

Burmese Army Oppresses Chin Christians, Study Says

Burmese soldiers are systematically using forced labor, torture and rape to persecute majority-Christian residents of Chin state in western Burma, according to a report released today.

Entitled, "Life Under the Junta: Evidence of Crimes Against Humanity in Burma's Chin State," the report by Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) documented "extraordinary levels of state violence" against the Chin ethnic population in Burma, also called Myanmar.

Due to the influence of U.S. missionaries last century, the Chin are estimated to be 90 percent Christian, and the study indicates that it is therefore difficult to separate religious attacks from ethnic and other human rights abuses. Persecution of Christians is reportedly part of a wider campaign by the Burmese junta to create a uniform society in which the only accepted religion is Buddhism, according a 2007 government memo circulated in Karen state giving instructions on how to drive Christians out of the state.

Respondents who were specifically targeted for their Christian faith and ethnicity said soldiers had threatened them with the destruction of their homes or villages and threatened to harm or kill family members. A total of 71 households from 13 of 90 villages and towns surveyed also said government authorities had destroyed their local church buildings.

The most brutal attacks included the forced conscription, abduction or murder of children under the age of 15, and the rape of men, women and children. Burmese soldiers, locally known as the Tatmadaw, also confiscated food, livestock and

other property and forced families to grow the cash crop jatropha, used to produce biofuel, instead of food crops required for basic survival. The study states that this caused many Chin to flee across land borders to India or Bangladesh.

Burmese soldiers were responsible for 94.2 percent of all specifically ethnic and religious incidents in the survey, supporting claims by advocacy organizations such as Christian Solidarity Worldwide that the military government is systematically working to “cleanse” Burma of ethnic and religious minorities.

Government agents also placed votes for Chin residents during national elections last November, warning them that soldiers in a nearby camp were ready to arrest them if they complained, and ordered a church to close after the pastor refused to wear a campaign T-shirt. (See “Burmese Officials Order Closure of Chin Church,” Nov. 18, 2010.)

When asked why the Burmese army acted as it did, 15 percent of respondents answered, “Because we are Christians.” Another 23 percent replied, “To persecute us,” and a further 23 percent said, “Because we are Chin.”

The report confirms evidence submitted to the United Nations for Burma’s Universal Periodic Review, to take place in Geneva from Jan. 24 through Feb. 4, that holds the ruling military junta responsible for widespread abuse of its citizens.

“Crimes Against Humanity”

PHR and five partner organizations, including the Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO), used scientific methods to carry out the survey in the early months of 2010, training 23 local surveyors to question a random sample of 621 households across all nine townships in Chin state. PHR identified the households only by survey number to protect their identity.

Those interviewed reported a total of 2,951 incidents in the

previous 12 months, of which 95 percent were carried out by the Tatmadaw, local government officials, Burmese police or border security forces.

The report made a clear distinction between internationally recognized “crimes against humanity” and general human rights violations. Of the crimes against humanity, the most prevalent was forced labor for 91.9 percent of those surveyed, followed by ethnic-religious persecution at 14 percent. After these crimes came arbitrary arrest, detention or imprisonment at 5.9 percent, abduction at 4.8 percent, torture at 3.8 percent, rape or other sexual violations at 2.8 percent, murder at 1 percent and miscellaneous abuses at 0.2 percent.

As for lesser human rights violations, 52.5 percent of households surveyed reported livestock killed, 50.6 percent were forced to give food, 42.8 percent forced to give money, 12.8 percent had property attacked or destroyed, 11.2 percent had family members beaten and 9.1 percent had family members wounded from gunshots, explosions or deadly weapons.

In many cases, people suffered from the full range of human rights violations.

Six households, or 1 percent of those surveyed, reported family members killed by the Tatmadaw in 2009, with two households reporting multiple family members killed, and two of the victims being under the age of 15. Three of the six households believed they were specifically targeted because of their ethnicity and Christian faith.

An elderly grandfather who spoke to PHR in March 2010 said he felt depressed and helpless after a year when the Tatmadaw killed an 18-year-old family member and forced others in the family to build roads, porter supplies and carry weapons, threatening to kill them if they refused. The military also stole livestock, demanded food supplies, and forced the family to grow a single crop rather than food crops needed for basic

survival.

"We dare not refuse the Tatmadaw, as even mothers with little children are beaten," one respondent said.

Burmese soldiers tortured more than one person in the family of a 46-year-old man, while local government authorities forced them to relinquish livestock, food and money. Seventeen percent of torture victims and 29 percent of rape victims were under the age of 15.

A 36-year-old father of five in Paletwa township said Burmese soldiers had raped more than one member of his family at knifepoint within the past year, arbitrarily detained another member of the household at gunpoint, conscripted a family member into the army and burned down the church that once stood in his village.

In a foreword to PHR's report, Richard Goldstone, a PHR board member and former U.N. chief prosecutor, and the Rev. Desmond Tutu of Chairman of The Elders, an independent group of prominent global leaders, urged that a U.N. commission of inquiry be established to investigate reports of human rights violations in Burma.

"It is unconscionable that suffering as dire as that of the Chin people under Burma's dictatorship should be allowed to persist in silence," they wrote.

They also urged Burma's immediate neighbors and trade partners to use the occasion of Burma's Universal Periodic Review to discuss the violations committed in Chin state and elsewhere in Burma, and work towards an alternative "roadmap" to democracy for the Burmese people.