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CSW urges Burma's government to stop military offensive against Kachin immediately

CSW (28.12.2012) - Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) today urged Burma's military to end its offensive against the majority Christian Kachin people in northern Burma immediately, and called on the international community to put pressure on the government of Burma to engage in a meaningful political dialogue with the Kachin and other ethnic nationalities.

According to news reports, four jet fighters and two helicopter gunships were used this morning to attack Kachin Independence Army (KIA) troops close to their headquarters at Laiza, on the China-Burma border. The aerial attack follows several days of shelling and a significant increase in troop movement and fighting.

The Burma Army has been conducting a military offensive against the Kachin since June 2011, breaking a ceasefire that had lasted for 17 years. Over 100,000 civilians have been internally displaced since the war began, and the Burma Army has been accused of grave human rights violations, including rape, torture, destruction of villages, looting and desecration of churches, and killing civilians. The offensive has intensified severely in recent days.

Andrew Johnston, CSW's Advocacy Director, said: "The dramatic escalation in the Burma Army's assault on the Kachin is deeply disturbing. To launch aerial attacks and deploy fighter jets and helicopter gunships marks the most serious intensification in this conflict since the war began. The government of Burma must be urged to stop this offensive immediately, and engage in a genuine peace process. The KIA, and its political arm, the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO), are seeking autonomy and equal rights in a federal, democratic Burma, not secession, and have made clear their desire to talk. But they are demanding a genuine peace process, involving a political dialogue, to find a lasting solution to decades of war, not simply a ceasefire. President Thein Sein and his government present an image of reform to the world, but how can reform be serious if it is accompanied by fighter jets and helicopter gunships? Unless reform is accompanied by a genuine peace process, it will not lead to the lasting change Burma's people desire and deserve. The international community must take this latest escalation very seriously, and must make it clear to Thein Sein that unless the Burma Army's offensive stops and a peace process begins, international pressure will be applied."

Rohingya Muslims persecuted after Myanmar crackdown

By Martin Petty

Reuters (01.08.2012) - Myanmar security forces killed, raped or carried out mass arrests of Rohingya Muslims after deadly sectarian riots in the northeast in June, a rights group said on Wednesday, adding the authorities had done little to prevent the initial unrest.

Aid workers were blocked and in some cases arrested, and Rohingyas bore the brunt of a government crackdown in Rakhine state after a week of arson and machete attack by both ethnic Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingyas, New York-based Human Rights Watch said in a report.

Based on 57 interviews with Rakhines and Rohingyas, the report seeks to shed light on a conflict that exposed deep-rooted communal animosity and put the spotlight on promises by the civilian government in office since 2011 to protect human rights after decades of brutal army rule.

"Burmese security forces failed to protect the Arakan (Rakhine) and Rohingya from each other and then unleashed a campaign of violence and mass round-ups against the Rohingya," said Brad Adams, Asia director at Human Rights Watch.

"The government claims it is committed to ending ethnic strife and abuse, but recent events in Arakan State demonstrate that state-sponsored persecution and discrimination persist."

Foreign Minister Wunna Maung Lwin said on Monday the authorities had exercised "maximum restraint" in restoring law and order and that the rioting was not fuelled by religious persecution.

He rejected what he said were attempts to "politicise and internationalise the situation as a religious issue", adding that the government was eager to promote "racial harmony among different nationalities".

In veiled criticism of the United States and European Union, which praised the government for its handling of the unrest, Adams said the international community had been "blinded by a romantic narrative of sweeping change" in Myanmar.

The former Burma has a diverse ethnic and religious make-up, but the Rohingya Muslims are not included by the government. There are at least 800,000 Rohingyas in the country but they are not recognised as one of its ethnic groups.

Neighbouring Bangladesh does not accept them and pushed boatloads back out to sea when they tried to flee the unrest.

"Resettle them"

Myanmar President Thein Sein said in June the government was only responsible for third-generation Rohingyas whose families had arrived before independence in 1948 and that it was impossible to accept those who had "illegally entered" Myanmar.

He recommended that the United Nations refugee agency UNHCR take care of them in camps or resettle them in third countries. UNHCR chief Antonio Guterres replied it could only resettle refugees that fled from one country to another.

The riots followed two brutal incidents in Rakhine state: the May 28 rape and murder of a Rakhine woman by three Rohingya males, who were sentenced to death, and the June 3 lynching in response of 10 non-Rohingya Muslims travelling on a bus.

Human Rights Watch said police and troops did not intervene to stop the mobs from beating the Muslims to death. During the riots that followed, it said some Rohingyas who tried to flee or put out fires at their homes were shot at by paramilitaries.

