

The Chin minority is at risk of extinction at the hands of Rangoon's dictatorship. Neighboring giants India and China stand pat because neither is prepared to cut ties with the junta at the risk of losing key geopolitical advantages and a trade market rich in natural gas and precious metals

The Christian Chin: Sacrificial Pawns

BURMA 2

By Emanuele Confortin

“The policemen beat me with a stick and then with his pistol butt. He hit me in the mouth and broke my teeth. My head bled badly. They then hit my back with their rifles. I still can't lift heavy objects. They stuck electrodes on my chest and wired them to a car battery. They'd turn on the power and turn it off only when I went into seizures. This went on hours. Then they did the same to the pastor's son. They said they wouldn't stop unless we gave them information about guerrillas groups.”

S.H.T, an ethnic Chin peasant, says he was 16 when Burmese police detained him along with the son of the local village pastor. Three days of torture followed. It was the year 2000. S.H.T. and the pastor's son (both go by their initials only, fearing reprisals) were charged with aiding and abetting pro-independence insurgents in northwest Burma (in 1989, the country was renamed Myanmar and given a new capital, Naypyidaw, close to historic Rangoon).

The Chin, Christian Baptists who make up some 90 percent of Burma's minority population, have faced persecution for years, but in anonymity. In 2008, Human Rights Watch (HRW) published S.H.T.'s horrific tale, along with 140 other interviews conducted in India, Malaysia and Thailand. It released them in a 2009 volume titled “We Are Like Forgotten People”. Its 100 pages outlined the atrocities committed against the Chin by the Burmese army and officials of the State Peace and Development Council





(SPDC), the official name for the government.

The HRW report focuses attention on the systematic intimidation tactics used by the Rangoon military since General Ne Win seized power in 1962. Since Ne Win's resignation in 1988, the military has continued repression of non-Buddhist minorities, ignoring appeals from international and human right organizations.

The persecution has led to the Chin to flee in waves. On August 8, 1988 the so-called 8888 rebellion pitted the China National Army (CNA), the military wing of the Chin National Front (CNF), against the Burmese army and caused thousands of Chin families were forced to flee over the border to Mizoram, India, where they faced further resistance from the local Mizo inhabitants and authorities. Resentment on the Indian side triggered yet another wave of ethnic oppression and violence. The 8888 rebellion alone is believed to have led to 10,000 deaths.

Global media has paid little attention to the woes of the Chin. Nor has India, which has remained conspicuously silent over the years. For New Delhi, the Chin are pawns sacrificed in the name of maintaining strong ties with the Burmese government, which supplies an array of natural resources and helps keep China's Bay of Bengal aims in check.

Christian Baptists

The term Chin identifies some 500,000 people that lived in the rugged mountainous area on Burma's northwest with India, known as the Chin State. Six major Chin tribes and 63 "sub-tribes" make their homes here, most living in abject poverty. Each tribe is culturally and linguistically distinct but all belong to the same ethnic stock.

After centuries of relatively peaceful existence in Burma, northern Bangladesh and Mizoram and Manipur (India), the Chin lost their autonomy to British rule in the 17th century. They were hounded from commercial trade routes once used by the British and condemned to subsistence farming for survival. The British Raj, its half-century occupation of India, also coincided with arrival of American Baptist missionaries and the subsequent Christianization of the Chin.

With the end of World War II came Burmese independence — which came officially in January 1948, when the final British troops left the country. Burmese democracy, a hobbled creation from the start, had highs and lows before succumbing to Ne Win's army dictatorship. It has held sway for nearly half a century using intimidation, imprisonment and if necessary political assassination to maintain control over the country.



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Since the 8888 uprising, the CNF and CAN have been relentlessly harassed by army troops seeking a stranglehold on dissent. Before 8888, the China State had no major military presence apart from two youth divisions stationed in the cities Kalaymyo and Kankaw. Two decades later, the Burmese military has 14 battalions with 400 troops spread over 50 established camps. They act as the eyes and ears of the SPDC in the region. They're also responsible for repeated persecution.

Daily Repression

Murder, rape, arbitrary arrests and detention, torture, suspension of religious and movement, forced labor, extortion, confiscation of property — this is the lot of

the Chin at the hands of the regime. In New Delhi, a demonstration by the Chin community against the Burmese regime. Above, the village of Mindat in the Chin region. Below, Indian Deputy Prime Minister Hamid Ansari.

the Chin at the hands of the regime.

The situation has placed the survival of whole villages at risk. An estimated 70 percent of the Chin population lived below the poverty line while 40 percent struggle simply to avoid famine. Most are compelled into forced labor on behalf of the regime. "If there are 365 days in a year, the SPDC demands that we work 165 of them. That means that we have only 200 for ourselves," T.P., a Chin elder, told Human Rights Watch in Mizoram, where he fled in 2008.

