



Chin Human Rights Organization

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PRESS RELEASE: for immediate release

Burma: Stop Christian cross removal; drop trumped-up charges

[Chiang Mai, Thailand] The Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO) today urged the authorities in Burma to overturn an order to dismantle and remove a large Christian cross in the State capital Hakha, and to drop trumped-up charges against Tial Cem, a Chin elder involved in planting the cross.

The Chin State government issued an order to dismantle the 54 foot high cross and remove it from its current location on Caarcaang hill in Hakha by 30 January, on the basis that it was constructed without permission. The order states that failure to dismantle and remove the cross would result in action being taken against J.P. Biak Tin Sang, one of those involved in planting the cross. It is unclear if the Chin State government is acting independently, or under instruction from the central government in Naypyitaw.

Tial Cem, a Chin elder involved in planting the cross in April last year, reported to CHRO that they did not seek official permission for the cross as they did not believe it would be granted. CHRO's 2012 report, *"Threats to Our Existence": Persecution of Ethnic Chin Christians in Burma*, documented in detail the discriminatory restrictions faced by Chin Christian organizations, which make it virtually impossible to secure such official permission for religious monuments and buildings. The report also documented the destruction of thirteen Christian crosses in Chin State, four of which were destroyed under the current government.

Trumped up charges

Tial Cem has been accused of cutting down pine trees without official permission, in breach of article 42 (b) of the 1992 Forest Law. To date, he has reportedly been summoned to Hakha Township Court six times, and is due to appear in court again today. According to Tial Cem, the area cleared is land owned by J.P. Biak Tin Sang. It is adjacent to the cross location. If found guilty, Tial Cem could be sentenced to a maximum of two years in prison. CHRO considers this to be a trumped-up charge, connected with the planting of the cross.

Tial Cem told CHRO, "We will not remove the cross. We will have to face whatever it takes. If the authorities say I have to go to jail, I am not afraid; I am ready to go to jail for this case."

Salai Bawi Lian Mang, CHRO's Executive Director, said, "This order to dismantle and remove the cross continues a decades-long pattern of religious discrimination against Chin Christians. The authorities have a choice to make now. They could overturn the order, issue official documentation to allow the cross to remain where it is, and drop the charges against Tial Cem. This would be an important first step in stopping this pattern. Or, they could press ahead with the order and the charges, and show the world that absolutely nothing has changed."

CHRO reiterated its call for the government to implement key recommendations on freedom of religion or belief made by the historic November 2013 Chin National Conference, including: grant land ownership rights for religious purposes; guarantee freedom of religious worship, assembly and proselytizing; and restore all Chin Christian crosses that were destroyed under various pretexts.

Planned demonstrations

In response to the Chin State government order to dismantle and remove the cross, on 23 January local people in Hakha town applied to Hakha police station for official permission to demonstrate against the order on Thursday 29 and Friday 30 January, in accordance with the Peaceful Assembly Law.

After submitting their request, Chin State Chief Minister Hung Ngai, formerly a Brigadier-General in the Burma Army, summoned the demonstration organizers to a meeting at the Chin State government cabinet office. Hung Ngai reportedly told them that the cross was planted without seeking official permission from the government, and was therefore illegal. However, he also told them the matter would be discussed further at a meeting of the Chin State cabinet. According to information received by CHRO, the cabinet meeting will likely take place the week beginning 2 February, as some Chin State government ministers are currently travelling.

A letter granting permission to demonstrate was issued by the Hakha Township police force, but for Sunday 1 and Monday 2 February, not the dates requested by the organizers. The official reason given was that 29 and 30 January coincide with rural development planning days. After community consultations, the organizers decided to re-submit their request to demonstrate on 2 and 3 February, as 1 February is a Sunday and a day of worship in the Chin Christian tradition. They have reportedly received official written permission from the Hakha Township police force, and demonstrations will take place between 10am and 12pm on Monday 2 and Tuesday 3 February.

It remains to be seen if the order will be enforced on Friday 30 January.

-ENDS-

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Notes to Editors:

1. Chin languages use Roman script. When Chin names are transliterated from Burmese into English, the spelling is changed significantly and this sometimes renders Chin names unrecognizable. Please refer to the English language version of the press release for the correct spelling of the names in English.
2. The right to freedom of religion or belief is enshrined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and is widely recognized as having customary international law status. The 1981 UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief sets out the basic tenets of freedom of religion or belief in more detail, including the right to worship or assembly in connection with a religion or belief, and to establish and maintain places for these purposes.
3. Caarcaang hill, also known as Calvary Tlaang or Calvary Mountain, is a sacred prayer site in the Chin tradition. The cross was formally planted on 29 April 2014.
4. J.P. Biak Tin Sang and Tial Cem applied for and received permission from Hakha township and district authorities to build an orphanage called the Miracle Calvary Youth Development Centre on the same site. However, this was overturned in October 2014.
5. CHRO's 2012 report, *"Threats to Our Existence": Persecution of Ethnic Chin Christians in Burma*, documents how official permission is notoriously hard to obtain for Chin Christian organizations, due to complex bureaucratic procedures and lengthy delays, resulting in requests being denied or simply ignored. Many Chin Christians have sought to circumvent these restrictions by applying for permissions in the name of an individual, rather than a Christian organization. However, if such buildings are suspected of being used for religious assembly, permission is often later withdrawn. Even when official permission is secured – more often than not, verbally – it can be revoked at any time.