

# **Chin National Front Movement and its Impact in Mizoram**

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## **Background information**

On the eve of the Independence of Burma from British rule, General Aung San, Leader of anti-Facist People's Freedom League (APPFL) organised a confence at Panglong in February 1947 on his return from England. At this conference, now popularly known as Panglong Conference, General Aung San outlined the framework of the constitution of the Union of Burma. With particular reference to the aspirations of the ethnic minorities such as Chins, Kachins, Shans and Karens an agreement was made on February 12 by which these minorities be provided for the highest possible autonomy for these groups of people, almost a federal status.<sup>1</sup> This interpretation was supported by the provision of succession clause in the 1947 constitution of the union of Burma.

However shortly after this conference General Aung San was assassinated by his political rivals.<sup>2</sup> When Burma became Independent on 4th January 1948 the new rulers of Burma eg. U Nu were not able to run Burma according to the constitution as envisaged by General Aung San and the Panglong conference. As a matter of fact in 1962 a military clique led by General Ne win staged a coup d'etat and took over Burma and introduced National Socialist Party in what, the general argued, was an attempt to save the country from national disintegration. In short, from 1962 till today Burma have been ruled by the Military Junta. By overthrowing the 1947 Union Constitution and refusing to read it the military regime treated these minorities as conquered colonial people and made to become third-class citizens.<sup>3</sup>

## **Chin National Front/Chin National Army was born**

In 1988 Mrs. Aung San Suu Kyi appeared on the political scene of Burma with a view to protecting the human rights of the Burmese people (which had been cruelly suppressed by the Military Junta for over two decades) and restoring Democracy in Burma a new Political

Party called National League for Democracy (NLD) was formed under the leadership of Mrs. Aung San Suu Kyi. Apart from the aim of the restoration of Democracy in Burma and protection of human rights, Aung San Suu Kyi declared that as and when NLD come, to power in Burma she would honour the provisions of the Panglong agreement as enunciated by her father with reference to the political status of the ethnic minorities federalism within the Union of Burma. This pronouncement had agreed appeal to the leaders of the ethnic minorities. To cut the story short, the Leaders of Chin Hills formed Chin National Front (CNF) in 1988 under the leadership of Tialkhala<sup>4</sup> and fell in line with the National League for Democracy. As a matter of fact, the United Nations has recognized the Chins as one of the indigenous peoples of the world.<sup>5</sup> The Chin traditionally inhabited an area of not less than 14000 sq. miles with a population not less than 500,000 in it. They hope that within a short time the National League for Democracy (NLD) under Aung San Suu Kyi would capture power in Burma and introduce a new order of things namely Federal Status for the China and other ethnic minorities. The Chin National Front became very popular in the China Hills and very soon Chin National Army was formed in order to further the aims of the Chin National Front. This in short is how Chin National Front/Chin National Army was born.

### **Military Crack Down by Burma Military Junta - SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council)**

In the polls held on 27th May, 1990 the National League for Democracy won 392 of the 485 seats, while the Junta's puppet national Unity Party got 10 seats. SLORC let loose a reign of terror and harassed all those people who supported the National League for Democracy. As a result of this thousands of the members of National League for Democracy (estimates over 300,000) including the Burmese students fled Burma and sought refuge in various parts of the world. In this situation the members of Chin National Front/Chin National Army also fled their homeland and mostly sought shelter in the land of their kith and kin - Mizoram side by side a very large population of the Chin Hills also fled their land and sought shelter in Mizoram.

The Government of India declared that all those citizens of

Burma who fled from the horrors of the Burma Military Junta and came to any part of India would be given official shelter/refuge as is the case with all those citizens of Burma who fled to other parts of the world and were given official recognition as refugees by the United Nations. However, things changed soon after the Deputy Foreign Minister of Burma visited New Delhi in early 1994 and exerted pressure upon New Delhi to stop assisting or permitting anti-SLORC activities from Indian Soil.<sup>6</sup>

With particular reference to the Chin National Front/Chin National Army members and other citizens from Chin Hills who sought shelter in Mizoram it may be stated that for almost the last seven years they have been sheltered in Mizoram peacefully and without harassment from any quarter in full pursuance of the policy of the Government of India.

