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# **Spike in anti-Christian violence feared before Burma elections**

***Attacks on Christians seen as politically expedient in majority-Buddhist nation***

By Vishal Arora

Compass Direct (20.01.2010) / HRWF (21.01.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) - As Burma's military junta gears up for its first parliamentary election in two decades this year, observers fear attacks on the Christian minority could intensify.

Mungpi Suangtak, assistant editor of a New Delhi-based news agency run by exiled Burmese journalists, the Mizzima News, said the Burmese junta has "one of the world's worst human rights records" and will "definitely" attack religious and ethnic minorities more forcefully in the run-up to the election.

The military regime, officially known as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), pledged to hold the election this year, and analysts believe polls will be held after July in the country, also known as Myanmar.

Suangtak told Compass that the Buddhist nationalist junta would target Christians particularly in Karen state, bordering Thailand, and in Chin State, bordering India and Bangladesh.

Many Christians are part of the Karen National Union and the Chin National Front, armed resistance groups that have been demanding freedom or autonomy for their respective states for decades, and therefore the junta sees the Christian minority as a threat, said Suangtak.

There are over 100,000 Christian Chin refugees in India who have fled the junta's attacks in the past two decades, according to Human Rights Watch.

Christians in Karen state are not safe. A Karen Christian worker living in the Mae La refugee camp on the Thailand-Burma border told Compass that ethnic Christians were facing human rights abuses by the junta "on a daily basis." Most recently, Burma army soldiers attacked a church, murdered a local farmer and injured others in Nawng Mi village on Dec. 19, 2009, reported Burma Campaign UK.

Parts of Karen state fall under the "Black Zone" – identified by the Burma army as an area under the control of armed resistance groups where its soldiers are free to open fire on anyone on sight – and the junta has been launching indiscriminate attacks to take control of village after village, said the Karen Christian.

"Those who are not able to flee across the border during such attacks are either killed or forcibly relocated in and confined to temporary camps set up by the junta," the Christian said. "Since the army litters surrounding areas with landmines, many local people die or

get injured while trying to run away from or coming to the camps to look for their relatives."

Over 150,000 refugees from Karen and neighboring Karenni states of Burma are living along the Thai side of the border, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. More than half of them are Christian.

A representative of the Free Burma Rangers (FBR), which trains and sends teams of local people to help victims of the junta's attacks inside Burma, said youths have been forced to become Buddhists in Chin state, where over 80 percent of the people are Christian.

Printing of Bibles is restricted, and churches are destroyed on a regular basis in the state, the source told Compass on condition of anonymity.

Access for foreign visitors to Chin state is, with some exceptions, prohibited, and the state is widely acknowledged to be the poorest part of the country, said Rogers.

"According to one Chin, the reason Chin state is denied resources, and foreigners are denied access, is specifically because the overwhelming majority of Chins are Christian," stated a 2009 report by London-based advocacy group Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW). "The SPDC has, it is believed, taken a deliberate decision to discriminate against Chin Christians."

The report cited a Chin Christian man who had served in the Burma army who faced discrimination.

"I had a colleague who was a Chin who became a Buddhist and he was promoted," the Christian says in the report. "I was told to change my religion if I wanted to get promotion. I refused to convert."

The report also quoted a Chin Christian as saying that students from a Christian youth fellowship at a university in Kalaymyo, in Chin state's Sagaing Division, collected funds among their own community to construct a small church.

"However, in 2008 and again in 2009, 'extremist Buddhists' destroyed the church building, and when the students reported the incident to the local authorities, the youth fellowship leaders were arrested, detained and then released with a warning," he said.

### **Religious Pretext**

Suangtak said successive governments in Burma have promoted Buddhism since General Ne Win took power in 1962, leaving Christians insecure.

"There is a general feeling in Burma that the state represents Buddhism, and most Christians, particularly from conservative sections, cannot trust the regime," said Suangtak.

Benedict Rogers of CSW said the junta doesn't differentiate between individual Christians involved in armed struggle and ordinary Christians who have not taken up arms.

"And when it attacks villages in conflict zones, churches and pastors are often among the first to be attacked," Rogers said.

A Christian worker from Burma's Mandalay city, however, told Compass that thus far he has heard no reports of any major anti-Christian incidents there. He said he was hoping the junta would try to woo people with peace rather than violence.

"But nothing can be said about the unpredictable junta," he said, adding that it was difficult to receive or send information in Burma. "Even in cities, the information infrastructure is limited and expensive, phones are tapped and e-mails are monitored. And the press is owned by the state."

Rogers, deputy chairman of the human rights commission for the U.K.'s Conservative Party, said the Buddhist nationalist regime "distorts and perverts Buddhism for political purposes and is intolerant of non-Burman and non-Buddhist ethnic and religious minorities, including Christians and Muslims."

Of the 56 million people in Burma, around 89 percent are Buddhist, with only 4 percent Christian.

Given that the junta merely uses religion for political power, it doesn't target Christians alone, Suangtak said.

"The junta has no respect for any religion, be it Christians or Buddhists, and anyone who opposes its rule is dealt with harshly."

Burma was ruled by military regimes from 1962 to 1990; at that point the National League for Democracy party, led by Nobel Laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, won the parliamentary election. But the regime seized power again by imprisoning members of parliament after the election.

Rogers, who has co-authored a soon-to-be-published biography of SPDC chairman Senior General Than Shwe, said that while the armed groups are not perfect, they are essentially fighting to defend their people against a "brutal regime" and are "not in any way terrorists."

"The armed groups have sometimes launched pre-emptive attacks on the military, but they have never attacked non-military targets and have never engaged in indiscriminate acts of violence," he said. "Even the pre-emptive acts are conducted for defensive, rather than offensive, purposes."

Rogers added that resistance groups were fighting to defend their people.

"Individual Christians who have joined the armed ethnic groups do so out of a perfectly biblical concept of just war, the right to defend your people from gross injustice."

Added an FBR source, "In Burma, no one protects except the pro-democracy resistance groups, and all relief inside the country is only possible because of them."

### **International Disrepute**

The 2009 annual report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom states that Burma's military junta had "one of the world's worst human rights records."

"Burma's Christian populations face forced promotion of Buddhism and other hardships in ethnic minority areas where low-intensity conflict has been waged for decades," the report states. "In addition, a new law passed in early 2009 essentially bans independent 'house church' religious venues, many of which operate because permission to build church buildings is regularly denied."

The report also pointed out that in January 2009, authorities in Rangoon ordered at least 100 churches to stop holding services and forced them to sign pledges to that effect. Burma, which the ruling junta describes as "The Golden Land" on its official website, has

been designated as a Country of Particular Concern by the U.S. Department of State since 1999.

Even after the 2010 election, little is expected to change.

The FBR source said the election was not likely to be free and fair, pointing out that the new constitution the junta adopted after an apparently rigged referendum in 2008 virtually enshrined military power.

"However, having an election is better than not having one at all," the source said.

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