

Minorities in Burma

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Who are Burma's minorities?

Burma has over 100 ethnic groups, languages and dialects and is said to have the richest ethnic diversity in Asia. Such diversity is attributed to the country's geographic location on a strategic crossroads, where historically it had acted as a buffer between the neighbouring powers of India, China and Thailand. Over 2,000 years of cross border migration and intermixing between cultures has led to the development of diverse ethnic settlements and communities residing typically in the mountainous frontier zones of the country.

There is no reliable census data available on Burma's ethnic minorities, although the government claims that there are 135 'national races'. Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Shan, Chin, Mon and Rakhine (Arakan) states take on the names of the seven minority groups who historically were able to negotiate state/territorial boundaries with the government. However, in themselves these states are not ethnically homogenous.

Of a population of 50 million people, the majority Burman constitute 50–75 per cent. The largest minorities are Shan (9 per cent) and Karen (7 per cent) groups, and Mon, Rakhine, Chin, Kachin, Karenni, Kayan, Chinese, Indian, Danu, Akha, Kokang, Lahu, Naga, Palaung, Pao, Rohynga, Tavoyan, and Wa peoples constitute 5 per cent or less of the population.¹

Historical and political context

Despite Burma's rich cultural heritage its history is one tainted by political violence, tensions between and within ethnic groups, ethnic and religious discrimination and persecution, amongst many other serious violations of human rights. Until British annexation of Burma as an Indian province in 1886 the country had never existed as a unified nation state, with its present geographical boundaries encompassing 100 different nationalities and centralised government administration. To date this remains a key issue and minority demands continue to be centred around rights to self-determination, autonomy, federalism and the right to manage the resources found within their territories.



Shan men relax in Tanna Kwei Point in Karenni State, having escaped from the Burmese army. Forced at gunpoint to carry munitions to the frontline, they had been away from their homes for two months.

Dean Chapman/Panos Pictures

In 1947 General Aung San, leader of the Burma Independence Army, was able to negotiate a plan for independence with the British colonial authorities and convince minority groups to join the Union of Burma. Through the Panglong Agreement (1947) Aung San outlined his government's commitment to minority rights and specifically gave the Shan, Chin, Kachin and Karenni peoples the option to secede from the union 10 years after independence. However, such aspirations were short lived as in July 1947 Aung San and most of his Burman dominated cabinet were assassinated. Karen, Mon and other ethnic nationalities which had not participated in the constituent assembly elections, together with the Communist Party of Burma, became dissatisfied with the new government, led by the civilian elected Prime Minister U' Nu, for its failure to heed minority demands for independence and federalism, and eventually took up arms against it.

In 1962, in the name of the defence of the territorial identity of the Union of Burma, a military coup was staged

by General Ne Win of the Burmese Socialist Programme Party which proceeded to crackdown on ethnic minority political leaders and pro-democracy activists. Discontentment became further entrenched and the opposition again took up arms, including in ethnic areas. This marked the beginning of an endless cycle of war and ethnic insurgency which has engulfed the country until the present day.

Current situation

The conflict

In 1997 the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) replaced the State Law and Order Restoration Council which had taken power through a military coup in 1988. By the 21st century ceasefire agreements had been signed with the majority of ethnic opposition groups. However, according to the Burma Campaign UK a number of ethnic minority parties have refused to sign ceasefire agreements, including the Karen National Union, the Shan State Army, the Karenni National Progressive Party, the Chin National Front, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland and various Arakan Rohingya groups. Some independent analysts and the Karen Human Rights Group argue that ceasefires have not guaranteed greater human or political rights for ethnic minorities and the government remains steadfast in its refusal to discuss any form of federalism. According to the 2007 report of the UN's Special Rapporteur on Myanmar on the north eastern Thai-Burma border (areas populated by Mon, Shan and Kaya) and in the western areas of the country (areas populated by Rohingya), government-led counter-insurgency operations continue and are characterised by high intensity violence and repression involving the use of excessive force and fire arms, and severe abuses of the human rights of unarmed civilians.

Minorities' political rights and representation

Due to decades of conflict Burma has become one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world. In 1993 to attract international loans and humanitarian assistance the SPDC took steps to initiate reform. This came through the 'seven point road map for national reconciliation and democratic transition' which would include the drawing up of a new constitution through the National Convention, and moves toward greater participation in the global economy. The National League for Democracy (NLD) headed by Aung San Suu Kyi, and many ethnic political parties that had won the majority of seats in the 1990 elections initially acceded to this process. But by 2006 many ethnic and pro-democracy parties including the NLD had withdrawn due to the government's failure to uphold and respect the fundamental freedoms of its opponents. Human Rights Watch continues to warn of a return to ethnic insurgency by dissatisfied minority parties

who participated in this process but remain largely excluded by the SPDC.

The National Convention came to an end in September 2007. However, in October the government resumed the process with a new committee set up to write the constitution. Proceedings continue to be boycotted by the NLD who are concerned that it will not reflect the true wishes of the people, and the office of the UN Secretary General has urged the government to make the process more credible and inclusive. A key issue to be tackled will be the role of the military in the future Burma. The National Convention has been criticized widely by human rights groups who believe that its aim is to legitimise military rule.

