

briefing

Burma

Visit to the India-Burma Border

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CHRISTIAN
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I. Executive Summary

*“We have been ruled by the army for 48 years. The army has killed our hopes.”
- A Chin pastor*

“The elections amount to nothing more than a change of clothes for the military. They are completely unacceptable.” – A Chin refugee

Burma has been ruled by a succession of military regimes since 1962. The current junta, known as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) and led by Senior General Than Shwe, has one of the worst human rights records in the world, and has been accused by leading international jurists and the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Burma of perpetrating sustained, widespread, systematic and egregious human rights violations, amounting in some areas to crimes against humanity and war crimes. These violations include the suppression of democracy, the denial of ethnic and cultural rights, and the widespread and systematic use of torture, rape as a weapon of war, forced labour, the forcible conscription of child soldiers, violations of religious freedom and extrajudicial killings.

On 7 November 2010 the regime held elections which have been widely regarded by Burma's people and the international community as a sham designed to perpetuate the military's rule. The leader of the democracy movement, Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, has spent a total of 15 years and 20 days in detention, and her latest period of house arrest was for seven years. She was disqualified from participating in the elections and her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), became illegal when it decided not to register to contest the polls. Aung San Suu Kyi was finally released on 13 November, but while her release is welcome, by itself it is no measure of progress. The military regime's offensives against ethnic nationalities, involving severe violations of human rights, continue.

In eastern Burma, the regime is carrying out military offensives against ethnic civilians, resulting in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people and rape, torture, forced labour and killings. Civilians, including women, children and the elderly, are sometimes shot at point-blank range. In western and northern Burma, the regime is also cruelly suppressing the ethnic nationalities, although the tactics vary.

The Chin people in western Burma are among the poorest, most marginalised and most persecuted peoples of Burma, targeted for their ethnicity, their political opposition to the regime and their religion, Christianity. Inhabiting Chin State along the border with India and Bangladesh, as well as much of Sagaing Division, the Chin are subjected to extortion, forced labour, rape, torture and religious persecution which have been documented by Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) in previous reports and by the United Nations, U.S. State Department, Human Rights Watch and the Chin Human Rights Organisation (CHRO). In addition, access to health care and education is extremely limited and as a result many people die of preventable or treatable diseases and are denied opportunities due to lack of education. Since 2007, the Chin people have suffered a chronic food shortage caused by a natural phenomenon of the flowering of the bamboo, which occurs every fifty years. Rats are attracted by the rich fruit produced by the flowering bamboo. Once the fruit supply is exhausted, rats then destroy rice and corn fields and consume rice supplies, other food sources and almost all means of livelihood and survival. At least 100,000 people in more than 200 villages were affected by this humanitarian emergency, according to CHRO,¹ and many

¹ Chin Human Rights Organisation, *Critical Point: Food Scarcity and Hunger in Burma's Chin State*, July 2008 - http://www.chro.ca/images/stories/files/PDF/special_reports/Critical_Point.pdf

died of hunger and famine-related disease. CHRO estimates at least 54 deaths², but many more may have occurred without being reported or documented. Although the recovery is beginning, particularly in northern Chin State, the effects of the food shortage are expected to continue for several more years, while in southern Chin State, particularly in remote areas of Paletwa, Mindat, Matupi and Kanpalet townships, the food security crisis is continuing.³

CSW travelled to Mizoram State, on the India-Burma border with a delegation led by Baroness Cox, Chief Executive of the Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust (HART), from 22-28 November, 2010. CSW has made four previous visits to the India-Burma border since 2004 and has been advocating on behalf of the Chin people, including the victims of the chronic food shortage, to secure humanitarian assistance and international support.

During the visit, the delegation received information about the conduct of the elections on 7 November, as well as examples of human rights violations, including forced labour. The delegation also heard evidence of the dire and desperate conditions in Chin State caused by lack of health care and education provision, and met community health workers who are being trained to provide basic health care in their villages.

CSW met Chin civil society organisations, which cannot be named for security reasons, and had meetings with Ministers in the Government of Mizoram and the former Chief Minister of Mizoram and President of the main opposition party, the Mizoram National Front, Mr. Zoramthanga.

In New Delhi, CSW visited Chin refugees and had meetings with several Indian Members of Parliament, the Indian National Congress party, civil society organisations and media and the British High Commission.

2. Recommendations

CSW believes the political, humanitarian and human rights situation in Burma, including in Chin State, requires urgent international attention, particularly from Burma's neighbours, India, China and Thailand, the members of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), as well as the European Union, the United States and the United Nations Secretary-General. Despite the welcome release of Aung San Suu Kyi, severe and widespread human rights violations continue to be perpetrated by the military regime, and the recent elections do not represent a meaningful step towards democracy. Pressure of various kinds must be maintained on the regime, and efforts must be made by the UN Secretary-General to facilitate a dialogue between the regime, the democracy movement led by Aung San Suu Kyi and genuine representatives of the ethnic nationalities. CSW therefore makes the following recommendations:

² Chin Human Rights Organisation, *On the Edge of Survival: The Continuing Rat Infestation and Food Crisis in Chin State, Burma*, September 2009 -

http://www.chro.ca/images/stories/files/PDF/special_reports/On_The_Edge_of_Survival.pdf

³ Chinland Guardian, *Ongoing food crisis puts southern Chin State on brink of starvation*, 1 December, 2010 - <http://www.chinlandguardian.com/news-2009/1131-ongoing-food-crisis-puts-southern-chin-state-on-brink-of-starvation.html>

2.1. To the Government of India:

- To strongly and pro-actively support and encourage calls on the UN Secretary-General to facilitate a meaningful dialogue process between the regime, the democracy movement led by Aung San Suu Kyi and the ethnic nationalities;
- To use its influence to encourage the regime in Burma to respond positively to Aung San Suu Kyi's calls for dialogue and to engage in a meaningful process of national reconciliation;
- To support the proposal for a Second Panglong Conference, to discuss the needs and desires of the ethnic nationalities and agree a way forward for a federal democracy;
- To adopt a more robust, proactive and constructive role in its relationship with the regime in Burma;
- To play a more active and constructive role within the United Nations, including ending its policy of opposition to the UN General Assembly and Human Rights Council resolutions on Burma;
- To continue to provide sanctuary to Burmese refugees and to ease restrictions and pressure on exiled Burmese non-violent humanitarian and human rights groups operating in India;
- To allow access to the India-Burma border for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and Non-Governmental Organisations;
- To permit international organisations to fund cross-border relief efforts in Chin State, enabling Chin relief teams to access remote areas of Chin State which UN agencies and Non-Governmental Organisations operating within Burma are unable to reach, due to restrictions by the regime and poor infrastructure.

2.2. To the United Nations:

- To pro-actively lead efforts to establish a dialogue process between the regime, the democracy movement led by Aung San Suu Kyi and genuine representatives of the ethnic nationalities, through the Secretary-General himself;
- To support the proposal for a Second Panglong Conference, to discuss the needs and desires of the ethnic nationalities and agree a way forward for a federal democracy;
- To establish a commission of inquiry to investigate crimes against humanity in Burma;
- To secure a universal arms embargo on the military regime in Burma;
- To request the UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion and Belief to investigate allegations of violations of religious freedom in Burma, including in Chin, Kachin and Rakhine States;
- To set out clear benchmarks of progress in Burma, including the unconditional release of all political prisoners, an end to human rights violations against ethnic nationalities, a nationwide ceasefire and a meaningful dialogue process.

