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## **U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing**

### **Two Years after the Coup: Religious Freedom in a Contested Burma**

Wednesday, February 8, 2023  
10:30am-12:00pm ET

**Written Testimony by Zo Tum Hmung, Executive Director, Chin Association of Maryland**

#### ***“The Worsening Situation for Christians Across Burma”***

### **INTRODUCTION**

Chairman Turkel, Vice Chairman Cooper, Commissioner Schneck and members of the Commission,

Thank you for holding this important and timely hearing and inviting me to speak today.

My name is Zo Tum Hmung, Executive Director of the Chin Association of Maryland (CAM). CAM is a non-profit organization based in Maryland, with an office in Washington, DC. We advocate for religious freedom and human rights in Burma and for durable solutions for Chins and other refugees and internally displaced persons from Burma.

Since the February 1, 2021 military coup, CAM has released three reports on the situation of the Christian minority in Burma. The basis of this testimony is our third report that we published last week. It is titled *Two Years After the 2021 Military Coup: The Worsening Situation of Christians Across Burma*.<sup>1</sup> This is also the title of my testimony this morning.

### **BACKGROUND**

The Burmese military, also known as the Tatmadaw, has intensified its violence against the Christian communities of Burma. It is destroying and burning down villages and towns inhabited by Christians. The Military is arresting, detaining, convicting, torturing, and killing pastors and other Christian leaders. They are also burning down churches, convents, schools, and religious buildings.

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<sup>1</sup> Chin Association of Maryland (CAM), *Two Years After the 2021 Military Coup: The Worsening Situation of Christians Across Burma*, January 2023 <https://chinmd.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/19484-2-Years-After-the-Coup-FIN-compressed.pdf>

The situation in Burma is worsening each day, and the numbers are staggering. According to United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk, the military and its allies have killed at least 2,890 people.<sup>2</sup> The military has also burned down 34,000 civilian structures and detained 16,000 people across Burma.<sup>3</sup> The fighting has left over 1.2 million additional internally displaced persons, and over 70,000 additional refugees have fled the country.<sup>4</sup> The largest group of the new wave of refugees are Chin Christians who have fled to India. They join the over 1 million refugees who fled to neighboring countries from Burma before the coup, including over 700,000 Rohingyas.<sup>5</sup>

I was born in Chin State, which borders Rakhine State, where Rohingyas reside. Therefore, I am familiar with the situation of Rohingyas. In 2017, I posted a statement on Facebook calling on my fellow Chins to join me in praying for the Rohingyas. I said that they are also human beings created by God. I have been deeply concerned for the Rohingyas and that there is still no accountability for the atrocities against them. I commend the recent USCIRF statement calling for accountability, which we wholeheartedly support. CAM also firmly believes that the atrocities committed by the Tatmadaw against Burma's Christian minority including Chin Christians constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity.

In June 2021, the National Unity Government (NUG) released a policy on the Rohingyas saying that, "The entire people of Burma is sympathetic to the plight of the Rohingyas as all now experience atrocities and violence perpetrated by the military."<sup>6</sup> The NUG calls for accountability, including "if necessary to initiate processes to grant International Criminal Court jurisdiction over crimes committed within Myanmar against the Rohingyas and other communities."<sup>7</sup> Among other things, the NUG plans for an inclusive process to develop a new constitution that will enable all ethnic groups in Burma to live in dignity and peace. This includes passing a new Citizenship law to help resolve the Rohingyas lack of access to citizenship, by basing "citizenship on birth in Myanmar or birth anywhere as a child of Myanmar Citizens."<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, NUG acknowledges that there is no hope to pursue such future plans with a military dictatorship continuing to commit atrocities.

