



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Burma

International Religious Freedom Report 2004

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The country has been ruled since 1962 by highly repressive, authoritarian military regimes. Since 1988, when the armed forces brutally suppressed massive prodemocracy demonstrations, a junta composed of senior military officers has ruled by decree, without a constitution or legislature. Although there is currently no constitution in place, the principles laid out by the Government for its reconvened constitutional convention allow for "freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess and practice religion subject to public order, morality, or health...." Most adherents of religions that are registered with the authorities generally are allowed to worship as they choose; however, the Government imposes restrictions on certain religious activities and frequently abuses the right to freedom of religion.

There was no change in the limited respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. Through its pervasive internal security apparatus, the Government generally infiltrated or monitored the meetings and activities of virtually all organizations, including religious organizations. It systematically restricted efforts by Buddhist clergy to promote human rights and political freedom, discouraged or prohibited minority religions from constructing new places of worship, and in some ethnic minority areas coercively promoted Buddhism over other religions, particularly among members of the minority ethnic groups. Under the principles that are to guide the drafting of the constitution, "the State recognizes the special position of Buddhism as the faith professed by the great majority of the citizens of the State." Christian groups continued to experience difficulties in obtaining permission to repair existing churches or build new ones in most regions, while Muslims reported that they essentially are banned from constructing any new mosques or expanding existing ones anywhere in the country. Anti-Muslim violence continued to occur during the period covered by this report, as did monitoring of Muslims' activities and restrictions on Muslim travel and worship countrywide.

There were flare-ups of Muslim-Buddhist violence during the period covered by this report. Persistent social tensions remained between the Buddhist majority and the Christian and Muslim minorities, largely due to old British colonial and contemporary government preferences. There is widespread prejudice against Burmese of South Asian origin, most of whom are Muslims.

The U.S. Government promoted religious freedom with all facets of society, including government officials, religious leaders, private citizens, scholars, diplomats of other governments, and international business and media representatives. Embassy staff offered support to local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and religious leaders and acted as a conduit for information exchange with otherwise isolated human rights NGOs and religious leaders. Since 1999, the U.S. Secretary of State has designated Burma as a

"Country of Particular Concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of approximately 261,970 square miles, and its population is approximately 50 million. The majority of the population is Theravada Buddhist, although in practice popular Buddhism in the country includes veneration of many indigenous pre-Buddhist deities called "nats" and coexists with astrology, numerology, and fortune telling. Buddhist monks, including novices, number more than 400,000 persons (roughly 3 percent of the male Buddhist population) and depend on the laity for their material needs, including clothing and daily donations of food. There is a much smaller number of Buddhist nuns. There are Christian minorities (mostly Baptists as well as some Catholics and Anglicans), Muslims (mostly Sunni), Hindus, and practitioners of traditional Chinese and indigenous religions. According to official statistics, almost 90 percent of the population practices Buddhism, 4 percent practices Christianity, and 4 percent practices Islam; however, these statistics almost certainly underestimate the non-Buddhist proportion of the population. Muslim leaders claim that there are approximately 7 to 10 million Muslims in the country--about 14 to 20 percent of the population--although it is impossible to verify this number. There is a small Jewish community in Rangoon, and while there is a synagogue, during the period covered by this report there was neither a congregation nor a rabbi to conduct services.

The country is ethnically diverse, and there is some correlation between ethnicity and religion. Theravada Buddhism is the dominant religion among the majority Burman ethnic group and among the Shan, Arakanese, and Mon ethnic minorities of the eastern, western, and southern regions.