2.3. To the European Union:

- To urge the UN Secretary-General to facilitate a meaningful dialogue process between the regime, the democracy movement led by Aung San Suu Kyi and the ethnic nationalities;
- To support the proposal for a Second Panglong Conference, to discuss the needs and desires of the ethnic nationalities and agree a way forward for a federal democracy;

- To maintain existing sanctions against the regime until meaningful benchmarks of progress have been met, to consider strengthening targeted sanctions if no progress is made, and to review options for new measures to be imposed if the situation deteriorates;
- To continue to raise the situation in Burma with the Government of India and encourage India to play a pro-active and constructive role in encouraging a dialogue process;
- To support the establishment of a UN commission of inquiry into crimes against humanity;
- To provide urgently needed humanitarian assistance to Chin State, to address acute food security, poverty, education and health needs and to provide assistance through cross-border mechanisms as well as in-country delivery.

2.4. To the United Kingdom:

- To urge the UN Secretary-General to facilitate a meaningful dialogue process between the regime, the democracy movement led by Aung San Suu Kyi and the ethnic nationalities;
- To support the proposal for a Second Panglong Conference, to discuss the needs and desires of the ethnic nationalities and agree a way forward for a federal democracy;
- To continue to raise the situation in Burma with the Government of India, and encourage India to play a pro-active and constructive role in encouraging a dialogue process;
- To work proactively to build an international coalition in support of the establishment of a UN commission of inquiry into crimes against humanity;
- To increase humanitarian assistance to Chin State, to address acute food security, poverty, education and health needs and to provide assistance through cross-border mechanisms as well as in-country delivery.

2.5. To the United States:

- To urge the UN Secretary-General to facilitate a meaningful dialogue process between the regime, the democracy movement led by Aung San Suu Kyi and the ethnic nationalities;
- To support the proposal for a Second Panglong Conference, to discuss the needs and desires of the ethnic nationalities and agree a way forward for a federal democracy;
- To maintain existing sanctions on the regime until meaningful benchmarks of progress have been met, to consider strengthening targeted sanctions if no progress is made and to review options for new measures to be imposed if the situation deteriorates;
- To continue to raise the situation in Burma with the Government of India, and encourage India to play a pro-active and constructive role in encouraging a dialogue process;
- To work proactively to build an international coalition in support of the establishment of a UN commission of inquiry into crimes against humanity;
- To provide urgently needed humanitarian assistance to Chin State, to address acute food security, poverty, education and health needs and to provide assistance through cross-border mechanisms as well as in-country delivery.

3. Introduction

3.1. Background

3.1.1. Burma

Burma has been ruled by a succession of military regimes since General Ne Win seized power in a coup d'état in 1962. The current junta, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), has been in power since the brutal suppression of democracy demonstrations in 1988. In 1990, the regime held elections which were overwhelmingly won by the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi. The NLD won 82 per cent of the parliamentary seats, but the regime rejected the results, imprisoned many of the elected Members of Parliament and intensified its grip on power. Aung San Suu Kyi spent over fifteen of the past twenty years in detention, and was only released when her current sentence of house arrest expired on 13 November 2010.

The past three years have been among the most significant and traumatic in Burma's recent history. In September 2007, the regime responded to peaceful protests by tens of thousands of Buddhist monks and civilians by unleashing a brutal, violent crackdown, in which thousands were arrested and many were beaten, tortured and killed.

Five months after the 2007 protests, a prominent ethnic leader, Padoh Mahn Sha Lah Phan, General Secretary of the Karen National Union (KNU), was assassinated at his home in Mae Sot, Thailand, under orders from the regime. Three months later, in May 2008 Burma was struck by Cyclone Nargis, the worst natural disaster to hit the country in decades. At least 140,000 people died and 2.5 million were displaced, as a result of the regime's failure to permit the provision of assistance in the immediate aftermath of the disaster.

On 10 May 2008, just a week after the cyclone, the regime held a sham referendum on a new constitution, which paved the way for elections in 2010. The referendum was blatantly rigged, with widespread intimidation and harassment of voters throughout the country. According to the SPDC, the turnout was 99 per cent of those eligible to vote and 92.4 per cent voted in favour of the new constitution. Under the new constitution, the military have 25 per cent of the parliamentary seats automatically reserved and immunity from prosecution for crimes past, present or future. To amend the constitution requires a three-quarters majority in Parliament, unachievable without the support of the military or the military-backed political parties.

In 2009, an American, John Yettaw, swam uninvited across Inya Lake to Aung San Suu Kyi's house and spent two nights there. As a result, she was accused of breaking the terms of her house arrest, for receiving a visitor without permission, and after a sham trial she was sentenced to a new term of three years' hard labour, reduced to eighteen months' house arrest. It meant she was unable to participate in the 2010 elections, and under the election laws her party, the NLD, would have had to expel her and all other political prisoners if it wished to register to contest the elections. At least 408 NLD members are currently in prison, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma).⁴ The NLD chose not to register, and as a result became an illegal entity.

⁴ Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma), Prisoners List - http://www.aappb.org/nld_list2.html

On 7 November 2010 the regime's elections were held. Seats were contested for the national parliament's two houses, the *Pyithu Hluttaw* (Lower House) and *Amyotha Hluttaw* (Upper House), and for state parliaments (*Pyine Hluttaw*). Although some ethnic and democratic parties did contest the elections and win some seats, the elections were regarded as a sham. The regime-backed USDP claims to have won over 80 per cent of the seats.

One week after the election, on 13 November 2010, Aung San Suu Kyi was released from house arrest. She addressed large crowds gathered outside her house and at the NLD headquarters, and spoke of the need for unity and national reconciliation. She repeated her appeal for dialogue with the military and highlighted the plight of the ethnic nationalities.

Meanwhile, conflict increased along the Thailand-Burma border between the Burma Army and a faction of the pro-junta Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) within hours of the election, and at least ten thousand Karen civilians fled across the border to Thailand. Since 1996, over 3,500 villages in eastern Burma alone have been destroyed and between 500,000 and one million internally displaced. Rape, torture, forced labour and the use of child soldiers are widespread and systematic, and civilians, including women, children and the elderly, are sometimes shot dead at point-blank range.

Over 2,200 political prisoners remain in prison in Burma, subjected to horrific torture and dire conditions. Some are serving sentences of as many as 65 years or more.

Burma is listed as a Country of Particular Concern by the U.S. State Department Office of International Religious Freedom, for its restrictions, discrimination and persecution of religious minorities, particularly Christians and Muslims.

3.1.2. *The Chin*

Burma's ethnic nationalities amount to forty per cent of the country's population and inhabit sixty per cent of the land. The Burman majority represents sixty per cent of the population. While there are many small ethnic groups, such as the Wa, the Pa-O, the Naga and the Rohingyas, and numerous sub-groups, there are seven major ethnic nationalities: the Karen, Karenni, Shan and Mon in eastern Burma; the Kachin in northern Burma; and the Arakan or Rakhine, and the Chin, in western Burma.

At least 90 percent of Chins are Christian, according to CHRO, and Christianity is an integral part of their ethnic and cultural identity. The Chin population is an estimated 1.2 million, but CHRO believes only 500,000 live in Chin State. The majority live outside Chin State. At least 100,000 Chins live in Rangoon, while 300,000 are in Kalaymyo, Sagaing Division and a further 150,000 are in the Kalay-Kabaw Valley, Sagaing Division, next to Chin State. In Mizoram State, India there are an estimated 75,000-100,000 Chin refugees, according to CHRO, and a further 8,000-10,000 in New Delhi. The UNHCR stated in August 2010 that there are 4,057 registered Burmese refugees and 4,484 Burmese asylum seekers in New Delhi, making a total of over 8,500, the overwhelming majority of which are Chin.⁵ In Malaysia, there are approximately 50,000 Chin refugees, while several thousand are living in exile in the United States, Canada, Australia and various countries in Europe.

