

**U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing: Burma in Transition:
Next Steps to Advance Religious Freedom and Improve Conditions for Religious
Victims**

**Thursday, February 27, 2025
10:30 AM-12 PM ET**

Written Testimony by Salai Za Uk Ling, Executive Director, Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO)

Vice Chair Meir Soloveichik, Commissioner Asif Mahmood, and distinguished members of the Commission, I extend my sincere gratitude to you for convening this hearing and providing me with the opportunity to testify. My name is Salai Zauk Ling, and I am the Executive Director of the Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO), the only locally led human rights organization in Burma with United Nations ECOSOC Special Consultative Status.

It is an honor for me to speak today, particularly as someone whose grandfather was one of the first Chin people to be converted to Christianity 119 years ago by American Baptist missionaries. The legacy of that conversion is not merely religious; it laid the foundation for the spiritual and communal identity of the Chin people. Today, Christianity remains a cornerstone of the Chin people's identity, and, tragically, this very identity has become a target of systematic violence and repression by Burma's military regime.

Since the February 2021 military coup, there has been a consistent pattern of violations of freedom of religion and belief initiated by State Administration Council (SAC) forces in Chin State. These include the willful destruction, looting, and occupation of churches and church compounds, instances of unlawful killing and enforced disappearance of pastors, the arrest and detention of pastors and church figureheads, and ongoing violations of the right to free worship and assembly on the Christian population at large.

It is important to stress that these attacks on Christians and violations of religious freedom are not confined to Chin State. This is a widespread phenomenon across Burma, particularly in other ethnic areas where Christians are concentrated, such as Kachin, Karen and Karenni States. The systematic targeting of religious minorities is part of a broader strategy by the SAC to suppress communities that it views as resistant to its control, further aggravating an already dire human rights situation throughout the country.

Notable and well-documented instances related to the widespread attacks on religious personnel and religious infrastructure include the egregious killing and mutilation of Pastor Cung Biak Hum of Centenary Baptist Church,¹ killed by SAC troops in my hometown of Thantlang as he attempted to extinguish spreading fires, caused by acts of arson, and the razing of all churches in Thantlang town over six months between October 2021 and May 2022.² Indeed, between 2021 and as I speak to you now, the CHRO has documented 124 instances of intentional attacks against buildings dedicated to religion committed by SAC forces. Although

¹ Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO), "Human Rights Briefing: Reign of Terror," September, 2021, available at: <https://www.chinhumanrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Reign-of-Terror-ReportCHRO-1.pdf>

² CHRO, "Legal Briefing," March 2023, available at: https://www.chinhumanrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Legal-Analysis_final-1.pdf

consistently targeted, the nature of attacks toward religious infrastructure has varied, but always inextricably linked to the conflict dynamics at play in Chin State.³

In 2021, the bulk of attacks toward religious infrastructure were acts of arson, desecration, and looting of churches carried out by convoys of SAC battalions sent into Chin State to quash the budding pro-democracy resistance.⁴ As the resolve of the pro-democracy forces persisted, the SAC began razing church infrastructure at will, as a form of punishment in acts of arson and incendiary rocket and artillery attacks. Between late 2022 and today, the form of intentional attacks on religious infrastructure relates primarily to airstrikes. As the SAC no longer can operate boots on the ground and is confined to the few fortified locations they still hold onto in Chin State, airstrikes are increasing exponentially. Since May 2023, there have been 37 documented airstrikes on churches, with just the latest example taking place on 6 February 2025, where an SAC airstrike seriously damaged the Catholic Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Mindat Township, rendering it unusable.⁵

It is important to note that attacks on churches should not be considered collateral damage, a consequence of conflict, nor random acts by SAC troops or their commanders, it is part of a deeply entrenched mindset and mode of warfare that attempts to destroy the cultural identity of a society. Chin State is located in the northwest of Burma, where 90 percent of the population of Chin State identifies as Christian. The Chin people, as a Christian ethnoreligious minority, have a decades-long and complex history of oppression related to freedom of religion and belief, where successive military governments have viewed Christianity as a foreign religion and therefore a threat to the creation of a homogenous national identity for the Union of Burma.⁶

Churches, being a symbol of both faith and identity of communities whom the regime is repressing also act as important community centres that often provide health, education, shelter, and humanitarian services to the Chin people. They are targeted for that very reason, in callous acts that are designed to destroy symbols of society that are opposed to an ultra-nationalist mindset and destabilize the budding administrations developing around their receding influence in Chin State, and in Burma on the whole.

