



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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SUBMISSION TO THE UN UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW

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**MYANMAR**

23<sup>RD</sup> SESSION OF THE UN UPR WORKING GROUP OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS  
COUNCIL

OCTOBER – NOVEMBER 2015





## SUBMISSION TO THE UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW

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# MYANMAR

### 23<sup>RD</sup> SESSION OF THE UN UPR WORKING GROUP – OCTOBER-NOVEMBER 2015

- 1 The Advocacy Department of Open Doors International warmly welcomes the Universal Periodic Review system and trusts it will improve the implementation of fundamental human rights in all UN member states.
- 2 Aligned to the mandate of Open Doors International, this submission focuses on the Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief.

#### GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

- 3 Open Doors International welcomed the thirteen recommendations regarding Freedom of Religion or Belief in Myanmar, made during the first cycle of the Universal Periodic Review.
- 4 It saddens Open Doors International to report that, to our knowledge, the recommendations made during the first cycle have not been implemented so far. There has been no significant improvement in the circumstances of religious communities in Myanmar since the previous Universal Periodic Review.
- 5 Myanmar is ranking 25 on Open Doors' World Watch List, a list ranking countries where Christians are most persecuted. It is based on scores derived from a set of questions. The questions cover various aspects of religious freedom, differentiating between the legal, official status of Christian churches and the actual situation of individual Christians. Attention is paid to the role of the Church in society and to factors that may obstruct the freedom of religion in a country. Thereby, the World Watch List provides an insight in the overall spectrum of the persecution of Christians in all spheres of life (private life, family life, community life, national life and church life). This results in a balanced scoring, taking into account both the impact of (violent) incidents and less visible, structural developments threatening the position of Christians. Open Doors is well aware that in countries where violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief affect Christians, they often also affect others who either adhere to no or a non-state supported religion.
- 6 Myanmar is made up of eight major ethnic groups. Two thirds of Myanmar's people are of Burmese ethnicity, also called Bama. Being Bama is equated with being Buddhist. Everyone deviating from this heritage is labelled as being potentially dangerous.
- 7 The roots of Christianity in Myanmar can be traced back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In 1966, the Myanmar government expelled all foreign missionaries, but by then, the church had become self-supporting. Open Doors estimates the Christian population at less than 10 percent. Most Christians belong to ethnic



minority groups. The majority of the Christians are extremely poor. Many are illiterate or semi-illiterate, unskilled, and live on a hand-to-mouth existence.

- 8 The position of Christians in the country by and large has remained unaffected by political changes towards democracy. With the rise of radical groups identifying themselves as Buddhists, like the '969', the situation for religious minorities rather deteriorated. We are not convinced that the government of Myanmar seriously attempts to counter these intolerant voices in society.
- 9 We express our serious concern about a set of four bills relating to religious conversion, inter-faith marriage, monogamy and population control. These bills for the protection of religion and race are currently discussed in parliament. They have been demanded by the 969, above mentioned, but are also supported by more than one million signatures of citizens across the country.

Although we acknowledge that this set of laws is so far no more than a draft, the mere fact that these laws were tabled with significant support of the Myanmar society is worrisome in and of itself feeding a culture of suspicion and intolerance rather than a culture of respect and inter-faith harmony. Although this might initially mainly affect the ethnic and religious minorities, it will eventually backfire on the society as a whole.

- 10 Myanmar has a Ministry of Religious Affairs which includes a department for the promotion and propagation of Sasana (Buddhist teachings). Although Open Doors acknowledges the fact that religion can unite people for good, we express our serious concern about the convulsion of state and religion.

## RELIGIOUS MINORITIES - CHIN

- 11 Some larger minorities are predominantly Christian like the Chin, or have strong Christian groups like Kachin and Shan. Despite several ceasefire agreements with different ethnic groups including some Christian majority groups, the largest groups continue to be in clashes with the army. These clashes happen to be at the Chinese border and spilling over to Chinese territory.
- 12 The Chin people, residing in the hilly Chin state, are the only tribe of which about 90 percent of the population identifies itself as Christian. Chin state is characterised by political instability. Due to insurgencies, local authorities regularly limit the right to move around freely. This blocks people from traveling to neighbouring states to buy their necessities.
- 13 Aside from the insurgencies, Chin State is also the poorest region in Myanmar. According to UNICEF, in 2010, 73% of Chin State residents lived below the poverty line<sup>1</sup>. Poverty drives mothers to marry off their daughters to insurgents. It also forces Chin to work in poppy farms owned by the insurgents. Many Chin become addicted to drugs as a result of their work in the poppy farms.
- 14 The State runs so called Border Areas National Races Youth Development Training Schools (or Na Ta La schools). These schools are attractive for minority people as they are run without school fees and meals

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.unicef.org/eapro/Myanmar\\_Situation\\_Analysis.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/eapro/Myanmar_Situation_Analysis.pdf)



are included. Although we acknowledge the attempt of the State to provide the very much necessary education in these rural areas, we are disturbed by complaints that these schools are used to influence the students and to introduce them to Buddhism sometimes in a coercive manner.

