate violations of religious freedom in Burma and hold Burma’s military regime accountable for their many human rights abuses.”

The church closures mark the most significant crackdown on Christian activity in Burma in recent years, affecting as many as 80 per cent of churches in Rangoon. Some local Christians believe that the immediate cause of the oppressive measures is church involvement in relief provision for victims of Cyclone Nargis.

Burma is categorised as a ‘Country of Particular Concern’ by the US State Department, for its violations of religious freedom. In 2007, CSW published a report, Carrying the Cross: The military regime’s campaign of restriction, discrimination and persecution against Christians in Burma, which revealed a 17-point document allegedly from an organisation affiliated to the Ministry of Religious Affairs, titled “Programme to Destroy the Christian religion in Burma”. The first point states: “There shall be no home where the Christian religion is practised.”

**Response to the Food Crisis in Chinland**

**LIVE AID CONCERTS TO COMBAT HUNGER IN CHIN STATE**

Van Biak Thang
Chinland Guardian

14 February, 2009: In an attempt to raise awareness and fund for the famine-affected people in Burma's Chin State, 'Chin Famine Live Aid Concert' is organised by Chin Communities across the globe in partnership with CHRO (Chin Human Rights Organisation).

The event will take place in countries including Australia, United States, Canada and Europe this year to support for the estimated 100,000 people with more than 200 villages severely affected by the SPDC-ignored ongoing famine in Chin State.

Victor Biak Lian of Chin Human Rights Organisation said: "This is a global campaign against starvation in Chin State, raising awareness about the suffering of our Chin fellows due to the ongoing rat-infested famine among the Chin people inside and outside Burma. This is the time when we, Chin people outside the country, come together and share what we each can to help our brothers and sisters."

Chin Community in Melbourne, Australia has received a number of Chin vocalists and human rights activists over the past week for the event scheduled today, which is held as part of the ongoing
international relief efforts for the Chin famine victims. Another two concerts organised by Chin Communities in Australia will take place at Adelaide and Perth on 21 and 28 February respectively.

A combined event of Chin Famine Live Aid Concert and the 61st anniversary of Chin National Day will be held in London, UK on 21 February. Miss Dim Lian, Secretary of Chin Community UK, sends a message: "As our symbol (the hornbill) signifies loyalty, we are together wherever we live. When you get hurt, we feel the pain. Let's keep our spirit alive, accommodate, stoop and cater for our fellow Chins in everything we do. This is a corporate responsibility in which each of us has to play our parts in restoring a caring culture among the Chins."

Last year, similar events were successfully held in Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore with famous Chin singers from Burma and India including Sung Tin Par, Zam Nu, San Pi, Mimi Lalzamliani, and Malsawm Tluangi (SP).

Food crisis in the remote areas along the Indian-Burmese border has begun since late 2006 when a plague of rats destroys basic crops and paddy fields in the region. Reports said that some 20 percent of the Chin population have been severely affected by the famine with 44 children losing their lives to malnutrition, diarrhoea and famine-related diseases. Thousands more have fled to neighbouring countries including India, Thailand Malaysia as refugees.

AUSTRALIA HOSTS FAMINE LIVE AID CONCERT SERIES

Lian Ding Hmung
Chinland Guardian

4 February 2009: The first of many well-known Chin vocalists invited to perform at the Chin Famine Live Aid Concerts has arrived in Australia, even as more artists are scheduled to arrive over the coming days. Cung Lian Thawng, a local musician and vocal talent arrived at the Melbourne International Airport Monday.

'I am honoured by the invitation and the opportunity to be a part of the effort to help the famine victims in Chin State,' Cung Lian Thawng said on his arrival.

Mami Varte, another famous performer from Mizoram is expected to arrive from India on February 7.

The Chin Famine Live Aid Concerts will take place over the next three weeks in three Australian cities; Melbourne on February 14, Adelaide on February 21, and Perth on February 28. The concerts are part of an ongoing awareness and fundraising campaigns to benefit Chin famine victims. Similar events were successfully organized in Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore last year with more events being scheduled to take place in the United States and Canada over the next few months.