Round about 1989 when Zo Re-unification Organisation (Zoro) movement was taking shape these leaders of Chin National Front/Chin National Army fully supported Zo Re-unification Organisation. However they contended that, as the success of the fulfilment of Zo Re-Unification Organisation may take an indefinite time they would continue to strife for federal status for the Chin Hills as per Panglong Agreement. They emphatically stated that should National League for Democracy come to power and Chin Hills became a federal state they would consider such a situation was bound to be the first step towards the success of Zo Re-Unification Organisation. In fact they sent a memorandum to Mr. Rajiv Gandhi, Prime Minister of India that they were in full support of Zo Re-Unification Organisation as declared at Champhai at the first ZOMI World Convention.<sup>7</sup> The struggle for federal status as per Panglong Agreement is in no way a substitute for Zo Re-Unification Organisation.

Viewed from Mizoram angle the Chin National Army movement (their aims and objects) is not to be opposed but welcome. All Political Parties in Mizoram including the Congress subscribe to re-unification of ZO inhabited areas under a single administration within the Union of India.

It is however a known Fact that Chin National Front/Chin National Army being a constituent of National League for Democracy is automatically opposed to the Burmese military rulers. It is well

known to most of us that the Burma Military rulers are totally hostile to Chin National Front/Chin National Army and want to eliminate the Chin National Army.

### **Leadership Crisis within Chin National Army**

Back to 1989 and onwards, since the Chin National Front/Chin National Army movement has become very popular in the Chin Hills various leaders competed to be the leader of Chin National Army. As early as 1989 there was a very unhealthy competition amongst the leaders of the Chin Hills to capture the leadership of Chin National Army. Prominent amongst these were Tialkhala and Nothankapa. Actually this is nothing unusual. The movement is a popular one. To be a leader of that movement (Chin National Army) is a prestige issue. Such competition is not unusual and is everywhere in any movement. Left to themselves the Chin National Army leaders would sort out things among themselves and the struggle for leadership issue can be easily and amicably settled among themselves. Unfortunately the Mizoram State Congress Ministry took sides. They pampered the faction led by Nothankapa who took leadership on 25.3.1989. Nothankapa was again expelled by Chin National Army/Chin National Front from the Organisation in December 1992 due to the fact that the latter misappropriated the party's fund. The Chin National Security Emergency Committee meeting held on 9.12.1992 elected Roger F. Biaklianthang as their leader.<sup>8</sup> However the leadership issue of the Chin National Army remained unsettled. In other words two factions one under Tialkhala and the other under Nothankapa have been at loggerhead with disastrous consequences - loss of lives and so on. As mentioned earlier had there been no interference from the Congress leaders and if they had been left to themselves, this struggle between the two factions would have been sorted out among themselves long time ago. But it persist till today.

### **The Chin National Army/Chin National Front and Mizoram**

Since the well-publicized massacre of pro-democracy activists in 1988, fear of forced labour, arbitrary detention, extra-judicial executions, and torture drove the Chins in ever increasing number from Burma to the Indian State of Mizoram. The Chin National Front is reported to have temporary camp within Mizoram and Archhuang,

Ngur, Khengkhawng, Siata, Siasi, Lungbun, Zawngling, Tuissih etc. of Mizoram-Myanmar border areas and created problems in certain quarters. One C.Lalmangaiha, President of Khuangleng Y.M.A was shot dead by Chin National Army/Chin National Front extremists on 12.7.1996 at Khuangleng village.<sup>9</sup> As a result of fear of Chin National Front activities in Mizoram the Burmese Refugees in Mizoram are either being pressurized to stop their pro-democracy activities or asked to return to their own country. The imprisonment or worse that awaits them in Burma does not count in the real-politik of sub-continental geo-politics. They are often harassed by the para forces.