Indeed, just after the February 1, 2021, coup, Christian leaders of Burma, including the Catholic Bishops Conference of Myanmar, the Myanmar Council of Churches, and Myanmar Christ Mission Cooperation Board issued a joint statement: "We share the fears and serious concern of all people in Myanmar over the Tatmadaw's control of power – [we] call to immediately release President U Win Myint, State Counselor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, and others detained and request the pursuit of reconciliation."<sup>9</sup> The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) made a

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<sup>2</sup> United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Two years after coup, Myanmar faces unimaginable regression, says UN Human Rights Chief," Press Release, January 27, 2023

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/01/two-years-after-coup-myanmar-faces-unimaginable-regression-says-un-human>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Rohingya Refugee Crisis,"

<https://www.unocha.org/rohingya-refugee-crisis>

<sup>6</sup> National Unity Government, *Policy Position of the Rohingyas of Rakhine State*, June 3, 2021

<https://gov.nugmyanmar.org/2021/06/03/policy-position-on-the-rohingya-in-rakhine-state/>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> CAM, *After the 2021 Military Coup in Myanmar/Burma: Challenges for Internally Displaced Persons and*

*Refugees*, October 2021 <https://chinmd.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/After-the-2021-Military-Coup-in->

similar call in the first point of its Five -Point Consensus: “First, there shall be immediate cessation of violence in Myanmar and all parties shall exercise utmost restraint.”<sup>10</sup> In December 2022, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 2669 that among other things “Demands an immediate end to all forms of violence throughout the country, and urges restraint and de-escalation of tensions.”<sup>11</sup>

Not only has the Tatmadaw so far ignored all of these calls to halt the violence, but they have increased their violence and tightened their control over Burma. On February 3, 2023, the Tatmadaw extended their state of emergency for six months and imposed martial law in 37 townships in eight regions and states, giving the regional military commanders direct control.<sup>12</sup> Martial law is imposed in 7 of the 9 townships in Chin State, 11 in Sagaing, five in Magwe, five in Bago, two in Tanintharyi, four in Karenni, two in Karen and one in Mon.<sup>13</sup> “Military courts will hear any criminal cases deemed critical of the regime. The junta warned that the death penalty and life sentences would be handed down.”<sup>14</sup> With these negative developments, the voluntary, safe, and dignified repatriation of refugees back to Burma, especially Rohingya is not a viable option.

While the general situation is worsening, the persecution of Christians is also worsening, as I will explain now.

## **KILLING PASTORS AND BURNING CHURCHES-- THANTLANG TOWN, CHIN STATE**

In Chin State and other areas with large populations of Christians, such as Kachin, Karen, Karenni State, and Sagaing Region, the Tatmadaw burns churches and targets Christian religious leaders for arrest, arbitrary detention, imprisonment, and killing. It is illustrative to look at the case of the Tatmadaw’s attacks on Thantlang Town, which share a pattern with attacks across the country.

In September 2021, the military began a campaign of arson in Thantlang. To date, the Tatmadaw has burned down 13 churches, including several that have special significance; Johnson Memorial Baptist Church was built to commemorate the last American Baptist missionary to the Chin.<sup>15</sup> Reportedly, 1,400 homes and businesses have been burned down and the entire population displaced. During the town’s burning, the military killed Pastor Cung Biak Hun, the pastor of Thantlang Centenary Baptist Church, on his way to lead firefighting efforts. The Thantlang Association of Baptist Churches, headquartered in the town, was burned down on December 30,

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[MyanmarBurma.pdf](#)

<sup>10</sup>His Majesty Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkih Mu’izzaddin Waddaulah, Sultan and Yang Di-Pertuan of Brunei Darussalam, *Chairman’s Statement*, April 24, 2021, p 4 <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/Chairmans-Statement-on-ALM-Five-Point-Consensus-24-April-2021-FINAL-a-1.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> United Nations Press Release, “Security Council Demands Immediate End to Violence in Myanmar, Urges Restraint, Release of Arbitrarily Detained Prisoners, Adopting Resolution 2669 (2022),” December 21, 2022 <https://press.un.org/en/2022/sc15159.doc.htm>

<sup>12</sup> Irrawaddy, “Martial Law Imposed on 37 Myanmar townships including resistance strongholds,” Feb.3, 2023, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/martial-law-imposed-on-37-myanmar-townships-including-resistance-strongholds.html>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> CAM, *Two Years After the 2021 Military Coup: The Worsening Situation of Christians Across Burma*, January 2023

2021.<sup>16</sup> This was especially painful for me; my church in Zephai village, just 22 miles away, was a member of the Thantlang Association of Baptist Churches.