Christianity is the dominant religion among the Kachin ethnic group of the northern region and also the Chin and Naga ethnic groups of the western region, some of whom also practice traditional indigenous religions. Christianity also is practiced widely among the Karen and Karenni ethnic groups of the southern and eastern regions, although many Karen and Karenni are Theravada Buddhists. Hinduism is practiced chiefly by the Indian population, who are concentrated in major cities and in the south-central region, although some Indians are Catholic. Islam is practiced widely in Arakan State, where it is the dominant religion of the Rohingya minority, and in Irrawaddy Division, as well as among some Burmans, Indians, and ethnic Bengalis. The Chinese ethnic minorities generally practice traditional Chinese religions. Traditional indigenous religions are practiced widely among smaller ethnic groups in the northern regions, and practices drawn from those indigenous religions persist widely in popular Buddhist rituals, especially in rural areas.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The country has been ruled since 1962 by highly authoritarian military regimes. The latest military Government, now called the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), has governed without a constitution or legislature since 1988. Under the principles that will guide the drafting of the constitution at the reconvened constitutional convention, there is "freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess and practice religion subject to public order, morality or health...." Most adherents of religions that are registered with the authorities generally enjoy the right to worship as they choose; however, the Government has imposed restrictions on certain religious activities and frequently has abused the right to religious freedom.

Since independence in 1948, many of the ethnic minority areas have been bases for

armed resistance against the Government. Although the Government has negotiated ceasefire agreements with most armed ethnic groups since 1989, active Shan, Karen, and Karenni insurgencies continued during the period covered by this report. Peace talks between the Government and the leading Karen insurgent group, the Karen National Union (KNU), began in December 2003 and led to a temporary cease-fire, which was still being observed at the end of the period covered by this report. Successive civilian and military governments have tended to view religious freedom in the context of whether it threatens national unity.

There is no official state religion; however, in practice the Government continued to show a preference for Theravada Buddhism. Under the principles expected to guide the drafting of the constitution, "the State recognizes the special position of Buddhism as the faith professed by the great majority of the citizens of the State." Successive governments, civilian and military, have supported and associated themselves conspicuously with Buddhism.

Virtually all organizations, religious or otherwise, must be registered with the Government. A government directive exempts "genuine" religious organizations from registration; however, in practice only registered organizations can buy or sell property or open bank accounts; these requirements lead most religious organizations to register. Religious organizations register with the Ministry of Home Affairs with the endorsement of the Ministry for Religious Affairs. The Government also provides some utility services, such as electricity, at preferential rates to recognized religious organizations.

Buddhist doctrine remained part of the state-mandated curriculum in all elementary schools. Students could opt out of instruction in Buddhism, and sometimes did. All students are required to recite a Buddhist prayer daily. Some Muslim students are allowed to leave the room during this act, while at some schools non-Buddhists are forced to recite the prayer. The Government also funded two state universities to train Buddhist monks and one university intended to teach non-citizens about Theravada Buddhism.

Official public holidays include several Theravada Buddhist holy days, as well as some Christian, Hindu, and Islamic holy days.

The Government made some nominal efforts to promote mutual understanding among practitioners of different religions. The Government maintained multireligion monuments in Rangoon and in other major cities. In 1998, the Government announced plans to build a new multireligion square on some of the land that it recovered in 1997 by relocating Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, and Muslim cemeteries in Rangoon's Kyandaw neighborhood. The project had been on hold since 2001, when the Government objected to the inclusion of a cross in the design of a proposed Christian monument at the site. In 2003, the Government issued verbal permission for the site to be constructed, but without the cross.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government continued to show its preference for Theravada Buddhism and to control the organization and restrict the activities and expression of the monkhood ("sangha"), although some monks have resisted such control. Beginning in late 1990, the Government banned any organization of Buddhist monks other than the nine state-recognized monastic orders. These nine orders submit to the authority of a state-sponsored State Monk Coordination Committee ("Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee," or SMNC), which is elected indirectly by monks. The junta also authorized military commanders to try Buddhist monks before military tribunals for "activities inconsistent with and detrimental to Buddhism," and it imposed on Buddhist monks a code of conduct. Infractions of the code are punished by immediate, public defrocking, and often criminal penalties. In November 2001, two nuns at

Thayet were arrested and sentenced to 7 years in prison for violating this code.

