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BURMA: Continuing large-scale religious freedom violations

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

Widespread religious freedom violations by the Burmese government continue, with Christians from the ethnic Karen, Karenni, Chin and Kachin nationalities and Muslim Rohingyas suffering particularly badly, Forum 18 News Service has found. It remains difficult to gather reliable information from inside Burma, but it is estimated that about 300 Buddhist monks and novices are in jail for protesting against the ruling military regime. Regime troops have pulled down the last remaining Christian cross on public display, and the regime has often forced Christian villagers to construct Buddhist pagodas in place of Christian crosses. Christians in the cities have more freedom than in rural areas and according to a Burmese church leader in Rangoon, "we cannot say we are persecuted for our faith - but there are a lot of restrictions". Religious persecution continues to be closely tied to ethnic and political conflicts, and the military regime tightly controls state-permitted religious activity.

Amid widespread government religious freedom violations, Christians among the ethnic Karen, Karenni, Chin and Kachin nationalities and Muslim Rohingyas suffer particularly harsh persecution. But while Burma's ruling military regime, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), promotes the spread of Buddhism in ethnic areas with large Christian or Muslim populations, it is simply using Buddhism as a political tool. When Buddhists themselves are not in line with the junta, they become the target.

The public face of SPDC control of religious communities is the Religious Affairs Ministry, headed by the minister, Brig-Gen Thura Myint Maung and deputy minister Brig-Gen Thura Aung Ko. It is normal for key members of the regime to hold a military rank and the ministry also has branches overseeing religious activity at a local level across the country. The minister eagerly claims to foreign visitors that although Burma is a Buddhist country there is freedom for all faiths.

The SPDC often cloaks itself in the imagery and language of Buddhism when it is politically convenient to do so. In December 2004, a three-day international Buddhist summit was held in the capital, Rangoon [Yangon], attended by over 1,000 Buddhist monks from around the world. The junta's Senior General Than Shwe told the gathering: "We should rid the world of the roots of all evils and sow the seeds of goodwill, tolerance, kindness and altruism for the sake of peace and prosperity."

Yet the SPDC has jailed over 1,400 prisoners of conscience, and is waging war against ethnic minorities. The junta stands accused of a catalogue of human rights violations, including systematic use of rape as a weapon of war, forced labour, forced relocation, forced conscription of child soldiers, human minesweepers, torture, arbitrary killings, and the destruction of villages, crops and livestock amounting to crimes against humanity and, in some areas, genocide. The military junta has also renamed the country Myanmar, as well as changing the name of the capital Rangoon to Yangon, against protests by the democratic opposition that the regime has no right to change these names without consulting the people.

It is extremely difficult to gather reliable detailed information from inside Burma about religious freedom. An estimated 300 Buddhist monks and novices are behind bars, according to a new report released by the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners in Burma (AAPP). The report, *Burma: A Land Where Buddhist Monks are Disrobed and Detained in Dungeons*, provides further evidence of violations of religious freedom in the country.

According to the AAPP report, an estimated 600 monks were killed during the 1988 massacre of pro-democracy demonstrators. Two years later, over 7,000 monks and novices were attacked while receiving alms peacefully on the streets of the central city of Mandalay in memory of the 1988 uprising. Monks and novices have been arrested and imprisoned at various times since then, including in 1990 when the Monks' Union of Mandalay launched an "Overturning the Bowls" campaign of protest at the military regime. Monks rejected food, religious offerings or donations from soldiers or their families, and refused to perform religious ceremonies for military officials or attend ceremonies hosted by representatives of the regime. This boycott spread across the nation.

A second "Overturning the Bowls" campaign was launched in 2003. When monks and novices refused to accept alms from military officials visiting their temple, they were arrested and defrocked. An estimated 300 monks have been forcibly defrocked in prison.

The AAPP calls in its report on all Buddhist organisations around the world to "condemn the Burmese military regime for using religion as a tool for political purposes, and for the State intrusion in Sangha affairs," and urges international Buddhist groups to boycott any religious conferences, seminars, exchanges or visits to Burma until the political situation improves. (The Buddhist term

Sangha in this context means monastic community.)