It called for the government to end abuses, grant full humanitarian access and invite in international monitors. Access to the area remains restricted.

Thein Sein is in a tight spot. Concessions towards the Rohingyas could prove unpopular among the general public, but perceived ill-treatment risks angering Western countries that have eased sanctions in response to human rights reforms.

Minister of Border Affairs Thein Htay says 858 people have been detained for involvement in the violence, including five UNHCR staff and a U.N. World Food Programme employee. It was unclear how many of the total were Rohingya or ethnic Rakhine.

The Foreign Ministry has said 77 people died and 109 were injured during the violence, and nearly 5,000 homes burnt down.

(Additional reporting by Aung Hla Tun in Yangon; Editing by Alan Raybould and Nick Macfie)

Burma reforms offer no respite for ethnic Christians

Minorities in war zones continue to suffer.

By Vishal Arora

Compass Direct News (04.05.2012) – Amid global euphoria over reforms in Burman-majority parts of Burma, life has changed little for more than 3 million Christians and other minorities left to suffer from one of the world's longest running civil wars.

Headlines around the world hailed the induction on Wednesday (May 2) of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi into parliament as the beginning of a new era in Burma, officially known as Myanmar. But for the 150,000 Internally Displaced People (IDP) living in eastern Karen state's 4,000 IDP camps, life is still about landmine blasts, gun and mortar attacks, and the possibility of a final war between armed insurgents and the Burma army.

Burmese President Thein Sein, a former military general, has introduced political reforms – the release of hundreds of political prisoners, new laws allowing labor unions and strikes and a gradual easing of media restrictions – and has reportedly ordered troops to stop offensive in ethnic areas, but senior military officials have not heeded his orders.

As part of its reform initiatives, the Burmese government is trying to ink ceasefire agreements with armed ethnic groups, including the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO). Karen rebels, however, believe the talks are a government strategy to buy time and prepare for a showdown.

"We have seen similar efforts by the government in 1949, 1963, 1996 and 2004, but each time talks broke down," said Saw Htee Ler, a rebel leader with the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), the armed wing of the KNU, which has been fighting for autonomy for more than five decades.

The government strategy, he added, is to engage the KNU in peace talks so that the military can bring supplies – arms, ammunition and food – into KNU-controlled areas without clashes.

“They have been able to freely bring in supplies in huge quantities without our men attacking them due to the tentative peace agreement reached in January,” Ler said. “They seem to be getting ready for major military operations against us in the near future.”

Aw John Nay Moo, a Karen commando from the KNLA’s “Special Force,” said the KNLA was still recruiting and training people.

“Peace talks do not mean our struggle is over,” he said. “We need to be ready all the time for a possible clash.”

Christian civilians targeted

Most of Burma’s Christians are from the ethnic minority groups of Karen, Karenni, Kachin and Chin and are predominantly Baptist. It is estimated that roughly 1.4 million Karens and Karenni, 1.1 million Chins and 900,000 Kachins are Christian.

While it is largely a struggle for self-determination in all ethnic states and all civilians suffer in the crossfire, the Burman-Buddhist dominated Burmese troops are often accused of being harsher on Christian civilians than on their Buddhist counterparts.

Ler, who was guarding a base on a hill about 30 minutes from an IDP camp, said military personnel target civilians because they are seen as the strength of the KNU.

“And Christians are targeted simply because their [government troops’] religion is Buddhist,” he said.

Ler said he had seen pictures of burned churches and received reports of such incidents.

Moo, the KNLA commando, agreed that Christian civilians were attacked more than Buddhist civilians. He cited a 2007 incident in Pekey Der village in Papu District under the KNLA Brigade 5 area, where troops burned down a church and “defecated on the Bible.” Moo said he learned of the incident from the church pastor.

Ler and Moo, who said they are Christians, said that they joined the KNLA to protect their land and people.

Saw Tu Tu, head of the Karen Refugee Committee, said that while all civilians face attacks, troops will not kill a Buddhist monk. “Military personnel usually take shelter in Buddhist temples,” he added.

Some churches, however, are attacked out of misunderstanding, he said.

“KNLA soldiers run to hilltops – that’s where churches are normally built – to take a strategic position when military personnel launch attacks on them,” Tu said. “And troops think the bullets are being fired from the church, and they retaliate.”

Naw K’nyaw Paw, an executive member of the Karen Women Organization who just returned from a trip to several Karen villages, said many Christians install Buddhist statues and keep Buddhist pictures in their homes to prevent attacks.