The state government of Mizoram initiated a campaign to expel from Mizoram, 40,000 Chin refugees. Order No. 37 of the Champhai Sub-Divisional Office officially closed the Burmese refugee camp at Champhai on 1st June 1995. This abrupt closure left thousands of Chins without housing or adequate provisions of food or other basic necessities. Additionally, a Task Force under the Chairmanship of the Deputy Commissioner has already been created for the expression of drafting an effective plan for the mass expulsion of the Chins.<sup>10</sup>

The present repatriation takes place in the wake of Indo-Myanmar talks on border trade. According to Ravi Nair, Executive Director, South Asian Human Rights Documentation Centre, the SAHRDC has received reliable reports that the trade pact established at the said meetings included an informal understanding calling for the repatriation of Chin refugees to Burma as well as joint Indo-Burmese army operations to quell both domestic insurgency movements both in North East India and Burmese democratic forces currently living in India. The armies of India and Burma on 12th April 1995 began a series of Joint military campaigns code named Operation Golden Bird. The Government of India seeks the co-operation of the SLCRC in combatting insurgency groups in North East India who are based on the Burmese side of the border. In return, the Government of India reportedly agreed to deport not less than 30 individual Burmese refugees per week as part of a larger co-operative insurgency movements. The Chin National Front is a pro-democracy movement resisting one of the most brutal regimes in the world. The SLORC will receive deportees from Thingsai Village, Lunglei District at Thattlang, Burma and deportees from Chakkhang Chhiatuipui District at Hmawngtlang, Burma.<sup>11</sup>

At present, these refugees are denied any of the minimum of International legal protection embodied in the Convention concerning the Status of Refugees. Remarkably, the Government of India has not yet certified the Chins as refugees. The predicament of the 40,000 Chins is complicated by the fact that the Government of India also denies UNHRC access to the seven states of the North-East including Mizoram. The UNHRC has only certified about 200 Burmese as refugees who were able to reach New Delhi to apply in person. But of this only 30 Chins Applied for refugee status.<sup>12</sup> The strategy is to keep them in the border camps or send them back to Burma.

Besides the Chins, many Arakanese also fled their traditional villages to seek refuge in India and Bangladesh. In 1995 in the month of June more than a hundred families arrived in four batches and settled at Parva area of Southern Mizoram. While many Chin refugees were able to merge or assimilated quickly with the Mizo community and found livelihood of their own by doing a petty trade, manual labour or by rendering their services as servants in many Mizo families. Many others were unable to get this chance and they have been rendered destitute without food, shelter, or medical facilities. Despite such unforgiving conditions, the Chin and Arakanese refugees will not voluntarily return to Burma.

The Arakanese refugee leaders met the Mizoram State Government's Minister of Home, Planning and Finance Mr. J. Lalsangzuala in Aizawl. The refugee leaders also met Joint Secretary in the State Home Ministry of Mizoram. No help has been forthcoming to the refugees subsequent to the meetings. To add to the problems of their fate the refugees received quit notice that the Burmese refugees must leave Mizoram before August 13, 1996. To this effect four Burmese organisations in exile in India-National League for Democracy-Liberated Area (NLD L/A), All Burma Students League (ABSL), Chin National Council (CNC) and Chin Students Union (CSU) jointly appealed the Mizoram Chief Minister, Lalthanhawla on August 14, 1996, to intervene in this matter and to review the decision on humanitarian ground<sup>13</sup> and so the Chins and the Arakanese continued to stay in Mizoram with no better condition and security. Their problems will certainly be settled whenever this mini International issue of Myanmar political problem is solved.

## References

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3. Lion U.K. *No Room for the Chin*, the Indigenouse Voice (Magazine) Dec. 94 January 95 p-28.
4. Reply of Dr. J.V. Hluna's starred question No. 73 in the Mizoram Legislative Assembly Session on 17.9.1996.
5. Listing them (by UN) 22nd in order in the paper published by the United Nations Department of Public Information DPI/1316-93925 November 1992-9M.
6. Ravi Nair, Executive Director, South Asian Human Rights Documentation Centre, Speaker, Human Rights on *International Convention for the Restoration of Democracy in Burma*, Constitutional Club, Rafi Marg, New Delhi, 4-6 Jan. 1996. Proceedings. p-102.
7. The Chin Nationa Army/Chin National Front was one of the signatories at the First ZO World Convention held at Champhai during May 19-21, 1988 for ZO Re-Unification movement.
8. Reply of Assembly starred question No. 73 on 17.9.1996.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Ravi Nair, op. cit. p-102-103
11. *Ibid* p. 103-104
12. *Ibid.*
13. Appeal for the Burmese Refugees in Mizoram State by National League for Democracy. All Burma Students League, Chin National Council, and Chin Students Union to the Chief Minister of Mizoram on 14.8.1996