

briefing

Burma

Visit to the India-Burma Border

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CHRISTIAN
SOLIDARITY
WORLDWIDE
VOICE FOR THE VOICELESS

PO Box 99, New Malden,
Surrey KT3 3YF

T: 0845 456 5464

E: admin@csw.org.uk

W: www.csw.org.uk

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I. Executive Summary

“Please help us to fight for our indigenous rights. I am concerned and worried about our future in Burma. Burma’s political crisis is not only a democracy problem, it is also an ethnic and constitutional problem.” – A Chin student

Burma is ruled by one of the world’s most brutal regimes. The junta, known as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) is guilty of sustained and egregious human rights violations, including the suppression of democracy, the denial of ethnic and cultural rights, and the widespread and systematic use of torture, rape as a weapon of war, forced labour, the forcible conscription of child soldiers, religious persecution and extrajudicial killings.

Among the poorest and most persecuted peoples of Burma are the Chin, a predominantly Christian ethnic group inhabiting Chin State and much of Sagaing Division, along the border with India. In addition to widespread human rights violations including religious persecution, forced labour and rape, over the past two years much of Chin State has been devastated by a chronic food shortage caused by a natural phenomenon of the flowering of the bamboo, which occurs approximately every fifty years. The bamboo flowering attracts plagues of rats, which then multiply in vast numbers. The rats then destroy the bamboo, rice fields, rice supplies, other food sources and almost all means of livelihood and survival for the local population. At least 100,000 people in more than 200 villages have been affected by the chronic food shortage caused by this phenomenon, and many have died of hunger and famine-related disease. The crisis is expected to last another two years, but the effects are predicted to continue for five years.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) travelled to the India-Burma border with a delegation led by Baroness Cox, Chief Executive of the Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust (HART). During what was CSW’s fourth visit to the area since 2004, the delegation received first-hand testimonial evidence of continuing human rights violations, and the effects of chronic under-resourcing of health care in Chin State. The delegation also heard allegations that international funding for emergency food relief for victims of the chronic food shortage, provided to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) through the World Food Programme (WFP) by the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development (DFID), was being offered to villagers in the form of loans repayable at 200 per cent interest, in at least 17 villages in Paletwa Township. CSW and HART have reported these allegations to the UNDP and called for an urgent investigation. If true, they raise grave questions about the integrity of the UNDP’s assistance in the area.

The delegation also met with leaders of the Chin community in Mizoram, including the Chin National Council (CNC) and the Women’s League of Chinland, and discussed the forthcoming elections in Burma planned for 2010. The CNC said that while they had no confidence in the election process or the new Constitution imposed by the military regime, they would support candidates who wished to contest the election, provided they shared the CNC’s “vision for democracy”. According to the CNC, the people in Chin State would not boycott the election, partly because they would probably be forced by the military to vote, and partly because they may wish to vote so that they “can prove the injustice”. However, the CNC emphasised that “we do not support or accept the Constitution or the 2010 elections”.

CSW also met Chin and Kachin refugees in New Delhi, and had meetings to discuss India’s policy on Burma with the Minister of State for External Affairs Dr. Shashi Tharoor, the Convenor of the Indian Parliamentarian Forum for Democracy in Burma, Sharad Joshi MP, the All India Christian Council, and academics at Jawaharlal Nehru University.

2. Recommendations

CSW believes the political, humanitarian and human rights crisis throughout Burma, including in Chin State, requires urgent international action. CSW broadly advocates a policy of combined targeted pressure with high-level engagement, and urges other members of the international community to adopt a similar approach. CSW calls for an increase and intensification of international pressure on the military regime ahead of the elections scheduled for 2010, along with increased efforts to achieve high-level, substantive, sustained and time-bound engagement with the regime. CSW therefore makes the following recommendations:

2.1. To the Government of India:

- To conduct a comprehensive review of its current policy on Burma, and to develop a policy which supports Burma's democracy movement;
- To cease its policy of uncritical engagement with the regime in Burma, and adopt a more robust, proactive and constructive role;
- To play a more active and constructive role within the United Nations, including ending its policy of opposition to UN General Assembly and Human Rights Council resolutions on Burma;
- To seek opportunities for engagement with Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD), as well as with the regime;
- To end completely its policy of providing arms and military training to the SPDC;
- To use its influence with the SPDC to persuade the regime to engage in a meaningful tripartite dialogue with the NLD and the ethnic nationalities, to revise the new Constitution, and to ensure that the 2010 elections in Burma are free and fair not only in procedure but in substance as well.
- To consider funding civil society initiatives in Burma and among exiled Burmese pro-democracy organisations;
- To permit international organisations to fund cross-border relief efforts to reach victims of chronic food shortage, severe poverty and displacement in Chin State;

2.2. To the United Nations:

- To secure a universal arms embargo on the military regime in Burma;
- To establish a commission of inquiry to investigate crimes against humanity in Burma;
- To invoke the 'Responsibility to Protect' mechanism in regard to Burma;
- To continue the efforts of the UN Secretary-General to secure the release of political prisoners and facilitate a meaningful tripartite dialogue between the SPDC, the NLD and the ethnic nationalities;
- To continue regular discussions on the political, humanitarian and human rights crises in Burma;
- To investigate allegations of corrupt practices within the UNDP in Chin State, and to ensure that emergency food relief provided by the WFP and the UNDP reaches those most in need;
- To request the UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion and Belief to investigate allegations of violations of freedom of religion in Burma, including in Chin and Kachin States;
- To reject clearly and categorically the current proposals for elections in 2010, and to insist on an alternative transition plan leading to a revised Constitution and a genuinely free and fair election process, inclusive of all democratic parties, monitored by international observers.