"A Christian-majority village under the KNU Brigade 1 area has turned into a Buddhist village, and the church there has been converted into a Buddhist temple, just so that government troops will not attack them," Paw said.

In "White" and "Brown Zones," where the government has full or partial control respectively, the medium of instruction is Burmese and not the Karen language, she added.

"They don't even teach Karen history," Paw said. "The government is clearly seeking cultural uniformity. We fear that we will be assimilated into the Burman culture if we give up our struggle."

Women suffer more, she said, noting that government soldiers force local people, including women, to work as their porters, and women are often harassed sexually.

Some cases of extortion by KNLA soldiers have also come to light, but most Karen people believe these are isolated cases and maintain that KNU's policies strictly prohibit unethical practices.

The religious dimension of the conflict can also be seen in the origin of the KNU. On Christmas Eve of 1948, Burmese forces launched a mortar-and-gun attack on a church in Mergui in southern Tenasserim Division, author Ashley South writes in his book, "Ethnic Politics in Burma: States of Conflict." Over 80 Karens were killed and several injured. This was followed by deployment of Burmese troops in Karen state in January 1949. The KNU was then formed, followed by the KNLA.

In 1961, then-Prime Minister U Nu's government passed the State Religion Bill in a joint session of parliament, making Buddhism the state religion. This deepened the conviction of the ethnic minorities that the Union government was being used as a tool for Burmanization and "occupation" of their areas. This followed the formation of the KIO, comprising mainly Christians, and its armed wing, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) in Kachin state, bordering China.

In predominantly Christian Kachin state, government troops have attacked KIA soldiers and civilians since a 17-year ceasefire broke down in June last year. The fighting has displaced over 75,000 people since then, according to the Kachin Development Networking Group.

Most recently, Burmese troops fired mortar shells between Bhamo area and the city of Laiza on April 26 despite ongoing peace talks. The shelling killed two children and injured two civilian adults in Kone Law village, Kachin News Group reported. The same day, heavy fighting was reported near the northern town of Laiza, KIO's main base, as rebels sought to block attempts by the Burma army to deliver reinforcements and supplies to a strategic army position.

Around 3,000 government forces have moved into locations around Laiza, according to Agence France-Presse.

"They are preparing to attack the KIA base in Laiza ... they have reinforced a lot of troops and sent a lot of artillery but have not attacked yet," an anonymous official was quoted as saying.

Some, however, are still hopeful of a peaceful resolution in ethnic states.

Nyo Ohn Myint, a senior member of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party, who is helping the government to establish peace with ethnic armed groups, said there was a deep-rooted mistrust between the two sides that was hindering peace talks. He hoped for a change in the relationship between the two sides by around 2020.

Little or no change

Amid conflicting media reports on how reforms have impacted ethnic minority states along Burma's borders, where most Christians live, Compass met the displaced civilians and rebels from the KNLA at an IDP camp on a hill surrounded by landmines. The 3,000 people in this camp live in a forest area that the Burma army has unofficially designated as a "Black Zone," an area entirely under the control of rebels.

Government troops stationed not too far from the hill can shoot-on-sight not only at Karen rebels but also civilians.

"I have no idea about the reforms being introduced in 'Burma Proper,' said 59-year-old Pohla Win, a lay leader of a Baptist church in the camp. "I have just heard about it on BBC Burmese radio."

Win was seated on the floor of his house, made of bamboo and dry leaves, overlooking the Salween River where Karen children were swimming.

"I and my family will be killed on the way if we attempt to go back to our village," he said.

Win said he fled his village in 1985 after Burmese troops launched an offensive in the area. But he arrived in this camp 18 years later, running from one village to another, walking on terrain where landmines had been laid by both the military and the rebels. Most of the families here had similar stories of how they reached the camp.

There is relative peace in the state after a tentative agreement was reached between the KNU and the government in January.

"Government check-posts are now less strict, and there are fewer clashes between troops and Karen soldiers," said Paw of the Karen Women Organization. But there is "absolutely no change" in Black Zones, she added.

In February, more than 1,100 new refugees, about 450 of them Christian, arrived at the seven refugee camps in Thailand, "which shows there were clashes between the troops and Karen soldiers after the January's peace agreement," said Tu of the Karen Refugee Committee. This is in addition to the existing 74,000 registered and 53,000 unregistered refugees in those camps.

The Karen are among six other non-Burman ethnic groups – including Karenni, Kachin, Chin, Mon and Shan – that do not see their land as part of Burma. During British rule, which ended in 1948, the states where ethnic people lived were collectively known as "Frontier Areas" and were administered separately by the British, as opposed to "Burma Proper," which was, and is, home to ethnic Burmans, mostly Buddhist.