In January 2003, three nuns were arrested under the 1950 Emergency Provision Act for demonstrating in Rangoon for lower prices on basic commodities, progress in political dialogue, and the release of political prisoners. They were defrocked and sentenced to at least 7 years in prison.

Since the early 1990s, the junta increasingly has made special efforts to link itself with Buddhism as a means of boosting its own legitimacy. State-controlled news media frequently depicted or described government officials paying homage to Buddhist monks; making donations at pagodas throughout the country; officiating at ceremonies to open, improve, restore, or maintain pagodas; and organizing ostensibly voluntary "people's donations" of money, food, and uncompensated labor to build or refurbish Buddhist religious shrines throughout the country. State-owned newspapers routinely featured, as front-page banner slogans, quotations from the Buddhist scriptures. The Government has published books of Buddhist religious instruction. The Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), a government-sponsored mass organization in which participation often is not entirely voluntary, has organized courses in Buddhist culture attended by millions of persons, according to state-owned media reports. Authorities defrocked and arrested a group of 26 monks in December 2003 and sentenced them in February to jail terms ranging from 7 to 16 years for refusing to accept government donations of robes and other items.

The Government continued to fund two state Sangha Universities in Rangoon and Mandalay to train Buddhist monks under the control of the SMNC. The Government's relations with the Buddhist monks and Buddhist schools are handled chiefly by the Department for the Perpetuation and Propagation of the Sasana (DPPS) in the Ministry of Religious Affairs. During the mid-1990s, the Government funded the construction of the International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University (ITBMU) in Rangoon, which opened in 1998. The ITBMU's stated purpose is "to share Burma's knowledge of Buddhism with the people of the world." The main language of instruction is English. There are reports that the ITBMU, while in principle open to the public, accepts only candidates approved by military intelligence officials or recommended by a senior, progovernment abbot.

The junta, which continued to operate a pervasive internal security apparatus, infiltrated or monitored the meetings and activities of virtually all organizations, including religious organizations. Religious activities and organizations of all faiths also were subject to broad government restrictions on freedom of expression and association. The Government subjected all publications, including religious publications and Muslim sermons, to control and censorship. The Government generally prohibited outdoor meetings, including religious meetings, of more than five persons. This monitoring and control undermined the free exchange of thoughts and ideas associated with religious activities. The Government continued to monitor closely the activities of members of all religions in part because some religious leaders and practitioners in the past have become active politically. In 1995, the Government prohibited any political party member from being ordained. Although this measure remained in effect, it was not strictly enforced.

The Government continued to discriminate against members of minority religions, restricting their educational, proselytizing, and church-building activities.

Government authorities continued to prohibit Christian clergy from proselytizing in some areas to support local Buddhist populations opposed to the spread of Christianity. For example, in early April 2002, the Government suddenly rescinded the Kachin Baptist

Convention's (KBC) permission to hold its 125th anniversary celebration in Kachin State. The celebration subsequently was allowed to take place in November 2002 and reportedly attracted approximately 30,000 members. The Government initially also denied the Baptist Youth Assembly permission to hold a rally for 3,000 members in Taunggyi, Shan State, in November 2001. In May 2002, the Government allowed the group to hold the rally, but attendance was restricted to only 300 members.

In general the Government has not allowed permanent foreign religious missions to operate in the country since the mid-1960s, when it expelled nearly all foreign missionaries and nationalized all private schools and hospitals, which were extensive and were affiliated mostly with Christian religious organizations. The Government is not known to have paid any compensation in connection with these extensive confiscations. The Government has allowed a few elderly Catholic priests and nuns who worked in the country prior to independence to continue their work. At times religious groups, including Catholics, Protestants, and other Christians, have brought in foreign clergy and religious workers as tourists, but they have been careful to ensure that their activities have not been perceived by the Government as proselytizing. Some Christian theological seminaries established before 1962 also continued to operate; however, in 2000 military authorities closed a Bible school that had been operating in Tamu Township in Sagaing Division since 1976.

