

Two Years After the 2021 Military Coup: The Worsening Situation of Christians Across Burma



**Chin Association
of Maryland, Inc.**

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Cover photos:

Church of Our Lady of the Assumption in the village of Chan Thar, Sagaing Region, Burma, from before and after it was torched by the Burma military on January 14, 2023. Photo by Radio Veritas Asia.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The Chin Association of Maryland, Inc. (CAM) is grateful to the International Religious Freedom (IRF) Summit 2023 Co-Chairs, the Senate Co-Chairs, and the House Co-Chairs for organizing the 2023 summit, a timely and important international event. We are thankful for the opportunity to be an IRF Summit Partner. We also thank session organizers for the opportunity to describe the escalating persecution of Christians across Burma and to discuss ongoing efforts to restore a federal democracy and peace in Myanmar/Burma two years after the military coup in February 2021.

CAM prepared this report to augment our IRF presentations and as a tool for further advocacy with Congress and the Administration to promote religious freedom, accountability for those who have violated it, and a robust humanitarian response to ensure protection and well-being for internally displaced persons and refugees from Burma fleeing the Burmese military's atrocities.

CAM is grateful to Chin churches. Without their support, this report would not have been possible. We are indebted to CAM's field staff and to Chin community members, especially those inside of Myanmar/Burma and Mizoram State, India, for their on-the-ground assessments for this report. We acknowledge John Indergaard, CAM Advocacy and Project Coordinator, who compiled and edited the report, including background information and case information. We are grateful as well to Matthew Wilch, who provided guidance and who helped to edit the report, and to Virginia Farris, Foreign Policy Advisor, Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, who helped to provide information from Catholic sources for the report.

A special thank you to Dr. C. Jeff Woods, General Secretary, American Baptist Churches USA for writing the Forward, and to Bishop David J. Malloy, Chairman, Committee of International Justice and Peace, US Conference of Catholic Bishops, for writing the Afterword of this report.

The names of people in photos or who provided personal accounts or photos used in the report and the names of people interviewed have not been included when it was requested or deemed necessary to protect their safety and security.

We have tried our best to describe and analyze in good faith the worsening situation of religious persecution of Christians across Burma in the wake of the military coup and its aftermath in Myanmar/Burma. However, if we have inadvertently made any errors in this report, they are our own.

Zo Tum Hmung
Executive Director
Chin Association of Maryland, Inc.



Grace Baptist Church was occupied by the Burmese Military in Mindat between May and September of 2021.

Photo Source: CAM source, anonymous for security reasons. Chin Association of Maryland (CAM), "After the 2021 Military Coup in Myanmar/Burma: Challenges for Internally Displaced Persons and Refugees," October 2021 <https://chinmd.org>.

FORWARD

I thank the Chin Association of Maryland, Inc. (CAM) for its new report on this difficult topic: Two Years After the 2021 Military Coup in Burma: The Worsening Situation of Christians.

This Report highlights the worsening situation for people of minority religions in Burma since the military coup in February 2021, especially focusing on Christians. The Burmese military, also known as the Tatmadaw, has intensified its violence, killing, and destruction, targeting pastors and other religious leaders and burning down churches. The arrest of Reverend Dr. Hkalam Samson, a long-time pastor in Kachin State and the former General Secretary of the Kachin Baptist Convention, and the burning of the historic Johnson Baptist Church in Chin State and the historic Church of Our Lady of the Assumption in Sagaing Region are sobering examples of atrocities against Christians and Christian communities in Burma. They are egregious violations of religious freedom.

The American Baptist Churches USA has a deep and longstanding love and commitment to the people of Burma, having been the first American Christian missionaries to Burma over 200 years ago. Baptists today constitute the largest Christian organization in Myanmar currently numbering nearly 1.4 million members in 17 Baptist Conventions.

We urge the US Congress and the US Administration to carefully consider the recommendations of the report. The Tatmadaw and its partners should be held accountable for their atrocities so that religious freedom can be established in a federal democratic union of Burma. Meanwhile, we must help to provide protection and humanitarian assistance for those suffering from these atrocities, especially internally displaced persons in Burma, and those who have fled to neighboring countries to seek refuge.

Dr. C. Jeff Woods
General Secretary
American Baptist Churches USA

ABOUT CAM

The Chin Association of Maryland, Inc. (CAM) is a 501 (c)(3) non-profit organization based in Ellicott City, Maryland, with an office in Washington, DC. CAM empowers Chin communities in Maryland to successfully integrate into American society. CAM also advocates for durable solutions for Chin and other refugees and internally displaced persons, and religious freedom and human rights in Burma. CAM has been documenting human rights and religious freedom violations. This is CAM's third report since the military coup on February 1, 2021. The others included *After the 2021 Military Coup in Myanmar/Burma: Challenges for Internally Displaced Persons and Refugees. Seventeen Months after the Military Coup in Myanmar/Burma: Escalating Persecution of Christians in Chin State and Sagaing Region.*¹ In addition, CAM also produces periodic statements and monthly news updates.

Chins, over eighty-five percent of whom are Christians, are an ethnic nationality from Burma.² They are a major recent US refugee group that fled from Burma to neighboring countries to escape ethnic, religious and political persecution by the Burmese military since 1962. In 2001, about 1000 Chin asylees came to the US through Guam, resettling largely in Maryland, Indiana, Florida, and Texas. Since 2002, the US has resettled many more Chin refugees coming through Malaysia and India. Chins now number 70,000 across the United States, with about 5,000 making Maryland their home.