2.3. To the European Union:

- To maintain existing sanctions and strengthen targeted sanctions against the Generals and their economic interests, as recommended by nine Nobel Peace Prize recipients on 19 February 2008, unless there are tangible signs of progress;
- To provide urgently needed humanitarian assistance to the victims of chronic food shortage in Chin State, through cross-border mechanisms if possible;
- To continue to raise the situation in Burma with the Government of India, and encourage India to review its current policy and adopt a more comprehensive policy supportive of the democracy movement;
- To support the establishment of a UN commission of inquiry into crimes against humanity in Burma;
- To work proactively to seek the introduction of a universal arms embargo by the UN Security Council.

2.4. To the United Kingdom:

- To increase humanitarian assistance provided to the victims of chronic food shortage in Chin State, through cross-border mechanisms if possible;
- To continue to raise the situation in Burma with the Government of India, and encourage India to review its current policy and adopt a more comprehensive policy supportive of the democracy movement;
- To support the establishment of a UN commission of inquiry into crimes against humanity in Burma;
- To work proactively to seek the introduction of a universal arms embargo by the UN Security Council.

2.5. To the United States:

- To maintain existing sanctions and strengthen targeted sanctions against the Generals and their economic interests, as recommended by nine Nobel Peace Prize recipients on 19 February 2008, unless there are tangible signs of progress;
- To continue to pursue opportunities for high-level, substantive, sustained and time-bound engagement with the regime;
- To continue to raise the situation in Burma with the Government of India, and encourage India to review its current policy and adopt a more comprehensive policy supportive of the democracy movement;
- To provide urgently needed humanitarian assistance to the victims of chronic food shortage in Chin State, through cross-border mechanisms if possible;
- To request the UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion and Belief to investigate allegations of violations of freedom of religion in Burma, including in Chin and Kachin States;
- To support the establishment of a UN commission of inquiry into crimes against humanity in Burma;
- To work proactively to seek the introduction of a universal arms embargo by the UN Security Council.

3. Introduction

3.1. Background

3.1.1. Burma

Burma has been ruled by a succession of military regimes since General Ne Win seized power in a coup d'état in 1962. The current junta, known as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), has been in power since the brutal suppression of pro-democracy demonstrations in 1988. In 1990, the regime held elections which were overwhelmingly won by the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Nobel Laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. The NLD won 82 per cent of the parliamentary seats, but the regime rejected the results, imprisoned many of the elected Members of Parliament and intensified its grip on power. Aung San Suu Kyi has spent over fourteen years under house arrest and remains in detention today.

The past two years have been among the most significant, and traumatic, in Burma's recent history. In September 2007, tens of thousands of Buddhist monks and civilians took part in demonstrations calling for change, in what became known as the 'Saffron Revolution'. The regime responded with a violent crackdown in which thousands were arrested and many were beaten, tortured and killed.

In May 2008, Cyclone Nargis hit Burma, and at least 140,000 people died and 2.5 million were left homeless as a result of the regime's failure to prepare the people for the cyclone, or to provide assistance in the wake of the disaster. In addition, the regime is guilty of the deliberate denial, restriction and diversion of aid. On 10 May 2008 the regime held a sham referendum on a new constitution, in which it threatened, intimidated and harassed voters throughout the country into voting in favour of the new constitution which enshrines military rule. Numerous reports have also been received of blatant vote rigging.

The SPDC is continuing a military offensive against civilians in eastern Burma, in which at least 3,300 villages have been destroyed since 1996 and a million people internally displaced. In November 2008, several hundred political activists were jailed, some with sentences of 65 years or more. The regime has jailed over 2,000 political activists in total. Prison conditions are desperate, with poor food and hygiene, denial of medical treatment and widespread and systematic use of torture.

Burma has the highest number of forcibly conscripted child soldiers in the world, and rape, torture and forced labour are widespread and systematic. Religious minorities, particularly Christians and Muslims, face restrictions, discrimination and persecution, and Burma is listed as a Country of Particular Concern by the US State Department Office of International Religious Freedom. In January 2009, at least 100 churches in Rangoon were ordered to close, and pastors were forced to sign documents in which they were informed they would be jailed if they resumed their activities.¹

¹ See CSW, *MPs Express Concern At Church Closures in Rangoon*, 10 February 2009 - <http://dynamic.csw.org.uk/article.asp?t=press&id=824> and CSW *Condemns Crackdown on Churches in Rangoon*, 15 January 2009 - <http://dynamic.csw.org.uk/article.asp?t=press&id=820>

3.1.2. The Chin

Burma's ethnic nationalities amount to forty per cent of the total population of the country, and inhabit sixty per cent of the land. The Burman majority represents sixty per cent of the population. There are seven major ethnic nationality groups, namely the Karen, Karenni, Shan and Mon in eastern Burma; the Kachin in northern Burma; and the Arakan or Rakhine, and the Chin, in western Burma. In addition, there are many smaller ethnic nationalities such as the Wa, the Pa-O, the Naga and the Rohingya, and various sub-groups within the major groupings.

