

LETTERS FROM THE FIELD

Chin State



As a part of wider CDNHR Research program that aims to provide information and analysis on the state of social harmony and citizens' voices on political process in Myanmar, the CDNHR Research team travelled around Chin State for 46 days in November and December 2016, disseminating about 2500 questionnaires for Social Harmony and 2500 questionnaires for Political Process research. Surveys were conducted in six townships of Chin State: three in the north, Hakha, Falam and Tedim townships, and three in the south, Mindat, Matupi and Paletwa townships. In addition, the Research team conducted several interviews with community elders, CSO members, political party members, religious leaders, groups of young students and general citizens in selected townships to gain further insight into regional events and to bring in analyses for the data.

Located on Myanmar's western border, Chin State is the second smallest State/Region in Myanmar. With a population of 478,801 (2014 Census data), Chin State is also one of the least populated states/regions with sparse settlements in hilly areas. In term of topography, entire region of Chin State is located within mountain ranges with most towns and villages sitting 5,000-7,000 feet above sea level. Its mountainous terrain makes



Chin lady at her small grocery shop in Mindat (credit: Michael McGrath)

Chin State hard to access from the rest of the country, hindering development process in the State. Chin State thus remains as the least developed state in the country – with the highest poverty rate of 73 percent.

The administrative regions of Chin State consist of nine townships and four sub-townships within three districts: two in the North (Hakha and Falam) and one in the South (Mindat). Falam Township used to be the state capital during the British colonial rule. During the reorganization of the government in 1974 led by U Ne Win's Burmese Socialist Party Programme (BSPP), state capital was

moved to Hakha Township, which brought about some grievances in the hearts of Falam residents. Paletwa Township, located at a border region between Chin State and Rakhine State on the Kaladan River, officially became a part of Chin State under U Nu's administration and was also a source of territorial squabble between the two states. While Rakhine claimed that the area initially belonged to the Arakan hill tracts under the British colonial rule, implying that Paletwa was reallocated to Chin State only after the independence, Chin rebuked that Chin people resided in the area preceding the British rule and

that they are the original owners of Paletwa.

Major ethnic population in Chin State are the Chin, which is divided into six main groups, namely Asho, Cho, Khum, Laimi, Mizo and Zomi. There are dozens of Chin sub-groups all over the state, with at least forty-five spoken dialects. The most widely spoken are Tedim among Northern Chin; Hakha and Falam among Central Chin; and Mindat Cho among Southern Chin.¹ Each dialect, especially northern and southern, appears to be so distinct that different Chin speaking different dialects will not likely understand one another, which

tion of the trip. Along the way, the team experienced first-hand the weak transportation infrastructure faced by Chin State residents. Although road transportation is the main mode of travel in Chin State, it remains fairly undeveloped. In the days following, interviews revealed that for most residents, poor transportation infrastructure indeed stands as the biggest challenge. Despite recent improvement in roads and bridges during the latter part of U Thein Sein government, respondents informed us that new road developments lack quality and longevity. Even since the construction of new roads, respondents informed us that during the rainy season, the new roads have become muddy and damaged by landslides, with no monitoring or maintenance. Considering that the flow of trade and transportation of goods in Chin State rely primarily on road transportation, the price of goods can rise drastically when the means of transport are disrupted. Furthermore, local residents, particularly from Mindat Township, expressed their concern about the environmental damage caused by careless planning and construction, such as the endangerment of rare orchid species and wildlife.

Despite widespread poverty, Chin State hosts beautiful towns that are relatively well-organized and developed, with the team being particularly impressed by the cleanliness of each town. From on-the-ground observation both in towns and villages, the team noticed many well-built, concrete houses that one would not expect to see in a poorest state. The

48

More than 48 hours of
interview

was witnessed during the Research team's trip.