Zo Tum Hmung, Executive Director of the Chin Association of Maryland, Inc. (CAM), previously co-founded and served as the first Executive Director of the Ethnic Nationalities Affairs Center-Union of Burma (ENAC), a research center that supports the peace process and development of democratic institutions in Burma. Mr. Hmung completed his Master in Public Administration from Harvard University's Kennedy School focusing on foreign policy and negotiations and also finished his Master of Theological Studies with a concentration in Christian Faith and Public Policy from Eastern University's Palmer Seminary. He was born in Chin State, Burma, and currently lives with his family in Ellicott City, Maryland.

John Indergaard, Advocacy and Project Coordinator and a past CAM intern, is scheduled to complete his Master of Science in Foreign Service at Georgetown University's Walsh School in May 2023. He received his Bachelor of Arts, with a Minor in International Relations, from Cornell University.

CAM also has field consultants in India and in Burma to carry out projects for the organization.



¹ Available at www.chinmd.org

² Republic of the Union of Myanmar, The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census Report Volume 2-C, July 2016, Accessed via ReliefWeb, <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/2014-myanmar-population-and-housing-census-union-report-religion-census-report-volume>. According to CAM's contacts inside Chin State, the percentage of Christians in Chin State is likely now over 85%.

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Chin Association of Maryland (CAM) prepared this report to share with participants and to augment its presentations at the International Religious Freedom (IRF) Summit from January 31 to February 1, 2023, in Washington, DC. CAM also prepared the report for further advocacy with Congress and the Administration to promote religious freedom, accountability for violators, and a robust humanitarian response for people from Burma displaced by religious and other persecution.

In the two years since the February 1, 2021 military coup in Burma, CAM has published two reports about Chin Christians in Chin State, Sagaing Region, and across the border in Mizoram State, India: *After the 2021 Military Coup in Myanmar/Burma: Challenges for Internally Displaced Persons and Refugees* (October 2021) and *Seventeen Months After the Military Coup in Myanmar/Burma: Escalating Persecution of Chin Christians in Chin State and Sagaing Region* (June 2022).³ This report will include some of the atrocities mentioned in those reports but particularly highlight Tatmadaw's atrocities since June of 2022.

The frequency and scale of atrocities continues to worsen in Burma. A report from the nongovernmental organization ACLED captures the shocking level of violence employed by the junta: "During the first half of 2022, more incidents of violence against civilians by state forces operating domestically were reported in Myanmar than any other country in the world."⁴ United Nations Special Rapporteur for Myanmar Tom Andrews recently called for more concrete action by UN member states to stop the atrocities given "the systematic gross human rights violations -- amounting to war crimes and crimes against humanity—being perpetrated daily on the people of Myanmar" by the military regime.⁵

Focusing on religious freedom, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) recommended in its April 2022 Annual Report that the US Department of State recognize Burma as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC), and on December 2, 2022, Secretary of State Antony Blinken made that designation once more.⁶ On December 14, 2022, USCIRF released a Burma Policy Update which highlighted the worsening plight of Rohingya Muslim refugees and Burma's Christian minority.⁷

3 Chin Association of Maryland (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-MyanmarBurma.pdf>, CAM, "Seventeen Months After the Military Coup in Myanmar/Burma: Escalating Persecution of Chin Christians in Chin State and Sagaing Region," June 2022 <https://chinmd.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/CRFReport-June-2022-June.22.22-compressed.pdf>

4 Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project @ACLEDDINFO, "Myanmar Continue Resistance Against the Coup," August 16, 2022. <https://twitter.com/ACLEDDINFO/status/1559656576918720512>

5 United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Press Release "Myanmar: Action needed to stop carnage, says UN expert after adoption of Security Council resolution," December 22, 2022 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/12/myanmar-action-needed-stop-carnage-says-un-expert-after-adoption-security>

6 USCIRF, "2022 Annual Report," April 25, 2022 https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2022-04/2022%20USCIRF%20Annual%20Report_1.pdf, Antony Blinken, "Religious Freedom Designations," Press Statement, December 2, 2022 <https://www.state.gov/religious-freedom-designations-2/>

7 United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), "Policy Update: Burma," December 14, 2022 https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2022-12/2022%20Burma%20Policy%20Update_0.pdf

This new report by CAM further highlights the worsening situation of Christians across Burma in not only Chin State and Sagaing Region, but also in Kachin, Karen, and Karenni States and in Mandalay Region. It details how the Burmese military, also known as the Tatmadaw, has abused, killed, and arbitrarily detained and convicted Christian leaders without due process; burned churches, and attacked civilians. These are the kinds of actions that constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity. International experts note that there is no rule of law in Burma, no independent court system to ensure that arrests, interrogations, detention, and convictions are proper or to redress unlawful actions by police and judicial authorities. As the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), a non-governmental human rights organization comprised of eminent jurists, has concluded about Burma's court system, "The judiciary is overwhelmingly subservient to the military and has lost even the modest gains it had made in independence and effectiveness over the last decade."⁸

The international community is pursuing accountability for the Tatmadaw's crimes against the Rohingya in the International Court of Justice (ICJ), with the case *The Gambia v. Myanmar* proceeding despite the Burmese military junta's objections.⁹ Just as the United States and ICJ are holding the Tatmadaw accountable for its brutality against the Rohingyas in Rakhine State, the international community must condemn and hold it accountable for their persecution of Christians across Burma.