The Chin are believed to total approximately 1.2 million, but according to the Chin National Council (CNC), only 400,000-500,000 still live in Chin State. The majority of Chins now live outside Chin State, either in other parts of the country or in exile outside Burma. In Mizoram State, India, there are an estimated 100,000 Chin refugees, and a further 5,000 in New Delhi. In Malaysia, the Chin refugee population is estimated at 40,000-50,000. Several thousand Chin are in exile in the United States, Canada, Australia and various countries in Europe. In Burma itself, 100,000 Chins live in Rangoon, while 300,000 live in Kalaymyo, Sagaing Division, next to Chin State, and a further 150,000 live in the Kalay-Kabaw Valley, Sagaing Division.

Between 80 and 90 per cent of Chins are Christian, and Christianity is an integral aspect of Chin ethnic identity.

3.2. About Christian Solidarity Worldwide

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) is an international human rights organisation specialising in religious freedom. With advocacy staff based in London and Brussels, CSW has partners and affiliates in the UK, USA, Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong, India, Sri Lanka, Norway, Denmark and France. CSW has been working on human rights issues in Burma for the past twenty years, making regular visits to the Karen, Karenni and Shan ethnic nationalities on the Thailand-Burma border, the Chin on the India-Burma border, and the Kachin on the China-Burma border. CSW provides funds to two orphanages in refugee camps for Karen and Karenni, supports relief for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) through the Free Burma Rangers and funds humanitarian and human rights projects among the Chin people. CSW previously visited the India-Burma border in 2007, 2006 and 2004. In 2007, CSW organised a delegation of Chin activists to visit London, Brussels, Berlin and Washington DC, in order to highlight the violations of human rights in Chin State, and in 2008 and 2009 CSW hosted and arranged advocacy meetings for Chin activists visiting London.

3.3. Itinerary and Purposes

CSW visited India from 10-25 November 2009. From 10-13 November, CSW had meetings in New Delhi with the Government of India, civil society and media, to discuss India's policy on Burma and assess ways in which CSW could contribute to efforts to raise awareness in India of the situation in Burma, through political activities, civil society and the media. The itinerary included meetings with the Minister of State for External Affairs Dr Shashi Tharoor, the Convenor of the Indian Parliamentarian Forum for Democracy in Burma, Sharad Joshi MP, the Burma Centre Delhi, the Euro-Burma Office, academics at Jawaharlal Nehru University and several correspondents from Indian and international media. CSW also visited

Chin and Kachin refugees in New Delhi. CSW had further meetings in New Delhi on 24 November, including with the British High Commission and the All India Christian Council. From 13-15 November, CSW had meetings with media organisations in Kolkata.

From 16-23 November, CSW and a delegation led by Baroness Cox, Chief Executive of the Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust (HART), visited Mizoram State. The delegation had meetings in Aizawl with the Chief Minister of Mizoram and Chin representative organisations including the Chin National Council (CNC), the Women's League of Chinland (WLC) and the Chin Famine Emergency Relief Committee. The delegation also travelled to Saiha and the border with Burma. CSW's objectives for the visit were as follows:

1. To obtain up-to-date information and evidence regarding human rights violations in Burma, particularly in Chin State;
2. To obtain up-to-date information regarding the political situation in Burma;
3. To obtain up-to-date information regarding the humanitarian situation in Chin State;
4. To assess current and future needs.

CSW donated 30,000 Rupees (£400) to the WLC, and 30,000 Rupees (£400) to the Chin Famine Emergency Relief Committee.

4. Human Rights Violations

Religious persecution, forced labour, rape, torture and other violations of human rights continue to be perpetrated in Chin State by the Burma Army on a widespread basis. During this visit the joint CSW-HART delegation obtained new testimonial evidence of such violations.

4.1. Religious discrimination and persecution

Access for foreign visitors to Chin State is, with some exceptions, prohibited, and Chin State is widely acknowledged to be the poorest part of the country. Education and health care are extremely limited and severely under-resourced, and electricity is scarce. According to one Chin, the reason Chin State is denied resources and foreigners are denied access is specifically because the overwhelming majority of Chins are Christian. The SPDC has, it is believed, taken a deliberate decision to discriminate against Chin Christians.

Chin Christians working in government are denied promotion. In the Burma Army, for example, Christians cannot rise above the rank of Major at the divisional level, and are unable to gain positions at the central level. Christians are often encouraged to change their religion in order to obtain promotion, and those who do change their religion are rewarded. One Chin Christian man who had served in the Burma Army told us, "I had a colleague who was a Chin, who became a Buddhist and he was promoted. I was told to change my religion if I wanted to get promotion. I refused to convert."