After independence – while ethnic minority leaders were discussing with their Burman counterparts conditions under which they could join the new Union of Burma – Frontier Areas were presumed to be part of the Union under the leadership of Prime Minister U Nu, a Burman nationalist. Civil wars erupted and continue today.

Burmese President Sein is from the Union Solidarity and Development Party, which won the majority of the seats in parliament in November 2010 elections, which were seen as rigged. A source close to the government said the split between moderates and hardliners in the military was real, and that the hardliners were perhaps trying to send a signal to the president that the military "old guard" is still in power.

The constitution of Burma gives more power to the military than the civilian president and reserves one-fourth of seats for military officials in legislative bodies at all levels.

The possibility of a full-fledged war cannot be ruled out even if it is against the will of President Sein. Ethnic armed groups say they are prepared to take on the military, which could lead to an unprecedented civilian toll.

Burma army ransacks church in Bhamo District

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (26.03.12) - On 13 March the Burma Army ransacked Sin Lum Pang Mu Baptist Church in Pang Mu village, located in Bhamo district.

According to Reverend Jangmaw Gam Maw, pastor of Pang Mu Church, soldiers from the 33rd battalion of the Burma Army's 88th Infantry Division burned bibles, destroyed church property, and stole a video player, loudspeakers and villagers' belongings. The soldiers claimed that the property belonged to a Kachin Independence Army outpost. They also took money from the church donation boxes.

The pastor and over 1,000 church members from Pang Mu village had abandoned the village for Mai Ja Yang IDP camp on 19 November 2011.

On 10 March, Burma Army soldiers disrupted a Christian conference and threatened a Member of Parliament (MP) at gunpoint in western Burma's Chin State, according to the Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO).

More than 1,000 delegates from 80 local branches of the Mara (Chin) Evangelical Church at Sabawngte village, in a remote area of Matupi township, southern Chin State, had gathered for the conference, which had official permission. CHRO reports that several Burma Army soldiers disrupted the meeting and rebuked the village headman for not reporting the event to the army camp. When Pu Van Cin, an MP from the Ethnic National Development Party, saw the soldiers confronting the village headman and tried to intervene, he was threatened at gunpoint.

Benedict Rogers, East Asia Team Leader at Christian Solidarity Worldwide, said, "These incidents illustrate that there is still a very long way to go in Burma's reform process, and for that reason, the international community should be cautious about lifting too many sanctions too quickly. We have seen very welcome progress in Burma at some levels in recent months, but the Burma Army continues to perpetrate grave violations of human rights in the ethnic areas, which include religious discrimination and persecution of minorities. Religious freedom is a fundamental value in any democratic society, and so if the Burmese government is serious about reform, it must protect religious freedom. We urge the international community to monitor the situation closely. While it is certainly right to ease some sanctions in recognition of the progress made, we urge the European Union, the United States and others to do so gradually, step by step, in proportion to the developments on the ground, and to retain some measures until further genuine change is secured. In Rangoon and the urban areas there is atmospheric change, but not yet substantial institutional, legislative and constitutional change that will make reform irreversible. In the ethnic areas, crimes against humanity continue. We call upon

President Thein Sein and all reform-minded officials in the Burmese government to take action to end the military's abuses, and to protect human rights, including religious freedom, for all."

Burma's Christian civilians attacked during Christmas

Government troops kill 47-year-old Christian, destroy church property in Kachin state.

By Vishal Arora

Compass Direct News (09.01.2012) – Attacks on Christians in Burma continued into the Christmas season in Kachin state as Burmese Army troops killed a civilian and destroyed church property despite President Thein Sein's order to stop the war against insurgents.

A Baptist church in Loije, Bhamo district, held a funeral on Dec. 27 for 47-year-old Maran Zau Ja, who was shot dead without provocation by Burmese Army's Light Infantry Battalion No. 321 on Christmas Day, a Kachin source told Compass by phone.

Zau Ja was a farmer who was returning from his sugarcane field with a friend when troops sprayed bullets at them. His friend survived the gunshots.

The two were not armed insurgents of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), the armed wing of the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) that has fought for autonomy in the Christian-majority state since the early 1960s, when then-Burmese Prime Minister U Nu made Buddhism the state religion.

About 90 percent of the roughly 56 million people in Burma, also known as Myanmar, are Buddhist, mostly from the Burman ethnic group. Burmese soldiers see "all Kachin civilians as the enemy," the Kachin News Group recently quoted a Kachin village elder as saying.