⁵ UNHCR Newsletter New Delhi, July/August 2010 - <http://www.unhcr.org/4c98b2c89.pdf>

3.2. About Christian Solidarity Worldwide

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) is an international human rights advocacy organisation, specialising in religious freedom. With advocacy staff based in London and Brussels, CSW has partners and affiliates in the UK, USA, Australia, Hong Kong, India, Sri Lanka, Norway, Denmark, France and Nigeria.

CSW has been working on human rights issues in Burma for the past twenty years, making regular fact-finding visits to the Thailand-Burma border, the China-Burma border and the India-Burma border, and inside Burma. In 2008, CSW visited the Bangladesh-Burma border, and Chin refugees in Malaysia.

CSW provides financial support to the Free Burma Rangers for relief and documentation work among the Internally Displaced Peoples (IDP), two orphanages in refugee camps on the Thailand-Burma border and human rights documentation and advocacy work among the Chin people. In 2008, CSW provided emergency funding for relief for victims of the chronic food shortage caused by the bamboo flowering, or *Mautam*, and support for training of community health workers.

CSW previously visited the India-Burma border in 2004, 2006, 2007 and 2009. In 2007, CSW organised a delegation of Chin and Kachin activists to visit London, Brussels, Berlin and Washington, DC to highlight the human rights violations in Chin State, and in 2008 and 2009 CSW hosted and arranged advocacy meetings for Chin activists visiting London.

3.3. Itinerary and Purposes

CSW visited India from 16-30 November 2010. From 16-20 November, CSW had meetings in New Delhi with Members of Parliament, media, civil society and policy-makers, to discuss India's policy on Burma and encourage the Government of India to play a more proactive and constructive role in promoting dialogue, national reconciliation, democracy and respect for human rights in Burma. CSW also addressed a meeting at the India International Centre (IIC), met the British High Commission, the All India Christian Council and the Euro-Burma Office, and visited Chin refugees. On 21 November, CSW had meetings in Kolkata.

From 23-28 November, CSW and a delegation led by Baroness Cox, Chief Executive of the Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust (HART) visited Mizoram State. The delegation had meetings in Aizawl with Ministers from the Mizoram State Government and Chin pastors and community health workers. CSW also had meetings with the former Chief Minister of Mizoram and President of the main opposition party, the Mizoram National Front, Mr. Zoramthanga, as well as with Chin civil society organisations. CSW's objectives for the visit were:

1. To obtain up-to-date information and evidence regarding human rights violations in Burma, particularly Chin State;
2. To obtain up-to-date information regarding the 7 November elections, particularly in Chin State, and the political situation in Burma;
3. To obtain up-to-date information regarding the humanitarian situation in Chin State and assess current projects and future needs.

4. Human Rights Violations

One Chin pastor told CSW:

“Living in the village is like living in hell. There is no hope for the future. We would like to leave, but we have nowhere to go.”

Another pastor recalled a time when a Burma Army Colonel visited the village, where the villagers were trying to find funds to build a school. One village elder asked the Colonel for help and in response the soldier said: *“I will cut off your leg and use it as a support post on which to build the school.”*

Human rights violations in Chin State, as in the rest of Burma, are particularly common and severe in areas with a high military presence. Since 20 November, according to Chin political sources, the Burma Army presence in parts of Chin State has increased significantly. Accurate figures are difficult to obtain, but one source told CSW that in one military post alone, the number of soldiers has doubled, from ten soldiers before 20 November, to 20-30 soldiers today. At least three battalions have moved to the border area. According to another respected Chin source, the number of troops in at least five different existing camps in Falam, Tedim and Tonzang townships have tripled since 12 November, 2010.⁶ This increase in troop numbers is likely to result in an increase in human rights violations, as the pattern of violations in Chin State is often directly correlated with the military presence.

Forced labour, rape, torture, violations of religious freedom and other serious human rights abuses continue to be perpetrated in Chin State by the Burma Army on a widespread basis. Denial of proper health care and access to education are also serious concerns and are symptomatic of the regime’s discrimination and persecution of the Chin people. CSW obtained new testimonial evidence of some of these violations, through many interviews with Chin pastors and community health workers. These are summarised in the section on Violations of Religious Freedom, Forced Labour and Extortion below and in the Appendix to the report.

4.1. Violations of Religious Freedom, Forced Labour and Extortion

The military regime in Burma is intolerant of all dissent and opposition, but it is shaped by a policy of Burmanisation and Buddhist-isation, manipulating and misusing religion for political purposes and ultimately control over the people and so is intolerant of non-Burman ethnic groups and non-Buddhist religious groups. Christians and Muslims are subjected to particular religious discrimination and, in some areas, persecution. For the Chin, Christianity is a core part of their cultural identity and an important unifying factor among the diverse Chin sub-groups, and so they are subjected to restrictions, discrimination and persecution on religious as well as ethnic and political grounds.

According to a CHRO report on 17 November, a church in Gangaw Township, Mergui Division has been ordered to close. On 9 November, Pastor Mang Tling, aged 47, whose mission project is run by Carson Baptist Church in Kalaymyo, Sagaing Division, was summoned to the Election Commission. The local police took photographs of his church compound and ordered him to stop holding church services and to discontinue a nursery

⁶ Chinland Guardian, *Troops Reinforced on the Western Front As Tensions Flare in Eastern Burma*, 3 December, 2010 - <http://www.chinlandguardian.com/news-2009/1134-troops-reinforced-on-the-western-front-as-tensions-flare-in-eastern-burma.html>

programme. During the election, he refused to wear a USDP T-shirt, and after the election the village headman filed a report to the local authorities, accusing the pastor of convincing Christian voters in the village to vote for the National Unity Party (NUP). Religious leaders are forbidden by law from engaging in politics and electoral campaigns.

The following are case studies of human rights violations relating to religious persecution, forced labour and extortion:

4.1.1. Interview with Pastor A, aged 31, from Matupi Township, Chin State

In Matupi, in southern Chin State, the people are uneducated. They dress very simply. As most are not educated, the soldiers force us to do whatever they want. The government does not allow us to construct new churches, but they also don't allow us to have meetings outside the church.

I want to establish a children's home. The government has a children's home but it is only for Buddhists. There is no chance for Christians. I am now helping some orphans – most of them are children whose parents cannot take care of them, they are busy with their farm work, so they left their kids at home. Some give them to the Buddhist children's home. But at the Buddhist children's home, the monks ask the parents for an agreement that the children become Buddhist. Then they force the parents also to become Buddhist. They enrol them into Buddhism. The monks are connected with the military. The government wants to extend Buddhism. I would like to have a children's home providing children with Christian guidance, but I cannot get financial assistance.

I was arrested three times. The first time was in 2005. I was at home when the military came. They didn't tell me anything. They just took me to the jungle, for three days, made me work as a porter in the jungle, carrying their arms, and then released me. They asked me what I was doing, and I just told them about my church work. In February 2008, I was arrested a second time and held in a military camp. I had gone to the next village for a funeral, and got into a discussion with some monks about the Bible. An argument began and people reported it to the authorities, and I was arrested. I was held for one week, then released by the help of others. In November 2008, I was arrested again, while preaching in a village. The military were trying to catch Chin National Front (CNF) soldiers, and they entered the village, saw me, were suspicious because I was the only stranger in the village, and arrested me. They asked me questions and beat me three times with bamboo, and then handcuffed me and took me to Matupi District Prison.

In June 2009, my wife was arrested while I was away. She was held for two days, handcuffed, along with one other lady and a man. She was given no reason.