Due to the Tatmadaw's ongoing atrocities against the people of Burma, the total number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) has reached an estimated 1,551,900, with an increase of 1,221,500 IDPs since the 2021 coup.¹⁰ An estimated 72,000 people have fled from Burma seeking refuge in neighboring countries since the coup, with an estimated 50,300 fleeing to India alone; the overall number of refugees from Burma in neighboring countries is now over 1,086,000.¹¹ The US must continue to lead a robust humanitarian response to this massive displacement. Not only are the numbers in need rapidly rising—the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) projects that Burma will have 2.7 million IDPs by the end of 2023-- but access to humanitarian actors and to those in need has worsened as well.¹²

8 International Commission of Jurists, "Myanmar: A year after military takeover, no rule of law or judicial independence, October 2, 2022, <https://www.icj.org/myanmar-a-year-after-military-takeover-no-rule-of-law-or-judicial-independence/>

9 CAM Media, "ICJ Rejects Burmese Military's Objections To The Rohingya Genocide Case," July 22, 2022 <https://chinmd.org/2022/07/22/icj-rejects-burmese-militarys-objections-to-the-rohingya-genocide-case/>

10 UNHCR, Myanmar Emergency Overview Map and Statistics, January 16, 2023 <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/98182>

11 UNHCR, Myanmar Emergency Update, January 9, 2023 <https://reporting.unhcr.org/index.php/document/3834>

12 OCHA, Myanmar Humanitarian Needs Overview 2023, January 15, 2023, p 6, available on Relief Web <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/myanmar-humanitarian-needs-overview-2023-january-2023>

Report Methodology

This report focuses on the experiences of the Christian minority across Burma, particularly those who have been targeted and displaced since the February 1, 2021, military coup. Some of the photographs and content are from CAM's previous two reports, *After the 2021 Military Coup in Myanmar/Burma: Challenges for Internally Displaced Persons and Refugees* and *Seventeen Months After the Military Coup in Myanmar/Burma: Escalating Persecution of Chin Christians in Chin State and Sagaing Region*, as well as from periodic statements and monthly news updates produced by CAM.¹³

CAM has extensive contacts in Chin State, Burma, and field consultants in Mizoram State, India, who regularly collect reliable information from internally displaced persons (IDP) and refugee community leaders on the ground. CAM also has contacts, particularly in the Christian community, in Kachin, Karen, and Karenni States, and in Sagaing and Mandalay Regions. It is difficult to identify and verify information about specific Burmese military battalions responsible for burning churches, houses, and killing pastors due to conflicting information about their uniforms and identities; however, ongoing investigations are taking place to identify the military battalions and commanders responsible for these attacks. The identities of community leaders providing information are kept confidential due to the security situation in Burma and Mizoram State, India. To provide the broader political and human rights context, this report is further supplemented with various reports by UN agencies, other reputable international organizations in the region, reputable US-based nongovernmental organizations, the US State Department, and reputable media sources.

13 CAM regularly produces statements (<https://chinmd.org/statements/>) and a monthly newsletter highlighting emergent events affecting Chin and other religious minorities in Burma.

II. RECOMMENDATIONS

CAM firmly believes that the atrocities committed by the Tatmadaw against Burma's Christian minority constitute religious persecution, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. CAM therefore calls upon the Biden administration and congressional leaders to take further steps to protect Burma's religious minorities.

To the Biden Administration:

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;

III. BACKGROUND

Burma is a country in Southeast Asia, bordering China, India, Thailand, and Bangladesh. It is made up of seven ethnic states and seven regions, with a population of roughly 57 million.¹⁴ Sixty-eight percent of the population is from the Burman ethnic group, which is primarily Buddhist, and the remaining thirty-two percent are from numerous ethnic nationalities and religious minorities. According to USCIRF, Christians comprise a majority in Chin and Kachin States, as well as a substantial minority in Kayah State.¹⁵

Before the British annexation in 1896, Chinland, the Kachin Hills, Shan State, and Burma were independent territories. Each was separately invaded by British colonists, who combined the territories as one province within British India. In 1947, the Burman General Aung San, as well as Chin, Kachin, and Shan leaders signed the Panglong Agreement to form a federal union that would provide equal rights and equal standing for both majority Burmans and minority ethnic groups, with a special focus on self-determination and autonomy for minority ethnic groups. On February 1, 1948, almost one year after the signing of the Panglong Agreement, the Union of Burma gained independence from Great Britain.

In March 1962, General Ne Win staged a military coup and established an authoritarian regime that lasted over five decades. The military regime nationalized the American Baptist Mission's institutions including missionary schools in Chin State and deported missionaries. In May of 1966, the regime deported to the United States the last Baptist missionary to Chinland, Reverend Dr. Robert Johnson. The Tatmadaw, the Burmese military, became known for brutally persecuting ethnic nationalities, religious minorities, and democracy activists. Ethnic nationalities continued to struggle in their fight for self-determination and autonomy, including for a federal democratic union and ethnic, political, religious, and cultural rights. They formed ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) to defend against the Tatmadaw.

The Tatmadaw and its governing political body, the State Administration Council (SAC; formerly State Peace and Development Council), have a long history of actively persecuting Christian and Muslim religious minorities. The Tatmadaw regularly interferes with Christians' and Muslims' abilities to practice their faith with its repeated persecution, and its repeated strategies to convert people to Buddhism. These reveal the Tatmadaw and SAC's general policy and practice towards religious minorities. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has long reported the abuses of the Tatmadaw against Christians and Muslims and has consistently recommended Burma be designated by the US State Department as a "Country of Particular Concern (CPC)." Since 1999 the State Department has followed this recommendation under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998.

14 This Background section is adapted from the History section of a previous CAM report, *Seventeen Months After the Military Coup in Myanmar/Burma: Escalating Persecution of Chin Christians in Chin State and Sagaing Region*, June 2022 <https://chinmd.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/CRFReport-June-2022-June.22.22-compressed.pdf>

15 <https://www.uscirf.gov/release-statements/uscirf-releases-new-report-burma> (Please note that Kayah State is also known as Karenni State and will be referred to as Karenni State in this report)

Since the military coup of 2021, the Tatmadaw has committed with impunity grave acts of religious persecution against Christians and other religious minorities, and the atrocities have increased in scale and scope, causing widespread displacement and expanded need for protection and humanitarian assistance.