Christians find it extremely difficult to obtain permission to build new churches or repair existing church buildings. According to one Chin Christian, students from a Christian youth fellowship at a university in Kalaymyo, Sagaing Division collected funds among their own community to construct a small church, in order to be able to worship on Sundays. However, in 2008 and again in 2009 'extremist Buddhists' destroyed the church building, and when the students reported the incident to the local authorities, the youth fellowship leaders were arrested, detained and then released with a warning. It is unclear whether the 'extremist Buddhists' were acting under instruction from the SPDC, but it is evident that no

action was taken against the perpetrators of the attack and instead the Chin Christian students were reprimanded.

The SPDC has a policy of 'Burmanisation' and 'Buddhist-isation', which is enforced in a variety of ways. In some areas of Chin State, particularly Matupi Township and Mindat Township, the SPDC has reportedly organised a Buddhist mission to convert Chin Christians to Buddhism. Buddhist-run orphanages and schools are used to lure Chin Christians with the promise of education, but the children are then forced to convert and become novice Buddhist monks. According to one Chin, during Buddhist festivals Chin Christians are forced to make donations to the regime of 5,000 kyats. One Chin Christian noted that although there are public holidays during key Buddhist festivals, important Christian celebrations such as Good Friday are not public holidays.

Chin Christian pastors are often singled out for forced labour. According to one Chin theological student, in 1997 in Matupi Township some churches were forbidden to celebrate Christmas, and were instead ordered to work as porters for the military during Christmas. In 2002, the SPDC destroyed a large cross which had been constructed by Christians in Matupi. "The SPDC persecutes Christians," she said. "The Constitution says there is freedom of religion, but in reality there is no freedom for Christians."

One Chin activist now living in India and working with an exiled human rights organisation said, "In 2005, I was on my way to a worship service held in a friend's home. On the way, I met some Burma Army soldiers who stopped me and asked where I was going. I told them. The leader of the group of soldiers grabbed me, and said, 'I don't think you are going to church. You are part of an underground group.' He took off his slippers and slapped me two times with them, and then took me away. I was very afraid. One by one they beat and kicked me, and dragged me [along the road] for half a kilometre. I suffered a lot. My eldest brother-in-law came to try to convince them that I was not in the underground, but the soldier beat him with a big stick. I was only released when my relatives paid a 500 kyat bribe."

He added, "On another occasion, I was going to join a farewell party with friends, in my second year of university, and we were practising a song for the church choir. Around 6pm we went to our friends' house for the party, and on the way we met two military intelligence officers. They asked me, 'Why are you walking in the middle of the road?' I told them that it was not our fault that we were walking in the middle of the road, and he became angry. He threatened, slapped and kicked us and then pointed a gun at my head and said, 'Don't do this, or your brain will burst out'. We were very frightened. We couldn't have the party, we were too scared."

CSW has previously documented religious persecution of Christians in Burma in a report, *Carrying the Cross: The military regime's campaign of restriction, discrimination and persecution against Christians in Burma*, published in 2007. A copy of the report is available from CSW or at www.csw.org.uk

4.2. Extortion and looting

The Burma Army regularly harasses villagers in Chin State, looting and extorting money and livestock. The following testimony of one Chin villager is an example:

"In 2007, the SPDC received information about the activities of a criminal gang doing bad things in Falam Township. The military came to the area to look for the gang, but while doing so they went drinking and got drunk. They demanded 2000 kyats from each and every house, to pay for their drinks. There were about 200 households in the area. They went to a

village seven kilometres from mine, searching for the gang, and there they looted and stole and spoiled everything. Soldiers asked people to provide two chickens. The police had also come to the area, and demanded one chicken, but then the police got angry with the villagers when they heard that the army had got two chickens and they only got one, so the police killed the village headman.”

He continued with a second example: “I was in a car with my uncle, about forty miles from Falam Township. My uncle was driving. Soldiers travelled in our car, and the trip cost around 30 gallons of petrol, but they contributed only 10 gallons, and the driver had to pay the rest. The area was full of soldiers, who demanded information about the insurgency.”

He concluded: “Burma Army soldiers often use civilians to go to the frontline ahead of them, so that in case of an attack the villagers are killed first. I want to request the international community, human rights organisations and the British Parliament to closely study the situation in Chin State, to know what is happening in Chin State.”

4.3. Forced conscription of child soldiers

Burma has the highest number of forcibly conscripted child soldiers in the world. Human Rights Watch has estimated that the number of child soldiers in the Burma Army could be as high as 70,000, and has documented the recruitment of child soldiers in Burma in two key reports, *My Gun Was As Tall As Me* (2002) and *Sold to be Soldiers* (2007). CSW has interviewed many former child soldiers on the Thailand-Burma border, and other organisations such as the Karen Human Rights Organisation have also reported the practice. According to one Chin from Matupi, the recruitment of child soldiers is continuing:

“In 2006, during the Burmans’ ‘Light Festival’, Chins were invited to participate. Our youth group took part, and the regime took the chance to forcibly conscript us into the military. They blackmailed us. They asked if we would like to go home, and offered to take us. But in reality they did not bring us home, instead they put us in jail for one night, and then took us to the infantry unit no. 140 camp, where we spent three nights. There were fourteen students in our group, but altogether 50 students. After three days, those who could afford to pay a bribe could leave, but my friends and I were not freed because the soldiers did not want to let us go. A student leader came and had a long negotiation with the soldiers, and two of the remaining four were released, but two were not. They were sent to Pakokku. On the way, one of the students tricked the soldiers, saying he needed to use the toilet, and he managed to escape.”