After a 48-hour ride in a cramped bus, the Research team arrived in Hakha Township, the first destina-

¹ Center for Applied Linguistics (2007). Refugees from Burma: Their Backgrounds and Refugee Experiences. Culture Profile No. 21. <http://www.cal.org/resources/pubs/burmese.html>

existence of these houses is explained by the migration and remittance dynamics that so often determine financial statuses in Chin State. According to 2014 Census data, 1-in-5 Chin residents have migrated to either foreign countries, or else other parts of Myanmar. Locals confirmed that a majority of households in each towns and villages had at least a family member living and working abroad, who would send back remittance that would contribute to the living conditions of those fortunate enough to have a family member overseas. Thus while some residents live in relative security, others live below the poverty line in precarious circumstances without a support-line.

Lastly, difficult transportation acts as a barrier to the unification of Chin sub-groups. The division and isolation of groups by the mountainous terrain has resulted in discrete ethnic

identities, languages and lineage.

Moreover, a more concrete division appears to exist between Northern and Southern Chin groups. Several factors contribute to this. Firstly, the dialects between North and South are mutually unintelligible, despite the fact that the sub-groups are all classified as being 'Chin'. Uniting around a common language is seen as necessary by those who strongly advocate a federal state, and yet deciding which language would be prioritized as the State's language stands as a major challenge. One interviewee suggested Mizo language (the Chin dialect spoken in Mizoram State, India) be adopted as the common language for all Chin groups mainly for the reason that textbooks and curriculums for those languages are already established. Due to poor transportation links, not a lot of interactions between different sub-groups exist,



Overlook of part of Falam Township (credit: Michael McGrath)

which leads to weak relations among the groups.

Chin youth nowadays seem more inclined to adopt a unified 'Chin' identity than are older Chin generations, who still identify themselves using different Chin tribes and clans. Ethnic nationalism appeared the strongest in Tedim Township, where a strong notion of tribal identity seems to have been successfully used to garner public support for the local political party – the Zomi Congress for Democracy. Indeed, in Tedim, many locals did not even identify with the term 'Chin', which is understood to be a term implanted by the Bamar and other outsiders. They instead in-

sist that they are Zomi.

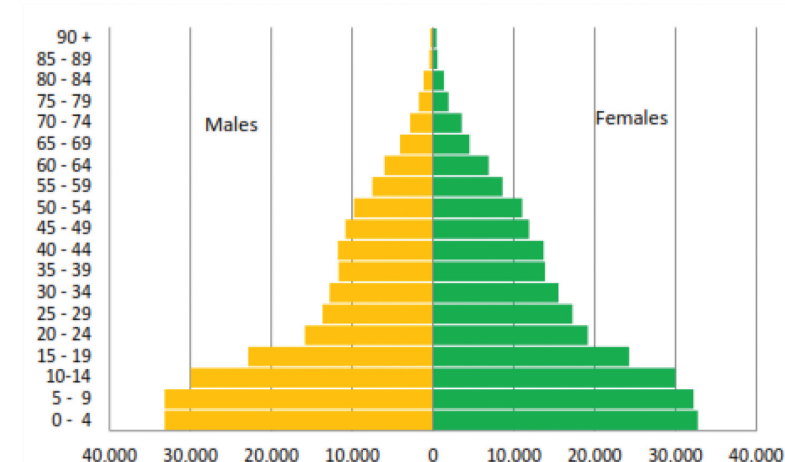
Furthermore, the interviewees deny any obvious tension between different sub-groups, yet subtle rivalry and nationalist spirit was detected in numerous interviews. Even though there is no outward discrimination towards one another, there is a strong notion in the South that the government favors the North because since the revolutionary council period, most of the governors were from the North, especially Tedim Township. Even nowadays, the Southern groups feel that opportunities for Chin State have gone more to the North.

A highlight of the trip was a visit to a village in Tedim; that restricts set-

tlement in the village to worshipers of the unique Parsian religion, which can be found only in Tedim, forming a separate and self-sustaining community on the outskirts of the town.

Despite the challenges encountered by the Research Team in Chin State, the trip was overall a very rewarding and successful mission, and will no doubt yield fascinating results for our ongoing project. Reports on analyzed survey data and in-depth discussions findings from Chin State will be published by April 2017 and shared with relevant stakeholders. For more information and updates on our reports, please subscribe to CDNHR Research Team at research@cdnh.org.

Figure 1. Population Pyramid of Chin State



Ref: Chin State Census Report, Vol. 3D. May 2015.