I have a lot of experience of forced portering. Sometimes the military comes during a church meeting and asks us to do portering, or to give them chickens or pigs. Currently many villages are contributing forced labour for the construction of a road from the village to Matupi, which is 25 miles and at least 6ft wide. They have to work three months a year, provide their own food, and all the materials for the road construction.

Crosses have been destroyed in Chin State. In Matupi three crosses were destroyed. The biggest cross, which had been built in 2000, was destroyed in 2004, and the other two in 2009. The Burma Army poured acid on the crosses, which were about 20ft tall. We had spent 350,000 kyats on building the crosses. Now we are not allowed to build any more crosses. According to the military, two of the crosses were destroyed because they were building a golf course. But this was just an excuse – the crosses were on the top of the hill, and the golf course was under the hill, so they had no effect on the golf course. I think the regime wants to eradicate Christianity,

and convert us all to Buddhism. That is why they establish children's homes run by Buddhists. Some of the monks in the village carry pistols – they are clearly working as intelligence agents. The government uses soft ways to convert people. In one village, two people were given 50,000 kyats per month by the government to convert. The reason the government wants to convert us is that it wants to eradicate the Chin nationalism spirit. If we are Buddhist, automatically our nationalist spirit [and Chin identity] is removed. It is a political interest. It is Burmanisation. We can use Chin language in the church, but we cannot use it in the schools. There is no subject in Chin language in school.

Our means of transportation is our feet. So we suffer from leeches and mosquitoes. The UN gave some mosquito nets which were intended for remote villages, but instead they were distributed at the hospital to hospital staff and military personnel, and not shared with the villages. Hundreds of people die from malaria every year.

4.1.2. Interview with Pastor B, aged 45, Matupi Township, Chin State

In 2005, I went to Paletwa Township for preaching, and the military came to my home, killed a pig and ate it all. They told my wife that when I come back, I must report to the nearby village. So when I returned I went to report, and they immediately arrested me, handcuffed me and beat me. They tied me with a rope to a tree for an entire night. They pointed a gun at me and said: 'If you say anything, we will kill you'. They thought I was a rebel. They beat me with sticks on my back ten times. There were thirty soldiers who arrested me.

4.1.3. Interview with Pastor C, aged 46, Matupi Township, Chin State

The government prohibited the construction of new churches and the holding of church evangelistic events. In 1987 and 1988 we started building three new church buildings, but we were told to stop and could not continue. We had already purchased the land, but since then we have not been able to build. Instead, we rent private houses for church meetings. Sometimes we face intimidation from the authorities. They threaten us, accusing us of illegal meetings and threatening to confiscate the property and close it down. In 1989 and the 1990s, two or three houses were closed down by the authorities, but church people gave 100,000-300,000 kyats as a penalty and they were allowed to continue. If we travel to another village, we have to report to the authorities, and if we fail to report, we have to pay a fine of 20,000-30,000 kyats. In 2006 and 2007 the authorities prohibited Christmas celebrations in Matupi, including carol singing.

I have heard from my relatives in remote areas that forced labour is common, even on Sundays. They have to work for the military, building fencing for the military camp, or gathering fruits from the forest or fish, for the military.

4.1.4. Interview with Pastor D, aged 45, Matupi Township, Chin State

We didn't have a church, so we worshipped in private houses. The authorities threatened us and demanded money. We paid 100,000-200,000 kyats. Without paying, we cannot worship. These problems started in 1988 until today, and the hardship has been increasing since 2000. It was especially bad under the Burma Army's previous Tactical Commander, from 2005-2008. In 2008, a new Tactical Commander came and he gave us registration for a permit to worship in the house. He did not intimidate us, but we had to pay a tax of 10,000 kyats per year. When I travel to other places for preaching or field work, I have to take a recommendation letter from the Township Peace and Development Council, which costs 5,000 kyats. If we hold a meeting, we have to pay 100,000 kyats for permission.

I have many experiences of forced labour. When the military is patrolling, and they need porters, they catch people, sometimes pastors, and force them to carry their goods. This happens especially in remote areas. It happens even on Sundays – they don't care.

5. Political Developments

Although some Chin people told CSW that the elections in their areas occurred with comparatively few problems, the majority of people provided examples of rigging, intimidation and harassment. One Chin refugee in New Delhi told CSW that *“The elections amount to nothing more than a change of clothes for the military. They are completely unacceptable.”* A Chin activist said the elections were “unfair” and that *“people were threatened that if they didn't vote for the regime party, there would be some kind of punishment.”* In most areas, the regime-backed USDP, went around with loudspeakers warning people of the consequences if they did not vote for them.

While Aung San Suu Kyi's release is very welcome, several Chin expressed the view that it is the regime's “manipulation” rather than a sign of real change. One Chin woman activist said *“we are overwhelmed with joy, and we have hope with her, that she will do something, but we are still suspicious about the regime's motives. We are worried that there is some reason behind this, that they may try to do some bad things to Aung San Suu Kyi, to the extent of killing her.”* On 30 May, 2003, the regime launched a violent attack on Aung San Suu Kyi and her supporters at Depayin in which at least 70 people were killed, and there are understandable fears that the regime may attempt another attack in the future.

The introduction of a new flag for Burma, immediately before the election, caused concern among many Chins, because the new flag only has one star, rather than the 14 stars representing the seven ethnic states and seven divisions on the old flag. This is interpreted as a sign of further ‘Burmanisation’, with one religion and one language.

According to one Chin refugee, the Chin National Party (CNP), which contested the election, submitted five proposals to the Election Committee earlier this year, highlighting the need for freedom of speech, religious freedom, freedom to construct religious buildings, the right for ethnic nationalities to publish their own literature, and access for international Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) to work for development in Chin State. All five recommendations were rejected. *“So we can see no real democracy, no real change,”* he said.

Official results had not yet been announced, but according to CHRO, in Chin State the regime's party, the USDP, won five seats in the *Pyithu Hluttaw* (Lower House), while the CNP and the Chin Progressive Party (CPP) both won two seats each. In the *Amyotha Hluttaw* (Upper House), the USDP won six seats, the CPP four seats and the CNP two seats. In the Chin State Parliament or *Pyine Hluttaw*, the USDP won seven seats, the CPP and CNP five each, and the Ethnic National Development Party one seat. In Kalaymyo, Sagaing Division, the USDP won the seats for both the Upper and Lower Houses of Parliament and two seats in the Regional Parliament, while the CPP won one seat in the Regional Parliament. According to CHRO, only three women candidates stood in Chin State. The woman candidate for the CNP in Thantlang town won her seat in the Lower House by a comfortable margin.

Harassment, intimidation and vote rigging by the junta-backed USDP were widespread. Even in the seats won by opposition parties, the USDP challenged the results. In Thantlang, where the CNP won all the seats, the USDP tried to file a complaint and has reportedly been studying the records to assess whether government employees voted for the CNP. The

Chairman of the Chin State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), former General Hung Ngai, has ordered an investigation into how each member of the civil service voted, after USDP candidates lost all contested seats in the three townships of northern Chin State.⁷ If any government employees are identified as opposition supporters, they are likely to be punished.

In Kalaymyo, according to one Chin civil society source, out of three thousand voters, one thousand voted in favour of opposition parties, but the results indicate those votes were cast for the USDP. A Chin activist told CSW that this occurred during the count. *“While counting votes, when they realised they would lose they stopped counting and took the ballots to their homes to count there – and then declared themselves the winner,”* she said.