The destruction of Thantlang and targeting of its churches and pastors met with little international attention and no accountability. These actions constituted war crimes and crimes against humanity, with the entire population displaced, but the military suffered no consequences. Instead, it learned again that it can terrorize the population of Burma and religious minorities with impunity. Since these attacks, the Tatmadaw has become bolder and more violent; instead of just ground forces, it also now targets the civilian population with air attacks.

### **ARRESTED, DETAINED, CONVICTED, KILLED PASTORS: KACHIN STATE & MANDALAY REGION**

Among the arrested and detained Christian leaders is Reverend Dr. Hkalam Samson, advisor and former General Secretary and President of the Kachin Baptist Convention.<sup>17</sup> He is detained at Myitkyina Prison, Kachin State. A credible source informed CAM that the hearing has been postponed to February 14, 2023. On December 7, 2022, Reverend Thian Lian Sang of Falam Baptist Church in Mandalay, Mandalay Region was sentenced to 23 years. He is imprisoned in Obo Prison, Mandalay.

The best-known example of Tatmadaw air attacks on civilians occurred in Kachin State on October 23, 2022.<sup>18</sup> At a concert celebrating the 62nd anniversary of the Kachin Independence Organization, Tatmadaw airstrikes killed approximately 80 attendees, including musicians and other civilians. Sources familiar with the situation informed CAM that two pastors were among the dead.

### **DESTROYING AND BURNING CHURCHES, USING THEM AS MILITARY BASES: KARENNI STATE AND SAGAING REGION**

Karenni State is known in Myanmar as a state where many Catholics live—90,000 of the 355,000 residents.<sup>19</sup> In February 2022, an official from Loikaw Diocese in Karenni State said that the sounds of his diocese were the sounds of a warzone, with “gunfire, artillery shells, and airstrikes a daily affair.” He said that fifteen parishes were “severely affected” by escalating fighting, and that at least seven had been hit by Tatmadaw shelling and airstrikes. Some 650 houses and other civilian properties had been destroyed including churches, schools, and monasteries. In the city of Loikaw, hundreds of people have been displaced, especially women, children, and the elderly.

Chan Thar, Mon Hla, and Chaung Yoe are three historic Catholic towns in Sagaing Region. They are known as Bayingyi villages, which claim descent from Portuguese settlers four centuries ago, including Catholic missionaries. They have produced many Christian leaders. The Tatmadaw attacked these towns over and over again since the coup.

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<sup>16</sup> CAM, “Statement on Burning of the Thantlang Association of Baptist Churches’ Office in Chin State, Burma,” December 31, 2021 <https://chinmd.org/2021/12/31/statement-on-burning-of-the-thantlang-association-of-baptist-churches-office-in-chin-state-burma/>

<sup>17</sup> CAM, *Two Years After the 2021 Military Coup: The Worsening Situation of Christians Across Burma*, January 2023

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

On November 24, 2022, the Tatmadaw burned down hundreds of houses in Mon Hla, the hometown of Cardinal Charles Maung Bo of Yangon and Archbishop Marco Tin Win of Mandalay.<sup>20</sup> The military killed a 7-year-old child, a 40-year-old woman, and a 30-year old man—all civilians—and destroyed 200 of the 700 buildings in the village, including a church and school, for which Cardinal Bo had helped to raise funds.

