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BURMA: Religious freedom survey, August 2004

By Benedict Rogers, Christian Solidarity Worldwide <http://www.csw.org.uk>

In its survey analysis of the religious freedom situation in Burma, Forum 18 News Service reports on religious freedom violations against Christians, Muslims and Buddhists as part of the military regime's systematic oppression of ethnicity and dissent. Christians amongst the Karen, Karenni, Chin and Kachin ethnic national groups have found that they have been targeted through practices such as destroying churches, forcible conversion to Buddhism, and the use of forced labour. The regime also attempts to attack the religious freedom outside Burma, Burmese Buddhist monks in the United Kingdom being threatened with serious punishment if they join religious ceremonies at a Buddhist monastery in Colindale, north London. The regime often uses the language and imagery of Buddhism. But the regime's real mentality was summed up by a Burma Army battalion commander, speaking as he urinated on the head of a Buddhist monk: "I do not believe in any religion. My religion is the trigger of my gun."

Christians, Muslims and Buddhists suffer persecution in varying degrees in Burma, but the situation is complex. Because of the regime's hostility to human rights and freedom of information, it is often difficult to obtain accurate, objective, and current information on religious freedom violations. But it is clear that religious persecution is a component of the wider, systematic oppression of ethnicity and dissent. There is undoubtedly an anti-Christian and anti-Muslim element, and the regime often cloaks itself in the language and imagery of Buddhism, but when Buddhists oppose it, the regime has no hesitation in detaining Buddhist monks or disrupting the activities of a monastery.

However, Christians among the ethnic national groups, the Karen, Karenni, Chin and Kachin, have found that their religious identity has in itself become a target. When the Burma Army attacks a Karen village which has a church and a Buddhist temple, the soldiers often burn down the church but do not damage the temple. A new report published this year by the Chin Human Rights Organisation <http://www.chro.org>, entitled 'Religious Persecution: A Campaign of Ethnocide Against Chin Christians in Burma', claims that "Burma's ruling military regime is systematically persecuting Chin Christians".

Burma has been ruled by successive military regimes since General Ne Win seized power in a coup in 1962. Elections were held in 1990, and the National League for Democracy, led by Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi on over 80 per cent of the parliamentary seats, but the regime annulled the results, imprisoned most of the victors, and intensified its grip on power.

The junta, now known as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), has been accused of sending hundreds of Buddhist missionaries to Chin State, in an effort to convert Chin Christians to Buddhism. Those who become Buddhists are rewarded with privileges, such as extra rice supplies, opportunities to study in good schools or exemption from forced labour.

While Christians and Muslims among the ethnic national groups suffer the most intense persecution, the regime sometimes cracks down on religious activities in Burma's major cities too. In 2001, more than 80 churches around the capital Rangoon were closed down, and an order was issued banning Christian meetings in buildings less than a hundred years old. However, despite being expelled by Ne Win in 1962, the current regime appears to allow Western missionaries to operate again in Rangoon, teaching and evangelising in churches and seminaries, provided they remain low-profile and apolitical.

In Chin State, in north-west Burma on the Indian border, where the population is 90 per cent Christian, the people have over the years built crosses on mountain-tops as a symbol of their faith and identity. In recent years, the Burma Army has forced villagers to tear down the cross and, in some cases, build a Buddhist pagoda in its place. According to a report by Christian Solidarity Worldwide in March, after a visit to the India-Burma border, the authorities have destroyed all crosses in Chin State.

Christians have sometimes been forced to contribute financially to the construction of Buddhist pagodas.

Reports have also emerged of Chin Christian children being lured away from their families with the offer of a good education. But instead, the authorities place the children, some as young as 11, in a Buddhist monastery, where their heads are shaved and they are forced to become novice monks. Some never see their parents again.

Printing Bibles in Chin State is forbidden, so the Chin smuggle Bibles printed in India. In 2000, it was reported that 16,000 Bibles were seized and burned.

Christians in Chin State are required to obtain a permit for any gathering of more than five people, other than a Sunday service. Any Bible study group or conference requires permits from the Religious Affairs Ministry, the police, the township authority, and the block-level authority. Any construction or renovation for religious purposes requires a permit. Since 1994, all applications for permission for the construction of new church buildings have been denied.

In February this year, the Baptist churches in Chin State organised a conference involving 49 churches. The organisers applied for permission two months in advance, paid the fee, but a week before the event, the local commander denied permission to build a structure in which to hold the conference. The churches appealed, but without success. They were informed that any gathering of over seven people would not be permitted, and any night-time worship service would be prohibited. A senior pastor who had acted as a mediator between the SPDC and the armed resistance, the Chin National Front, appealed to the head of military intelligence, and two days before the conference was due to start, permission was given for the conference to go ahead – but there was no time to build a shelter.

