

## The Chin Diaspora: A Great People Resource

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Geographically, the Chin state is located in western Myanmar. There are nine townships: Hakha, Falam, Thantlang, Matupi, Kanpetlet, Mindat, Paletwa, Teddim and Tonzang. The following are excerpts regarding the landscape and ethnicity in Chin.

The Chin Hills lie between latitude 24' in the north and 21'45" on the south and between longitude 94'5" on the east and 93'20" on the west. It consists of a much broken and consorted mass of mountains, intersected by deep valleys and utterly devoid of plain and table land.<sup>1</sup>

The Chin state surrounds the Kachin (north side), the Arakan state (south side), Sagaing division in Burma (east side), and the international boundaries of Bangladesh and India (west side). Chin land covers an area of 13,902 square miles.<sup>2</sup> Myanmar has eight major tribes: Burma, Chin, Kachin, Shan, Kaya, Kayin, Mon, and Rakhine. The Chin people can be divided into tribal groups as they called themselves as Asho, Cho (Sho), Khuami, Laimi, Mizo and Zomi.<sup>3</sup> Some of the tribes have many clans within their tribes. For example, the Zomi people in Tedim Chin has 237 clans.<sup>4</sup> The Chins were formally known as animists and head hunters – the latter was a myth because, historically, head hunters did not exist among the Chin. After their resistance was suppressed in 1890, the British ruled them and placed them under the Arakan. On January 4, 1974, almost thirty years after independence of Myanmar (1948), the Chin region was granted state status.<sup>5</sup>

1. Sing Khaw Khai, *Zo People and Their Culture: A Historical, Cultural Study and Critical Analysis of Zo and its Ethnic Tribes* (Manipur: Khampu Hatzaw New Lamka-G, 1995), xi.

2. Khup Za Go, *Christianity in the Chin Land* (Guwahatti: Christian Literature Center, 1985), 1.

3. Lian H. Shkhong, *The Origin of the Chin in Chin: History, Culture & Identity*, ed. K. Robin (New Delhi: Dominant Publishers and Distributors, 2009), 27

4. Sing Khaw Khai, *Zo People and Their Culture*, 77.

5. Sing Khaw Khai, *Zo People and Their Culture*, 77.

More than 80 percent of the Chin population is Christian out of an estimated number of a million people with half of the population residing in the Chin state.<sup>6</sup> The first Christian missionaries were Reverend Arthur E. Carson and his wife, Laura H. Carson. They reached Hakha on March 15, 1899.<sup>7</sup> Due to poverty, poor education, social discrimination and a ruthless military regime, many Chins have left and immigrated into richer countries. The population is visibly decreasing in size; many of them have left their state for a better living and for the hope of a brighter future.

Today, the Chin immigration (leaving the Chin State) is an issue for debate: is it good or bad? Leaders discuss the issue without committing to one side or the other. A Christian preacher said, "About the Chin immigration, we cannot say that it is totally good or totally bad."<sup>8</sup> This paper seeks to educate the Chins about their diaspora, to help them to understand better their own context and current challenges. The article highlights aspects of the plight of all the Chins in North America, Europe, Asia and Oceania (Australia and New Zealand) beginning with their life, works and their contributions. As resources, this article relies significantly on the questionnaires and interviews answered by ethnic Chins living in different countries since very little document is done on the topic.

### The Scale of the Chin Diaspora

Today, many Chins live and work in other countries. Most of them live as refugees in democratic countries that respect human rights: America, Canada, United Kingdom, Germany, Sweden, Norway, Czech Republic, Denmark, Switzerland, South Korea, Japan, Australia, New Zealand,<sup>9</sup> Finland and the Netherlands.<sup>10</sup> These Chins who already have settled in the above countries used the United Nation's refugee agency (UNHCR)<sup>11</sup> through their offices in Thailand, India, Malaysia, and

6. Sing Khaw Khai, *Zo People and Their Culture*, 77.

7. Chawn Kio, *Chin Sining Tuanbia* (Hakha: CACC, 2006), 65. The title in English means *The History of the Chin People*.

