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The Protection of Ethnic Chins in Burma
Advocacy Strategies and European Decision Makers

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This topic is important, not only for the Chin people but more widely because of its relevance to the future of human rights and religious freedom in Burma.

The significance of current events must not be underestimated. The hate speech and discriminatory policies that are being promoted by groups like 969 suggest a pattern that is all too reminiscent of the run-up to mass killings and state-facilitated genocide that we have witnessed in other countries. At risk of sounding alarmist, what may be viewed by the mainstream press as an issue of marginal importance may very well be the first stirrings of a tragedy of international proportions.

The first step toward ensuring the protection of Ethnic Chins in Burma is to broaden the commitment to work for the protection of the rights of every minority in the Myanmar Republic, whether they are Chin or Rohingya or whatever. It is by basing our policy on **universal standards of human rights** that apply to all Burmese citizens that we will achieve a more secure and prosperous future for this country. European decision makers must be able to articulate this message in a coherent and compelling way. Yes, there is an urgency to protecting minorities in Burma. There is also the equally important task of establishing momentum for a genuine peace process and national reconciliation on a wide scale.

This implies the transformation of a **culture of religious intolerance** that is not only widespread but also deeply rooted in the sense of national identity. Burma is a multi-religious and multi-cultural society; however, its self-professed identity as a Buddhist state is being presented as normative for everyone. This is an old story, not only for Burma but for many countries – and yes, even in our own European history. This is tribalism at its worst and at its most dangerous.

Concerning actions to be taken, there are various points of leverage that are noteworthy here. There is the obvious need to exert pressure on the **Burmese regime** itself, which is ultimately responsible for the protection of its own citizens. However, there have been few signs of late that the political will is present to decisively address these concerns.

External pressure could also come from a number of sources. It could come from neighbouring countries that have a stake in a stable Burma. It could come from **ASEAN** - the Association of Southeast Asian Nations – although this is highly unlikely. There is a unifying principle within ASEAN to refrain from any outside interference in the domestic affairs of its Member States. There is also the fact that Myanmar itself will assume the ASEAN presidency in 2014, so we should not expect much from Myanmar's neighbours or from ASEAN in the coming years.

From the **European side**, there is the External Action Service and especially its Myanmar/Burma desk. NGOs and individuals that wish to engage European policy on Burma would do well to begin here, inviting a regular exchange of views and information on what is happening on the ground. In April 2013, the EU Council committed itself to initiate regular human rights dialogues with Myanmar/Burma. It would be good to find out where is this going. What steps are being taken toward this goal?

There is also the office of Stavros Lambrinidis, the EU Special Representative for Human Rights. There is also a UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Myanmar/Burma. These are all avenues of engagement that can be vigorously pursued, particularly when there is a **delegation** that is planned to the region.

This is also the case for the European Parliament's Subcommittee on Human Rights. One such high-level delegation of the Subcommittee took place back in April of this year. Were questions raised on this occasion concerning the Chin community? What was the outcome of these discussions? Are there openings for further dialogue to be exploited? This is the kind of information that is helpful to access from delegations.

The visits of delegations can have considerable influence on third countries, because they send a strong signal to country authorities. At the same time such visits can boost the morale of local actors who may be under pressure or feel isolated.

Although these delegations only represent one piece for the EU structure, they are usually perceived within the countries visited as representing the EU as a whole. In this way, delegations can – by their very presence in the country – put in motion an on-going interactive process – informing and updating the members of the delegations, raising concerns that have been expressed in parliamentary resolutions and opening discussion. It is often the role of NGOs to keep pressing to see that this happens.

NGOs and other advocates can help by briefing delegations before a country visit. They can also encourage that debriefings and assessments take place soon after fact-finding missions and that they are involved in them. They should urge delegations to submit and help disseminate reports with a special focus on any official commitments that were secured during the visit. NGOs can also contribute to the designing of follow-up strategies.

In regards to other mechanisms within the European Parliament, there is the possibility of organising **public hearings and conferences** on any given issue, such as this one today. This has the effect of raising the visibility of the issue and at the same time raising the competence of the Parliament to position itself and to take action.

Even when attendance at the actual event is lower than the organisers had hoped for, which is sometimes the case, the fact of having raised the issue in a public setting puts it on the radar screen and itself calls for a response.

MEPs are also able to submit written **parliamentary questions** at any time. Thousands of such questions are asked every year on a diversity of topics. The use of parliamentary questions has enabled a number of MEPs to express their concerns about women's rights, human trafficking, immigration, freedom of expression and many other topics. Often the issues that are raised are echoes of what has received attention in the media.

Such questions are addressed to the European Commission, and the relevant Commissioner will then formulate an official response, typically in highly diplomatic language, highlighting the advances that have been made, congratulating the country's achievements, what the Commission has already done and then outlining where improvements are in order.

The value of this process is that it prompts the Commission to position itself and to provide information in its response to the question that can be helpful to MEPs, NGOs and others that are working on that particular concern.

Another mechanism to be employed is the use of **resolutions**, which are mostly declaratory in nature and are intended to express the concerns of EU citizens as voiced by their democratically-elected representatives.

There have been a number of such resolutions over the past 18 months directed toward improving the human rights situation in Burma.

Countries typically react when they are targeted by such resolutions. They are very sensitive to international criticism and notably when it is voiced by the European Parliament.

Resolutions can help stir the pot and raise the debate about the human rights issues in question. In response, countries usually raise objections, questioning the reliability of the sources of information or how particular events are perceived by external actors. Provoking reactions and commentary of this sort can be very helpful and again raise the visibility of the issue to a higher level where it cannot be altogether ignored.

The impact of resolutions is significantly reinforced when a specific concern is addressed in several resolutions or when they have been introduced in a timely manner, like just before or after a public hearing or a press conference or a country visit by MEPs. It is often prior to a vote on a country-specific resolution that there is the potential for constructive dialogue with the third country. This dialogue can sometimes be more effective than the resolution itself.

Finally, of course, within the structure of the European Parliament there is the **Subcommittee on Human Rights**, which has established itself as a focal point for human rights questions in the Parliament. It provides a permanent forum for discussions with other EU institutions, with the UN, the Council of Europe, government representatives and human rights activists in many non-EU countries.

Its main objective is to mainstream human rights issues into all aspects of the external relations of the European Union. It has issued guidelines for all inter-parliamentary delegations to third countries. It tries to monitor and evaluate the implementation of EU instruments in the field of human rights.

The Subcommittee can also organise hearings. So can **Europe Aid**, by the way, which is charged with monitoring development policy for the EU, including compliance of aid recipients with internationally recognised human rights standards.

These are some of the opportunities that are open for direct advocacy or for indirectly influencing the larger framework of transnational associations that can be brought to bear on the situation of Ethnic Chins in Burma. Of course, the question of timing is crucial as well as knowing when and to whom human rights NGOs should target their actions for the greatest impact.

Other actions could be undertaken beyond those mechanisms that are established within EU structures. Other international institutions can be engaged. The UN could establish a Commission of Inquiry. The ICC Prosecutor can be urged to step up its monitoring of the situation. The UPR process can be accessed through the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva. These are all possibilities for advocacy.

Finally, it is important to underscore the role of **Media advocacy** in changing the situation in Burma. One of the chief tools in this effort is knowledge and the sharing of information. What is happening to ethnic and religious minorities in Burma is a chronicle of sadness and abuse. The more that it is brought into the public discourse the sooner it can change. Here the media have a vital role to play in shaping public opinion, engaging influential people and moving decision makers to take action.