It is of no coincidence that the large-scale operation, launched in late 2021, resulting in the widespread destruction of Chin State's churches was named "Operation Anawratha" in honor of the warrior-founder of the Burmese nation who ascended the throne of Pagan in 1014.⁷ Under this operation, large convoys consisting of hundreds of trucks and armored vehicles advanced into the northern townships of Falam, Hakha, and Thantlang and the southern townships of Mindat, Matupi, and Kanpetlet. Defectors from the SAC interviewed by CHRO have confirmed that SAC columns operating in Chin State during Operation Anawratha had

³ CHRO Data

⁴ Washington Post, "Burn it All Down: How Myanmar's Military Razed Villages to Crush a Growing Resistance" 23 December, 2021, available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2021/myanmar-military-burn-villages-tatmadaw/>

⁵ Agenzia Fides, "ASIA/MYANMAR - A Catholic church hit by bombing in Chin State," 10 February, 2025, available at https://www.fides.org/en/news/76014-ASIA_MYANMAR_A_Catholic_church_hit_by_bombing_in_Chin_State

⁶ See, CHRO, "Threats to Our Existence: Persecution of Ethnic Chin Christians in Burma," September, 2012, available at: https://www.chinhumanrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Threats_to_Our_Existence.pdf

⁷ Asia Times, "Myanmar military prepares an onslaught for the ages," 19 October, 2021, available at: <https://asiatimes.com/2021/10/myanmar-military-prepares-an-onslaught-for-the-ages/>

been instructed by commanding officers to use churches and religious compounds to camp inside on the basis that it was unlikely that local defense forces would attack them there. While camped in churches, extensive damage, looting, desecration of church materials, and arson attacks were widely reported; flagrant violations of the Geneva Conventions.⁸

The SAC also views church figureheads as sympathetic to the resistance, and due to this targets them to act as conduits with resistance actors. In October 2021, a special clearance operation was ordered to take place in Thantlang town, which ultimately led to the near destruction of all its infrastructure and every religious building. Before this, on more than one occasion, pastors were summoned to meetings with the Battalion Commander from LIB 269, Lt. Col. Thaung Hlaing, and once with the Regional Deputy Commander, Brig. General Myo Htut Hlaing to the Chin State Government Office in Hakha. At these meetings, religious elders and pastors were told to persuade resistance movements to cease activities. Threats were made that Thantlang would be burned to “ash” if orders to cooperate were not obeyed.⁹ Indeed, given the pivotal role that pastors play in Chin society, they often face the risk of reprisals or being caught in the crossfire while tending to communities in conflict areas. There have been eight documented killings of clergymen by the SAC in Chin State, the latest taking place on Christmas Eve 2024 in Mindat Township.

Another aspect of attacks on religious freedom of religion and belief relates to free association and peaceful assembly. The SAC has extended the state of emergency that has served as justification for their claim to legitimate authority in Myanmar multiple times. Declaring martial law across the country’s 14 states and regions, including eight in Chin State, continues to impact religious freedom of assembly. Prior to the liberation of the majority of major towns and villages in Chin State, curfews imposed on civilians between 6 p.m. and 6 a.m. were enforced under either a shoot-on-sight or immediate arrest and detention policies, given night-time sermons are customary in Chin State, worshippers were impeded their right to assembly. This situation is still the case in Hakha Town, where the SAC still maintains administrative control.

Beyond this, in February 2023 the SAC imposed a rule that worshippers must report to township administrators a week in advance if they were to attend Sunday services. This order applied to all residents of Hakha, Tedim, Tonzang, Falam, Matupi, Kanpetlet, Thantlang, and Mindat townships. Such monitoring of Church activities was designed to instill fear into worshippers, the only ritual of daily life where families and communities could congregate in one place for an extended period.