8. James Lian Sai, a message delivered on the funeral service in Yangon on August 27, 2010. Reverend James Lian Sai is the founder of the Church on the Rock and principal of ACTS International Bible College & Institute in Yangon.

9. Ngun Cung Lian, correspondence interview by author, August 16, 2010. Dr. Ngun Cung "Andrew" Lian is the assistant director of the Center for Constitutional Democracy at Indiana University.

10. "Perhkalh" Pu Thang Hlun, correspondence with author, August 19, 2010. Mr. Pu Thang Hlun is the church chairman at Norway Chin Mission Church in Oslo, Norway.

11. For more information about the UNHCR, see their online homepage.

Guam to gain refugee status. Some Chins are also seen in countries like the Philippines, Hong Kong, Singapore, and India, to further their religious studies. Some also live in Bangladesh.<sup>12</sup> According to one very reliable political Chin leader, Victor Biak Lian, the Chins are seen in the following countries (the numbers are approximated):

1. Mizoram State of India – 80,000 to 100,000 people
2. Delhi – 8,000 people
3. Thailand – 2,000 people
4. Malaysia – 45,000 to 50,000 people
5. Singapore – 800 people<sup>13</sup>
6. Philippines – 200 people
7. South Korea – 80 people
8. Japan – 120 people
9. Australia – 3,000 people
10. Switzerland – 20 people
11. Holland – 40 people
12. Germany – 200 people
13. England – 20 people
14. Sweden – 200 people
15. Norway – 1,000 people
16. Denmark – 1,000 people
17. USA – 16,000 people
18. Canada – 1,200 people.

Besides the above mentioned countries, the Chin people live and work in other parts of the world. One Chin leader confidently states that the Chins are scattered in at least thirty-eight countries.<sup>14</sup>

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United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "About Us," <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c2.html> (accessed November 27, 2010).

12. Victor Biak Lian, correspondence with author, August 23, 2010. Mr. Victor Biak Lian is a Chin politician in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

13. Ro Thawng, correspondence with author, August 25, 2010. Mr. Ro Thawng is the Church Chairman in Singapore.

14. Chan Thawng, correspondence with author, August 23, 2010. Chan Thawng is a Chin community leader in the Mizoram state, India.

### Causes of the Chin Diaspora

The main reasons for leaving the country are poverty induced by military actions,<sup>15</sup> lack of religious and political rights,<sup>16</sup> and other human rights violations such as forced labor, rape,<sup>17</sup> social discrimination,<sup>18</sup> and, finally, a hope for a better future.<sup>19</sup> A UN report given by a Chin writer states that more than 70% of Chin people live under the internationally defined poverty line.<sup>20</sup> He also adds that in a world “classified into the First and Third world countries; if there were such a concept of a Fourth World, then, Chinland would have been designated as such a member.”<sup>21</sup> The same Chin writer also reported:

Besides economic factors, ethnic and religious discrimination are the main factors that push the Chin people to leave the Chin State in search of safety and better security. With the Chin State, having proportionally the largest Christian population (this is in ratio in percentage, the Karen people have numerically more people and thus more Christians) in the whole of Burma, the Chin people suffer from various kinds of human rights abuses, systematic measures of repression, and persecutions based on ethnicity, religion, and cultural identity. This is an unwritten policy of what is known as ‘Burmanization’ being implemented by the totalitarian regime with aims to eliminate the Christian culture and traditions of ethnic nationalities in order to assimilate them into a homogenous Burman culture.<sup>22</sup>

A committee member of the Chin Refugee Center in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, expressed his feeling of living in the country:

In Myanmar, even in our own state, we have no right to defend ourselves even when we were abused and treated unfairly, when they killed and

15. Lian Hram, correspondence with author, August 17, 2010. Mr. Lian Hram is a Chin pastor in America.

16. Mang Hlei Cung, correspondence with author, August 17, 2010. Mr. Mang Hlei Cung is a Chin community leader in New Delhi, India.

17. Ngun Cung Lian, correspondence with author, August 18, 2010.

18. Hmignte, correspondence with author, August 18, 2010.

19. Thawng Ling, correspondence with author, August 17, 2010. Mr. Thawng Ling is a former Burmese general.

20. Khaipi (Aaduedue), “Can Migration Be Construed As Development for Chin People?” *Chinland Guardian.com*, August 21, 2010, <http://www.chinlandguardian.com/articles/1014-can-migration-be-construed-as-development-for-chin-people.html> (accessed November 29, 2010).