4.4. Cultural genocide

The SPDC is deliberately pursuing policies designed to eradicate Chin culture.

According to one Chin student, in Matupi the Burma Army troops are encouraged by their commander, Colonel San Aung, to marry local Chin women from Matupi. They are paid 100,000 kyats and one pig if they succeed in marrying a local Chin woman. This appears to be an effort to dilute the ethnicity of the Chin, and is a practice that has also been reported by other ethnic groups throughout Burma.

Another Chin student from Rangoon said that the regime deliberately distorts the teaching of history in schools, and excludes the history of the ethnic groups and the development of the concept of the Union of Burma. “While growing up I was aware that we were a ‘union’ as a country, but I was confused about the so-called Union of Burma. The reason we didn’t

understand is that we only learn about the history of Burma in school, and the history which is taught is wrong,” he said. Until the British colonisation of Burma, beginning in 1824 in the south of the country, through to the capture of middle Burma in 1852 and the rest of the country by 1885, the Chins lived as an entirely separate entity, and were never ruled by the Burmese kings. Instead they inhabited territory which is now divided between three countries: Burma, India and Bangladesh. “In school, this is not taught. There is nothing about Chin history. We are only taught about the Thirty Comrades and the Dobama Asiayone [the Burmans’ movement for independence from Britain].” As a result of the one-sided teaching of history in Burmese schools, he concluded, “the majority and minority populations are separated from each other, and we feel weak and vulnerable because our Chin history is not recognised.” In a university examination on Burmese culture and tradition, he wrote his real opinions and described what he knew of Chin identity and history. “I thought it was a good opportunity to express my ethnic feelings. I wrote four pages of answers, saying ‘I am not a Burman, I am a Chin’. I talked about Buddhist culture, and described Chin culture such as our bamboo dance, in the belief that people will recognise the different ethnic groups. I hate Burmanisation. I expressed my view that if the education system continues in this way, teaching false history, we will lose our ethnic and national feelings. The history professor called me to see him and warned me. He said that everyone else is learning Burmese history, and I was the only one writing complaints. He told me that if I insisted on answering in this way, I would not be allowed to sit exams for other subjects. He said he would delete my answers and I could rewrite the exam and pass. I did not want my answers to be deleted, so I failed. We cannot learn true history in our country. There is no printed true history available, we cannot print true history, and we cannot learn our own language in school. Before independence we had our own language, but now we cannot learn it in school. Please help us to fight for our indigenous rights. I am concerned and worried about our future in Burma. Burma’s political crisis is not only a democracy problem, it is also an ethnic and constitutional problem.”

According to the WLC, the number of Burmese teachers in Chin State has increased, and almost every village now has a Burmese teacher. “The regime is trying to assimilate Chin State. Schools are all in Burmese and we are not even allowed to teach Chin language as a subject. Only in some areas can extra language classes for Chin be arranged, through the church. The regime is trying to kill the Chin language.”

4.1. Human rights violations in Kachin State

CSW visited Kachin refugees in New Delhi, and heard some examples of human rights violations in Kachin State. Like the Chin, the Kachin are a majority Christian population, and they face religious discrimination and persecution. The construction of new churches is generally forbidden, and several Christian cemeteries have been occupied by the military and pagodas built in them, according to Kachin refugees. In Danai Township, Hukong Valley, western Kachin State, three churches were destroyed in 2007 when the SPDC-backed mining corporation Yuzana Company confiscated land to develop gold mining and plantations.

Forced labour in Kachin State is widespread. In Danai Township, Hukong Valley, western Kachin State, the SPDC constructed a military camp and forced villagers to contribute forced labour. Throughout Kachin State, the SPDC is developing ‘jetsu’ (physic nut) plantations, and forcing villagers to grow ‘jetsu’ trees. In some areas, one person from each family is required to work on ‘jetsu’ plantations, and if no one is able to go, they must pay a fine of 10,000 kyats. If they are unable to pay that amount, the punishment is detention with feet and hands in stocks for an entire day.

The SPDC appears to have a policy of encouraging the availability of drugs in Kachin State, as a means of destroying Kachin society. Drug dealers openly sell heroin and the authorities ignore them. However, Kachin drug addicts are sometimes arrested and jailed, and forcibly conscripted into the Burma Army.

CSW has made three visits to Kachin State on the China-Burma border. Further details and full reports are available from CSW.

5. Political Situation

In 2010, the SPDC plans to hold elections, based on the new Constitution which was introduced in a referendum in 2008. The referendum is widely regarded as a sham, in which the ballots were blatantly rigged, and the new Constitution will simply enshrine military rule. It guarantees at least 25 per cent of the parliamentary seats for the military, and excludes democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi and other pro-democracy activists from participating. A full briefing on the Constitution and the 2010 elections is available from CSW.

