Chins of Myanmar in Mizoram
A Fact-Finding Report, 2005
Executive Summary:

A fact-finding team (hereafter, the Team) from Human Rights Law Network, Delhi went to Mizoram on a three-week fact finding mission (April 28-May 20 2005) to assess the situation of the Chins and their integration dynamics with the host population. Five out of eight District headquarters, namely, Aizawl, Lunglei, Lawngtlai, Saiha and Champhai were visited.

The most important findings are that:

1. the Chin population in Mizoram is increasing steadily and serious propaganda is being leveled against them; motivated by various vested interests.
2. the notion that most Chins are economic migrants is a misnomer and deserves scrutiny. There is no denying that there may be some Chins with solely economic motives, but for the majority, economic migration is merely one of the symptoms of what is actually caused by one or a combination of social, political, religious, ethnic/racial persecution they faced in Myanmar.

The Chin’s migration to India is caused by the severe collapse of social, political and economic conditions in their traditional communities in Myanmar that would otherwise provide them with the right environment and the means to sustain their livelihoods to live a dignified life. The Chin State is one of the most backward states in Myanmar.

Population Dynamics:

Kolasib, Mamit and Serchhip were not visited due to the relatively low concentration of Chins in these Districts. The highest concentration of Chins is in Champhai district (bordering Myanmar). There are at least 63,000 Chins in Mizoram*. This is a sharp increase by at least 13,000 since the 2003 evictions called by YMA (Young Mizo Association). The population is believed to be increasing steadily. No individual or organization could give accurate data on the Burmese population but the information provided is realistic. Most interviewees agreed on an estimated number that helped the team to add up the total being mentioned. The approximate District-wise population break-up is as follows: Aizawl – 10,000; Lunglei – 8,000; Lawngtlai - 10,000; Saiha - 10,000; Champhai - 20,000; Serchhip - 5,000.

There were large numbers of Chin amidst the local population throughout the 5 districts visited. An average of 12,600 per District is a huge number in a small state like Mizoram with a total 891,058 population.

* Mizoram- A Background: Mizoram (Land of Mizos) formerly known, as Lushai Hills is located between Bangladesh and Myanmar, with a population of 891,058. The term MIZO is a collective name for several clans and tribes belonging to the Mongoloid stock of the Kuki-Chin group, whose ancestral home could be traced back to the settlement in Burma around 14th century and to the present habitat in Mizoram around 1700 A.D. The first mention of ‘ZO’ as the name of people is found in the writing of Fan-Cho, a diplomat of Tang Dynasty of China in 862 A.D., who called the Chiefs and the Princes of Chindwin valley “ZO”. The ethnic tribes who are today known as MIZO where earlier known by different generic names such as Jo, Dzo, Kukis (Cucis) and Lushais. Zo means ‘high altitude’ because these ethnic tribes invariably choose to live on the crest of the mountain for security and health reasons. By adding ‘M’ (person or people) as prefix or suffix, we get a generic term ‘MIZO’ or ‘ZOMI’, which means “people of the high places or land” or better still “The Highlanders”.

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The interviewees had experienced severe economic hardship, violence and the repression of civil society in Myanmar. Most Chins came to Mizoram between 1988 and the mid 1990s. Movement of Chins to other Northeastern states is negligible (except those Lushais, Paites and other Chin-Kuki groups who enter on the Manipur side of the border) and within Mizoram to a certain extent. In general, the Chins prefer to stay where they find close ethnic affinities. For instance, the Maras of Myanmar prefer Saiha District where majority are Maras of Mizoram and the Lais prefer Lawngtlai District. Sometimes, the Chin undertake short distance travel for labour, especially between two adjacent Districts.

The Team observed that the majority of the Chins in Mizoram end up as cheap labour in domestic work, road constructions, agriculture work, including timber sawing in jungles, roadside vegetable vendors, scavengers in the jungle for roots, tubers, leaves and herbs, petty pan shops. Some are forced into sex-work.

There are a few enterprising Chins in parts of Mizoram who own petty, small and medium businesses (by Chin standards). However, the small number of these businesses has led to a perception amongst the host population that the Burmese are well off. This is far from the truth. The majority of the Chins, in their struggle to make ends meet, work very hard to survive. Despite their contribution to the labour market and other services, they are labeled as selfish, backward, uncivilized, “ngapi” (a food substance with a repellant odour) anti-social and foreigners.

The Chins earn on average INR 100 to INR 120 per day in Mizoram. In the majority of cases they are cheated out of their wages by contractors. In some cases the sub-contractors also cheat and exploit the workers by paying less than they had promised or paying irregularly. Despite the hardships and exploitation, life in Mizoram is better than in Myanmar. The daily wage in Myanmar for the same work is a paltry 500 Kyats, equivalent to a daily wage of INR 25 per day.