21. Khaipi, “Can Migration Be Construed As Development for Chin People?” (accessed November 29, 2010).

22. Khaipi, “Can Migration Be Construed As Development for Chin People?”.

ate our animals without any price. Every night, we did not have sound sleep for fear that the soldiers may come, at any time, to check whether we host visitors or guests with us. So, I compare Myanmar with Hell.<sup>23</sup>

The Chins and their state suffer from religious and political discrimination under the rule of Myanmar's Buddhist military regime. Violations in human rights run rampant in the Chin state. According to a recent report Military Junta authorities have destroyed a cross which was 23 feet high and 3 feet wide built by Christians in the prayer garden near Chauhyo village, Makui tract, Mindat Township, Chin state western Burma on 24 July (2010).<sup>24</sup> The government neglects to provide the infrastructure such as paved roads and transportation systems, which is very poor or non-existent. For example, there are no airports or railway station in the Chin state, and the Myanmar government does not permit tourists to visit the Chin state. Though there are many rivers and mountains, only six bridges exist throughout the state. Electricity is so scantily supplied that some villagers constructed a mini-hydro from their meager resources. Modern communication is also lacking because no telephone lines are provided in villages. The government requires unduly large sums of money to have a telephone landline.

Furthermore, from 2003, the Chin state has not received any government funding for hospitals or higher education. Here below is a UN report made in 2009:

A WFP survey of the food security situation in seven townships in May 2009 found that households were mainly concerned with food, health, and education, but the majority were unable to afford these basic necessities and were forced to rely on loans. According to the HRW report, there are only 12 hospitals, 56 doctors, and 128 nurses in the state. Some hard-to-reach villages complain that government health workers only visit twice a year. Education is also lacking, with no universities in the state and 1,167 primary schools, 83 middle schools and 25 high schools.<sup>25</sup>

### The Life of the Chin Diaspora

Because the Myanmar government fails on many levels to provide the basic needs for human life and modern development, those who live

23. Hmigte, correspondence with author, August 17, 2010.

24. BNI, "Christian Cross in Chin State Destroyed by Junta Officials," *Burma News International*, August 20, 2010, <http://www.bnionline.net/news/khonumthung/9200-christian-cross-in-chin-state-destroyed-by-junta-officials.html> (accessed November 29, 2010).

25. IRIN, "Myanmar: Chin State – A Mountain of Trouble" IRIN: Humanitarian News and Analysis Service of the UN Office for the Coordination

and work in other countries are considered as heroes and frontiers by the people at home. The purpose of this section is to explain the life of the diaspora Chin and their contribution to the homeland.

First, the living standards of most diaspora Chins are low. They are employed in grueling, menial low-paying jobs that are often despised by local citizens of a country.<sup>26</sup> Between 5 to 10% of Chins have better jobs such as managing restaurants or fruit companies or as butchers.<sup>27</sup> In India, the Chins often find themselves working with the lowest caste being paid less than the indigenous low caste of Indians.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, the Chins continue to fill undesirable jobs in America.<sup>29</sup> The diaspora Chins usually do not have sufficient educational background or professional training to have better jobs.

Nevertheless, as a hard working people, the diaspora Chins make improvements in their living condition. A Chin man in America reports:

Today, compare with our life in Myanmar, we have a better life and a higher living standard. We, those who used to have very poor food, have very good and many choices of food; and those who used to live in huts and bamboo or wooden houses now live in very good apartments; those who had only bullock carts now owned expensive cars; and have our own computer which we could hardly imagine before.<sup>30</sup>

Second, the diaspora Chins center their lives around worship and fellowship through local churches. Today, Chin-Christian churches or fellowships are seen wherever the Chin are found. For examples, there are about twenty Chin churches seen in Malaysia alone,<sup>31</sup> eleven churches in Singapore,<sup>32</sup> and about twenty churches in America. The Chins care for and minister to one another through the church. Reaching out is another important characteristic in the Chin church. In a telephone conversation, a ten-year old boy who lives in Norway said to his grandmother that when he grows up he will preach to the Norwegians, many of who have become backsliders and secularists.<sup>33</sup> A Chin man, who now

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of Humanitarian Affairs, December 7, 2009, <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=87352> (accessed November 29, 2010).