'The Chin communities living in Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth have put in considerable energy and time planning and preparing for the concerts,' says David Thang, a contact person for the organizing committee in Melbourne. 'With these concerts we hope that more people in Australia, including the Australian government and aid organizations will be aware of the situation and take responsive actions. We have high hope that our investment will pay off,' he says.
Rev. James Tin Kung, a contact person of the organizing committee in Perth echoes the same sentiment. 'We arranged these concerts because we believe that even a cent counts for those who are in need. We have a responsibility to help our brothers and sisters at home who are facing starvation.'

According to Chin Human Right Organization (CHRO) and the World Food Programme (WFP), an estimated 100,000 people from at least 129 villages have been severely affected by the ongoing famine, which happens only once in fifty years because of rodent infestation. Twice in a century, an indigenous variety of bamboo in Chin State flowers abundantly and attracts the rodents. The rats eat the fruit of the flowering bamboo, multiple quickly and destroy as much as 75 percent of the crops in Chin State, Burma.

The concerts in Australia will also feature speeches by prominent Chin activists such as Victor Biak Lian of Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO), Dr. Lian Hmung Sakhong of the Ethnic Nationalities Council (ENC), Dr. Sui Khar and Dr. Salai Ngun Cung Lian of the Chin National Front (CNF).

WFP: 'FOOD PLUS CASH-FOR-WORK PROGRAMME' UNDERWAY IN CHIN STATE

Van Biak Thang
Chinland Guardian

15 February, 2009: In response to the food crisis caused by a plague of rats, World Food Programme (WFP) launched its programme called 'Food Plus Cash-For-Programme' in six townships of Chin State.

In its recent report, WFP said the programme focuses on improving productive assets that will increase food security, such as agriculture land development, construction of trafficable roads as well as others identified by the local Chin communities. The project will also benefit a total of 6,360 households in 50 villages, the report added.

The project activities, which are set to begin in mid-January 2009, will be carried out in coordination with UNDP, GRET (Groupe de Recherche et d'exchange Technologiques), KMSS (Karuna Myanmar Social Services) and CAD (Country Agency for rural Development).

The WFP's report also said: “Project activities are underway and we are coordinating with UNDP who are implementing projects in the southern part of Chin Sate. Specifically, through 12 projects, WFP will develop 155 acres of terraced land in Tiddim, Falam, Hakha, and Thantlang Townships in collaboration with GRET, a total 15 miles of roads in Tonzang and Tiddim with KMSS, and 72 miles of road assets in Hakha and Thantlang with CAD. Each project will last 15-45 days.”

"The expanded terraced land is expected to support 1,898 households in 17 villages when completed, and the newly constructed roads will provide 28,972 villagers an increased access to 25 surrounding villages. The roads are expected to improve the communities' food accessibility as well as access to water."

Chris Kaye, WFP Country Director and Representative, told Chinland Guardian when asked about how WFP makes sure relief aids reach those worst famine-affected in the remote jungles: “We intend to carry out further assessments in March to help strengthen our understanding of the needs in more areas
of Chin. As you rightly point out however, we are constrained by terrain and logistics capacity. Rest assured, with our partners, we will continue to do all we can to address the hungry poor in Chin.”

Chin churches, organisations and individuals worldwide have also been actively involved in contributing towards the betterment of the devastating situation facing their Chin fellows in military-neglected Burma since late 2006. A series of Chin Live Aid Concerts was organised in Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia to raise awareness and fund for the famine victims in 2008 and is set to take place this year in countries including Australia, United States, Canada and Europe.

Besides its report on the famine ‘Critical Point: Food Scarcity and Hunger in Burma’s Chin State’ in July 2008, Chin Human Rights Organisation has since 2006 been actively involved in initiating the famine concerts, raising awareness among international communities and collaborating with both local and international organisations.