Prior to the election, active supporters of the opposition parties were threatened. One man, a campaigner for the CNP in Tlangpi, ran away because the threats were too intense. Reports also emerged of the USDP misleading elderly voters into casting their advance votes for the USDP. Many voters were unable to vote, because they had not been allocated voter registration numbers or could not find their voting numbers. Advance postal votes were manipulated and allocated almost entirely to the USDP. People who wished to travel on 7 November were given advance votes, but were told to vote for the USDP and warned that if they did not, they would not be allowed to travel. During the campaign, the USDP reportedly warned people that if they did not vote for them, there would be no development in their area.

The USDP reportedly cast votes on behalf of voters in some areas, particularly Tedim and Kalaymyo. One family member, for example, who might be a USDP supporter, would vote on behalf of his or her relatives, and when the relatives turned up to vote they were informed that their vote had already been cast for them. In Rulbu village, Falam Township, for example, all the villagers voted for the USDP out of fear, because in the 2008 referendum when they voted against the draft constitution, the regime cut off their electricity supply. They were afraid if they voted against the USDP they would face some repercussions. The USDP also promised that if the villagers gave them their votes, they would reconnect their electricity supply. In Kalay, voters for the USDP were allowed to vote up to three times. In Gangaw, Mergui Division, one pastor was arrested because he was known to oppose the USDP.

The USDP used youth as forced labour for their campaign, and if a person was unable to join the campaign they were required to find a replacement. The Election Commission also used villagers to carry materials from village to village. The USDP forced people to make contributions to their campaign, demanding 1,000 kyats per household, especially in Hakha. *“Nobody refused,”* a Chin civil society source said. *“No one was strong enough.”* District offices, information offices, schools and other public buildings were also forced to buy the new flag, particularly in Hakha and Falam, and pay 5,000 kyats per flag. *“Nobody likes the new flag,”* one Chin said. *“It is Burmanisation.”*

A further dimension is that the election was held on a Sunday, an important day of rest and worship for the Chin people who are overwhelmingly Christian. Many Chins did not vote because they were busy at church and many others gave up trying to find their voting number. One pastor believes this was a deliberate decision by the regime. *“They did it knowingly. They denounce Christians, and they often call for porters on Sundays deliberately.”* Pastors, and all ordained religious clergy including Buddhist monks, were denied the vote.

⁷ Chinland Guardian, *Civil Servants to be probed for voting against USDP*, 15 November, 2010 - <http://www.chinlandguardian.com/news-2009/11/19-civil-servants-to-be-probed-for-voting-against-usdp.html>

A Chin civil society activist told CSW: “We still think the election was a sham. Automatically the regime took 25 per cent of the seats, as guaranteed in the constitution, and the USDP claims to have won 80 per cent of the unreserved seats. We don’t think it’s a meaningful election. But at least ethnic parties will now be in Parliament, mixing with the USDP, so it will be interesting to see how that works and how the government is formed.” Another Chin political activist said that those who have been elected as Members of Parliament for opposition parties are “very brave”. While they will have very few opportunities to make a difference, “at least they can speak”.

All Chin welcome the release of Aung San Suu Kyi, and many said that morale is now very high as a result of her release. Since her release she has met with ethnic leaders, including Chin representatives, and has spoken of the idea of a Second Panglong Conference to discuss the ethnic situation. The Panglong Conference, convened by her father, independence leader Aung San on 12 February, 1947, provided the foundations for a federal democracy in which ethnic rights and autonomy were respected, although its proposals were never implemented. Aung San Suu Kyi has proposed a second Panglong Conference to address the current needs and desires of ethnic nationalities, an idea welcomed by ethnic leaders. Chin political groups advocate tripartite dialogue between the regime, the democracy movement led by Aung San Suu Kyi, and genuine representatives of the ethnic nationalities, and a Second Panglong Conference could be an important part of this process.

6. Humanitarian Situation

Since 2007, much of Chin State has been devastated by a chronic food shortage known as ‘*Mautaam*’, caused by a natural phenomenon which occurs every fifty years when the bamboo flowers. A plague of rats is attracted to the bamboo flowering, and the rats destroy the bamboo, and then rice fields, rice supplies and all sources of food, multiplying significantly in the process. CHRO estimates that at least 100,000 people in more than 200 villages were affected.

In 2007, CSW provided emergency financial assistance for relief efforts, to enable some food supplies to be provided to the Chin people through cross-border delivery mechanisms. CSW also urged the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development (DFID) to provide assistance, and since 2008 DFID has funded food relief for some of the affected areas through the World Food Programme (WFP). The food shortage and DFID’s response are detailed in CSW’s previous report, *Burma: Visit to the India-Burma Border, 10-25 November, 2009*. During this visit, the delegation was able to hear first-hand accounts of how the situation has developed.

One pastor told the delegation:

“I have been sent on behalf of all the famine victims to say thank you to you. The famine came in 2007. We had no place where we could tell our difficulties. We didn’t know anybody to whom we could speak about our suffering and starvation. For many families, the famine meant exodus, because of fear of starvation. Thousands left their own villages to places where they could get food. They had no food left with them, and they had so many tears. Everybody had fear and could not stay in their villages. They had no strength anymore, but they felt they had a duty to live with and protect our villages where our forefathers had lived for so many years. For the parents, the most painful thing was to tell our children we have no food left. For some people, even carrying food in the jungle, they died. Even for pastors, we had no strength to pray at the funerals of those who died. We had no energy, because our hearts were broken into pieces. Life has been very difficult for many years under this regime, but in the past three years we have had a double challenge: the Burmese government and the famine. Due to this regime, most of our youth left the

village even before the famine came. As there was no youth left, women and the elderly were responsible for finding food. Some pregnant women were carrying such heavy loads that they lost their babies. For those women who had their babies, they produced no breast-milk, and so the babies suffered malnutrition. The babies cried the whole night. At night time the village was filled with the crying voices of babies. During the famine, people could not even sit in church. The church bells rang but no one went, because they were all in the jungle looking for food. But now, our church is back. After we got food, we became sure in our hearts that our villages would not be destroyed by the famine. We had peace, and we knew we would have food to eat as a family. Now, our village women are producing breast-milk. If you hadn't given help, we would have died. But now, our hunger is finished and with the help of aid, we can cultivate fields, have a good harvest, and have rice – with your help.

However, although the recovery is beginning, particularly in northern Chin State, the effects of the food shortage are expected to continue for several more years, while in southern Chin State, particularly in remote areas of Paletwa, Mindat, Matupi and Kanpalet townships, the food security crisis is continuing.⁸ The WFP conducted a survey of the food security situation in eight of the nine townships in Chin State in October 2010, and concluded that the food consumption of 81 per cent of the households in the villages surveyed was classified as inadequate. At least 22 per cent of food consumption was “poor”, while 59 per cent was “borderline”. Only 19 per cent of food consumption of surveyed households was described as “adequate”. The rats’ infestation was the major cause of food insecurity in 57 per cent of households. The WFP concluded:

*Due to the fact that crops were damaged by rodents, there will be a significant reduction on crop production for many households this year. The findings of the survey conclude that the food security situation in Chin State remains critical ...*⁹

The WFP has therefore recommended that food assistance continue to be provided until the next harvest. The WFP recommends food for work or cash for work activities, a policy CSW highlighted in our previous visit report as flawed. However, CSW welcomes the WFP’s recommendation for the provision of relief in areas affected by the rats’ infestation, as well as support for livelihood activities to assist farmers to increase agricultural production.