Christian leaders are calling for an end to the violence. Immediately following 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.”¹⁶

More recently, Cardinal Charles Maung Bo, Archbishop of Rangoon and President of the Catholic Bishop’s Conference of Myanmar, was “grief stricken” by the military junta’s destruction of his home village of Mon Hla, Sagaing Region, in November 2022. Calling for dialogue and an end to violence, he said, “We can never find any solution through war... It is of great importance to tame our mind and stay humble and not to choose the path of war and killings to find a solution.”¹⁷

On January 22, 2023, Pope Francis also expressed sadness for attacks on Christian churches, saying, “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.”¹⁸

Rashad Hussain, US Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, is also calling for change. He condemned the attacks on Cardinal Bo’s home village and two other Tatmadaw actions described later in this report – the arrest and detention of Rev. Hkalam Samson, former General Secretary and President of the Kachin Baptist Convention, and the junta’s long sentence imposed on Pastor Thian Lian Sang.¹⁹ The Ambassador said, “Burma regime’s charges against Rev Hkalam Samson, Pastor Thian Lian Sang’s harsh 23-yr sentence and attacks on Cardinal Bo’s largely Catholic home village are unacceptable. We urge the regime to cease repression against religious actors and communities, and end the violence.”²⁰

16 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-MyanmarBurma.pdf>

17 Light for the Voiceless News, “Cardinal Bo calls for dialog after military raids his village,” December 5, 2022 <https://www.licas.news/2022/12/05/cardinal-bo-calls-for-dialogue-after-military-raid-on-his-home-village/>

18 Aleteia, “Myanmar, Peru, Cameroon: Pope Prays for countries in conflict,” January 23, 2023 <https://aleteia.org/2023/01/22/myanmar-peru-cameroon-pope-prays-for-countries-in-conflict/>

19 CAM Media, “Statement on the Detention of Reverend Dr. Hkalam Samson in Burma,” December 6, 2022 <https://chinmd.org/2022/12/06/statement-on-the-detention-of-rev-dr-hkalam-samson-in-burma/>; Also see RFA Burmese, “Prominent Burmese Christian leader in poor health in prison,” Radio Free Asia, January 17, 2023 <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/hkalam-samson-01172023165429.html>, CAM Media, “Statement on the Sentencing of Reverend Thian Lian Sang to 23 Years at the Obo Prison in Burma,” December 8, 2022 <https://chinmd.org/2022/12/08/statement-on-the-sentencing-of-reverend-thian-lian-sang-to-23-years-at-the-obo-prison-in-burma/>

20 Rashad Hussain, @IRF_Ambassador, 3:55 pm December 30, 2022 https://twitter.com/IRF_Ambassador/status/1608930072135884800

Political leaders are now taking action. Two bills 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 HR 7776, the *James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act of 2023*, which included the full text of the *Burma Unified through Rigorous Military Accountability Act of 2021 (BURMA Act)*.²¹ This legislation authorized the provision of technical assistance and non-lethal aid to the pro-democracy movement and to the EAOs.²² President Biden also signed HR 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 \$136,127,000.²³

Nearly two years after the military coup, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 2669, its first statement on the dire situation in Burma.²⁴ Resolution 2669 called for an end to the violence, restraint from all parties, a de-escalation of tensions, and the release of political prisoners such as Aung San Suu Kyi.²⁵ Although the statement does not go as far as the US government and others might hope, it could form the basis of further international collaborations among UN member states to work for peace and democracy in Burma, as recommended by UN Special Rapporteur to Myanmar Tom Andrews.²⁶

21 HR 7776, James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act, 2023, Public Law 117-263, December 23, 2022, p 967 <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/7776>

22 Ibid, p 975.

23 HR 2617, Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023, on December 29, 2022, p 594 <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/2617>

24 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>

25 Ibid

26 United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Press Release "Myanmar: Action needed to stop carnage, says UN expert after adoption of Security Council resolution," December 22, 2022 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/12/myanmar-action-needed-stop-carnage-says-un-expert-after-adoption-security>

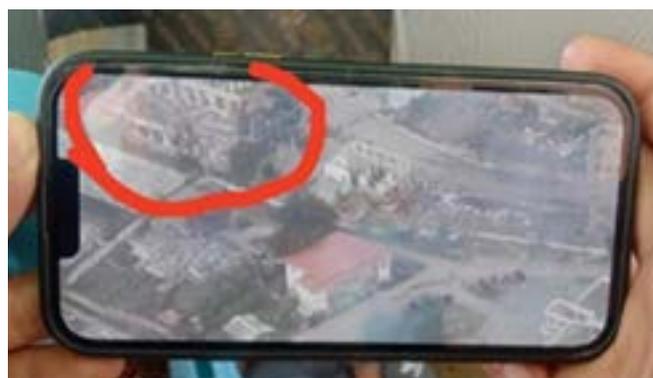
IV. ACTS OF RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION TARGETING THE CHRISTIAN MINORITY SINCE THE COUP

This section of the report underscores key cases of Tatmadaw persecution targeting Christians in Chin, Kachin, Karen, and Karenni States, as well as Sagaing and Mandalay Regions. These include: a) the burning, destruction, and occupation of churches and religious properties, b) the abuse, killing, arrest, interrogation, torture, detention and conviction of Christian pastors, and c) attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure. While this list of cases is not exhaustive, it illustrates a pattern of persecution, violence and atrocities committed with impunity by the Tatmadaw throughout Burma against Christian leaders and Christian communities.