26. Perhkalh, correspondence with author, August 17, 2010.

27. Lian Hram, correspondence with author, August 17, 2010.

28. Mang Hlei Cung, correspondence with author, August 18, 2010.

29. Thwang Ling, correspondence with author, August 18, 2010.

30. Lian Hram, correspondence with author, August 24, 2010.

31. Lal Pek Lian, correspondence with author, August 24, 2010. Mr. Lal Pek Lian is a Chin pastor of the largest Chin church in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

32. Ro Thawng, correspondence with author, August 24, 2010.

33. Biak Hmun Lian, correspondence with author, August 24, 2010.

lives in America, comments that Chins are generally highly praised and appreciated for their moral and religious life by their neighbors.<sup>34</sup>

Third, the diaspora Chins know the need to form organizations to protect themselves and to help one another. For example, in America, they formed the Chin American Community Development (CACD) for the purpose of helping and protecting other Chins.<sup>35</sup> The Chin Refugee Centre (CRC) in Malaysia is another such organization. The leaders of CRC do social ministries that include visiting jails, hospitals, and homes. They also help them deal with death.<sup>36</sup> In addition, there are online services such as the Chinland Guardian, the Rhododendron, and the Khonumthung that update the condition of Chin people in and outside Myanmar.

Fourth, the Chins who live abroad generally remain faithful to God and to their friends and families. They are also known to respect human life and are highly recommended as hard working, obedient, and honest people.<sup>37</sup> Historically, they are known to be loyal to their causes.<sup>38</sup> As such, the diaspora Chin have contributed significantly to improve the lives of those living at homeland. Though they earn only small incomes, they often set apart some portions for their family members or relatives in Myanmar to help them.<sup>39</sup> One Chin man reports, "In this (First-World) country, we receive what we have worked for. So, we can save some money and send it to our family and relatives."<sup>40</sup> As a result, many at home have built better houses and live a higher quality of life.<sup>41</sup>

They have donated their resources to construct roads, bridges, and private hospitals and clinics in the Chin State. They have also built the mini-hydro in villages because more than 70% of the Chin population does not have government provided electricity. A Chin man shares his hope here below:

We have just begun to live the real life and have now a very bright future because we see with our own eyes and learn many good things, practically, from well advanced people. Now is just the beginning and we would

34. Thawng Ling, correspondence with author, August 24, 2010.

35. Victor Biak Lian, correspondence with author, August 18, 2010.

36. Lal Pek Lian, correspondence with author, August 24, 2010.

37. Perhkalh, correspondence with author, August 18, 2010.

38. Zaw Htwe Maung, "Were Chin Soldiers Made Scapegoats?" *Chinland Guardian.com*, November 22, 2007, <http://www.chinlandguardian.com/articles/737-were-chin-soldiers-made-scape-goats-.html> (accessed November 29, 2010).

39. Mang Hlei Cung, correspondence with author, August 18, 2010.

40. Thawng Ling, correspondence with author, August 18, 2010.

41. Hmingte, correspondence with author, August 18, 2010.

do better and greater things in the days to come for our people and for our Chinland.<sup>42</sup>

In fact, through local church involvements, almost every Chin contributes to the development of the Chinland. For example, the churches in Malaysia have built church and Bible school buildings. They also provide for orphanages and road construction and sent funds during Cyclone Nargis and famine in addition to doing mission and evangelism.<sup>43</sup> Members of the Chin diaspora also network outside their ethnic roots to non-Chin churches, foundations, and organizations that are interested in helping the poor. The Chin churches throughout the world continue to work in their newly adopted countries and to assist their people in the homeland.<sup>44</sup> A local leader praised the great contributions made by the diaspora Chins: “They are our backbones as they helped us with what we ourselves cannot afford. They built churches; even Bible schools, and made great contribution in other areas of Christian ministries.”<sup>45</sup>