Due to restrictions on UN agencies and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) by the regime, combined with poor infrastructure, many remote areas in Chin State cannot be reached and are thus denied humanitarian aid. The only way to reach many of these areas is through Chin relief workers, including community health care workers, back-pack medics and relief teams, accessing areas from the India-Burma border. Some governments and NGOs have already funded such cross-border aid on the Thailand-Burma border, and a few have supported cross-border aid on the India-Burma border, but there is a need for further financial support. Without such cross-border relief work, thousands of Chin people will continue to die of preventable and treatable diseases and chronic food shortages, unreached, unheard and unknown.

⁸ Chinland Guardian, *Ongoing food crisis puts southern Chin State on brink of starvation*, 1 December, 2010 - <http://www.chinlandguardian.com/news-2009/1131-ongoing-food-crisis-puts-southern-chin-state-on-brink-of-starvation.html>

⁹ World Food Programme, *An Analysis of the Food Security Situation in Chin State*, October 2010

7. Conclusions

The release of Aung San Suu Kyi is a very welcome step, and offers the opportunity for meaningful change in Burma if accompanied by further measures. Her ability to meet international diplomats including the UN Special Envoy Vijay Nambiar, to give media interviews to international and exiled Burmese media outlets, to address public gatherings and to meet members of the NLD, representatives of ethnic nationalities and other political activists are all welcome developments. However, the international community must recognise that the release of Aung San Suu Kyi is, by itself, no measure of lasting progress, and that in the ethnic states in Burma, little has changed. The Chin people, along with other peoples in Burma, continue to suffer severe and widespread human rights violations, denial of education and health care and poverty, as documented in this report. The elections were a sham, and offer no meaningful change for the country. As one pastor concluded:

“This regime has made us poor. In development, culture and psychologically we are poor. But if I stand against the military, they will catch my wife or my son or me – and so no one dares to speak out.”

It is therefore essential that pressure is maintained on the regime, to release all political prisoners, end the violations of human rights against the ethnic nationalities, declare a nationwide ceasefire, and enter into a meaningful dialogue process.

It is equally essential that all players, including the international community, the regime and the democracy movement recognize that the ethnic nationalities must be fully included and involved in any political process in the future. As a Chin political activist told CSW:

“The Burma problem is not only democracy. The main issue is the ethnic issue.”

A tripartite dialogue, between the regime, the democracy movement led by Aung San Suu Kyi and genuine representatives of the ethnic nationalities, is the only alternative to continued conflict and suffering in Burma. The UN Secretary-General, supported by the international community, including Burma’s neighbours, China, India and Thailand in particular, must take the lead in attempting to facilitate a new dialogue process. The opportunity that has been provided with the release of Aung San Suu Kyi is one which must not be missed.

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8. Appendix: Interviews with trainee community health workers

8.1. Mr A, aged 28

Four years ago, I completed my Bachelor of Theology degree in Rangoon, and came back to my village. I studied in Rangoon for three years. In Rangoon, I saw cars, and rich people, and I thought about the villagers who are very poor. From my village to Rangoon, I travelled three days' walk to Matupi, and then three days and two nights by bus to Rangoon.

I wanted to continue to study in Bangalore, but had no money. My father had stomach disease, and could not work. He said don't study the Bible, we don't have money. My family had nine members, and when my father was unable to work due to stomach disease all my brothers and sisters were affected. We couldn't get to school. My father told me: "You have to get married, work for our family and feed us". I did get married, one year ago, and now I have one son. One day my father felt stomach pain, and then my two sisters got pneumonia. They were coughing every night, the whole night, and could not sleep. I thought: 'How can I help them? What medicine can I give them? I don't know'. The villagers are also suffering, because they don't know what medicine to take. Some women died in delivery, because there is no nurse in the village. All the villagers are helpless. Each year, at least one baby and one mother died in child birth, out of about 20 deliveries each year.

Village life is very very difficult. When the villagers are sick, there is no medicine. When the SPDC comes, they kill pigs and chickens and take villagers as porters, for forced labour. Usually they come once or twice a year, and take four or five people each time, to do one or two days forced labour. We have to carry rice, alcohol, sugar, milk and arms for the soldiers, on our backs, sometimes for between 25 and 50 kilometres. The soldiers do not treat us well – they scold and beat us. Sometimes if a person has a fever and cannot carry the load, they are scolded. One time, a soldier put his gun into the mouth of my friend, a porter who was sick, and said: "Do you want to die?" My friend did not know Burmese, could not understand, but he was exhausted, could not walk any more, and the soldiers beat him many times. He told them in his language, Mara, "Please kill me".

8.2. Mr. B, aged 30, from village X, Thantlang Township

In my village, there is primary school, but the nearest middle school is in a village 15 miles away. The nearest high school is in Hakha, the state capital, 95 miles away. We have problems with food, education and water. Clean water is available two miles away, from a water pipe. It is very difficult to get medicines in the village. The closest place is in Thantlang, 77km away. The common health problems include malaria, diarrhoea, typhoid, anaemia and measles.

When the SPDC come to my village, they ask for food and meat. They come sporadically, sometimes just once a year. There is a military camp 30 miles away.

8.3. Ms. C, aged 23, from village Y, Paletwa Township

From my village to the India border is at least 120km, four days walk. I walked from 6am until the evening, sometimes 6pm or 9pm. I wake up in the early morning, have breakfast, then pack food in banana leaves for lunch, and walk all day, stopping whenever I can find shade, to rest. Due to landslides, I sometimes have to walk like an animal on four legs.

In my family there are eight children. I have four sisters, and I am the fifth, and I have three brothers. All my sisters are married. We have 60 houses in the village with around 300 people.

In my village school only goes to 6th Grade. Teachers from other villages come to teach grade 8 or 9. I had to stop studying with tears – my sisters and I were crying when we were unable to study anymore, and after Grade 4 we became farmers. The only way to continue through grades 5 and 6 is to ask elder students to become our teachers, to unofficially study. After Grade 6 there are no more teachers and therefore none of us can study further even though we want to. My father took me to another village where they are able to teach further Grades and he built a small bamboo hut for me to stay in, as we demanded him to do this. I lived there for two years and my sister came to help. Every Saturday we went back to the village to collect rice to keep us in the coming week. We would walk the whole of Saturday, twelve or thirteen hours, stay the night and then walk back the whole of Sunday, sometimes through the night as we didn't want to miss our classes. We would arrive very early on Monday morning in time to attend classes.

We would carry heavy loads of rice back, usually seven or twelve kgs. I studied Grades 7 and 8 during those two years. My father thought that we shouldn't go to school as he thought women would be too soft to go through all of these difficulties.

There was no fee, but the school required contributions. My father sold chicken and rice to enable me to make a contribution to the school. The syllabus in Burma is all in Burmese, so we were not allowed to study in Chin, although I spoke my local village language at home. I learnt Burmese during Grade 5. Everything we needed to buy we had to work for, usually by carrying rice bags, as we had no other money. We also sold chickens and that helped us buy pencils and pens.

After I finished Grade 8 I wanted go to high school, but my father couldn't afford to pay the school fees. So I remained in the hut and attended the same school for another two years, again going back home every weekend to obtain food for the coming week. My elder sister felt that she had to go home for Grade 10 so I lived in the hut on my own for the whole of Grade 10. I used to be scared at night time as I was on my own, but I went to a neighbour if I needed to. If I got sick in my village people were worried as there was nothing that could be done, with no healthcare knowledge available in the village apart from one man who had received some training from the government. Even though we know now about medicines, because of the training we have received, we see them only in a book or in our brain – we have never seen these medicines ourselves.

I attended High School in that hut, but when it came to sit the exams, I could not do so in the village because there was no proper school. So I travelled for four days in order to take my exams. I knew that I had to pass my examinations and that my father would be very upset if I didn't make it. I prepared for the exams by staying with a school teacher and managed to pass my school exams. I stayed in Paletwa for two months, and finally passed my exams in a government controlled school.