Chin State

Military burns down Johnson Memorial Baptist Church and 12 other Thantlang churches

Since September 2021, the Tatmadaw has burned down thirteen churches in the Chin Christian town of Thantlang. Among the most notable incidents was the destruction of Johnson Memorial Baptist Church on May 24, 2022,²⁷ which had eight pastors and approximately 2,800 members. The church had been built to commemorate Dr. Robert Johnson, the last American Baptist missionary to the Chins before his expulsion by the Burmese military regime in 1966. On June 9, 2022, the Tatmadaw also burned down Thantlang Baptist Church, which had eight pastors and over 3,000 members. As of June 2022, the entirety of Thantlang's population, numbering 50,374, was forced to flee, leaving them displaced either as IDPs within Burma or as refugees in Mizoram State, India.



(Left) Johnson Baptist Memorial Church before the arson attack.

(Right) Johnson Baptist Memorial Church after its destruction.

Photos by CAM source are anonymous for security reasons.

²⁷ CAM, "Seventeen Months After the Military Coup in Myanmar/Burma: Escalating Persecution of Chin Christians in Chin State and Sagaing Region," June 2022 <https://chinmd.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/CRFReport-June-2022-June.22.22-compressed.pdf>

Chin in Mandalay Region

Arrest, Conviction, and 23-Year Prison Sentence of Reverend Thian Lian Sang

Reverend Thian Lian Sang was the ethnic Chin pastor of Falam Baptist Church in Mandalay Region, in central Burma. CAM previously reported Reverend Sang's arrest on September 16, 2021.²⁸ Upon his arrest, the Tatmadaw confiscated 400,000 kyats (\$215 USD) from his home as well as his family's cellphones.

On December 7, 2022, Reverend Sang was sentenced to twenty-three years in prison on charges of rebellion against the government and providing weapons to rebels.²⁹ He remains at Obo Prison, Mandalay Region, where he has been held since his arrest. As noted in the Executive Summary above and relevant when evaluating this and other arrests, interrogations, detention, and convictions of pastors, the International Commission of Jurists has said that there is no rule of law or judicial independence in Burma since the 2021 coup, explaining that the court system "is overwhelmingly subservient to the military."³⁰



(Left) Reverend Thian Lian Sang preaching at Falam Baptist Church.

(Right) Reverend Sang before his arrest and sentencing to twenty-three years in prison.

Photos by CAM source are anonymous for security reasons.

28 CAM, "Statement on the Sentencing of Reverend Thian Lian Sang to 23 Years at the Obo Prison in Burma", December 2022. <https://chinmd.org/2022/12/08/statement-on-the-sentencing-of-reverend-thian-lian-sang-to-23-years-at-the-obo-prison-in-burma/>

29 CAM Media, "Statement on the Sentencing of Reverend Thian Lian Sang to 23 Years at the Obo Prison in Burma," December 8, 2022 <https://chinmd.org/2022/12/08/statement-on-the-sentencing-of-reverend-thian-lian-sang-to-23-years-at-the-obo-prison-in-burma/>

30 International Commission of Jurists, "Myanmar: A year after military takeover, no rule of law or judicial independence, October 2, 2022, <https://www.icj.org/myanmar-a-year-after-military-takeover-no-rule-of-law-or-judicial-independence/>

Chin State

Killing and Abuse of Pastor Cung Biak Hum

On September 18, 2021, the Tatmadaw shot and killed Pastor Cung Biak Hum, age 30, of Thantlang Centenary Baptist Church in Thantlang Township.³¹ At the time of the shooting, the pastor was on his way to organize efforts to prevent a fire that was started by the military from spreading further into Thantlang's residential and commercial areas. Witnesses reported that after killing Pastor Hum, Tatmadaw soldiers stole his mobile phone and then proceeded to cut off his finger and steal his wedding ring.³² While the SAC and Tatmadaw denied these allegations, deeming them "fake news," eyewitnesses report that the military was responsible for Pastor Hum's death.



(Left) Pastor Cung Biak Hum and his family.

(Right) Pastor Cung Biak Hum after his killing by the Tatmadaw.

Photos by CAM source are anonymous for security reasons.

31 The Irrawaddy, "Brother of Slain Myanmar Pastor Says Regime Fails to Take Accountability for Atrocities," September 24, 2021 <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/brother-of-slain-myanmar-pastor-says-regime-fails-to-take-accountability-for-atrocities.html>

32 CAM Media Statement, "Statement on the Death of Pastor Cung Biak Hum, the Bombing of Religious Facility and Houses in Thantlang and Hakha, Chin State, Burma," September 21, 2021, <https://chinmd.org/2021/09/23/cbcusa-statement/>

Chin State

Military arrested and killed Reverend Ngai Kung

The Tatmadaw arrested Reverend Ngai Kung, a Christian pastor from Matsupi Township, Chin State, September 23, 2021, and took him to the 1B-140 Camp in Matupi Town; the Tatmadaw also arrested a second person who was later released.³³ Reverend Kung was part of the Covid-19 Control and Response Committee for the township.³⁴ A CAM source familiar with the situation said that Reverend Kung was the pastor of a congregation known as The Church in the small village of Ngaleng. The source reported that Reverend Kung was killed by the military.



(Above) Reverend Ngai Kung.

Photo by CAM Source is anonymous for security reasons.