According to the Special Rapporteur, as of 16 December 2006, 1,201 political prisoners were still languishing in state-run prisons, with a further unknown number of prisoners being detained in ethnic areas and secret jails. In addition leaders from ethnic political parties including the Chairperson of Shan State and the NLD have been detained and given prison sentences of 100 years or more.

Human rights

Civilians living in ethnic areas are the worst affected by the country's 60-year-old war, constituting the majority of its victims. The Special Rapporteur says that between 1996 and 2006 the war generated an estimated 1 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) many of whom were drawn from ethnic nationalities. According to the Thailand Burma Border Consortium and local partner organisations there are currently 503,000 IDPs in surveyed sites in eastern Burma and Human Rights Watch estimates that there are around 150,000 refugees living in 10 border camps in Thailand. Humanitarian assistance is denied to IDPs as the SPDC does not allow UN agencies or humanitarian organisations to gain access to this population.

Civilians are also forcibly relocated to state-run and heavily militarised villages where their human rights are severely violated by SPDC soldiers. Such abuses include extra-judicial and summary executions, human minesweeping, torture, extortion and confiscation of minority lands.

Forced labour continues to affect the lives of hundreds of people in ethnic areas working in 'model' villages and on small scale government-run infrastructure projects, despite Burma being a signatory to International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention 29 concerning Forced or Compulsory Labour (1930), and repeated condemnation from the ILO.

In 2006 the Special Rapporteur received reports of several cases of sexual violence and abuse being committed against ethnic minority women, including 30 cases of rape of Chin women. In Kayin State the impacts of such abuse carried out by the military has also been documented.



of Rakhaing. In an October 2007 Associated Press article Karen National Union secretary general Mahn Sha said “We need to work together with the Mon, other groups, the students, to oust the (junta). We have a common enemy and common goals.”

Shan

Most ethnic Shan live in Shan State but smaller communities of this ethnic group can be found living in the state of Kachin. Most are Theravada Buddhists, with some elements of animist practices. They speak a language which is part of the Tai-Kadai language family, and closely related to Thai and Lao. The Shan are probably Burma’s largest minority with an estimated population of 3–4 million.²

The Shan continue to be at the receiving end of horrendous violations of their human rights because of the ongoing conflict between some Shan rebel groups and Burmese army. Military and other government authorities are persistently reported as committing human rights violations, including forced labour, portering or conscription, arbitrary detention, torture, rape, sexual slavery, and extrajudicial killings, especially in central and southern Shan State. Many Shan in 2006 fled to Thailand as refugees due to such violations. Leaders of the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (closely associated with Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy), first arrested in 2005, were still detained in early 2007.

Religious discrimination

The stateless Rohingya Muslim minority still faces deep discrimination as the government refuses to recognise them as an official ethnic group and denies them equal citizenship rights. In addition freedom of movement for the Rohingyas is severely restricted, and they are unable to access medical and educational services because they cannot travel outside their respective villages.

To a lesser extent, Christian minorities such as the Karen and Karenni also continue to experience forms of discrimination and harassment due to their Christian beliefs.

Pro-democracy protests 2007

Historically ethnic nationality parties and pro-democracy movements have worked in alliance. During the SPDC crackdowns of the 1970s, in 1988 and in 1990, pro-democracy activists sought refuge in ethnic minority held areas of the country. It was in such areas that alliances were established and where the exiled elected government of Burma was formed.

Information on the involvement of ethnic minorities in the Rangoon pro-democracy protests in October 2007 is hard to come by. Despite their lack of visibility in reports on the demonstration (due in part to the fact that they live mainly in rural areas), groups such as the Karen, Shan, Karenni and Rohingya joined the protests on the Thai-Burma border and in the city of Sittwe in the western state

Karen

The term ‘Karen’ refers to a number of ethnic groups with Tibetan-Central Asian origins who speak twelve distinct but related languages (‘Karenic languages’). These languages are part of the Tibeto-Burman group of the Sino-Tibetan family. The vast majority of Karen are Buddhists, although around a third of the population converted to Christianity during British rule.

In Karen areas armed opposition to the SPDC continues and as such the Karen continue to suffer the brunt of extrajudicial executions, forced labour, forced relocation and confiscation of land, human minesweeping and the burning of villages, rape and other forms of sexual violence, as well as discrimination by state authorities in areas such as language use and education. In 2006 alone 27,000 people in eastern Burma became IDPs. Many have also fled across the border to Thailand as refugees.

Mon

2007 US State Department statistics estimate the Mon population at being just below 1 million. The Mon however, contend this figure believing that their numbers are between 4–8 million. Most ethnic Mon live in or near Mon State, with Thailand to its east and the Andaman Sea coastline to its west.

Mon is a Monic language from the Mon-Khmer group of Austro-Asiatic languages. Many Mon are bilingual and also use the Burmese language, while some only speak in Burmese. The vast majority of Mon are Theravada Buddhists, with some elements of animist practices.