The CSW-HART delegation met leaders of the CNC, the umbrella organisation which brings together four Chin political parties – the Zomi National Congress (ZNC), the Chin National Front (CNF), the Mara People's Party (MPP) and the Chin National League for Democracy (CNLD). Representatives of all four political parties were present in the meeting. The CNC informed the delegation that while they do not believe in the 2010 elections or the new Constitution, they will support anyone who “shares [their] vision for democracy” and wishes to contest the elections as a candidate in Chin State. “We don't support or accept the Constitution or the elections, but we cannot stop people running in the elections. The people will not boycott the election, not because they support the process, but because they want to prove the injustice of it. The military will also force people to vote, so there is no choice. We believe the people would like free and fair elections and a review of the Constitution. We want governments which have a voice to push the regime to review the Constitution, have free and fair elections and allow international observers to monitor the election. We believe sanctions should be kept in place.”

In a personal opinion not on behalf of the CNC, one Chin political leader told the delegation he welcomed the new US policy on Burma, combining sanctions and engagement. He said that the recent visit by US Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell, in which he was able to meet Aung San Suu Kyi, was a positive step. “Before the US change of policy, no other country's diplomats could meet Aung San Suu Kyi. Now they can, and the NLD have been able to have meetings with each other,” he argues. “But we are still looking at it very carefully. There has been no improvement in human rights, and the violations continue. In southern Chin State in particular, the military comes all the time and there has been no improvement.”

6. Humanitarian situation in Chin State

Chin State is the poorest part of Burma, with little investment in infrastructure. According to one Chin, roads are limited, and even on the major 120-mile route from Kalaymyo to Hakha, there is no tarmac road. There is almost no electricity available in Chin State. In Hakha there is a very limited supply, and is generally reserved for senior officials in the SPDC. According to one Chin student, a youth group in Hakha collected money in order to provide street lights, but the authorities refused permission. “The authorities prefer to corrupt money and give it to the VIPs,” he said.

Poor transportation and road infrastructure has led to significant variations in prices in Chin State. A bag of rice in Hakha, for example, reportedly costs 17,000 kyats, while in rural areas it can cost up to 30,000 kyats.

Education is chronically under-resourced, and is “one of the main needs in Chin State”, according to one student. Other states have colleges and universities, but in Chin State there is no university. Only a few Chin students can travel to Rangoon, Mandalay, Kalaymyo and other cities for higher education. Many Chin children are unable to travel to school at all, due to poor transportation. School teachers in Chin State are so poorly paid that they offer private tuition in order to earn extra income to survive, but most families are unable to afford private tuition. One student said that at university, his teachers were so badly paid that they asked for bribes to pass the exams. He was unable to pay a bribe, and so his teacher failed him. “Education is very important. In Chin State, government schools do not have enough resources, enough teachers, buildings or text books,” said one Chin student. Another student said that in his university in Kalaymyo, “there are no books and no libraries”.

In addition to poor infrastructure and education, Chin State faces a serious humanitarian and health crisis.

6.1. Health care

Health care in Chin State is severely under-resourced and many areas have no access to medical assistance at all. In many areas people are reliant on community health workers, and organisations such as the CNF Backpack Health Workers and the Women’s League of Chinland (WLC) are active in providing medicines, public health education, and training in basic primary health care.

HIV/AIDS is increasing, and many infected people come to Mizoram for diagnosis and treatment. However, no statistics are available. The virus is often contracted in Chin State as a result of blood donations from local hospitals, or through hospitals using dirty or shared needles on patients. In Kanan village, Kampat, in Kalay-Kapaw Valley, Sagaing Division, it is reported that the local hospital donated infected blood.

In many areas medicines are unavailable; however in the capital of Chin State, Hakha, medicines can be bought but are unaffordable for most Chin people. No medicine is provided by the SPDC free of charge, and the quality of the medicine available in Hakha is poor. In Falam, another major town, it is reported that no medicine is available at all.

6.2. Harassment of health workers

Backpack health workers and WLC representatives travelling into Chin State to deliver medicines do so at considerable personal risk. The CSW-HART delegation was told of one WLC worker who had to cross a river on one journey, and almost drowned. One health worker was caught by the Burmese police, and had to pay a bribe of 20,000 kyats to be released. Another WLC member was caught in a village in Paletwa Township, and questioned for an hour about why she was bringing in food and where she had obtained it. She was released when two village headmen who had been arrested with her informed the authorities that they had requested her to buy food from Mizoram. In another case, Burma Army soldiers found medicines which a health worker had left with a village headman, and took some for their own use.

One representative of the WLC told the delegation, “There are two reasons we do not want to get caught. Firstly, for ourselves, and secondly, for the sake of the villagers, because they are questioned so much. But even though it is such a difficult situation, we want to keep going inside [Chin State] again and again. We know it is dangerous, but we want to keep going in.”