On 3 January 2005, Burmese army troops pulled down a 15-metre (50-foot) cross built by Chin Christians on a hillside in Matupi, in Chin State of north-western Burma on the Indian border. This was believed to be the last remaining cross on public display. Other crosses in towns such as Tonzang, Tedim, Falam, Hakha and Thantlang have been destroyed in recent years, and the Burma Army has often forced Christian villagers to construct Buddhist pagodas in place of the Christian crosses.

According to the Chin Human Rights Organisation (CHRO), "the regime is vigorously pursuing a policy of religious persecution against Chin Christians in order to expand the influence of Buddhism in Chinland." The Chin people are 90 per cent Christian, and live near Burma's western border with India. "The ultimate goal is to gain control of the Chin people by annihilating their culture, religion and ethnic identity," the CHRO complained. "The destruction of crosses, church buildings and persecution of Christian religious leaders are evidently designed to crush the will and psychology of Chin Christians."

The destruction of the last remaining cross led to protests by exiled Chin Christians in Malaysia and India. In Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 164 Chin protestors were arrested in January after demonstrating outside the Burmese Embassy. Chin Christians delivered a letter to the Burmese Ambassador demanding an end to religious persecution in their homeland. A similar protest took place a week later at the Burmese Embassy in New Delhi, India.

While Christians among the ethnic groups along Burma's borders face severe persecution, Christians in the cities have more freedom. According to one Burmese church leader in Rangoon, "we cannot say we are persecuted for our faith - but there are a lot of restrictions". Churches are restricted on who they may invite to services, what they may say and where they can meet, but they do not face the same harassment that churches in Chin, Karen and Karenni areas face. "We did not see religious people terrorised," one Western church leader who recently visited the country told Forum 18 News Service. "People have freedom of worship but not full religious freedom."

Religious persecution in Burma is closely tied with ethnic and political conflicts, which is why the churches in the cities, firmly under the control of the regime, face less severe problems. "The situation for religious groups is complicated by the internal political situation," the Western Christian leader explained. "Many Christians come from ethnic tribes who are opposed to the government, which does not make things easy for either side."

There have been "positive moves" towards improving religious freedom, the leader adds. In February, 80,000 Roman Catholics gathered for the Second National Eucharistic Congress of Myanmar, at a Marian Centre in Nyanglebin, in Rangoon diocese (the first such gathering since 1956). A special message from Pope John Paul II was read to the assembled crowd by Archbishop Charles Bo of Rangoon, and the Papal Nuncio to Thailand and Apostolic Delegate for Myanmar, Archbishop Salvatore Pennacchio, presided at Mass. A Karen Catholic priest confirms this. "This is true," he told Forum 18. "All the bishops in Burma were there, and many priests and religious men and women were also there. There were no problems at all."

The priest, who cannot be named for security reasons, added: "The Catholic Church does not have many conflicts with the ruling society. Because the Church inside Burma doesn't get involved in political struggles, the Church right inside Burma is free to celebrate the feasts."

After the important Islamic feast of Eid-ul-Adha in January 2005, there were reports of Muslim Rohingyas in the northern Arakan State being taxed by regime troops for animals sacrificed in celebration of the feast, as well as being targeted for financial extortion at Buddhist festivals, and being encouraged by regime troops to take part in such festivals. For the first time in recent years, Muslims are said to have been banned from celebrating Eid in the open air and restricted to celebrating the feast in mosques. There have also been reports of violence against Muslims instigated by regime-backed Buddhist monks.

The military government retains tight oversight over all religious meetings, with specific permission required for any special event or for a visitor to address a religious gathering. Religious leaders are subject to close oversight and government spies are believed to operate within religious communities. Some religious literature is published within the country, though under the authorities' watchful eye. Religious groups that try to maintain contact with fellow-believers abroad assume that their contacts are monitored by the authorities.

- 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).

For background information, see Forum 18's Burma religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=396

A printer-friendly map of Burma, under the regime's name of Myanmar, is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=myanma>

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