

## Minorities in Burma

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### Who are Burma's minorities?

Burma has over 100 ethnic groups, languages and dialects and is said to have the richest ethnic diversity in Asia. Such diversity is attributed to the country's geographic location on a strategic crossroads, where historically it had acted as a buffer between the neighbouring powers of India, China and Thailand. Over 2,000 years of cross border migration and intermixing between cultures has led to the development of diverse ethnic settlements and communities residing both in mountainous frontier zones and lowland plains areas of the country.

There is no reliable census data available on Burma's ethnic minorities, although the government claims that there are 135 'national races'. Kachin, Karen, Kayah (Karenni), Shan, Chin, Mon and Rakhine (Arakan) states take on the names of the seven minority groups who historically were able to negotiate state/territorial boundaries with the government. However, in themselves these states are not ethnically homogenous.

Of a population of 56 million people, the majority Burman constitute around two thirds. The largest minorities are Shan (9 per cent) and Karen (7 per cent) groups, and Mon, Rakhine, Chin, Kachin, Karenni, Kayan, Chinese, Indian, Danu, Akha, Kokang, Lahu, Naga, Palaung, Pao, Rohyinga, Tavoyan, and Wa peoples each constitute 5 per cent or less of the population.<sup>1</sup>

### Historical and political context

Despite Burma's rich cultural heritage its history is one tainted by political violence, tensions between and within ethnic groups, ethnic and religious discrimination and persecution, amongst many other serious violations of human rights. Until British annexation of Burma as an Indian province in 1886 the country had never existed as a unified nation state, with its present geographical boundaries encompassing 100 different nationalities and centralised government administration. To date this remains a key issue and minority demands continue to be centred around rights to self-determination, autonomy, federalism and the right to manage the resources found within their territories.



Shan men relax in Tanna Kwei Point in Karenni State, having escaped from the Burmese army. Forced at gunpoint to carry munitions to the frontline, they had been away from their homes for two months.

*Dean Chapman/Panos Pictures*

In 1947 General Aung San, leader of the Burma Independence Army, was able to negotiate a plan for independence with the British colonial authorities and convince minority groups to join the Union of Burma. Through the Panglong Agreement (1947) Aung San outlined his government's commitment to minority rights. The 1947 constitution specifically granted the Shan and Karenni peoples the option to secede from the union 10 years after independence. However such aspirations were short lived as in July 1947 Aung San and most of his Burman dominated cabinet were assassinated. After independence in 1948, Karen, Mon and other ethnic nationalities which had not participated at Panglong or in the constituent assembly elections became dissatisfied with the new government, led by the civilian elected Prime Minister U Nu, for its failure to heed minority demands for autonomy and self-determination. In March 1948 the Communist Party of Burma began insurrection against the government and, as violence spread across the country, the

Karen, Mon, Rakhine and other ethnic groups took up arms as well.

In 1962, a new federal movement emerged in the country as discontent spread among the Shan, Kachin and more nationality peoples. But a military coup was staged by General Ne Win and his newly-formed Burma Socialist Programme Party which proceeded to crackdown on ethnic minority political leaders and pro-democracy activists. Alienation from central government deepened and armed opposition increased once again, especially in ethnic border areas. This marked the beginning of an endless cycle of war and ethnic insurgency which has engulfed the country until the present day.

## Current situation

### The conflict

In 1997 the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) replaced the State Law and Order Restoration Council which had taken power through a military coup in 1988. By the 21st century ceasefire agreements had been signed with the majority of armed ethnic opposition groups. However a number of ethnic minority parties have refused to sign ceasefire agreements, including the Karen National Union, the Shan State Army-South, the Karenni National Progressive Party, the Chin National Front, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland and various Rohingya groups. Some independent analysts and the Karen Human Rights Group argue that ceasefires have not guaranteed greater human or political rights for ethnic minorities and the government remains steadfast in its refusal to discuss any form of federalism. According to the 2007 report of the UN's Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Myanmar on the eastern Thai-Burma border (areas populated by Karen, Karenni, Mon and Shan) and in the north western areas of the country (areas populated by Chin, Rakhine and Rohingya), government-led counter-insurgency operations continue and are characterised by high intensity violence and repression involving the use of excessive force and fire arms, and severe abuses of the human rights of unarmed civilians.