6.3. Chronic food shortage

Since 2007, a chronic food shortage has devastated large parts of Chin State. It is the result of a natural phenomenon which occurs approximately every fifty years, when the flowering of the bamboo causes an explosion in the rat population. The rats multiply, and destroy the bamboo, the rice fields, rice supplies and almost all means of survival. The Chin Human Rights Organisation (CHRO) has estimated that at least 100,000 people in more than 200 villages have been affected. At least 54 deaths have been recorded, as a result of extreme malnutrition and famine-related disease, although the real death toll is likely to be much higher. The CHRO has documented the food emergency in two reports, *Critical Point: Food Scarcity and Hunger in Chin State*, published in 2008, and *On the Edge of Survival: The Continuing Rat Infestation and Food Crisis in Chin State, Burma*, in 2009. The situation has also been documented by the Burma Relief Centre, Project Maje, and reported in international media including the BBC, *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph*. HART also published a report in September 2008, after interviewing victims of the chronic food shortage on the India-Burma border.ⁱⁱ CSW and HART have raised awareness of the crisis and funds for the relief effort, including successfully advocating to the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development (DFID) that they should provide support. DFID has so far provided £800,000 for food relief in Chin State, delivered through the World Food Programme.

The CSW-HART delegation had discussions with the WLC, the CNC and the Chin Famine Emergency Relief Committee regarding the current situation. According to the WLC, in some areas the situation has improved, but in many areas villagers continue to face a severe food shortage, partly due to the continued presence of the rats and partly due to insufficient rainfall resulting in no harvest. In some areas, the population used to be able to harvest 500 tins’ worth of rice (each tin weighing 7-8kg), but this year they have not even been able to produce 40 tins. Even in those areas where the situation has improved, because the rat population has diminished or moved on, the effects of the food emergency will be felt for some time.

The SPDC has provided no assistance whatsoever to the areas affected by the chronic food shortage. The only aid received has been delivered either by Chin groups themselves, co-ordinated by the Chin Famine Emergency Relief Committee, or in some areas by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), with funds from DFID channelled via the WFP. However, the Chin Famine Emergency Relief Committee says that while international assistance is appreciated, the amount so far is “insufficient”. According to the Chin Famine Emergency Relief Committee, in Thantlang Township, only 28 out of 87 affected villages received food assistance from DFID, delivered through the WFP to the UNDP. In Matupi Township, only nine villages received such relief. In both townships, food assistance was provided at the end of 2008 and lasted only three months. No further assistance has since been received.

In Paletwa Township, the worst-affected area, a total of 11,507 rice acres and 4,316 corn fields have been destroyed by the rats, according to the Chin Famine Emergency Relief Committee. Out of a population of 35,702, at least 5,625 families are regarded as “emergency” cases. In an eight-month period, twelve people from five villages died of hunger-related illness.

Out of 401 villages in Paletwa, between 70 and 80 villages received food assistance from the UNDP. However, according to a Chin famine relief worker who returned from Paletwa the previous week, in at least 17 villages the local UNDP office has provided assistance in the form of loans rather than aid, and charged recipients 200 per cent interest. According to his findings, based on interviews with local villagers, recipients of loans have been told that if they receive cash from UNDP to buy food, they must repay twice the amount. Typically, a cash loan amounts to 200,000-300,000 kyats. In some villages, rice has been provided, and recipients have allegedly been told that if they receive one rice bag, they must return two rice bags when their land can be cultivated again and they can harvest rice. Furthermore, if they are given rice, they then have to pay tax at checkpoints on the river when they are carrying the supplies back to their villages. From the Kaladan River to Paletwa, there are 17 Burma Army check-points, and villagers have to pay 500-1,000 kyats per boat at each checkpoint. CSW has written to the UNDP Resident Coordinator to urge him to investigate.

In Thantlang, the UNDP has reportedly introduced a food-for-work programme, providing food supplies in exchange for labour. The villagers are often severely malnourished, weak and sick, and food is typically only provided to those who work, not their family members or other villagers who do not or cannot work. In some places, those eligible for the programme are 18 year-olds and above, but in other areas 15 year-olds are included in the food-for-work programme. As a Chin relief worker said: "People have to go to work for food, and so they have to leave their own work. It is a kind of forced labour. If they do not work, they won't get food."

Many areas are unreachable by the UNDP, because they are difficult to access by road. Among 400 villages along the Kaladan River, only 70-80 have received assistance from UNDP, because they are the only ones that can be reached by road. Eight Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) are operating in Chin State, but they have failed to access many areas affected by the chronic food shortage. These include, in addition to UNDP, World Vision, CARE Myanmar, GRET (Research and Technological Exchange Group), Country Agency for Rural Development (CARD), KMSS (Karuna Myanmar Social Services), CRDT (Community Development for Remote Townships Project) and the Chin Mautam Relief Committee (CMRC). One Chin famine relief worker said: "From our field visits, we have found that Paletwa Township is the poorest in Chin State. There are a lot of human rights violations in these areas, and we want the world to know. No NGOs reach them. There are eight NGOs in Chin State but none reach these areas. Without delay, our main priority is how to reach these, the most affected areas."

The effects of the chronic food shortage are severe and wide-ranging. In addition to the immediate issue of hunger and malnutrition, famine-related diseases such as diarrhoea have increased and sickness due to reduced resistance caused by hunger is prevalent. Many villagers have been forced to dig for yams and other roots to survive, and these cause severe stomach pain, internal gaseousness and constipation. Children's education is affected, and many are unable to go to school due to illness, weakness and hunger. It is anticipated that the severe food shortage will continue for another two years, and that its effects will last for five years. There is therefore an urgent need for continued humanitarian assistance to the areas affected by the chronic food shortage.