The Team came across many cases of Chin people wanting to travel to Delhi to seek refugee status but who could not afford the journey. Fear of rejection by UNHCR and subsequent disappointment after borrowing huge sums of money to travel the long distance to Delhi leads them to remain in Mizoram. They have also seen and heard tales of “genuine” but rejected cases returning to Mizoram. Many of the people who were forced by circumstance to come to Delhi after the 2003 evictions in Mizoram, live in appalling conditions. They have no proper place to live; many are in debt due to rental prices and school fees. Unable to find a livelihood to sustain themselves they are living a life of bare existence. There is a serious need to examine the condition of these people who are wholly without assistance and to look to agencies, including the UNHCR, for assistance.

**Cross-Border Movement:**

The Indo-Myanmar border with the Northeastern State of India is a porous one. There is a lot of trade movement especially in the Champhai district of Mizoram. Two flourishing Indo-Myanmar trade centres in the Champhai District are Moreh in Manipur and Zokawthar. Cross-border movement for trade existed even prior...
to the 1988 Myanmar political crisis, but the magnitude of the influx multiplied over the years due to the socio-political crisis in Myanmar. Out of the huge Chin population in Mizoram most can never imagine going back to their homes in Myanmar. Those Chins who were earlier in trade but were caught in the 1988 crisis do not dare venture back into Myanmar. The Chins who are solely into trade move in and out between Myanmar and Mizoram but mostly through the jungle routes to avoid police harassment and fines at border check-gates. Crossing borders without valid permits (for business or otherwise) is illegal but happens fairly regularly due to the lax border personnel who find a cheap source of income in such movements through “fines”. Whenever people cross the border several times they often change their identities at the border check-gate. This is done in order to avoid getting caught for overstaying beyond the permitted duration (generally 1 month, but renewable at a cost. The amount varies across the state).

Methodology of the Fact Finding:

The prime purpose of the mission was to understand the population and integration dynamics of Chins in Mizoram. The main guide of the Team was Mr. Suan Parte, a leader in ZOHRGN (Zo Human Rights Global Network). Other guides included Mr. Thangte, a coordinator of ZORO (Zo Re-unification Organisation), Mr. Cornellius, a religious teacher and Mrs. Betty, all Chins and based in Mizoram. The team spent an average of two days in each district where both individual and group interviews were conducted. The team wanted to acquire as much information on each district in as little time possible. Rather than spending time traveling around to meet individuals, the emphasis was on meeting groups. The team did meet individuals and interviewed them separately (38 males and 35 females) but most of the data in this report was gathered from discussions within the groups. The information in this report is taken from individuals in group interviews sharing their personal opinions, and is not the group’s general opinion.

The Chin Women’s Organisation (CWO) is the only civil institution of Chins with branches in almost all the Districts of Mizoram. The Team met members of all its branches it visited. Each individual from the CWO was interviewed alone before hearing the concerns and aspirations of the organisation as a team.

Similarly the team met the Chin Refugee Committee (CRC) but this institution (run by men) is restricted to Lunglei and Lawngtlai districts and despite some members on its rolls, the general Chin populations hardly know of its existence. And those that do, care little about it. They see no benefit to being associated with it and instead foresee negative consequences from locals in the event of being identified as “refugees”.

To ensure as much objectivity as possible in the fact finding, the Team met and interacted individually as well as in groups with locals, lecturers, YMA Presidents, former YMA Presidents, Students’ organisations like MSO (Mara students’ organisation), MZP (Mizo Zarlai Pawl), government officials, doctors, taxi drivers, co-passengers in buses and taxis, petty shopkeepers, politicians, religious leaders amongst others.
It may be noted here that despite having met a wide spectrum of individuals and groups, none could provide hard facts on **population composition** (see annexure for some details) because no organisation or agency documents these figures. Foolproof data pertaining to age, male-female ratio, percentage of children in schools, access to education and health, etc., are hard to come by because there is no secondary data available and the Team could not have gathered data in the given time. Nevertheless, if one wants such information, an extensive survey running into at least a couple of months needs to be carried out. Some of the District-wide data provided later in the report reflects only those of the District headquarters the Chins interviewed are aware of. Whatever data incorporated in this report is based on estimates.

**Causes of Forced Displacement:**

The Team wished to discover the causes of the increasingly large presence of Chins in Mizoram. The Team wanted to understand the push and pull factors of such a large demographic movement. For example, were the push factors (military regime and its implications) stronger than the pull factors (the perceived better life in Mizoram) or the other way round?