The military uses the Chin for the most brutal possible tasks, including hauling cargo through the jungle and the building of roads and troop barracks. Village chiefs are responsible for choosing who works in these details. The chosen are often away from home for long stretches, their whereabouts unknown.

T.P. continues: "Sometimes we are called to work once or twice a month. Other times it's only for three days. Sometimes a month ... We never know. We are offered nothing in exchange. We have to bring everything from home, food, and the tools to do the job, everything. We do a lot of things for them without any salary and while we work for them we can't even attend to our own matters."

The Tatmadaw (the Burmese military) also forces women, children and the sick to



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work. It exempts those who yield to blackmail, usually food or money. Refusing to work means a beating, jail and sometimes death.

In addition to draining time and labor, the military also loots villages at will. What it can't take it extorts. Crops are stolen and sold elsewhere, depriving towns of their livelihood. What food and cash the inhabitants have is taken when troops learn of it. The raids often yield indiscriminate arrests, particularly of the young.

Most are detained for "abetting" the resistance, including T.M., who spent a year in the Thantlang military prison. "The main problem was that the soldiers didn't give enough food to survive on," he told HRW. "There was yes, but often it was full of small stones and pieces of glass. We could eat the beans they offered only after separating it from the impurities that usually came with them. Even the water was bad. We got three cups a day total, for drinking and washing."

The same fate awaits those who challenge strict religious laws. The Chin State is the only part of the country not dominated by the Buddhist majority. This grates on the regime that seeks a single model for national identity. It seeks to impose that model by extinguishing

local traditions, including languages and faiths, with the army as a kind of Buddhism enforcement force at the rural level. Possession and dissemination of the Bible is a crime punishable by a jail term. But in Burma, jail almost invariably includes torture. It's also a crime to "traffic" in Christian symbols such as crucifixes. Churches are banned, so is working to repair those damaged or burned by government troops.

This pattern of abuse ensures a constant flow of Chin from Burma into India, and to lesser extent Thailand and Malaysia. Once again, however, the conditions they face in these states, often hostile to immigrants, can provide little relief from what they left behind.

Intolerance among Christians

The Indian state of Mizoram is home to approximately 100,000 Chin, 20 percent of the state's total population. Many Chin arrive after trooping through the jungle with just the clothes on their backs. Their lack of documents compromises their potential refugees status in the eyes of Indian authorities.

Before the 1888 rebellion, Burmese military control of the Chin was less intense. This permitted some Chin to trade with the Mizo. Others crossed the border and took

jobs as migrant workers. For years, Mizoram authorities and its people were generally tolerant to the immigrants (Mizoram has the second-highest education rate in India). That changed as the influx grew. Soon, welcome and refugee centers became overcrowded, which deepened tension between the two sides. Gradually, the Mizo began organizing against the Chin influx. Incidents of intolerance grew and are now conducted with impunity, local authorities often turning a blind eye.

“[Residents of Mizoram] take advantage of our situation,” said P.D., a Chin interviewed by HRW in 2005 in the Mizoram village of Lawngtlai. “They demand money in exchange for not reporting us to local police and to the YMA (Young Mizo Association). Some people can’t bear the sight of us and try to pick fights. Our life here is hell. We cannot defend ourselves because to do so just means causing problems for the whole. The only solution is to lay low and hope to avoid the threats. Being Burmese means being exposed to discrimination.”

Although the Mizo people belong to the same ethnicity as the Chin, sharing traditions and Christian faith, feel the “foreign minority” constitutes a threat to their livelihood. As a result, the Burmese in this northeastern Indian enclave struggle to find stable employment, let alone homes. They’re also excluded from religious life and their children turned away from local schools. Their security is at risk since Indian authorities do little on their behalf.

As often happens in the rest of India, tension caused by social inequities increases gradually before exploding suddenly, particularly around the time of local or



Most of the Chin community outside Burma is in India, above, where its members tackle the regime in exile. Below, Burmese General Than Shwe with former Indian President Abdul Kalam. India is complicit in discrimination against the Chin.

national elections. Mizoram has already seen its share of anti-foreigner campaigns and their violence. The YMA, which counts 350,000 supporters, or 40 percent of the population, leads the resistance together with the smaller Py Thyutlia Mara (Mara Youth Association, MTP, from the Maraland district of Mizoram).

In July 2003, news that a 9-year-old Mizo girl had been raped by a Chin man led the YMA to issue an ultimatum to the Chin population, circulated through the YMA’s 750 regional offices. They were “ordered” to leave by August. Police and local authorities backed the YMA’s demands, and by August





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some 10,000 Chin had been forcibly driven back across the border into Burma.