7. Refugees in Delhi

According to the Chin Refugee Committee (CRC), the number of Chin refugees in New Delhi has increased from 2,800 in 2008 to 5,000 in 2009. This increase has been partly due to the chronic food shortage in Chin State, partly as a result of increased militarisation by the Burma Army in Chin State leading to increased forced labour, rape, forcible recruitment of soldiers and other abuses.

Conditions for refugees in Delhi are extremely difficult. The UNHCR's subsistence allowance for refugees is currently 2,240 Rupees per month and is provided for six months, but in 2010 it is expected that it will be cut to three months. For those who work, the UNHCR provides a top-up salary scheme for one year, of 19,000 Rupees. Many work in restaurants, stores, offices, garment factories and as housemaids, earning 1,000-1,500 Rupees a month.

In addition to the Chin community, there are other Burmese refugees in Delhi, including an estimated 70 Kachins.

8. India's Burma Policy

As a country that takes pride in calling itself 'the world's largest democracy', India has a special responsibility to address the crisis in Burma. It has a particular regional responsibility, as a country bordering Burma, and a historical responsibility, since in colonial times India and Burma were ruled by the British as one country. Burma's democracy leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, went to school in Delhi, where she became friends with Jawaharlal Nehru's grandchildren. In 1993, she received India's prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru Award.

During the protests in Burma in 1988, the Government of India under Rajiv Gandhi provided strong support to the democracy movement. In the 1990s, however, India changed its policy, abandoning support for the democracy movement and pursuing a policy of uncritical engagement with the regime. This was for three reasons: economic, military and strategic interests. India was attracted to Burma's oil and gas supplies and trading opportunities, sought a military alliance with the regime to crush its own insurgents, and tried to counter-balance China and reach out to South-East Asia with its "Look East" policy. Indian companies invested a thirty per cent stake in the Shwe Gas pipeline, although in the end India lost out to China when the regime granted China the major contract. In 2004 the head of the SPDC, Senior General Than Shwe, visited India and an agreement was signed to construct the Thamanthi hydro-electric power project. India will receive eighty per cent of the power. India is Burma's fourth largest trading partner, and its second largest export market. Bilateral trade amounts to almost \$1 billion a year.

India has supplied arms and military training to the regime, and has stayed largely silent in the face of severe human rights violations in Burma. While the military beat, arrested, tortured and killed Buddhist monks peacefully protesting in September 2007, India's Petroleum Minister visited Naypyidaw to sign another gas exploration contract. When Aung San Suu Kyi was put on trial earlier this year and sentenced to a further eighteen months' detention, despite already serving over fourteen years, India's response was again muted. In November 2009, India joined Belarus, China, Iran, Libya, North Korea, Sudan and Zimbabwe in voting against a resolution on Burma at the UN General Assembly. The resolution did not impose sanctions – it simply urged the regime to stop violating international humanitarian law. The world's largest democracy sided with the world's most repressive regimes.

By pursuing this policy of uncritical engagement with the regime, India risks losing out completely. It cannot compete with China for economic or political influence, and yet if it continues its current policy, it will severely damage its own reputation and lose friends in Burma's democracy movement who may one day be in government. It would be more strategic if India adopted a comprehensive long-term policy of support for the democracy movement, recognising that the junta in Burma is not the guarantee of stability, but the cause of instability. Refugee outflows from Burma into neighbouring countries, including India, are a result of the regime's brutal offensives against civilians. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton noted this in Singapore recently, when she observed that "internal problems within Burma are not confined within Burma's borders... That instability is not good for anyone."

It is unrealistic to expect India to impose sanctions, but India should be encouraged to be more proactive and constructive in promoting human rights in Burma. In its interactions with the regime, India should raise concerns more robustly. It should stop opposing resolutions at the UN. Indian politicians and diplomats should build on US Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell's recent visit, and seek regular meetings with Aung San Suu Kyi. India's engagement should be with the democracy movement as well as the Generals. India should end its provision of arms and military training completely, and provide funding for civil society instead. It should permit the delivery of cross-border humanitarian assistance to victims of famine and poverty in Burma, and press the regime to review its new Constitution and engage in a meaningful dialogue with the democracy and ethnic nationality movement ahead of next year's planned elections.

9. Conclusions

The political, humanitarian and human rights crisis in Burma continues to be one of the worst in the world, and Chin State is among the worst-affected parts of the country. The situation is summed up by one Chin student, who told the CSW-HART delegation that once he has finished his studies, he has "no hope for a future in Burma". He said:

"If we want to tell the truth, if we want freedom of speech, then everyone really worries about their life. The younger generation is willing to take risks, they want change, they want to find some hope from someone. Who can change our country? They want to sacrifice their lives. But the situation is hopeless. There is no future."

International action, combining political, diplomatic and economic pressure on the regime along with efforts to pursue high-level, substantive engagement and the provision of humanitarian aid to those most in need, as well as support for Burma's democracy movement and civil society, may help to offer the people of Burma the prospect of hope and a future for which they have struggled for so long and given so much.

For further information, please contact Benedict Rogers, East Asia Team Leader at CSW, on ben@csw.org.uk or visit www.csw.org.uk

ⁱ Available at www.chro.ca

ⁱⁱ Available at www.hart-uk.org