Chin State

Arrest, detention, torture, killing of Pastor Om Kui

On December 11, 2021, the Tatmadaw arrested and detained Pastor Om Kui of the Church of Christ in Bakon Village, Kanpetlet Township, while he was on his way to the town of Kanpetlet to purchase food. On December 13, 2021, the pastor's dead body was found on the side of a road; the cause of death was reportedly torture by the Tatmadaw.³⁵

³³ Burma News International, "Villagers Flee Fighting Between CDF and Tatmadaw in Matsupi Township," <https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/villagers-flee-fighting-between-cdf-and-tatmadaw-matupi-township>

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ CAM Media Statement, "Statement on the death of Christian Pastor Om Kui in Burma," December 15, 2021, <https://chinmd.org/2021/12/15/statement-on-the-death-of-christian-pastor-om-kui-in-burma-2/>

Chin State

Arrest, Interrogation and Escape of Reverend Van Cem

Reverend Van Cem was a pastor at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Hakha, Chin State. He was involved in the April 2021 protest of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) against the coup.³⁶ Reverend Van Cem helped supply CDM protesters with daily necessities using funds donated by a Chin youth support group in the United States.

On October 9, 2021, Reverend Van Cem was arrested by the military junta on the basis of reports by informants within the support group. He was held in solitary confinement and questioned for an entire day before escaping. He fled to Aizawl, Mizoram, India by April 2022.



(Top Left) Reverend Van Cem at the Bethlehem Baptist Church, Hakha, Chin State.

(Top Right) Reverend Van Cem's house after military confiscation, Photo by Hakha Times.

(Bottom) The Bethlehem Baptist Church.

Photos Top Left and Bottom by CAM sources are anonymous for security reasons.

³⁶ CAM Interview with Reverend Van Cem, January 13, 2023.

Chin State

Military airstrike against civilian housing and medical facilities at Camp Victoria

On January 10, 2023, five Tatmadaw Yak-130s, and on January 11, three Tatmadaw Yak-130s carried out airstrikes on Camp Victoria, the headquarters of the Chin National Front (CNF), in northwestern Chin State.³⁷ The airstrikes destroyed civilian housing and medical facilities, forcing hundreds of Chin civilians to flee across the border to seek refuge in Mizoram State, India. Five members of the CNF were killed in the strike. Many civilians had previously sought refuge at Camp Victoria, from Thantlang and other villages destroyed by the Military. CAM has verified that two bombs landed on the Indian side of the border, damaging the truck of a Mizo villager from Farkawn Village in Mizoram State, India. After the airstrike, Radio Free Asia interviewed Zo Tum Hmung, CAM Executive Director about the bombing of Victoria Camp.³⁸ Mr. Hmung noted that the Tatmadaw was in violation of the UN Security Council Resolution 2662 (2022), in which the Council “demands an immediate end to all forms of violence throughout the country, and urges restraint and de-escalation of tensions.”³⁹



(Above) Destroyed medical facilities at Camp Victoria, Chin State.

Photos by Chinland Information Center’s Facebook page, accessed on January 11, 2023.

37 Ingyin Naing, “Refugees Flee to India Amid Military Airstrikes in Myanmar,” VOA News, January 18, 2023 https://www.voanews.com/a/refugees-flee-to-india-amid-military-airstrikes-in-myanmar/6924644.html?fbclid=IwAR3IEf_7uT3dPvAyRUzSzXy3QLZmYHU3xsupY-cxsoVXYR8KnhUICzXrK2ZQ; please note that at the time of the VOA Burmese news interview, CAM understood that there were three Yak-130s and two MIG – 29s involved in the air strikes on January 10 and 11, 2023. CAM confirmed the new information about the number and types of the jet fighters involved in the attacks from knowledgeable sources on the ground.

38 Radio Free Asia Interview with Zo Tum Hmung, CAM, January 13, 2023 <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=699610228332917-->

39 Security Council Resolution, S/Res/2669, 21 December 2022, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N22/767/33/PDF/N2276733.pdf?OpenElement>

Kachin State

Arrest, interrogation, detention of Reverend Dr. Hkalam Samson, Kachin Baptist Convention

On December 5, 2022, the Tatmadaw arrested and detained the Reverend Dr. Hkalam Samson at Mandalay International Airport on his way to Bangkok, Thailand, for medical treatment. Dr. Samson is an adviser and former General Secretary and President of the Kachin Baptist Convention (KBC), which is headquartered in Myitkyina, the capital of Kachin State.⁴⁰

Upon his arrest, Dr. Samson was interrogated overnight at the Tatmadaw's Central Regional Military Command headquarters and flown back to Myitkyina.⁴¹ According to one attorney this arrest did not follow legal procedures, which would require an arrest warrant, an explanation of the reason for the arrest, and placement at a police station before transfer to an interrogation center.

Dr. Samson is currently being held at Myitkyina Prison, where he appeared before a secret court on January 11 and 13, 2023 on charges of criminal defamation, incitement, and unlawful association with an illegal group. His wife reports that the family has not been allowed to visit or provide Dr. Samson with medicine and food.



(Above) Reverend Hkalam Samson before his arrest.

Photo by CAM source is anonymous for security reasons.

40 CAM Media, "Statement on the Detention of Reverend Dr. Hkalam Samson in Burma," December 6, 2022 <https://chinmd.org/2022/12/06/statement-on-the-detention-of-rev-dr-hkalam-samson-in-burma/>

41 RFA Burmese, "Prominent Burmese Christian leader in poor health in prison," Radio Free Asia, January 17, 2023 <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/hkalam-samson-01172023165429.html>

Kachin State

Military airstrikes kill 80 people, including many civilians, attending A Nang Pa Concert

At a concert celebrating the 62nd anniversary of the Kachin Independence Organization on October 23, 2022, Tatmadaw airstrikes killed approximately 80 attendees, including musicians, civilians, and several high-ranking Kachin Independence Army officers.⁴² Over 100 more were injured, and emergency workers reported that some victims died because Tatmadaw troops prevented their transport to a hospital in the nearby town of Hpakant. Sources familiar with the situation informed CAM that two pastors were among the dead.