As Chin State is slowly “liberated” nascent administrations are beginning to clear the way for returns of IDPs and refugees, however, with the ever-present threat of airstrikes and artillery fire by the SAC, this will continue to be a slow and dangerous process. Since 2021, a fresh outflow of Chin populations has sought shelter in neighboring India, where approximately 50,000 Chin people reside. Further afield, in Malaysia, there are more than 80,000 Chin asylum seekers. These populations face specific challenges to religious freedom and forms of discrimination associated with ethnicity and religion. As a large proportion of Chin asylum seekers residing in Malaysia await official registration – approximately 70 percent, although exact figures are unknown – and endure little to no access to health, or education for children, they very often seek employment in the informal labour market. As such, they are vulnerable

⁸ Supra note 4

⁹ Supra note 2

to arrest and detention, and the potential for refoulment. In a recent example, 69 undocumented Chin Christians were detained as they attended a pre-Christmas gathering in Bandar Nilai, in a planned raid initiated by Malaysian security forces.¹⁰

While the Malaysian authorities have duties to enforce immigration rules and regulations, tens of thousands of Chin asylum seekers await registration and processing via the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and remain outside of their protection. Concerns have been raised by Chin community members on the selective enforcement of immigration raids – specifically targeting Christian gatherings. Once detained, without official registration, people can remain incarcerated for months, sometimes years, and many have faced deportation under duress from the Myanmar Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, circumstances which often may amount to refoulment.

Recommendations

In highlighting systematic attacks toward freedom of religion and belief in Chin State, and the precarious circumstances faced by ethnic Chins and other religious minority asylum seekers abroad, I respectively make the following recommendations:

- The U.S. Government could consider reinstating the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP), suspended on 27 January 2025 by Executive Order. The effect of this meant that many refugees, both in India and Malaysia who had been granted asylum in the U.S. and were due to relocate, are left in limbo.
- The U.S. Government could consider increasing funding toward the UNHCR to increase its capacity to process and register asylum seekers, this would offer vital protection to asylum seekers from the potential of long-term incarceration and the possibility of refoulement.
- The U.S. Government could consider direct funding to local refugee organizations that act as the first point of contact for asylum seekers. These organizations struggle to provide education, registration processes, and funds for emergency health care.
- The U.S. Government could reinstate and increase funding to strengthen protection and humanitarian assistance for internally displaced persons in Burma, utilizing cross-border modalities of aid. The CHRO would entirely support the notion that ethno-religious minority aspirations of a genuine democratic Union of Burma, where religious and ethnic minority groups are fairly represented and enjoy equal rights are aligned with U.S. interests in the Asia Pacific. Humanitarian and technical support to ongoing health, education, legal and humanitarian programs being undertaken in ethnic areas are never more in need, and local governance mechanisms are at a critical juncture.
- In the current conflict environment, airstrikes pose a direct threat to Chin populations and populations across Myanmar. The U.S. Government could help with supporting the initiation of life-saving early warning systems and bomb shelters.
- In the current climate of impunity which SAC commanders continue to enjoy, individual sanctioning of SAC figureheads who ordered, and carried out mass atrocity crimes against religious minorities could be considered by the U.S. Government.

¹⁰ New Straits Times, "Immigration dept detains 69 illegal immigrants at pre-Christmas illegal gathering in Nilai," 15 December, 2024, available at: <https://www.nst.com.my/news/crime-courts/2024/12/1148814/immigration-dept-detains-69-illegal-immigrants-pre-christmas>

- An international unified approach to cutting the SAC's access to aviation fuel is required. The U.S. Government could lead efforts at the U.N. Security Council to impose an aviation fuel and arms embargo on the SAC.
- The U.S. Government could consider increasing support for the investigation and documentation of human rights abuses committed by the SAC toward religious minorities in Burma, including abuses targeting Christians, and support ongoing attempts to hold the SAC accountable under universal jurisdiction.