Fifth, some of the Chin diaspora churches also take part in missions by helping to send and support missionaries to unreached areas, sponsoring Bible college students, building Christian operated clinics,<sup>46</sup> and promoting education through publishing books and videos.<sup>47</sup>

Lastly, the diaspora Chins aim to produce the future Chin leaders. They realize that their children, especially those studying in First-World countries, are the hope of their people. Chin parents, therefore, devote their lives to provide good education to their children.<sup>48</sup> So, today, many

42. Perhkalh, correspondence with author, August 18, 2010.

43. Lal Pek Lian, correspondence with author, August 24, 2010. The writer’s own village, with about 120 families, has two concrete church buildings that were built by the contribution of the villagers who lived and worked in different countries such as America, Canada, Denmark, Norway, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, and India. In the same way, many Chins from other countries have donated large amounts of money to support church building projects in their own towns and villages. In addition, Chin Revival Church in Dallas, Texas has been the main financial supporter of a number of orphanages in Myanmar.

44. Thawng Ling wrote in a correspondence with author, August 18, 2010: “Even though we have our own difficulties, I praise God and am very happy that we can donate enough money for church buildings back in the country.”

45. San Cung Nung, interview by author, Yangon, Myanmar, August 23, 2010. Reverend San Cung Nung is also an academic dean in Yangon, Myanmar.

46. Lal Pek Lian, correspondence with author, August 24, 2010.

47. Victor Biak Lain, correspondence with author, August 18, 2010.

48. Victor Baik Lian, in an interview with author, states : “Living in the First-World country, I am very happy that our children have a privilege to study at the schools in these countries because our children’s education is the most



immigrant Chin children are studying at various schools in First-World countries. For this very reason, many Chin parents left their homeland to live and work in foreign lands. One Chin man said:

We, older people, have no more chance to seek for education. However, it is very good that the younger generation and our children have privilege to study at very good schools in developed countries. These people will soon become great scholars and leaders and become a great blessing to other Chin people, especially to the Chins in Myanmar, because it is not the money that brings transformation and development, but education.<sup>49</sup>

### Epilogue

Despite the many contributions that the diaspora Chins make to their homeland, there are some challenges and concerns that must be addressed. First, the migration of the Chin people has deteriorated life at homeland. The common joke among the Chins, “Since there are no adult men left, the women have to kill animals during Christmas and New Year celebration.” San Cung Nung believes that the dream of living in a more prosperous country undermines the duties and endeavors that people must carry out while still living in Myanmar. In addition, people have shifted their focus to amassing material wealth rather than spiritual benefits. This brings, today, a very low moral life among Chin community.<sup>50</sup>

Second, an American-Chin expresses his concern that many leaders who are trained in the West do not return home.<sup>51</sup> Even those who have returned to the country live only in Yangon and Mandalay. So, there are very few qualified leaders in the Chin State. Mang Hlei Cung reports, “I personally believe that most of the Chins in the developed countries will not return to Myanmar, not more than 35%.”<sup>52</sup> Another immigrant, Ngun Cung Lian from America, hopes that at least scholars, politicians, and the wealthy will return home for to show their dignity.<sup>53</sup> Victor Biak Lian believes that most of the Chins in our neighboring countries (Thailand, Malaysia, India, and Bangladesh) may return home, but most of the Chins who have already settled in the First-World countries will not return.<sup>54</sup>

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important thing in my life as a father.”

49. Ngun Cung Lian, correspondence with author, August 18, 2010.

50. San Cung Nung, correspondence with author, August 18, 2010.

51. Lian Hram, correspondence with author, August 18, 2010.

52. Mang Hlei Cung, correspondence with author, August 18, 2010.

53. Ngun Cung Lian, correspondence with author, August 18, 2010.

54. Victor Biak Lian, correspondence with author, August 18, 2010.

Third, one of the biggest problems faced by the diaspora Chins is the language barrier. Due to the poor educational system in Myanmar many have cannot speak English when working abroad thereby having difficulty in communicating with other workers, and employees. Lian Hram, a pastor in America, states,