My father was a different person when I passed my exams. He sold pigs, chickens and other animals to raise money for me to go to university, and I studied in Sittwe University, in Arakan State, for a BSc degree. I had to travel for seven days to get to Sittwe. I stayed with a missionary family in Sittwe, who asked me to help with cooking, because every day they had many guests. So for three years, I woke up at 4am, started cooking until 8am, and then I was in college from 8am until 3pm. As soon as classes were finished I went home and started cooking again, until 6pm, and then studied until 11pm. I graduated with a BSc in Botany in 2008, but I am so sad that I cannot speak English. I would like to speak directly, without an interpreter.

When I finished university, there were no jobs in Burma, so I was jobless. I started working with my father in the field, until I heard about the community health worker training programme. When I graduated I thought: 'What can I do for my village, even though I have a BSc? Nothing!' But then a village committee was set up to select two people to attend the community health worker training. There were rumours that only those with Grade 10 maximum would be selected and I desperately wanted to be chosen. So I felt very frustrated. 25 people from my village applied so a voting system had to be established to select two. I always go to the mountain to pray every Sunday at 2pm. But that day was the day when the selection was made so I missed the chance. By the time I came back my mum told me that I had been called but I had missed the vote. However, I wasn't willing to accept the situation and a group prayed for me to go to the training. So I was sent and even though my village had already selected two people I kept up my hope that I could still go. Otherwise, they knew I would go mad.

So I went to the village where I had studied high school, and when I arrived I heard the news that many villagers had been invited to the training, but were so far away that they failed to come because they were too scared of the soldiers. I knew that the places for the training were limited to two people per village, and I felt that the organiser probably would not break the rule, so I had to make a big decision. I decided to approach the headman of the village and ask him to issue me with an endorsement letter to come on behalf of those villages who were too scared to come. I travelled for two days to the village and found that in fact two people had been selected. Then I went to another village for a further day and found they had also selected two people. Then finally I heard of a third village that still had a vacancy. Exhausted, I went to this village and asked the church leaders to pray. The villagers came and said they had been looking for someone who would go to the community health worker training, and had not yet found anyone. They agreed I could go on their behalf, and they prepared an endorsement letter. I spent two days of sleepless nights and felt increasingly scared that I would be rejected by my village and also by the organiser of the training. But the endorsement letter came through, the trainer arrived and I was accepted. I will do everything I can for the village that I am representing, but also for my own village. So many people have left the village because of the famine and there are only 18 houses left.

8.4. Ms. D, aged 20, from village Z, Matupi Township

When I knew I would have an opportunity to speak to you, my first thought was 'what do I say?' But then I thought, 'I cannot wait to tell my story'. We are nine children in my family. Two have died and the rest are living. The eldest were twins but my mother had no breast milk and so couldn't feed them both, so one was looked after by a neighbour. Because my mother had no breast milk, she was advised to get powered milk (Amul). My father brought animals, especially chickens, to India, to sell in order to buy powdered milk and sugar, to make milk for the baby, but it was a lot to carry. Sometimes he could carry only ten packets of milk and sugar, and it would take four or five days walk each way. Within a month the packets would be finished and so he had to find chickens to sell and go again.

The elder children were looked after by my mother, but the younger ones were taken care of by our grandparents. The younger ones couldn't get breast milk and so suffered malnutrition. The twins got skin diseases which they were unable to cure. They were too weak and could not resist anything.

The third child was born and again my mother felt very guilty about the two eldest children who were taken to my uncle who sold some chickens to try and provide milk for them. Then the fourth child was born. My mother worked very hard to feed the children, working hard in the fields. The fields were fenced, to keep the domestic animals from entering the field, and there was a bridge on the way. My mother fell from the bridge when she was pregnant, and had

great pain inside. When the fourth was born his legs were twisted, with broken bones, like polio. He is disabled and is now aged 23.

For three months my mother held him, but he was so disabled he was sent to the hospital. The doctors decided his leg was infected, and that it had to be amputated. So now he has a prosthesis. He returned to the village but there were no opportunities for him as he is disabled. Sometimes he says he thinks he should die, he thinks he should kill himself. He is very depressed. My father is now very deaf, so only my mother can give my brother counselling. There is no help available.

I am the fifth child. After the twins there was another boy who lived only until he was five years old. He died from diarrhoea, and my mother always cries about it. The twins had many difficulties. The elder one of the twins also died. He dropped out of school after Grade 3, so that the younger one could go to school. He felt very sad, had severe depression, and when he was 14 years old he was persuaded to join the Burmese police force. My mother tried to stop him but he said he had to go. He was taken away and we didn't see him for 14 years. He was a child soldier. Finally we heard that he had run away from the police force, and had come to India. He got sick and was brought to hospital in Aizawl, but it was too late to save his life. After 14 years of not seeing him, our family came to pick him up and take him to our village, but he could only speak for two days. We gave him liquid and he lived another eight days, and then died. That was in 2006.

As I was growing up my mother always told me not to study, but to learn how to be a farmer, so I can feed my younger brothers and sisters. From the age of five I accompanied my parents and grandparents to the fields to work. I used to ask my mother why the other children were wearing green uniforms and going to school, and I was going to the fields with a basket. So I decided to run to school without any books, just my catapult. In school I ran from room to room with my catapult – I didn't stay in class. I had no understanding of what school meant.

Again and again I asked my mother for schooling, and finally she allowed me to go to school. But she told me to work to raise the money for books. The only option was to work selling rice. So the way was open, and one lady, a school teacher, came to teach in the village and my mother asked the teacher to allow me to stay with her and to look after me. I stayed with the teacher until Class 4. The teacher was so strict – if I was unable to read the lesson, she used to hit me, but she hit lovingly, not angrily. She demanded that I read until 10pm, but for a small girl it wasn't easy to stay up until 10pm.

After Class 4, I went on to middle school. But the teacher with whom I had stayed had to leave the village and transfer to another village, so I had no place to stay for education. My mother told me that I must stop my education because my younger brother was coming up for education. Every time she proposed that I stop my schooling, I said that in order to overcome our difficulties in the village I needed education. If I didn't have education, no one will tell us how to overcome our difficulties.

One of my mother's brothers is a teacher, and he also travelled regularly to another village where there was a middle school. My mother made me go along with my uncle for middle school, two days' walk away. After two years studying in that village, my uncle had to leave because he was being transferred to another village, and so again I had to stop my education because there was no teacher. But there was a private school up to Grade 7, and so I stayed there for four months and finished Grade 7. But then my father told me to stop my education, because he was spending a lot of money on it. Admission fees, extra classes, books and pens cost, on average, a total of 20,000 kyats for one year. He told me: 'Because of you, we have only one pig left to pay for the repairs on our house, and so we are not able to repair the house'. I decided to work, and came to India where I worked for three months, earning just 50

Rupees a day. Then my mother told me that because she and my father were getting old, they did not have the strength to work in the fields for cultivation, and so asked me to do that work. She promised that after one year I could continue my education. While working for cultivation, I also bought and sold products, to make money to pay for my education the following year.