Christian groups continued to experience difficulties in obtaining permission to repair existing churches or build new ones in most regions. Muslims reported that they essentially were banned from constructing new mosques anywhere in the country, and they had great difficulty in obtaining permission to repair or expand existing structures. Authorities reportedly destroy any informal houses of worship or unauthorized religious construction they discover. Buddhist groups are not known to have experienced similar difficulties in obtaining permission to build pagodas, monasteries, or community religious halls.

In parts of Chin State, authorities reportedly have not authorized the construction of any new churches since 1997. The Government reportedly also has denied permission for churches to be built on main roads in Myitkyina, the capital of Kachin State. In Rangoon authorities have instructed various Christian groups to call their places of worship "social centers" rather than churches. One source estimated that the Government approves construction of only approximately 10 to 15 new churches per year. The Religious Affairs Ministry argued that permission to construct new religious buildings "depends upon the population of the location." However, there appeared to be no correlation between the construction of pagodas and the demand for additional places of Buddhist worship. In most regions of the country, Christian and Muslim groups that sought to build small places of worship on side streets or other inconspicuous locations did so with informal approval from local authorities. However, informal approval from local authorities creates a tenuous legal situation. When local authorities or conditions have changed, informal approvals for construction have been rescinded abruptly and construction halted. In some cases, buildings have been torn down.

Since the 1960s, Christian and Islamic groups have had difficulties importing religious literature into the country. All publications, religious and secular, remain subject to control and censorship. Translations of the Bible into indigenous languages cannot be imported legally; however, Bibles could be printed locally in indigenous languages with government permission—often difficult to obtain. During the period covered by this report, there were no reports of the confiscation of Bibles or other religious materials. In 2002, the German-based company Good Books for All was allowed to distribute 10,000 Bibles in the country. One religious group reported that in 2001 it had received government permission to import 2,000 English-language Bibles, the first such import allowed in 20 years. The Bibles were not imported, however, and in May 2002, the Government reversed its earlier decision.

Bibles continued to be smuggled into the country.

State censorship authorities continued to enforce restrictions on the local publication of the Bible, the Koran, and Christian and Muslim publications in general. The most onerous restriction was a list of over 100 prohibited words that the censors would not allow in Christian or Islamic literature because they purportedly are indigenous language terms long used in Buddhist literature. Many of these words have been used and accepted by some of the country's Christian and Muslim groups since the colonial period. Organizations that translate and publish non-Buddhist religious texts are appealing these restrictions. They reportedly have succeeded in reducing the number of prohibited words to approximately 12, but the issue still was pending at the end of the period covered by this report. In addition, according to other reports, the censors have objected to passages of the Old Testament and the Koran that may appear to approve the use of violence against nonbelievers. Although possession of publications not approved by the censors is an offense for which persons have been arrested and prosecuted in the past, there have been no reports of arrests or prosecutions for possession of any traditional religious literature in recent years.

The Government allowed members of all religious groups to establish and maintain links with coreligionists in other countries and to travel abroad for religious purposes, subject to restrictive passport and visa issuance practices, foreign exchange controls, and government monitoring that extended to all international activities by all citizens regardless of religion. The Government sometimes expedited its burdensome passport issuance procedures for Muslims making the hajj or Buddhists going on pilgrimage to Bodhgaya, India, although it limited the number of pilgrims.

Religious affiliation and ethnic background are indicated on government-issued identification cards that citizens and permanent residents of the country are required to carry at all times. Having "Muslim" or "Bengali" on the cards often led to harassment by police or immigration authorities. Citizens also were required to indicate their religion on some official application forms such as passports.