Since we do not know English, we cannot clearly express or explain what we have in mind. So, we need other's help when we receive some important letters or when we want to go to hospitals, clinics, and offices. We are discouraged and depressed when we cannot find people to help us because others are also busy with work.<sup>55</sup>

Fourth, the diaspora Chins, having come from a dictatorial country, struggle greatly in their new countries because they have not learned to use their freedom responsibly. As a result, many Chins abuse their new freedom by crossing the legal limits set by the countries in which they now live. For instance, the Chins—who practiced a culture of temperance—not only began to drink alcoholic beverages but also drove cars in intoxication thereby incurring fines or being jailed.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, there is a deep concern for the gradual declining of Christian spirituality in the life of the diaspora Chin.<sup>57</sup>

Fifth, the loss of Chin language and culture is also a matter of profound concern. Children are, perhaps, more vulnerable to the ills of a new society. They misbehave and fail to show respect to their parents and elders even though disobedience goes against Chin values. Dr. Samuel Ngun Ling indicates that “Many Chin young people, unknowingly, are assimilated into the cultures of others.”<sup>58</sup> The loss of cultural values brings unhappiness to many parents of the diaspora Chin families.<sup>59</sup> There is a tendency to respect only the cultures of the rich and developed countries at the expense of treasuring one's own mother culture. Moreover, within a very short period of time, many children and young people have already forgotten their mother tongues and use English as their first language.<sup>60</sup> To speak English is a definite advantage for the young diaspora Chins, but their inability to speak the language of their parents result in disconnection from their parents' culture.<sup>61</sup>

55. Lian Hram, correspondence with author, August 18, 2010.

56. Thawng Ling, correspondence with author, August 18, 2010.

57. Perhkalh, correspondence with author, August 18, 2010.

58. Stephen Ni Kio, *Lai Nunphung* (Chin Culture), forwarded by Dr. Samuel Ngun Ling (LBC: Yangon, 2006), 11.

59. Thawng Ling and Mang Hlei Cung, correspondence with author, August 18, 2010.

60. Lian Hram, correspondence with author, August 18, 2010.

61. Hmingte and Perhkalh, correspondence with author, August 18, 2010.

Sixth, Chins are not impervious to the evils that surround them. Thawng Ling, a former Burmese general is concerned that the younger generation Chins want to learn more bad things than good things from the cultures of adopted countries.<sup>62</sup> If a person loses his culture, that person also loses his patriotic spirit.<sup>63</sup> In fact, some youngsters even feel ashamed of their fellow countrymen.<sup>64</sup>

Lastly, family problems are becoming serious threats for many of the diaspora Chins living in First-World countries: Many are experiencing separation, infidelity (adultery), and a lack of child discipline. One reason why family problems persist is the lack of fellowship in the family.<sup>65</sup> One Chin housewife in America expressed, "My husband works at night and comes home in the morning. He sleeps in the bedroom during the day when I am busy with house works and children. I long for the weekend so that I can have a family fellowship time."<sup>66</sup> Historically, the Chins have considered marriage and divorce gravely.<sup>67</sup> Today, some Chins arrange their marriages almost overnight, without parental permission and the knowledge of their church pastors. This new perspective on marriage cheapens its value thereby contributing to a rise in divorce rate.<sup>68</sup>

In conclusion, although the diaspora Chins have contributed greatly to enhance their own lives and the lives of the Chins in Myanmar, they are also facing great challenges in their adopted countries as well as creating new challenges for people back home. It is hoped that the survey given in this paper will clarify their situations and add toward finding creative and effective solutions that they might continue to thrive in their new homes and grow in their contribution to the homeland.

62. Thawng Ling, correspondence with author, August 18, 2010.

63. Victor Biakk Lian, correspondence with author, August 18, 2010.

64. Chan Thawng, correspondence with author, August 18, 2010.

65. Lian Hram, questionnaire.

66. "Lily," questionnaire by and letter to the author, August 20, 2010. "Lily" is a housewife in America.

67. Ngun To, *Laimi Phun Thawhkehna le Khuatlakuak* (Yangon: Ngun To, 2007), 30. The book title's translation is "The Origin of Chin People and Their Settlement."

68. Lal Pek Lian, questionnaire.