THE PERSECUTED CHURCH:
BURMA

BRIEF HISTORY OF BURMA

The nation of Burma (also called Myanmar), has a rich and complex history. Nestled between India on the West and Thailand and China on the East, the region has been an important overland trade route for central Asia.

As a province of British India, the region attained stability and became a leading exporter of rice. Following WWII, the country negotiated for independence, which was successfully formalized on January 1947.

Immediately conflict began between the conservative and communist movements and persisted until 1962, when there was an army takeover under General Ne Win and the country was forced to become socialist.

After Ne Win was forced to step down in July 1988, the country was plunged into anarchy. In a claimed attempt to re-establish law and order, the Defence Minister formed a State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in September 1988. In practice, this meant that the country was again subject to martial law. The Council forced a new constitution and used its power to clamp down on rival political parties, arresting those who spoke out against the new government. The next year the military government announced a change in name from Burma to Myanmar (those who advocate democracy in the country reject the name Myanmar).

To this day, senior military officers continue to rule by decree.

CHRISTIANITY IN BURMA

The gospel first took root in Burma during the colonial period as a result of Protestant missionaries. After the government expelled all foreign missionaries in 1966, foreign clergy and religious workers were only allowed to come as tourists, so long as their activities were not perceived as proselytizing. This makes it very difficult for any kind of sustained missionary endeavours. However, the indigenous church is very vibrant and even sends out missionaries of its own.

While Burma is officially a secular state, in practice it promotes the Theravada sect of Buddhism and discourages all other religious practices. Though Christians are vastly outnumbered (close to 89% of Burma’s 54 million population are Buddhist, with 4% Christian, 4% Muslim and 3% Hindus), the Burmese church is very solid.

Although Christians are technically free to worship in Burma, they must navigate around a minefield of government restrictions which makes it very difficult to be a practising Christian.

PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS IN BURMA

The abuse against Christians in Burma is widespread and systematic, according to a report by Christian Solidarity Worldwide presented at the British parliament in London. Often this persecution is closely tied to the Christians’ minority status. Christianity is widely practised among the Kachin people in the north, the Karen peoples of the North-East and the Chin and Naga peoples of the western region. Because these are minority ethnic groups they are subject to severe oppression, which includes regular rape, pillage, genocide, ethnic cleansing and the use of people as human minesweepers. The children of these families are sometimes kidnapped and forced to enlist in the army. Many of these children are then left to starve if they cannot keep up with the troops.

One of the challenges facing Burmese Christians is an inability to get anything done outside the apparatus of the state. It is impossible to have buildings, to open private schools, to open bank accounts, to import food or to publish or import Bibles without first going through the hostile government. Rarely does the state approve buildings for churches or Bibles for publication. Importing translations of the Bible in indigenous languages is strictly forbidden while some local publications of the Scriptures have been allowed (some of which are forced to navigate around a list of more than one hundred prohibited words).

Christians who complain about this hostile state of affairs can find themselves implicated in false cases. This happened to Yeh Zaw, pastor of the Phawkkan Evangelical Church, when he wrote to the leader of the regime in Rangoon after they closed down his church in 2006. Police responded to the letter by arresting Yeh Zaw on the charge that he had been travelling without an identity card. New converts have been known to have their National Identity Cards removed for no reason.

In the regions where Buddhism is strong, Christians are explicitly prohibited from evangelizing in order not to upset local populations. Pastors who disobey this order are subject to imprisonment and even torture.

Although the Government has supported the forced conversions of Christians to Buddhism among the Chin peoples since 1990, it leaves the majority of Christians alone. One man who recently returned from Burma told Christian Voice that the situation is very similar to 1st century Rome. He said that Christians do not get in trouble so much for being Christians, but rather for having loyalties other than the state. Unlike the government of North Korea, Burma is moderately happy to tolerate Christians provided they pay homage to the god of the state and don’t...
rock the boat.

