

## Christian ethnic groups harassed and abused by Burmese army

Country/Region: Myanmar, Burma, South and East Asia

A conference of over 1,000 Chin Christians was disrupted by Burmese soldiers, while a brutal military offensive against another predominantly Christian ethnic group continues.

Several soldiers interrupted the gathering of delegates from 80 local branches of the Chin Evangelical Church at Sabawngte village in Matupi Township, southern Chin state, on 10 March.

They rebuked the village headman for not informing them about the event, although permission had been obtained, as required for Christian gatherings, from the township general administrative office.

Pu Van Cin, a Chin MP from the Ethnic National Development Party, had a gun pointed at his stomach by an army captain when he tried to intervene.

The soldiers continued to disrupt the conference for the rest of the day, and at night, as the worship service was about to begin, a captain carrying a gun entered the makeshift church while ten soldiers stood guard around it. They returned to their camp the next day.

The conference, which ran from 8-13 March, then continued without further disruption.

The Chin are estimated to be 90% Christian. Most Christians in Burma are from non-Burman ethnic minorities; they are frequently targeted by the military because of both their faith and their ethnicity.

Salai Za Uk Ling, program director for the Chin Human Rights Organisation, said, "It is very difficult for Chin Christians to hold large gatherings without harassment and disruption."

### Brutal offensive continues

Elsewhere, in Kachin – another predominantly Christian state – the Burmese military is continuing its brutal offensive; this has led to the displacement of some 75,000 people, who are in desperate need of food, medicine and shelter.

Human Rights Watch said that the Burmese army has attacked Kachin villages, razed homes, pillaged properties, threatened and tortured civilians during interrogations and raped women. Children as young as 14 have been conscripted as forced labourers.

The military launched its offensive in Kachin State in June; it broke a 17-year ceasefire with the Kachin Independence Organisation, which controls the territory, by attacking ethnic forces.

Soldiers have seized churches, fired at worshippers and imposed severe restrictions on Christian activities.

### Reforms commended

Burma has been commended by the international community for the recent human rights and pro-democracy reforms it has made, but continuing abuses against the predominantly Christian ethnic-minority groups show that the country still has a long way to go.

There is hope of further improvement, as by-elections on 1 April have been opened up to the opposition. The greatly respected pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi is running for a seat in the national parliament.



Ethnic minority Christians are often targeted by the Burmese military