Non-Buddhists continued to experience employment discrimination at upper levels of the public sector. During the period covered by this report, the most senior non-Buddhist serving in the Government was the Deputy Attorney General (a Baptist). There were no non-Buddhists who held flag rank in the armed forces. The Government discouraged Muslims from entering military service, and Christian or Muslim military officers who aspired to promotion beyond middle ranks were encouraged by their superiors to convert to Buddhism.

Members of the Bengali Muslim (Rohingya) minority in Arakan State, on the country's western coast, continued to experience severe legal, economic, and social discrimination. The Government denied citizenship status to most Rohingyans on the grounds that their ancestors allegedly did not reside in the country at the start of British colonial rule, as required by the country's highly restrictive citizenship law. Muslim Rohingya minority returnees from Bangladesh complained of severe government restrictions on their ability to travel and to engage in economic activity. Although essentially treated as foreigners, these Muslims are not issued Foreigner Registration Cards (FRCs). Instead the Government gives them "Temporary Registration Cards," which give them status preferential to a foreign resident. They are required to obtain permission from the township authorities whenever they wish to leave their village area. Authorities generally do not grant permission to Rohingya Muslims, or other native non-Muslim Arakanese, to travel to Rangoon. However, permission sometimes can be obtained through bribery. In addition, because the Government reserves secondary education for citizens only, Rohingyans do not have access to state-run schools beyond primary education and are unable to obtain most civil service positions. Restrictions on Muslim travel and worship, in particular,

reportedly continued countrywide during the period covered by this report.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Government restrictions on speech, press, assembly, and movement, including diplomatic travel, make it difficult to obtain timely and accurate information on human rights in the country, including freedom of religion. Information about abuses often becomes available only months or years after the events and frequently is difficult or impossible to verify.

The military has killed religious figures on some occasions. In 2002, troops killed 10 ethnic Karen, including a pastor, a day after being ambushed by fighters from a Karen resistance group.

Government security forces and the USDA continued to take actions against Christian groups, arresting clergy, destroying churches, and prohibiting religious services. Evangelists in South Dagon and Hlaing Thayar Townships near Rangoon were accused of proselytizing and were threatened in 2002 and 2003 with arrest if they opened house churches and kindergartens. In Rangoon during 2001, authorities closed more than 80 house churches because they did not have proper authorization to hold religious meetings. These closures continued in Rangoon and elsewhere throughout the period covered by this report, although numbers are not known. At the same time, the authorities made it difficult, though not impossible, to obtain approval for the construction of "authorized" churches.

Authorities have attempted to prevent Chin Christians from practicing their religion. Since the early 1990s, security forces have torn down or forced villagers to tear down crosses that had been erected outside Chin Christian villages. These crosses often have been replaced with pagodas, sometimes built with forced labor.

The authorities reportedly subjected Christian sermons to censorship and repeatedly prohibited Christian clergy from proselytizing. In April 2002, two Chin pastors--Reverend That Ci and his son-in-law Reverend Lian Za Da--and their families reportedly were arrested in a suburb of Rangoon for having unregistered overnight guests in their home. However, Reverend That Ci had filed the necessary paperwork and had not received a reply. The arrests reportedly were an effort to force them to stop proselytizing so openly in the Dagon North area. When they refused, they were sent from Dagon North police station to Insein prison. The pastors and their families reportedly have been released from prison.