Leaders of local religious and famine organisations said that they are willing to collaborate with international organisations and NGOs in order to address the situation more effectively.

Four Chin groups based in Aizawl, Mizoram including Chin Famine Emergency Relief Committee, Chin Humanitarian Relief Committee, Women's League of Chinland and Public Affairs Committee, agreed to work in close cooperation by providing cross-border food aid to the worst famine-affected areas of Chin State, according to the report in October, 2008.

The Chin projects are funded with generous contributions from DFID (UK Department for International Development) and Denmark.

**Report**

**BURMA: REPORT DOCUMENTS ABUSE OF CHIN CHRISTIANS**

Human Rights Watch shows systematic, officially sanctioned religious freedom violations.

DUBLIN, February 20 (Compass Direct News) – A Human Rights Watch (HRW) report released in January details serious and ongoing abuses against the Chin people, a minority group in Burma's northwest who claim to be 90 percent Christian.

HRW's research echoes a 2004 report by the Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO) that described targeted abuse of Christians in Chin state, with the Burmese army subjecting pastors and church members to forced labor, arbitrary arrest and detention, torture and sometimes death.

While religious oppression is extreme in Chin state, restrictions also apply elsewhere in Burma, also known as Myanmar. Most recently, officials in January forced the closure of more than 100 churches in Rangoon and ordered owners of apartment buildings and conference facilities not to rent their properties to religious groups.

Based on interviews with Chin refugees in India and Malaysia between 2003 and 2008, HRW's report describes how an increasing number of army battalions stationed in Chin state since 1988 have inflicted forced labor and arbitrary fines on the Chin people, as well as bullied them away from Christianity toward Buddhism.

"When we meet the army, we are shaking," a Chin refugee pastor told HRW. "Whatever they want is law."
The HRW report, entitled "We Are Like Forgotten People," notes that soldiers frequently forced Christians to donate finances and labor to pagoda construction projects in areas where there were few or no Buddhist residents.

They also occasionally forced Christians to worship in Buddhist pagodas. One Chin pastor described how Burmese soldiers brought him to a pagoda and prodded him with their guns, commanding him to pray as a Buddhist. "They said that this is a Buddhist country and that I should not practice Christianity," he told HRW. The military forced village headmen to present "volunteers" for military training or army construction projects and secured "donations" such as food or finance for army battalions. Soldiers severely beat or detained headmen if a village failed to meet quotas, seizing livestock or property in retribution.

Pastors often faced similar treatment, particularly if church members were accused – often without proof – of involvement with the Chin National Front insurgency group. HRW listed arrest, detention and torture as methods used against those accused of being part of the Chin National Front, based across the border in northeast India. Torture included beatings with sticks or guns and electric shocks via metal clips attached to high-voltage batteries. Such measures were also used to crush dissent against army policies such as failure to pay extortionate and arbitrary fees.

The military government promoted Buddhism over all other religions in Chin state through threats and inducements, destroying churches and other religious symbols, and restricting the printing and importing of Bibles and other Christian literature, HRW reported.

A judge in 1999 sentenced one man from Falam township to three years in prison for bringing Chin language Bibles into Burma, contravening Burma's 1965 Censor Law. Authorities also burned 16,000 copies of Chin and other ethnic language Bibles brought into neighboring Sagaing Division, another Chin majority area, in 2000.

'Campaign of Ethnocide'

CHRO's 2004 report, "Religious Persecution: A Campaign of Ethnocide Against Chin Christians in Burma," explained that Christianity had become inseparable from Chin culture following the arrival of American Baptist missionaries in 1899. The report, based on information gathered in Chin state, gave numerous examples of the destruction of churches and crosses, the burning of Bibles and restrictions on other religious publications and activities between 1993 and 2004 – including the extrajudicial killings of four Chin Christians in 1993. Burmese authorities routinely denied permission for the construction of new churches and required permits for large church gatherings, although lengthy bureaucratic processes meant that most of these gatherings were eventually postponed or cancelled.