### Minorities' political rights and representation

Due to decades of conflict Burma has become one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world. In 1993 to attract international loans and humanitarian assistance the SPDC took steps to initiate reform. This came through the 'seven point road map for national reconciliation and democratic transition' which would include the drawing up of a new constitution through a National Convention, and moves toward greater participation in the global economy. The National League for Democracy (NLD) headed by Aung San Suu Kyi, and many ethnic political parties that had won the majority of seats in the 1990 elections initially acceded to this process. But the arrest of opposition leaders

continued, and by 2006 many ethnic and pro-democracy parties including the NLD had withdrawn due to the government's failure to uphold and respect the fundamental freedoms of its opponents. Human Rights Watch continues to warn of a return to ethnic insurgency by dissatisfied minority parties who participated in this process but remain largely excluded by the SPDC.

The National Convention came to an end in September 2007. However, in October the government resumed the process with a new hand-picked committee set up to write the constitution. Proceedings continue to be boycotted by the NLD and ethnic parties who are concerned that it will not reflect the true wishes of the people, and the office of the UN Secretary General has urged the government to make the process more credible and inclusive. A key issue to be tackled will be the role of the military in the future Burma. The National Convention has been criticized widely by human rights groups who believe that its aim is to legitimise military rule for another generation.

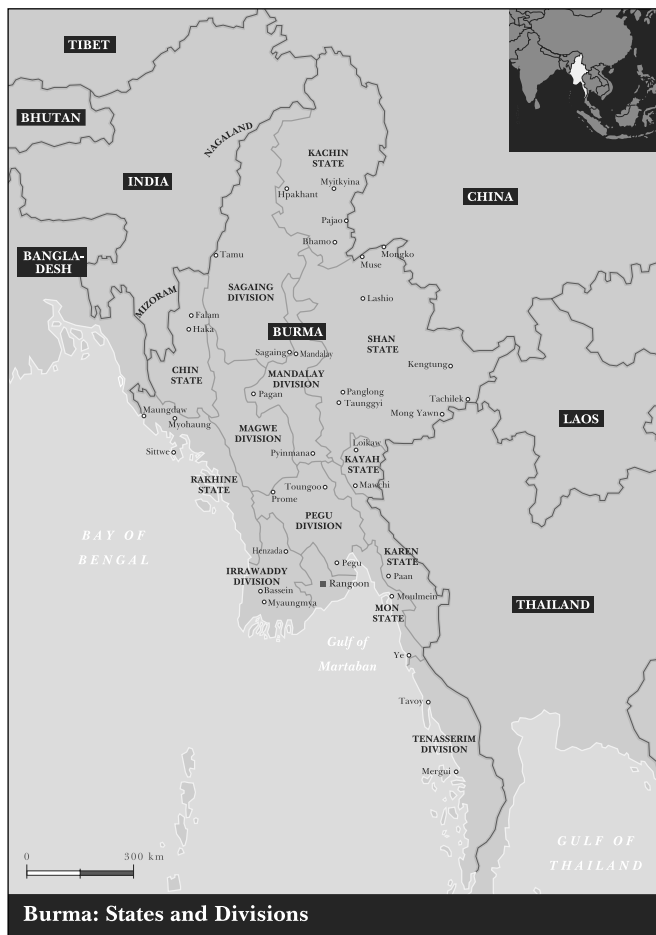
According to the Special Rapporteur, as of 16 December 2006, 1,201 political prisoners were still languishing in state-run prisons, with a further unknown number of prisoners being detained in different ethnic areas and secret jails. In addition leaders from ethnic political parties, including the Chairperson of the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy, have been detained and given prison sentences of up to 100 years or more.

### Human rights

Civilians living in ethnic areas are the worst affected by the country's 60-year-old war, constituting the majority of its victims. The Special Rapporteur says that between 1996 and 2006 the war generated an estimated 1 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) many of whom were drawn from ethnic nationalities. According to the Thailand Burma Border Consortium and local partner organisations there are currently 503,000 IDPs in surveyed sites in eastern Burma, and Human Rights Watch estimates that there are around 150,000 refugees living in 10 border camps in Thailand. Humanitarian assistance is denied to IDPs as the SPDC does not allow UN agencies or humanitarian organisations to gain access to this population.

Civilians are also forcibly relocated to state-run and heavily militarised villages where their human rights are severely violated by SPDC soldiers. Such abuses include extra-judicial and summary executions, human minesweeping, torture, extortion and confiscation of minority lands.

Forced labour continues to affect the lives of hundreds of people in ethnic areas working in 'model' or relocation villages and on small scale government-run infrastructure projects, despite Burma being a signatory to International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention 29 concerning Forced or Compulsory Labour (1930), and repeated condemnation from the ILO.



In 2006 the Special Rapporteur received reports of several cases of sexual violence and abuse being committed against ethnic minority women, including 30 cases of rape of Chin women. In Karen State the impact of such abuse carried out by the military has also been documented.