The Government attempted to coerce members of the Chin ethnic minority to convert to Buddhism and prevented Christian Chin from proselytizing by, among other things, arresting and physically abusing Christian clergy and destroying churches. Until 1990, the Chin generally practiced either Christianity or traditional indigenous religions with little interference from the Government. Since 1990, the Government has supported forced conversions of Christians to Buddhism. The majority of Chins, however, are still Christian. This campaign, reportedly accompanied by other efforts to "Burmanize" the Chin, has involved a large increase in military units stationed in Chin State and other predominately Chin areas, state-sponsored immigration of Buddhist Burman monks from other regions, and construction of Buddhist monasteries and shrines in Chin communities with few or no Buddhists, often by means of forced "donations" of money or labor. Local government officials promised monthly support payments to individuals and households who converted to Buddhism. Government soldiers stationed in Chin State reportedly were given higher rank and pay if they married Chin women and converted them to Buddhism. The authorities reportedly supplied rice to Buddhists at lower prices than to Christians, distributed extra supplies of food to Buddhists on Sunday mornings while Christians attended church, and exempted converts to Buddhism from forced labor. Chin leaders reported that in December 2003, during a visit to Chin State of Prime Minister Khin Nyunt,

primary- and middle-school Christian children were forced to perform a Buddhist ritual in his honor. While it could not be independently verified, the Chin Human Rights Organization also reported the January 2003 escape of five Chin children who had been forcibly placed in a Buddhist monastery in Matupi Township.

In 2001, there were credible reports that in Karen State's Pa'an township, army units repeatedly conscripted as porters young men leaving Sunday worship services at some Christian churches, causing young men to avoid church attendance. Soldiers led by officers repeatedly disrupted Christian worship services and celebrations.

There were credible reports that SPDC authorities systematically repressed and relocated Muslims to isolate them in certain areas. For example, Muslims in Arakan State were forced to donate time, money, and materials toward buildings for the Buddhist community. Certain townships in the Arakan State, such as Thandwe, Gwa, and Taung-gut, were declared "Muslim-free zones" by government decree in 1983. There are still original-resident Muslims living in Thandwe, but new Muslims are not allowed to buy property or reside in the township. Muslims no longer are permitted to live in Gwa and Taung-gut.

During the last 2 years, local authorities in Arakan State scheduled approximately 40 mosques for destruction, including some in the state capital Sittwe, because they were reportedly built without permission. There were other such allegations in Rangoon Division and Karen State. Thirteen mosques were destroyed in Arakan before the authorities desisted at the request of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Over the past year, the Government gave written permission to repair existing mosques in some areas. However, to ensure that destroyed mosques are not rebuilt, they have been replaced with government-owned buildings, monasteries, and Buddhist temples.

In 2003, there were several violent incidents involving Muslims and Buddhists. In June 2003, there were unverified reports of incitement of anti-Muslim violence by USDA members in Irrawaddy Division. In July 2003, anti-Muslim violence flared briefly in Pyinmana, about 175 miles north of Rangoon, when a Muslim food stall owner refused to sell food to the friend of a Buddhist monk. The police regained control, but damage was done to Muslim homes and shops.

From October to December 2003, there were several violent clashes between Buddhists and Muslims in the Mandalay area and in Rangoon. In Kyaukse, near Mandalay in the central part of the country, a mob led by Buddhist monks attacked Muslim homes and mosques following an alleged attack by Muslim youth on monks reciting sutras to commemorate the end of Buddhist Lent. One week later, also in Kyaukse, another Buddhist mob attacked Muslim homes and mosques, killing at least 10 Muslims. Authorities managed to keep the anti-Muslim violence from spreading to nearby Mandalay. In November 2003, troops reportedly fired on monks protesting the arrest of a local abbot and killed two of them.

In late October 2003, Buddhist monks and local civilians in Rangoon attacked Muslim shops and homes over several nights in two predominately Muslim neighborhoods. Three Muslim shop owners were beaten badly by the mobs.

Though there was little violence in Rangoon and Mandalay after November 2003, there were unverified reports of attacks in November on a mosque and attached madrassa in Maungdaw, northern Arakan State.