I used to pray for my family. My father was deaf, my brother almost blind, one brother disabled. I used to pray that God would help me, give me wisdom and energy, so I can help my family. Many people prefer to go to the city for high school, but I stayed back. I passed my matriculation, but with low marks. As my marks were low, I didn't want to go to college, but I was willing to try to get a government job. I went to Hakha, but I had to raise 20,000 kyats to go there. I earned 10,000 kyats working, carrying sand from the river. Three times a week for seven weeks, I carried 25 kg bags of sand six miles. I would leave the village at 6am, walk five hours to the river, arrive at 11am, have lunch, and walk back carrying the sand, arriving at the village at 7pm. I earned 500 kyats (half a dollar) per 25kg bag. Then I walked six days to reach Hakha, carrying rice. I could not afford 20,000 kyats and I had no relatives in Hakha, but I stayed with a teacher and looked after their children. In order to get a job, I had to pay 600,000 kyats as a bribe to the authorities. I could not afford that and so after two months I came home. I had expected to be able to get a job but I couldn't, and I felt ungrateful to God. I used to pray for my family situation. I felt helpless.

At this time I heard about the community health worker training programme. I decided to give my name, and I was selected. But I had no money to come to the training, and so my mother sold some rice and I was able to come. But as I am the main person making money in the family, it caused a lot of problems. My parents did not understand the training, and asked me to come home. But they didn't try to stop me doing the training – they just didn't understand it. If they were educated, they could have understood. I cannot leave the training now – if I do, how will my family live?

Finally, my family came to understand my commitment. But my mother has a heart problem, and is not healthy. When she works in the fields she gets giddy, and is unable to walk. She doesn't remember anything. But she understands my vision. She used to write in letters that apart from God, we have no one to help us. My father, even though he is still alive, is unable to work, but whenever he gets some money, he tries to help. Out of such difficulties, God has called me to do this training. Even if you can't get much education, if you get wisdom from God you get everything. Poverty has blocked good education – it would have been very good if from childhood somebody had helped us for education.

Sometimes there are health workers paid for by the government, but if we call them we have to pay them again. I am willing to help others freely. My parents used to teach me that if I want to achieve my vision, I need to be humble. I believe God who saved us from many difficulties will be able to fulfil my vision, so we can help the sick people in the villages. Being a trainee health worker is a great mission to save the sick, and I am very proud to be doing it. I praise God – I did not deserve to be selected for this, but God chose me.

8.5. Ms. E, aged 20, a Khumi from village A, Paletwa Township

After I was born, my father left us, and my grandfather on my mother's side came and took my mother away, and so as a small baby I was left with somebody in the village who had no children and so I grew up in their family. I studied in another village where my grandfather lived, two days' journey from my home village, but my foster parents were not able to provide for my education. After they took me in, they had four children, and so they could not afford education. Eventually, they took me to live with their parents, my adopted grandparents, and they also came to live with them.

When I studied in school, they asked her for school fees. At that time my foster mother was pregnant and unable to work, so my foster father had to sell vegetables. One day, when he was out collecting vegetables, floods came, causing stones to roll and crush him. He died. My foster mother was pregnant and there was nobody to look after the family, so my grandmother was the main person looking after us. It was so difficult. At the time of delivery of my foster mother's baby, the hospital was three days' journey from the village, and we had no money. My grandmother sold some rice to get money to enable my foster mother to go to hospital, but after she gave birth, she died. We had no place to stay because we had sold everything. I was 11 years old.

We had to depend on my grandmother, but she was unable to walk. My brother was sent to an orphanage for education, and my grandmother tried to get money to pay for his education. But then she also died. Her eyes became yellow. She died one year after my mother.

At that time, my father's sister married a drunkard. When she was pregnant, he beat her, and she died – three years after my mother had died. I was 15 at this time, and I took care of the child. We had no money and couldn't feed the baby properly, but we did our best. We did cultivation to get money to buy baby food. The baby is now aged seven, and is in Class 3.

I heard information about the health worker training programme from a person in the village. I heard that they were inviting applications, so I determined to go there. I thought that if I had this opportunity earlier, I could have known how to look after my mother and father who had died. Maybe their deaths could have been prevented. I wanted to do this even though I wasn't educated.

Without the knowledge of our village I came to the training. I went back to my village after stage 1, but my village complained when I got back because I didn't look after the children. They said that the training was illegal. They threatened to report me to the Village Council. After second phase I went back home and approached some people to tell them about the training. Half the villagers now understand the importance of this training. Before I came to the training, nobody had a toilet [because they did not know about the importance of toilets], but after the second phase people start to have toilets [because I have been able to educate them]. People come to me asking how I can help and if I don't know I say that I will find out from my teachers. The problem that I'm facing is lack of medicine. People want medicine but I cannot afford it. If I had money I could get medicine from another town. The villagers had an expectation that I would bring medicine. People come to understand the importance of water and medicines. They want me to have some. My village has started to support me and encourage me in the training, and many other people want to come and receive health education. I also want them to come and have training, because I am alone and there are around 300-400 people in the village. Young people pray for me and I feel very good. My church also supports me and I am prayed for there.

About once a month the military comes and gives many orders: for money, livestock (chickens, pigs) and forced labour. Mainly they want porters. They ask us to collect bamboo. Sometimes they ask each house to provide five bamboo trees, and if we fail to give them bamboo they will fine us about 10,000 kyats.

8.6. Ms. F, aged 22, from village B, Thantlang District

There are seven members of my family – my parents, aunt, one brother and three sisters. I am the eldest. My parents have no education. They are farmers. I studied to Grade 7 in my village and then went to Hakha to study until Grade 10. My mother isn't well due to gastric problems

and my father sold pigs to India to pay for my school fees. I passed matriculation in 2005. My father told me not to go to college in 2006 as the other children needed education, which involves a lot of money, so I stayed one year with my parents. I worked in the fields helping my parents with cultivation, which was hard work and I felt very sad. The following year my father allowed me to go to college, saying I was to use the money very wisely, as we are very poor. Because of this I wasn't able to stay like my friends – I had to work and study with people in the town. Since I was staying with these people, I had to look after their children. Sometimes I missed the bus and missed class. I understand that it was only out of difficulty that I could go to college, and so I prayed to God that I could complete my college. I graduated in 2009 with BSc in Physics. As I completed my studies, I heard about the community health worker training programme. I heard the news in Hakha, and came back to my village immediately, even though it was a Sunday, so that I could be allowed to go for the training. I was not selected by the villagers, but I believed I could be a blessing to the village if I went, even though we do have some midwives in our village, and so I came to the training. I told my village of my willingness and commitment, and so they allowed me to come.

Before coming to the training, I knew nothing about prevention, or the importance of water, and I thought that only medicine was important. Now I have learned many things, including about water, cleanliness, sanitation. I am very proud to have learned so much about health. Before we knew nothing about giving protein to the children, or about vitamins, energy or what to eat, but now I know so much more. I'm also able to organise the village health committee. The purpose of the committee is to understand the needs of the village. The committee consists of 11 elected members, including pastors, teachers, farmers, Village Council members and health workers. We have a vision to have a fund so that those who cannot afford medicine may get it. I believe that my training will be a blessing for the village. By the help of God I will be able to do my best for sick people and those in need.

Since most villagers depend on 'slash and burn' cultivation, people face problems with natural disasters, floods and storms. Last month floods washed away many fields, leaving many villagers helpless. Many students drop out of school as a result – many young people are forced to work for money instead, and some come to India. Two people died in the flood, one aged 65 and the other aged 33. At least five villages nearby were affected by the floods, and three were particularly badly affected. About 40 houses were affected. The 33 year-old man who died tried to cross the river, but couldn't make it because it was swollen. The other one who died was my relative. But the more difficulties happen around the village, my confidence gets stronger and stronger. I am waiting to finish the course and then I will go and work among them.

My aunt is disabled, because when she was small she was given an injection which damaged her legs. So even though she passed matriculation, she is unable to do anything. My parents are not healthy – they have the disease 'beri-beri'. My father also has pain in his bones, and he is the main person working for the family.