While New Delhi knew about the events of 2003, as well as later xenophobic campaigns in 2007 and September 2008, it rarely chastised the Mizo police. It allowed the quiet, methodical efforts deportation to continue. It also permitted the handing over of Chin “suspects” to the SPDC, an act with obvious and usually lethal consequences.

Over the years, the New Delhi government has fielded appeals from Western governments and NGOs such as HRW on behalf of the Chin. So has Pu Lal Thanhawla, the newly-elected president of Mizoram and a member of the Indian National Congress Party. He’s been asked to take in the fleeing Chin and help with their official recognition as refugees.

These appeals are more easily made than followed through with. India never ratified the 1951 Geneva Convention on refugees or its 1967 Protocol. As a result, refugees have the same status as illegal aliens under India’s Registration of Foreigners Act (1939), Foreigners Act (1946) and Foreigners Order (1948). Under Indian law, the Chin can be arrested, imprisoned and repatriated to their country of origin.

Burmese troops systematically raid and loot Chin villages, hoping to compel helpless villagers to work in the bamboo and teak industries.

In an effort to placate Western democracies, New Delhi recently opened its doors to hosting foreign NGOs. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) is also present. But there’s a caveat. Its members are not authorized to examine illegal alien roles or even to travel to areas where immigration concentration is high. The only hope for the Chin, in UN terms, is to reach New Delhi and apply for assistance directly. This effectively calls on them not only to flee Burmese brutality and cope with discrimination in Mizoram, but travel a further 2,460 kilometers to the Indian capital, hoping finally for relief.

India and Burma Ties

To some extent at least, the Indian government has its hands tied on the Chin issue. For years, the country’s remote northeast border has represented something of an Achilles’ heel. It harbors a number of pro-independence groups supported by local populations and armed by China, Bangladesh and Burma.

This had led the government of Manmohan Singh (and before that the one of Atal Vajpayee's Bharatiya Janata Party) to cooperate with the Burmese military in efforts to rein in rebel groups, including that oppose the Burmese regime, and stop opium traffic that heads from the Golden Triangle (Burma, Laos and Thailand) onward to Europe through Mumbai and Nigeria. From the perspective of Burmese regime, the Chin headed for Mizoram are part of the problem (the junta rejects allegations of repression and refuses to acknowledge the existence of a problem). CNA members on the run from the Burmese military are seen, under this arrangement, as enemies of New Delhi.

This situation on partly explains the India's position concerning the Chin. The other factor is economic. India has a major interest in Burma, which has huge deposits of natural gas (2.5 trillion cubic meters, 1.4 percent of the world reserves), coal and oil. It also supplies teak, minerals, nickel, marble and metals and an array of precious stones that India covets.

Burmese exports are rewarded by India with weapons, technology and international support. This trade-off explains why New Delhi repeatedly feels compelled to consider Burmese repression, including the Chin situation, an "internal matter."

In lieu of refugee camps and welcome centers for persecuted Christians trying

desperately to flee Burma, the border has an Indian-made fiber optic telecom line linking the Indian state of Manipur on the Burmese city of Mandalay. The connection was inaugurated in Rangoon in February by ceremonies attended by Indian Vice President Hamid Ansari. Amid the festivities, came new a trade agreement and bilateral development cooperation deal. At the same time, bilateral trade figures covering 2007-2008 showed trade between the two nations worth \$901.3 million, with Burma getting the better of deal: its Indian exports are worth \$727.85, second only to what it gets from China.

China, Rising

New Delhi's approach to Burma must be seen in geopolitical terms. Beijing, seeking to assure growth and influence, needs Rangoon's support. Like its friend-rival India, China needs cheap energy resources and raw materials and is willing to trade weapons to the junta to get them. China's legitimacy helps cover for Burma's international shortfalls, particularly at the UN.

This accounts for the position of China's UN Ambassador Wang Guangya, who rejected Burmese censures proposed by the United States during the monk-led Saffron Revolt of 2007. Beijing was profoundly uncomfortable accepting a precedent in which Buddhist monks brought a military government to its knees. It feared that the fallout could have lapped into Tibet, where Tibetan resistance to China remains alive and well even after 50 years of occupation.

For the Chinese, backing Rangoon also means unfettered access to the Indian Ocean, allowing ships a way to bypass the Strait of Malacca bottleneck (if necessary) and establish strategic military positions in Burma and neighboring islands. China's free access into the Bay of Bengal, ensured by Rangoon, helps Chinese authorities to assist its depressed western territories, creating industries and jobs in an effort to improve stability in critical area light years away from the capital.

Under these complex circumstances, India can't afford to bungle its relationship with Burma. The stakes are simply too high. At issue are economic growth, internal stability and some leverage over the two most powerful armies in Asia.



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