Karen State

Military kills five, including two Christian leaders, in bombing of Lay Wah Village

On January 12, 2023, two junta warplanes bombed Lay Wah Village in Mutraw, Karen State.⁴³ The attack killed five people, including two Christian leaders and a child. The two religious leaders, identified as Catholic catechist Saw Re Di and Baptist pastor Saw Cha Aye, were killed when bombs destroyed their respective churches.⁴⁴ The attack on Lay Wahh Village was reportedly the latest of many attacks “targeting churches, convents, institutions, and clinics in predominantly Christian regions of Kachin, Kayah [also known as Karenni], Karen, and Chin states.”⁴⁵

Karenni State

Military airstrikes make life a warzone for 15 Catholic parishes in Loikaw Diocese⁴⁶

In February 2022, an official from Loikaw Diocese in Karenni State said that sounds of her diocese were the sounds of a warzone, with “gunfire, artillery shells, and airstrikes a daily affair.” He said that 15 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, he said hundreds of people have been displaced, especially women, children, and the elderly. Karenni State is known in Myanmar as a state where many Catholics live—90,000 of the 355,000 residents.

42 CAM Media, “Statement Condemning Airstrikes on Myanmar’s Kachin in Kachin State,” October 27, 2022 <https://chinmd.org/2022/10/27/statement-condemning-airstrikes-on-myanmars-kachin-in-kachin-state/> Richard C. Paddock, “Airstrike Kills at Least 80 During Outdoor Concert in Myanmar,” The New York Times, October 25, 2022 <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/25/world/asia/myanmar-coup-concert-killed.html>

43 Hein Htoo Zan, “Myanmar Junta Jets Bomb Church, Killing Child, Mother, and 2 Pastors,” The Irrawaddy, January 13, 2023 <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-junta-jets-bomb-church-killing-child-mother-and-2-pastors.html>

44 UCA News, “Five die in Myanmar military attack on village churches,” January 16, 2023 <https://www.ucanews.com/news/five-die-in-myanmar-military-attack-on-village-churches/100026>

45 Ibid

46 Catholic New Service, “Catholics in Myanmar’s Kaya [Karenni] state in war zone, says church official,” CRUX, February 18, 2022 <https://cruxnow.com/church-in-asia/2022/02/catholics-in-myanmars-kayah-state-in-war-zone-says-church-official>

Karenni State

Military loots and burns down St. Matthew Catholic Church

At approximately 3:00 pm on June 15, 2022, the Tatmadaw looted valuables and donated food from St. Matthew Catholic Church in Dawnyaykhum, Phruso Township before burning it to the ground.⁴⁷ This occurred one day after soldiers burned down four other houses in the village.

Karenni State

Military kills 35 at Christmas Eve Traffic-Stop Massacre near Moso Village

On December 24, 2022, Tatmadaw soldiers forced thirty-five people out of their vehicles on Christmas eve day, killed them, and burned them and their vehicles along a highway near Moso Village in Hpruso Township.⁴⁸ The UK-based nongovernmental organization Save the Children reported that two of its staff were among the dead, along with a number of women and children.

Sagaing Region

Military kills three civilians and destroys hundreds of buildings, a church, and a school in Mon Hla Village

On November 24, 2022, the Tatmadaw burned down hundreds of houses in the Catholic village of Mon Hla, Khin-U Township, the hometown of Cardinal Charles Bo of Yangon and Archbishop Marco Tin Win of Mandalay.⁴⁹ 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. Mon Hla is one of Sagaing's historic Bayingyi villages, which claim descent from Portuguese who settled in the area four centuries ago, including Catholic missionaries.

47 CNA, "Myanmar troops set fire to Catholic church, rebel group says," June 16, 2022 <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/251566/myanmar-troops-set-fire-to-catholic-church>

48 Radio Free Asia, "Save the Children confirms deaths of two aid workers in Myanmar mass killing," December 28, 2022 <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/charity-killings-12282021185427.html>

49 UCA News, "Cardinal's village hit as Myanmar junta steps up attacks," November 25, 2022 <https://www.ucanews.com/news/cardinals-village-hit-as-myanmar-junta-steps-up-attacks/99532>

Sagaing Region

Military torches the Church of Our Lady of the Assumption, the rectory, and the convent in Chan Thar Village

At 8 am on January 14, 2023, Tatmadaw troops entered Chan Thar, a Bayingyi village in Ye-U Township, they began to burn down houses and continued doing so all day long.⁵⁰ After billeting overnight in the Church of Our Lady of the Assumption, they set fire to the 129-year-old building on Sunday morning, January 15, along with the parish priest's house and the nuns' convent.⁵¹

The soldiers involved came from Light Infantry Battalion 364 based in Mawleik, Sagaing Region, and another Light Infantry Battalion based in Hmawbi, Yangon Region. Reportedly, there was no fighting in the area, and the arson attack was completely unprovoked.⁵² Chan Thar's 800 inhabitants, who are majority Christian, fled when the Tatmadaw approached.

Chan Thar, Mon Hla, and Chaung Yoe are three historic Catholic towns, among Sagaing's historic Bayingyi villages, that the Tatmadaw has attacked over and over again since the coup. They are well known towns with many Christians, and they have produced many Christian leaders.



(Left) The Church of Our Lady of the Assumption before and after its destruction, Source: Radio Veritas Asia.

(Right) Inside of the Church before and after its destruction, Source: Radio Veritas Asia.