On Dec. 16, troops of Light Infantry Battalion No. 142 burned a building housing the kitchen of a Baptist church in Dingga village, also in Bhamo district, the source added. KIA men and local villagers managed to save the church building, but the fire engulfed five homes.

Earlier, on Nov. 30, Burmese soldiers killed a woman and injured six villagers as they fired mortar shells targeting civilians in Tarlawgyi area in Waingmaw Township, while another battalion burned down 10 homes in Nam Wai village and five more in neighboring Hpa Ke village. (See www.compassdirect.org, "Christian Civilians in Burma Face Deadly Attacks," Dec. 5, 2011.)

On Oct. 16, about 150 soldiers from Light Infantry Battalion 438 stormed Nam San Yang village in the Daw Phung Yang area of Bhamo district and opened fire at members of a Catholic church before the weekly mass. While no one was hurt, the priest and some parishioners were detained. (See www.compassdirect.org, "Burma Army Targets Christian Civilians in War on Insurgents," Oct. 28, 2011.)

Thailand-based activist Shirley Seng of the Kachin Women's Association told Compass that civilians have been living in fear since military action hit Kachin state last June, and that her research team found that women and children were most affected by the war. At

least 37 women and girls were raped during the first two months of the conflict, she said – 13 of them killed.

She added that other girls and women continue to be abducted.

“They just disappear after being abducted,” Seng said. “Perhaps they are first sexually abused and then killed or sold to brothels.”

President’s Sham order

The KIO controls most of Kachin state and runs schools and hospitals and the public distribution system. The Burmese government or Army has little control outside the state capital of Myitkyina. Since June 2011, however, when the Army ended a 17-year-long ceasefire with the KIO, government troops were heavily deployed in KIO-controlled areas leading to clashes.

More than 90 clashes have occurred between the Army and the armed insurgents since President Sein, a former junta general, reportedly instructed the military on Dec. 10 to start no fighting with the KIA.

The president’s order was apparently a mere show, the Kachin source said, adding that deployment of Army personnel and attacks on civilians were on the rise and helicopters were bringing in ammunition and reinforcements.

“The government made peace with [formerly detained opposition leader] Aung San Suu Kyi and has set a few political prisoners free to gain concessions from the international community on its brutal military offensive against ethnic minority states, primarily in Kachin,” the source said.

After the general election in 2011, believed to be rigged and the first in two decades of junta rule, the military’s proxy Union Solidarity and Development Party came to power and has been trying to showcase reforms in an attempt to end economic sanctions and gain legitimacy.

Little has changed, however, for Burma’s ethnic minorities.

Internally displaced people

According to local estimates, the military conflict has displaced about 45,000 people.

“It’s a major threat to thousands of displaced civilians who are caught between the warring parties,” Lynn Yoshikawa, an advocate from the Washington, D.C.-based Refugees International, told Compass by email. “The Burma Army does not distinguish between combatants and civilians, leading to severe human rights abuses. There is not enough assistance, and with winter setting in, displaced people lack enough warm clothes and are more vulnerable to diseases.”

Yoshikawa urged the international community “to put pressure on the military to follow the president’s orders to halt attacks against the KIO and make sure that the UN’s access to areas outside government control is sustained and expanded to meet the growing needs.” International donors should fund the humanitarian response, she added, or else the United Nations World Food Program’s food stocks will run out in February.

In addition to Kachin, six other ethnic minority states – including Christian-majority Chin state and Karen state, which has a substantial presence of Christians – have had armed and unarmed groups fighting for autonomy from the successive military-led regimes for decades.

While Kachin is the current target of the Burma Army , it is feared that other states are also likely to face war in the near future. Ethnic minority areas along Burma's borders with India, Thailand and China are resource-rich and have strategic importance for the Union government. Burma's neighbors have invested, and intend to accelerate investment, in power generation and other projects in and around the ethnic minority region.

The ethnic minority states were administered separately during British rule. Some ethnic leaders agreed to incorporate their states into Burma after the Panglong Agreement was signed in 1947 providing for full autonomy, a share of the national wealth and the right to secession to ethnic states. But Gen. Aung San, democracy activist Suu Kyi's father who was then heading the interim government and led the signing of the agreement, was assassinated months later. Subsequent regimes refused to honor the agreement and forcibly made ethnic states a part of the new country.

The federal government is carrying on with the military offensive on the one hand, and holding "peace talks" with armed ethnic minority resistance groups on the other, the Kachin source said. Minorities are still praying and hoping for peace in the near future, he added.