**FULL OF GRACE AND GRATITUDE**

*Christian Voice* researcher Robin Phillips interviewed two Christian brothers who had just returned from a trip to Burma. One of the men, a pastor, writer and popular speaker who cannot be named for security reasons, went to Burma on a tourist visa to minister to the saints. He said:

“I went with the purpose of helping to ground the saints in solid Biblical theology. It did not take me long, however, before I realized that I was going to learn far more than I was going to teach.

“I was confronted with men and women who face enormous hardships and even the possibility of starvation, and yet they are too filled with grace and gratitude to even begin to grumble. Instead they are excited, cheerful and focused exclusively on the opportunities God is giving them to minister. Far from being discouraged at the anti-Christian condition of the country, the Burmese saints are excited to have such a vital mission field all around them.

“I would encourage the Christian Voice readers, in their concern for Burma, to consider the reality of our Western spiritual poverty. In terms of spiritual maturity and treasures in heaven, these folks are far, far richer than we are. We need them to pray for us.”

**CHALLENGES FACING THE BURMESE CHURCH**

The brothers who spoke with *Christian Voice* told of terrible food shortages facing Christians in the North. The food shortage has resulted from a curious quirk of nature that occurs twice every century. In the bamboo forests of Northern Burma and Eastern India there lurks a small population of black rats. Every 48 years the bamboo goes to seed and produces a special fruit. When this fruit drops, the black rats begin eating it, with the effect that their population - normally quite small - begins multiplying exponentially. Within a single season, the population of black rats goes from a few hundred per acre to thousands. Eventually the bamboo fruit is all eaten and the enormous army of rats turns to devour anything it can find, which means unharvested rice fields.

Many of the Christians in Northern Burma are subsistence farmers whose diet consists primarily of rice. Our contacts ministered to Christians who had had their farms wiped out by the rats last fall. So far they have been able to get by on some rescued rice and a brief yam season (the yams, underneath the soil, are protected from the rats), but between the end of April and the next rice harvest in November, they will pretty much have nothing. To make matters worse, the government, which remains in denial of the problem, has raised taxes on the same people in order to feed their troops.

Because the government operates on the premise that they can create paradise on earth, to acknowledge food shortages is to admit that the government has failed. In Burma the state is God so when the state fails, their God fails. Thus, the government has forbidden public discussion of this problem while their own people starve.

Details about how to help our Burmese brothers and sisters are given below.

**READ:** Colossians 1:3-6; 2 Corinthians 8-9; James 1:2-3.

**PRAY:** The pressures on Christians to deny Christ and convert to Buddhism are great. Often this pressure is indirect resulting from the fact that Christians are rarely promoted to upper levels in government jobs. In a country where the government controls everything, this can be very difficult and can create the temptation to apostatize. Pray that all the Burmese Christians will remain faithful to Christ.

**PRAY:** for the Karen people. Many of these predominantly Christian people have been run out of their villages by government repopulation programs. Forced to hide in the jungle, these people have no way to support themselves apart from the undercover work of foreign missionaries. Given the sensitive nature of this problem, we are unable to divulge more details, but we would urge our members to hold the Karen people up in prayer.

**HELP SUPPLY RICE!** Our Burmese brothers and sisters are in desperate need of rice after having their crops destroyed by the rats. The congregations that *Christian Voice* has contact with consist of 3500 people, all who are facing the possibility of starvation. The price of rice has soared to £16 per bag (a bag feeds a family of five for a month). The leaders of these churches have figured that 2568 bags of rice would cover all the households for a period of six months. With about £8,000 in transportation costs within their own country, the total to supply this rice comes to about $75,000 (roughly £51,577). If you would like to donate, you can do so over Pay Pal at the following link: http://www.sabbath-house.org/newdonate.htm. For the safety of our Burmese brothers and sisters, we cannot advertise this campaign widely but publish anything about it on the internet. However, those who are collecting the money can safely and quietly get the funds to them via proven back channels, and the local pastors can then oversee the deliveries.