50 The Irrawaddy, "Myanmar Junta Soldiers Torch Century-Old Church in Sagaing," January 16, 2023 <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-junta-soldiers-torch-century-old-church-in-sagaing.html>

51 UCA News, "Myanmar junta torches century-old Catholic church," January 17, 2023 <https://www.ucanews.com/news/myanmar-junta-torches-century-old-catholic-church/100060>, RVA News, "An Ancient Catholic Church in Myanmar burnt down," January 19, 2023 <https://www.rvasia.org/church-asia/catholic-church-myanmar-burnt-down>

52 The Irrawaddy, "Myanmar Junta Soldiers Torch Century-Old Church in Sagaing," January 16, 2023 <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-junta-soldiers-torch-century-old-church-in-sagaing.html>

V. INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS AND REFUGEES FROM BURMA—AN UPDATE

Due to the Tatmadaw’s ongoing atrocities against the people of Burma, the total number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) has reached an estimated 1,551,900, with an increase of 1,221,500 IDPs since the 2021 coup.⁵³ An estimated 72,000 people have fled from Burma seeking refuge in neighboring countries since the coup, with an estimated 50,300 fleeing to India alone; the overall number of refugees from Burma in neighboring countries is now over 1,086,000.⁵⁴ The US must continue to lead a robust humanitarian response to this massive displacement. For more on IDPs and refugees see the following UNHCR map from January 9, 2023.



(Above) Displacement and refugee flows since the coup as of January 9, 2023.

Source: UNHCR Myanmar Emergency: Regional Update, January 2023⁵⁵

53 UNHCR, Myanmar Emergency Overview Map and Statistics, January 16, 2023 <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/98182>

54 UNHCR, Myanmar Emergency Update, January 9, 2023 <https://reporting.unhcr.org/index.php/document/3834>

55 UNHCR Myanmar Emergency: Regional Update, January 16, 2023 <https://reporting.unhcr.org/document/3993>

Not only are the numbers in need rapidly rising—the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) projects that Burma will have 2.7 million IDPs by the end of 2023-- but access to humanitarian actors and to those in need has worsened.⁵⁶ OCHA noted an “essentially increasing reliance on local networks of responders in conflict areas. Administrative barriers for travel authorizations (TAs), incidents of detention and arrest of humanitarian actors, intimidation and harassment, and frequent security checkpoints all constrained humanitarian access to people in need in 2022. Restrictions on telecommunications and internet networks further hindered timely and safe humanitarian access and assistance to people in need.”⁵⁷



Map of Mizoram State, India⁵⁸



Map of India⁵⁹

56 OCHA, Myanmar Humanitarian Needs Overview 2023, January 15, 2023, p 6, available on Relief Web <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/myanmar-humanitarian-needs-overview-2023-january-2023>

57 Ibid.

58 CAM, “Unsafe: Chin Seeking Refuge in Malaysia and New Delhi, India,” September 2020, <https://chinmd.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Chin-Refugees-Final-Oct-8-2020.pdf>

59 Matthew Wilch, Zo Tum Hmung, Jenny Yang, “Seeking Refuge: The Chin People in Mizoram, India”, December 2011, <http://media.virbcdn.com/files/b3/FileItem-222256-SeekingRefugeTheChinPeopleinMizoram>

AFTERWORD

In light of the worsening situation of Christians in Myanmar highlighted in this report, my prayers and concern turn to this country, joining with Pope Francis, who in January 2023 lamented, “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 oldest and most important places of worship in the country, was burned and destroyed.”

Cardinal Charles Maung Bo, Archbishop of Yangon and President of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Myanmar, has consistently called for peace and reconciliation as the people of Myanmar are suffering “the Way of the Cross,” given the number of deaths, unjust arrest and imprisonment of so many, destruction of communities and property that have led thousands to flee for refuge, and the devastation to the economy, plunging many into poverty.

In his January 20, 2023, statement on behalf of religious leaders, Cardinal Bo joined with two fellow Catholic archbishops in asking why sacred places are attacked and destroyed, and in making a passionate appeal to “let the guns fall silent” and for all to “start the sacred pilgrimage of peace – united as a nation and as a people.”

We stand in solidarity with the Church in Myanmar in their plea for the guns to go silent and for all stakeholders to come together in the pursuit of peace. We urge the US government to provide humanitarian aid to go to all those in need in Myanmar and those who have fled to the surrounding countries. Our prayers continue for a peaceful resolution to the conflict in Myanmar and for the strength and resilience of the Church and its people.

Bishop David J. Malloy
Chairman, Committee on International Justice and Peace
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops



Sang Fang Memorial Church, built in memorial of Rev. Sang Fen, one of the earliest Christian converts and preachers among Chin people under the American Baptist Mission in Chinland. The church was occupied by the Tatmadaw on March 16, 2022.

Photo Source: Rev. Dr. Stephen Hre Kio. Chin Association of Maryland (CAM), "After the 2021 Military Coup in Myanmar/Burma: Challenges for Internally Displaced Persons and Refugees," October 2021 <https://chinmd.org>.



On October 14, 2021, the Burmese military occupied the Chuncung Baptist Church in Chuncung village in Hakha Township. They first stayed at the property then looted and destroyed parts of the property.

Photo Sources: CAM source, anonymous for security reasons. Chin Association of Maryland (CAM), "After the 2021 Military Coup in Myanmar/Burma: Challenges for Internally Displaced Persons and Refugees," October 2021 <https://chinmd.org>.



(top) Thantlang Town Burning 1. Photo Source: The Chinland Post. Chin Association of Maryland (CAM), "After the 2021 Military Coup in Myanmar/Burma: Challenges for Internally Displaced Persons and Refugees," October 2021 <https://chinmd.org>.

(bottom) Thantlang Town Burning 2. Photo Source: CAM source, anonymous for security reasons. Chin Association of Maryland (CAM), "After the 2021 Military Coup in Myanmar/Burma: Challenges for Internally Displaced Persons and Refugees," October 2021 <https://chinmd.org>.