In areas where ceasefire agreements have not held the Burmese army has continued to conduct occasional raids, causing severe human rights violations, including enforced labour, displacement, rape, murder, and land confiscation. As a result, there has been mass displacement to Thailand. Mon state has become heavily militarised since 2000 and this has hampered efforts to redress the number of IDPs.

The government banned the use of the Mon language, and they are hugely under-represented in state institutions due to discriminatory practices which favour ethnic Burmans.

UN and international agencies based in Rangoon have very limited access to Mon cease-fire areas.

Kachin

The Kachin encompass a number of ethnic groups and speak almost a dozen distinct languages belonging to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family. They live in northern Burma on the border with China, mainly in Kachin State.

There are no reliable statistics on the Kachin population, however estimates suggest there are around one million. The Kachin are one the largest Christian minorities with around 10 percent following Buddhist practices, with some elements of animism. Kachin state saw a two-fold increase in the presence of the SPDC army in 2007. This has led to more human rights violations including land confiscations, forced labour and sexual violence. The SPDC is also appointing ethnic Burmans to most administrative positions leading to a decline in the use of the Kachin language

Kachin women and children are being driven by poverty into the sex trade in Rangoon and China.

As Christians the Kachin are being subjected to conversion activities and discriminatory treatment by SPDC authorities, such as rewards for conversion to Buddhism, exemption from forced labour, lower prices for basic foodstuffs, and greater educational opportunities including free schooling for those that send their children to Buddhist monasteries.

Rohingya and Muslims

Burma's mainly Sunni Muslims constitute 4 per cent of the population³ and live mostly in the north of Rakhine State (also known as Arakan).

The majority of Muslims in Rakhine State are known as 'Rohingya'. Their language (Rohingya) is derived from the Bengali language and is similar to the Chittagonian dialect spoken in Bangladesh.

A second group of Muslims in Rakhine State are known as Arakanese or Burmese Muslims. They speak Rakhine, closely related to the Burmese language and tend to share similar customs to the Rakhine Buddhists.

The human rights situation of the Rohingya and Arakanese Muslims has deteriorated. Lack of citizenship has maintained their exclusion from employment and other opportunities.

The requirement of a permit for Rohingya to get married remains and has led to a backlog of applications, and years of delay before permission is granted.

The hardening of restrictions of movement have disproportionately affected the Rohingya in northern Rakhine since 2005, as a pass is now required for any movement between villages, even for day trips to health clinics.

The army continues to be guilty of imposing forced labour on Rohingya villagers and children. Forced labour is used for construction and maintenance of military camps, shrimp farms and plantations, portering, and the establishment of model villages.

Human rights violations such as land confiscations, discriminatory restrictions on employment, education, access to forest resources and arable land, together with tighter controls of local economies, and arbitrary taxes, has created problems of poverty and food insecurity.

Chin

The Chin are of Sino-Tibetan origin and inhabit a mountain chain which roughly covers western Burma through to Mizoram in north-east India and small parts of Bangladesh. They are composed of a number of ethnic groups.

A mountain people by tradition, perhaps 80 per cent are Christians, while most of the remaining population are mainly Buddhists or Animists, with a very small Jewish community.

Combined with the difficulty in accessing state schools and the denial of education in their own language, the Chins are severely disadvantaged by the military regime's educational and employment policies.

Christians such as the Chins living in major cities like Rangoon face restrictions on the construction of places of worship and public manifestations of religion.

The living conditions of Chin State are continuing to degrade. Land confiscations for tea and jatropha plantations controlled by the army continue unabated. The army continues to force Chin to work against their will and without pay on these plantations.

The overall situation in Chin State has worsened as violations of human rights have gone unpunished. Chin state has become increasingly militarised. There has been an increase in reported cases of forced labour, closing of Chin schools, summary killings and arbitrary arrests against local Chins by SPDC security forces.

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Karenni

Karenni, sometimes also known as the Red Karen or Kayah, actually refers to a Karen grouping which includes a number of ethnic groups.

There is no reliable data, but it is estimated that they may number 250,000. The Karenni live in Kayah State, situated between Shan State to the northwest and Karen State to the southwest. There is also a sizeable Karenni-speaking population in Shan State. In general most Karennis are Christians, though a large percentage is Buddhist.

The Karenni live in Burma's smallest state in the least developed region of the country. It is also one of the states most closed to foreigners.

The situation of Karenni has not improved since the conclusion of ceasefires in 1994 and 1995. Forced displacements and militarization of the state by the Burmese army has been accompanied with claims of forced labour, land confiscation for mining and logging activities, involuntary relocation, torture, arbitrary executions, and sexual violence. Such violations have all negatively impacted the small population of Kayah State and have led to malnutrition, poor health and a disproportionate lack of

education opportunities compared to other parts of the country.

The Karenni have been excluded from any benefits that have arisen from development projects and many of these have also led to serious environmental degradation and deforestation, seriously hampering many of the Karenni's traditional agricultural and economic activities.

Notes

- 1 Burma Campaign UK, 2004; *CIA World Factbook*, 2007
- 2 *Ethnologue* 2001; US State Department 2007
- 3 *CIA World Factbook*, 2006

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