- 15 Obtaining legal permission to build a church is a cumbersome process involving authorities at various levels. Church leaders need to win the support of these officials to get the documents they need. This is especially true for congregations not belonging to the registered mainline church.
- 16 Chin Christians from Hakka faced a government order to destroy and get rid of a 54-foot tall cross as it was constructed without permission. The cross was perched in April 2014 on a land belonging to J.P. Biak Tin Siang at the Caarcaang Prayer Mountain. Sang's spokesman and Chin elder, Pu Tial Cem, explained that they did not seek permission to build the cross as they did not believe it would be granted.
- 17 Local officials regularly organise village meetings during Sunday worship services. As all villagers are required to attend these village meetings, it makes it impossible for them to manifest their Christian religion. Non-attendance could lead to serious repercussions and is therefore not an option for the villagers.

## RELIGIOUS MINORITIES - KACHIN

- 18 Kachin State is located in the North of Myanmar, bordering China and India. It hosts around 1.7 million people, 1.2 of which are ethnic Kachin. The situation in the Kachin stands out as the government and especially the army tries to break their strife for independence and in this effort targets Christians. More than 100,000 Kachin are internally displaced across Kachin State and into neighbouring China due to continuing military campaigns in order to break Kachin resistance. The Kachin people have a long history of fighting for their independence and mistrust between the army and the Kachin people is deeply rooted.
- 19 Attacks by the army were reported in April and in October 2014. Churches were attacked and Christian men and women were misused as porters. Also, there are reports on sexual violence.
- 20 On 20 January, two women were found dead in their rooms on a Church compound. It is thought locally that soldiers from the Myanmar army are guilty of these murders. We appreciate the DNA test conducted on soldiers in a bid to identify the culprits.

The two victims, Maran Lu Ra (20), and Tangbau Hkawn Nan Tsin (21) worked for the Kachin Baptist Convention as volunteer teachers at camps for internally displaced people in Kachin State.

In contrast to the initial willingness to conduct DNA tests on soldiers, on 28 January 2015, the Myanmar military threatened legal action against anyone alleging that the military is responsible for the killings of the two teachers. The President's office followed suit and directed the threat at the media. These limitations to Freedom of Expression give ground to the impression that protecting the military is more important than truth finding and protecting the people.



## ETHNIC MINORITIES – RAKHINE STATE

- 21 Rakhine State is located in the Western part of Myanmar, bordering Bangladesh. It makes up around five percent of the whole territory of Myanmar and is inhabited by roughly 3.1 million people, around 800,000 of them self-identifying as Rohingyas. Bangladesh sees them as Myanmar citizens whereas Myanmar tries to portray them as Bangladeshi migrants. That is why the government prefers to call them Bengali.
- 22 The vast majority of Rohingya people adheres to Islam. While their exact number is debated, there is a small number of Christian converts among them. These Christians with a Muslim past are pressured from two sides: the government of Myanmar which acts against the Muslim minority of which they are part, and the Muslim minority itself, which acts against the converts.

Violent attacks against the Muslim minority of the Rohingya have occurred frequently since at least 2012.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- 23 Open Doors International calls on the Myanmar authorities to ensure that all people on Myanmar territory can fully enjoy their fundamental rights including the right to Freedom of Religion or Belief.
- 24 Open Doors International welcomes the Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights in Myanmar, and calls upon the government of Myanmar to cooperate fully with the mandate.
- 25 Open Doors International urges the Myanmar Government to invite the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief and the UN Special Rapporteur on Minorities.
- 26 Open Doors International calls on the Myanmar Government to allow for a structural and constructive engagement between the government and all Myanmar faith groups and civil society more in general, on the wellbeing of the country.
- 27 Open Doors International calls on the Myanmar Government to make sure that all citizens share equally in the wealth and resources of the country.
- 28 Open Doors International calls on the Myanmar authorities to ensure swift justice for misconduct by soldiers, rather than shielding them from public scrutiny, investigative journalism, and accountability.

Open Doors in particular calls on the Myanmar authorities to ensure that the perpetrators of the murder of Maran Lu Ra and of Tangbau Hkawn Nan Tsin are found and convicted.

- 29 Open Doors International calls on the Myanmar government to ensure that education is provided for all youth and that school is a safe place for all students regardless their ethnicity or religious affiliation.
- 30 Open Doors International calls on all formal and informal leaders of the country to speak out against any inter-ethnic and inter-religious violence and to foster a climate of mutual trust and respect.



- 31 Open Doors International calls on the Myanmar government to speak out against the package of four bills relating to religious conversion, inter-faith marriage, monogamy, and population control as, at least in their current form, they are inconsistent with international human rights law and fuel inter-ethnic and inter-religious tensions.