### Religious discrimination

The Rohingya Muslim minority in the north Rakhine State still faces deep discrimination as the government refuses to recognise them as an official ethnic group and denies them equal citizenship rights. In addition freedom of movement for the Rohingyas is severely restricted, and they are unable to access medical and educational services because they cannot travel outside their local areas.

To a lesser extent, Christian minorities among such peoples as the Chin, Karen and Karenni also continue to experience forms of discrimination, and harassment is most acute in areas where there is armed conflict.

### Pro-democracy protests 2007

Historically ethnic nationality parties and pro-democracy movements have often worked in alliance. During the military government crackdowns of the 1970s, in 1988 and in 1990, pro-democracy activists sought refuge in ethnic opposition-controlled areas of the country. It was in such areas that alliances were established and where the exiled government of Burma was formed from elected MPs who had fled the cities.

Information on the involvement of ethnic minorities in democracy protests in September 2007 in Rangoon and other urban areas is hard to come by. Ethnic nationality populations are greater in rural areas. But groups such as the Karen, Shan, Karenni and Rohingya joined the protests on the Thai-Burma border and in the city of Sittwe in the Rakhine State. In an October 2007 Associated Press article Karen National Union secretary general Mahn Sha said “We need to work together with the Mon, other groups, the students, to oust the (junta). We have a common enemy and common goals.”

### Shan

Most ethnic Shan live in Shan State but smaller communities of this ethnic group can be found living in the Kachin State to the north. Most are Theravada Buddhists. They speak a language which is part of the Tai language family, and closely related to Thai and Lao. The Shan are probably Burma’s largest minority with an estimated population of 3–4 million.<sup>2</sup> In the Shan State there are also other minority peoples, including the Kokang, Lahu, Palaung, Pao and Wa.

Since 1989 many armed ethnic groups in the Shan State have agreed ceasefires with the military government, including the Kokang, Palaung, Pao, Wa and Shan State Army. But in other areas, the local population continue to be at the receiving end of horrendous violations of their human rights because of the ongoing conflict between the Shan State Army-South and Burmese army. Military and other government authorities are persistently reported as committing human rights violations, including forced labour, portering or conscription, arbitrary detention, torture, rape and extrajudicial killings, especially in central and southern Shan State. Since the mid-1990s many Shan have fled to Thailand as refugees due to such violations. Leaders of the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (closely associated with Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy), first arrested in 2005, were still detained in early 2007 and serving long prison terms.

### Karen

The term ‘Karen’ refers to a number of ethnic groups with what are thought to be Tibetan-Central Asian origins who speak a dozen distinct but related languages (‘Karenic’). The Karens inhabit many parts of lower Burma, with the main populations in the Irrawaddy Delta and Thai borderlands. The majority of Karen are Buddhists, but as many as a third of the population have converted to Christianity since the days of British rule. Spirit-worship also continues in mountain areas.

In Thai border areas armed opposition to the SPDC continues and as such the Karen continue to suffer the brunt of extrajudicial executions, forced labour, forced relocation and confiscation of land, human minesweeping

and the burning of villages, rape and other forms of sexual violence, as well as discrimination by state authorities in areas such as language use and education. In 2006 alone 27,000 people in eastern Burma became IDPs. In the past two decades many others have fled across the border to Thailand where there are over 100,000 refugees in official camps and many more working as migrants outside.

## Mon

2007 US State Department statistics estimate the Mon population at being just below 1 million. Mon leaders however, contest this figure believing that their numbers are much higher, at around 4 million. The vast majority of Mon are Theravada Buddhists and are the descendants of one of the early civilizations in southeast Asia. Mon language is from the Mon-Khmer group of Austro-Asiatic languages, but the use of spoken Mon has greatly declined during the past 150 years. Today most Mon speakers live in the Mon State, with Thailand to its east and Andaman coast to its west.

Since 1995 the New Mon State Party has had a ceasefire with the military government. But in areas where ceasefire agreements have not held, the Burmese army has continued to conduct occasional raids, causing severe human rights violations, including enforced labour, displacement, rape, murder, and land confiscation. As a result, the displacement and migration of Mon villagers to Thailand have continued. The Mon State remains heavily militarised and this has hampered efforts to redress the number of IDPs. UN and international agencies based in Rangoon have very limited access to Mon cease-fire areas.

As with other minority languages, the Mon language is not used beyond fourth grade in government schools, and Mon people continue to be under-represented in state institutions due to discriminatory practices which favour ethnic Burmans.

## Kachin

The Kachin encompass a number of related ethnic groups who are linked by clan systems and speak a dozen dialects belonging to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family. They live in northern Burma on the border with China and India, mainly in the Kachin State.

There are no reliable statistics on the Kachin population, but estimates suggest there are over one million. The Kachin are one of the largest Christian minorities with around 10 percent following Buddhist practices, with some elements of spirit worship still continuing in the hills.