The use of forced labour across Burma is widespread and well-documented, by human rights organisations and the International Labour Organisation. In Christian communities, the SPDC sometimes demands forced labour during religious festivals and on Sundays, deliberately disrupting religious events. In Sabunte, Chin State, Burma Army soldiers ordered villagers to work as porters for the military from 20 December 2003 until 19 January 2004, meaning they were unable to celebrate Christmas and New Year in their villages. Instead, they were forced to carry 20-25 kilogramme packs of rice, ammunition and mortars. Similarly, in July 2003, SPDC troops entered a church in Hmun Halh during a Sunday service, and ordered the worship leaders to work as porters for the army immediately, thus disrupting the service.

Christians are denied promotion in the army beyond the rank of Major, and cannot hold a position as a head of department. Major Thawng Za Lian defected from the Burma Army in 1999 after being denied promotion because he is a Christian. "Soldiers more junior to me were being promoted but I was not. When I saw General Tin Oo, he told me explicitly that there was a policy not to promote Christians above the rank of Major. He asked me to change my religion to Buddhism, and to obtain an army order recognising the conversion. If I submitted this, I could get promotion. But I did not want to change my religion."

In Karen and Karenni areas, in south-east Burma along the Thai border, Christians are also targeted. In 1995, the SPDC stirred up religious tensions between Christian and Buddhist Karen, which led to the creation of the break-away Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), a militia allied with the junta. According to a 53 year-old Karen Christian woman interviewed in April, on March 25th this year, DKBA troops forced Karen Christian villagers to clear an area in front of the village church and construct a Buddhist pagoda. Two days later, DKBA troops disrupted the church service using loud-speakers to spread Buddhist propaganda, drowning out the voice of the pastor. Christians were warned that once the pagoda was built, they would all have to leave the village if they did not become Buddhists. The pastor was threatened with death, and fled.

Muslims have also been targeted. A report released by Amnesty International earlier this year, called 'Myanmar: The Rohingya Minority – Fundamental Rights Denied', claims that the Muslim Rohingya people in Rakhine (Arakan) State in western Burma, along the Bay of Bengal coast, are virtually stateless. They are effectively denied Burmese citizenship, their freedom of movement is severely restricted, and they are subject to arbitrary taxation, land confiscation, forced eviction, destruction of property and forced labour. Thousands have fled across the border to Bangladesh.

Religious persecution of Muslims in other parts of Burma is also widespread. In 1997, 40 mosques were ransacked in Mandalay and the capital Rangoon. Muslim refugees in camps on the Thai-Burmese border report being forced by Burma Army soldiers to eat pork, in a deliberate effort to humiliate them.

The SPDC's predecessor, the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) adopted the slogan: "To be a Burmese is to be a Buddhist". Almost 90 per cent of the population of Burma is Buddhist, and the regime plays that card as a political tool in its war on dissent. In 2001, after closing down 80 churches in Rangoon, the junta built its biggest pagoda. In December this year, Burma is due to host over 1,500 people at the fourth World Buddhist Summit, jointly organised by the Nenbutsushu Buddhist sect of Japan and Burma's Religious Affairs Ministry.

However, when Buddhists themselves challenge the regime, it has no hesitation in suppressing them too. The Shan ethnic national group of north-east Burma, for example, is largely Buddhist and faces similar human rights violations, including rape and forced labour, as the Karen and Chin.

The regime's tentacles reach well beyond its borders. In London, it has been reported that the Burmese Ambassador's wife has told all the Burmese Buddhist monks in monasteries in London, Birmingham and Manchester not to join in religious ceremonies at a Burmese Buddhist monastery in Colindale, north London, because the monk in charge is regarded by the regime as a political opponent for his support of the exiled democracy groups. Monks have been warned that their passports will be removed and they could face serious punishment in Burma if they associate with the Colindale monastery.

Ultimately, the regime has little religious belief, and is intent simply to hold onto power. Its mentality is summed up by the words of a Burma Army battalion commander, speaking after he had attacked a village and urinated on the head of a Buddhist monk: "I do not believe in any religion. My religion is the trigger of my gun."

- Benedict Rogers is a journalist and human rights activist working with Christian Solidarity Worldwide, and has recently published 'A Land Without Evil: Stopping the Genocide of Burma's Karen People' (Monarch, 2004).

A printer-friendly map of Burma is available at
<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=myanma>

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