A September 2008 U.S. Department of State report confirmed that Chin state authorities have not granted permission to build a new church since 2003.

As recently as last November, a government official ordered residents of Tayawaddy village in neighboring Sagaing Division to destroy the foundations of a new church building erected by members of a Chin Christian student fellowship. A report in the Chinland Guardian claimed villagers were subsequently ordered not to rent their homes to Chin students or the homes would be destroyed.

Enticement to Convert

CHRO's report gave clear evidence of government support for coerced conversions. For example, the government offered free secular education to several children from impoverished families, only to place them as novice monks in Buddhist monasteries in Rangoon. The Ministry of Religious Affairs has also sent Buddhist monks to villages and towns throughout Chin state under the Hill Regions Buddhist Mission program, one of several Buddhist missionary initiatives highlighted on the ministry's website. Chin residents who spoke to CHRO likened these monks to
"military intelligence" operatives who worked in partnership with Burmese soldiers to control the Chin people.

According to one Chin resident, "Anyone who doesn't abide by the monks' orders is reported to the State Peace and Development Council [Burmese government officials] and punished by the army."

Another Chin man from Matupi township attended a government-sponsored "social welfare" training session only to discover that it was a propaganda session led by a Buddhist monk.

"In the training we were taught the 17 facts of how to attack and disfigure Christians," he explained. The 17-point method encouraged converts to criticize Christian ways of life as corrupting culture in Burma, to point out weaknesses in Christianity, and to attack Christians by both violent and non-violent means.

"We were promised that 1,200 kyats per month [US$190] would be provided to those families who became Buddhist," the training participant added. That amount of money is significant in the Burmese economy.

The instructor also ensured participants that they would be exempt from "portering" and other forms of forced labor and compulsory "donations" if they converted, and that the government would provide education for their children.

"I became a Buddhist because of such privileges rather than because I think Buddhism is better than Christianity," the Chin participant told CHRO.

Religious Policy Elsewhere

According to CHRO, both the Burmese army and the monks are pursuing an unofficial government policy summed up in three words; "Amyo, Batha, Thathana," which translates as "One race, one language, one religion" – or Burman, Burmese and Buddhist.

This policy was exemplified by the forced closure in January of more than 100 churches in the capital, Rangoon.

Officials on Jan. 5 invited pastors from more than 100 Rangoon churches to a meeting where they were ordered to sign documents pledging to cease operation of their churches or face imprisonment. About 50 pastors attended, according to Burmese news agency Mizzima.

A CHRO spokesman told Compass yesterday that a significant number of these churches were ethnic rather than majority Burman churches.

In mid-January, officials ordered several other major Rangoon churches to close, including Wather Hope Church, Emmanuel Church and an Assemblies of God Church. (See Compass Direct News, "Burma Clamps Down on Christians," Jan. 21.)

Officials from the Ministry of Religious Affairs in January summoned the owners of buildings where churches met and ordered them not to rent their properties to religious groups, according to another local online news source, the Democratic Voice of Burma.

In the late 1990s, Burma stopped issuing permits for land purchase or the construction of new churches in Rangoon and elsewhere, leading many Burmese Christians to conduct services in rented apartments or office buildings.

The church closure orders may simply be an extension of Burma's existing religious policies, which elevate Buddhism in an effort to solidify national identity. The country's population is 82 percent Buddhist, 9 percent Christian and 4 percent Muslim, with traditional ethnic, Chinese and Hindu religions accounting for the rest.

In a 2007 report describing religious persecution throughout Burma, including Chin state, Christian Solidarity Worldwide cited the "Program to Destroy the Christian Religion in Burma," a 17-point document that had circulated widely in Rangoon. Allegedly authorized by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the program's first point declared that, "There shall be no home where the Christian religion is practiced."

The Ministry of Religious Affairs subsequently pressured religious organizations to publicly condemn CSW's report and deny all claims of religious discrimination in Burma.