Since the 1990s ceasefires have existed between the military government and armed ethnic opposition groups. The state, however, remains highly militarized, with continuing reports of human rights violations including land confiscations, forced labour and sexual violence. Grievance has also grown due to rampant deforestation,

gold-mining and plans for hydro-electric dams that further marginalize the local people. Ethnic Burmans still dominate in state administrative positions, and many young Kachin women have been driven by poverty into the sex trade, including into China.

Christianity continues to spread, but in some areas local communities have reported pressures to convert to Buddhism, including exemption from forced labour, lower prices for basic foodstuffs and free schooling for those that send their children to Buddhist monasteries.

## Rohingya and Muslims

Burma's mainly Sunni Muslims constitute 4 per cent of the population<sup>3</sup> and live mostly in the Rakhine State (also known as Arakan) as well as urban areas of lower Burma.

Muslims in the north Rakhine State are generally known as 'Rohingya'. Their language (Rohingya) is derived from the Bengali language and is similar to the Chittagonian dialect spoken in Bangladesh.

Other Muslims in the Rakhine State are referred to as Arakanese Muslims. They speak the same language as the majority Rakhine population, who are mostly Buddhists and whose dialect is related to the Burmese language. The Rakhine also have a long history of distinctive culture and identity, and ethnic grievance and tensions with the central government have continued until the present day.

The human rights situation of the Muslims has especially deteriorated since Burma's independence. Citizenship restrictions on the Rohingya population in the Bangladesh borders have deepened their exclusion from employment and other opportunities. Delays on marriage permits have led to a backlog of applications, and the requirement of passes to travel from villages has disproportionately affected the Rohingya population, even for day trips to health clinics.

The army continues to be guilty of imposing forced labour on Rohingya villagers and children. Forced labour is used for construction and maintenance of military camps, shrimp farms and plantations, portering, and the establishment of model villages.

Human rights violations such as land confiscations, discriminatory restrictions on employment, education, access to forest resources and arable land, together with tighter controls of local economies, and arbitrary taxes, has created problems of poverty and food insecurity.

## Chin

The Chin (Zomi) are of Tibeto-Burman origin and inhabit a mountain chain which roughly covers western Burma through to Mizoram in north-east India and small parts of Bangladesh. They are composed of over 40 ethnic groups and dialects.

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A mountain people by tradition, perhaps 80 per cent are Christians, while most of the remaining population are mainly spirit-worshippers or Buddhists.

A Chin State was created in 1974 but remains impoverished and under-developed. Tensions with the military government deteriorated from the late 1980s when armed opposition spread in the India border region. The Chin State has become increasingly militarised, with worsening reports of violations of human rights that have gone unpunished. There has been an increase in reported cases of forced labour, summary killings and arbitrary arrests against local Chins by the SPDC security forces.

The living conditions of Chin State are continuing to degrade. Land confiscations for tea and jatropa plantations controlled by the army have increased. The army continues to force Chin villagers to work against their will and often without pay on these plantations.

The Chin also have difficulty in accessing state schools, and Chin advancement is also held back by restrictions on education in their own language and discriminatory employment policies. Chins also complain of restrictions on the construction of places of worship and public manifestations of religion, especially in the Chin hill areas.

## Karenni

Karenni, sometimes also known as the Red Karen or Kayah, refers to a family of around a dozen Karen-related groups.

There is little reliable data, but it is estimated that they may number 250,000. The Karenni live in the contemporary Kayah (formerly Karenni) State, situated between Shan State to the north and Karen State to the south. In general most Karennis are Christians, but there is also a Buddhist Shan minority in the state.

The Kayah state is Burma's smallest and one of the most impoverished regions in the country. Despite ceasefires in the mid-1990s with some of the armed Karenni factions, it remains one of the most closed states to foreigners, and the overall humanitarian situation has not improved. Forced displacements and militarization of the state by the Burmese army has been accompanied with claims of forced labour, land confiscation for mining and logging activities, involuntary relocation, torture, arbitrary executions, and sexual violence. Such violations have all negatively impacted on the local inhabitants and have led to malnutrition, poor health and a disproportionate lack of education opportunities compared to urban areas of the country.

The Karenni have been largely excluded from any benefits arising from development projects, such as the Lawpita hydro-electricity dam, and villagers complain that recent projects have led to serious environmental degradation and deforestation, seriously hampering many of the Karenni's traditional agricultural and economic activities.

## Notes

- 1 Burma Campaign UK, 2004; CIA World Factbook, 2007
- 2 Ethnologue 2001; US State Department 2007
- 3 CIA World Factbook, 2006

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