At 8 am on January 14, 2023, Tatmadaw troops entered Chan Thar and began to burn down houses.<sup>21</sup> They stayed overnight in the Church of Our Lady of the Assumption, a 129-year-old building. On Sunday morning, January 15, they set fire to the church, along with the parish priest's house and the nuns' convent. Chan Thar's 800 inhabitants, who are majority Christian, fled when the Tatmadaw approached. There was no fighting in the area, and the arson attack was completely unprovoked. This happened less than a month after the aforementioned UN Security Council Resolution 2669 (2022) that "Demands an immediate end to all forms of violence throughout the Country..."<sup>22</sup>

On January 22, 2023, Pope Francis expressed sadness for these attacks: "Sadly, my thought turns in particular to Myanmar, where the Church of Our Lady of the Assumption in the village of Chan Thar – one of the most ancient and important places of worship in the country – was burned and destroyed. I am close to the helpless civilian population subject to severe trials in many cities. Please God that this conflict will soon come to an end, opening a new period of forgiveness, love and peace. Let us pray together to Our Lady for Myanmar."<sup>23</sup>

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Two bills recently passed by Congress and signed by President Biden mark positive steps to help change the situation in Burma. On December 23, 2022, President Biden signed H.R. 7776, the James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act of 2023, which included the key provisions of the Burma Unified through Rigorous Military Accountability Act of 2021 (BURMA Act).<sup>24</sup> This legislation authorized the provision of technical assistance and non-lethal aid to the pro-democracy movement and to the ethnic armed organizations (EAOs). President Biden also signed H.R. 2617, the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023, on December 29, 2022, which maintains appropriations for Burma at the previous year's level of no less than \$136,127,000.<sup>25</sup>

CAM now calls upon the Biden administration and congressional leaders to take additional steps to protect Burma's religious minorities.

*To the Biden Administration:*

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> United Nations Press Release, "Security Council Demands Immediate End to Violence in Myanmar, Urges Restraint, Release of Arbitrarily Detained Prisoners, Adopting Resolution 2669 (2022)," December 21, 2022 <https://press.un.org/en/2022/sc15159.doc.htm>

<sup>23</sup> Aleteia, "Myanmar, Peru, Cameroon: Pope Prays for countries in conflict," January 23, 2023 <https://aleteia.org/2023/01/22/myanmar-perucameroon-pope-prays-for-countries-in-conflict/>

<sup>24</sup> CAM, *Two Years After the 2021 Military Coup: The Worsening Situation of Christians Across Burma*, January 2023

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

1. Actively impose targeted sanctions against the military officials who have committed atrocities against the people of Burma, including atrocities targeting religious minorities such as Christians in Chin, Kachin, Karen, and Karenni States as well as Sagaing and Mandalay Regions; and Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State;
2. Designate atrocities against Christian minorities, especially the Chins, as war crimes and crimes against humanity, consistent with the designation of crimes targeting the Rohingya ethnic and religious minority;
3. Include language condemning the violations of religious freedom by the Tatmadaw in future US legislation and UN resolutions on Burma, especially at the UN Security Council.
4. Increase US leadership and engagement with the UN, ASEAN, and other concerned nations of goodwill to end the violence and restore a viable path to build peace and democracy in Burma.

*To the US Congress:*

1. Increase funding to investigate and document human rights abuses by the Tatmadaw against religious minorities in Burma, including abuses targeting Christians;
2. Conduct a Congressional Fact-Finding mission to the Indo-Burma border area and Thai-Burma border area related to the protection and humanitarian needs of IDPs and refugees from Burma and related to the atrocities, including gender-based atrocities, against religious minorities, including Christians.
3. Conduct a Congressional hearing on the persecution of Christians in Burma.
4. Increase funding to strengthen protection and humanitarian assistance for internally displaced persons in Burma, and to strengthen protection, humanitarian assistance, and pursuit of durable solutions for refugees from Burma in India, Malaysia, Thailand, and Bangladesh.

I am adding a 5th recommendation for the administration, given increased air attacks by the Tatmadaw:

Work with NUG, ethnic armed organizations and others to allocate some of the non-lethal assistance for protection of the civilians from the Tatmadaw air attacks.

Thank you again for the invitation.

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