While there is no direct evidence linking the Government to these violent acts against

Muslims, Muslim leaders and non-Muslim local residents insisted that the instigators were affiliated with the Government. In both Kyaukse and Rangoon, witnesses claimed that many of the Buddhist attackers systematically were transported into and out of the Muslim areas. Others claimed to see monks carrying pistols and walkie-talkies under their robes. Muslim leaders insisted that Buddhist-Muslim relations in Rangoon and elsewhere were harmonious, suggesting only provocateurs could spark this kind of violence. While the specifics of how these attacks began and who carried them out have not been documented fully, it appears that the Government was, at best, slow to protect Muslims and their property from destruction. The violence significantly heightened tensions between the Buddhist and Muslim communities.

In the aftermath of these attacks, the authorities paid some compensation to the affected Muslims and gave permission to the Kyaukse Muslims to rebuild the two mosques destroyed in the violence. To date the reconstruction has not occurred because most Muslims have not returned to their previous neighborhoods. In addition the Government arrested and defrocked 44 monks and 26 other Buddhists suspected of participation in the Kyaukse and Rangoon violence and imposed a 7 p.m. curfew on all monasteries. There were unverified reports that one senior monk received a death sentence; it is not known what sentences the other monks received. These measures caused some tension between the Government and the usually favored Buddhist monkhood, leading to some localized demonstrations inside Rangoon monasteries (put down without incident). Seventy Muslims were arrested and 31 Kyaukse Muslims were sentenced in December 2003 (1 received the death penalty) for their involvement in the violence, including the alleged murder of a senior Buddhist monk. Muslim leaders called the trials a mockery of justice, but they did not address the veracity of the charges.

Aside from the alleged government instigation of anti-Muslim violence, authorities also refused to approve requests for gatherings to celebrate traditional Muslim holidays and restricted the number of Muslims that can gather in one place.

In March 2002, six Muslims reportedly were arrested in connection with the unauthorized addition to a madrassa in Arakan State. They were released following demolition of the unauthorized construction. There was also an unverified report of the burning of Muslim homes in a village in Karen State in late April.

In 1991, tens of thousands (according to some reports as many as 300,000) of members of the Muslim Rohingya minority fled from Arakan State into Bangladesh following anti-Muslim violence alleged, although not proven, to have involved government troops. Many of the 21,000 Rohingya Muslims remaining in refugee camps in Bangladesh have refused to return because they fear human rights abuses, including religious persecution. The UNHCR reported that government authorities cooperated in investigating isolated incidents of renewed abuse of repatriated citizens.

The Government continued to prevent Buddhist monks, along with all other segments of society, from calling for democracy and political dialogue with prodemocracy forces. During the period covered by this report, government efforts to control these monks included travel restrictions, arrests, pressure on Buddhist leaders to expel "undisciplined monks," and a prohibition on certain monasteries from receiving political party members as overnight guests. More than 100 monks credibly have been identified as having been imprisoned during the 1990s for supporting democracy and human rights; however, about half of these have been released, and there was no reliable estimate of the number of Buddhist clergy in prisons or labor camps at the end of the period covered by this report. Monks serving sentences of life in prison reportedly included the Venerable U Kalyana of Mandalay, a member of the Aung San Red Star Association, and the Venerable U Kawiya of the Phayahyi monastery in Mandalay.

In August 2001, at a religious ceremony in Mandalay, a Buddhist monk reportedly was arrested for delivering a sermon critical of the prevailing economic and political situation. There was no information available on whether he was later released or if he remains in prison. In 2002, the authorities expropriated a Rangoon monastery presided over by a senior Buddhist monk. This seizure led to complaints and the subsequent arrest of eight monks.

There continued to be credible reports from diverse regions of the country that government officials compelled persons, especially in rural areas, to contribute money, food, or uncompensated labor to state-sponsored projects to build, renovate, or maintain Buddhist religious shrines or monuments. The Government calls these contributions "voluntary donations" and imposes them on both Buddhists and non-Buddhists. In recent years, there had been credible reports that Muslims in Arakan State have been compelled to build Buddhist pagodas as part of the country's forced labor program. These pagodas often have been built on confiscated Muslim land. There were no known reports of such activity in Arakan State during the period covered by this report; however, Chin leaders reported that prior to Prime Minister Khin Nyunt's visit to the region in December 2003, Christians in Tidim Township were forced to help build a Buddhist pagoda and monastery. There also were reports of forced labor being used to dismantle temples and monasteries.

Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD), has been in prison or house arrest since forces allied with the Government attacked her and her convoy, which included several NLD-allied monks, while traveling in Sagaing Division in the northwestern region of the country in May 2003. The Government reportedly used criminals dressed in monks' robes in the ambush.

Forced Religious Conversion

Since 1990 government authorities and security forces, with assistance from monks of the Hill Regions Buddhist Missions, have sought to coerce Chins, including children, to convert to Theravada Buddhism.

There were credible reports that hundreds of Christian tribal Nagas in the country have been converted forcibly to Buddhism by the country's military. The persons were lured with promises of government jobs to convert to Buddhism, while those who resisted were abused and kept as bonded labor by the military.

There were no reports of forced religious conversion of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorists

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

There are social tensions between the Buddhist majority and the Christian and Muslim minorities. Preferential treatment, both in hiring and in other areas--for non-Buddhists during British colonial rule, and for Buddhists since independence--is a key source of these tensions. There is widespread prejudice against ethnic Indians, particularly ethnic Bengalis, many of whom are Muslims. The Government reportedly contributed to or instigated anti-Muslim violence in cities throughout the country in 1997, 2001, and 2003.

Since 1994, when the progovernment Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) was organized, there has been armed conflict between the DKBA and the predominately Christian KNU. Although the DKBA reportedly includes some Christians and there are many Buddhists in the KNU, the armed conflict between the two Karen groups has had strong religious overtones. During the mid-1990s, it reportedly was common DKBA practice to torture Christian villagers and kill them if they refused to convert to Buddhism; however, DKBA treatment of Christians reportedly improved substantially after the DKBA began to administer the regions under its control. During the period covered by this report, however, there was an unverified report that local DKBA commanders forced the local "sangha" council to order the demolition of six monasteries in Myawaddy whose abbots had been critical of the DKBA.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy continued to promote religious freedom in its contacts with all facets of society. During the period covered by this report, Embassy officials discussed the importance of improved religious freedom with government and military officials, private citizens, scholars, representatives of other governments, and international business and media representatives. Embassy staff met regularly with leaders of Buddhist, Christian, and Islamic religious groups, including ethnic minority religious leaders, members of the faculties of schools of theology, and other religious-affiliated organizations and NGOs. The Chief of Mission hosted an Iftaar celebration for Muslim leaders and regular receptions for senior members of the Catholic and Protestant clergy.

Through public diplomacy outreach and by traveling as much as permitted by the Government, Embassy staff offered support to local NGOs and religious leaders and acted as a conduit for information exchange with otherwise isolated human rights NGOs and religious leaders. In two cases the Embassy offered educational advice and assistance to human resource training programs run by the Catholic Church and hosted visitor programs that examined the religious community's role in conflict resolution.

Since 1999, the Secretary of State has designated Burma as a "Country of Particular Concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

In July 2003, the Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act and an accompanying Executive Order imposed new sanctions on the country, including banning the importation of products from the country into the United States and the export of financial services from the United States to it. Previously, the U.S. Government had also discontinued bilateral aid to the Government, suspended issuance of licenses to export arms to the country, and suspended the generalized system of preferences and Export Import Bank financial services in support of U.S. exports to the country. The U.S. Government also suspended all Overseas Private Investment Corporation financial services in support of U.S. investment in the country, ended active promotion of trade with the country, halted issuance of visas to high government officials and their immediate family members, and froze SPDC assets in the United States. It also has opposed all assistance to the Government by international financial institutions and urged the governments of other countries to take similar actions. New investment in the country by U.S. citizens has been illegal since 1997.

Released on September 15, 2004