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## **BURMA | Chin State Government Orders Removal of Cross, Elder Prosecuted**

An ethnic Chin elder is due to appear in court Jan. 28 on trumped-up charges which Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) believes are connected with his involvement in the planting of a cross on a hill in Hakha town, Chin State, in April 2014. The Chin State government has ordered the 54 foot-high cross, which it argues has been erected illegally to be removed Jan. 30.

The Chin Human Rights Organisation (CHRO) reports the elder, Tial Cem, was accused of cutting down pine trees without official permission, in breach of article 42 (b) of the 1992 Forest Law. To date, he has reportedly been summoned to Hakha Township Court six times, and is due to appear in court again today. If found guilty, he could be sentenced to a maximum of two years in prison.

According to Tial Cem, the charges refer to land situated adjacent to where the cross has been planted and owned by J.P. Biak Tin Sang. An order to remove the cross, issued by the Chin State government, states failure to dismantle and remove the cross would result in action being taken against J.P. Biak Tin Sang, who was also involved in planting the cross. The order stipulates the cross must be dismantled and removed from Caarcaang Hill in Hakha by Jan. 30 on the basis that it was constructed without permission.

Tial Cem told CHRO they did not seek official permission for the cross as they did not believe it would be granted. Chin Christian organizations face discriminatory restrictions which make it virtually impossible to secure such official permission for religious monuments and buildings. CHRO's 2012 report, "Threats to Our Existence: Persecution of Ethnic Chin Christians in Burma," outlines these restrictions in detail and documents the destruction of 13 Christian crosses in Chin State, four of which were destroyed under the current government. CSW detailed violations of freedom of religion in its 2007 report, "Carrying the Cross: The military regime's campaign of restrictions, discrimination and persecution against Christians in Burma."

Local people in Hakha received written permission from the Hakha Township police force to hold demonstrations protesting the government order to remove the cross on Feb. 2 and 3. Protest organizers were informed by Chin State Chief Minister Hung Ngai the cross was planted without seeking official permission from the government, and was, therefore, illegal, but the matter would be discussed further at a meeting of the Chin State cabinet, which is likely to take place the week beginning Feb. 2.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of CSW, said, "The destruction of Christian crosses in Chin State has long been a policy of the Burmese authorities, often accompanied by forcing Chin Christian villagers to build Buddhist pagodas in their place. If Burma is to proceed down a

genuine path of reform, it must protect the most basic human right of freedom of religion, and allow Christians in Chin State to construct symbols of their religion in appropriate ways. The order to destroy this cross, and the prosecution of the Chin elder, illustrate once again that freedom of religion continues to be violated in Burma. We call on the authorities in Chin State to rescind the order to destroy the cross and to drop the charges against Tial Cem.”