The stories of the interviewees clearly show that the push factor is by far the strongest factor. Many stated that it was a necessity for them to flee from actual or impending persecution. In Myanmar, the military personnel forcefully demanded human labour and material resources (food crops and livestock). Daring to refuse would render them extremely vulnerable to torture or even murder. They had absolutely no forum to voice their dissent. Constant fear was a daily phenomenon in Burma.

**Integration Dynamics:**

One major finding was that certain sections of the Mizo community especially the YMA, used the media in Aizawl town to spread propaganda about the Chin. Newspapers claim and blame the Burmese of being responsible for an “unprecedented increase” in drug trafficking, alcohol and drug abuse, prostitution and HIV/Aids. Drugs, particularly, opium and heroin come from Myanmar through Champhai in Mizoram while the banned allopathic ones like Proxyvon, Dizypam, etc., come from India via Silchar, a municipal town close to Mizoram in Assam. Another story getting wide media coverage is the sex-work in Baga, a township in Assam between Silchar and nearby Vairengte, a small town in Kolasib District of Mizoram. It is alleged that most of the sex-workers are Burmese.
Such stories spread intolerant attitudes towards the Burmese, making their life in Mizoram extremely difficult. The slightest incidents, perceived by a few Mizos to be involving the Burmese, can trigger YMA to go to any extent to vent their wrath, (like it did in 2003 over an alleged rape case involving a Myanmarese; one, that ultimately proved otherwise). The overall situation in Southern Mizoram, particularly Lawngtlai and Saiha districts is volatile but not as pronounced as in Aizawl. Even as we write this report we hear of a death of a Chin (an evangelist) belonging to Thantlang in Chin State, caused by injuries sustained during an attack, allegedly by two locals from Saiha District. The motive of the attack is yet to be ascertained but is most likely, money. Whatever the reason, the fact remains that Mizoram is not a safe place for “outsiders”. A Metei from Manipur, alleged to be involved in drug trafficking, was beaten up and later died in the hospital in Aizawl in mid-May 2005. The Mizos are more tolerant of Vais (“plain people” - people of mainland India) than they are for their supposedly same-ethnic-stock brethren of “Zo” origin.

Incidentally, it was a certain President (Mizo) of ZORO (Zo Re-Unification Organisation) who sheltered in his workshop in Aizawl, at least a hundred fleeing Chins during the 2003 eviction called by YMA. Such incidents displaying sympathy and solidarity for the Zo community are few and far between. Mizos perceive of a situation where non-Mizos could outnumber them eventually. Mizoram is economically dependent on the Central Govt. funds by 94%. Some share of their BPL stock is divided among the Chins who, according to some Mizos, “unscrupulously” manage to possess ration cards and election cards. The YMA is noting these developments. Most of the “illegally acquired” ration and election cards have been checked by YMA and confiscated. The “Burmese issue” is used by the political parties for popular votes and becomes more heated at election times.

Conforming to the Mizo way of life would entail assimilation through language, social, cultural and religious norms (to join the existing denominational churches rather than fragment into newer ones based on ethnic affinities). The Chins, however, wish to assert their own ways of life by cherishing and upholding their language, traditions, etc. and staying together in solidarity.

This is another source of discrimination and isolation perpetrated by the “majority” host community (especially in Aizawl and Lunglei Districts). Upon being asked how they cope with this they reason that going back to their own land is unthinkable until democracy prevails.

In the view of many, as long as the Chins fall in line with the “acceptable Mizo way of life”, restraining themselves from the alleged
anti-social activities and “contribute” rather than live off the meager resources in Mizoram, the general Mizo population would be able and willing to put up with them.

Having said that, the host population does not mince words when they label the Chins “foreigners” despite the “blood-relationship”. Many take the view that: “After all, they are foreigners. Even though we share the same ancestry, there is an international boundary that separates us. We cannot escape from this fact.” When asked about electoral inclusion of Chins, they said: “they are foreigners and therefore should be treated as such according to the Indian Constitution.” However, their main problem with the Chins, more than the “foreigner issue” is the alleged increase in the anti-social activities. The YMA (Champhai) estimates that approximately 50,000 Mizo youth are currently drug-addicted. According to YMA President, Saiha, at least 18 Mizo youth have succumbed to HIV/AIDS deaths in 2005 alone.

Lawngtlai and Saiha districts are more relaxed, resulting in absorbing an increasing population from the Chin State. This is due to a variety of factors. Although one cannot distinguish between potential refugees and otherwise, Champhai’s case may be attributed more to factors consequential upon enhanced Indo-Myanmar trade relations. (Champhai is a district headquarters that is closest to the Indo-Myanmar border). Nevertheless, it should be pointed out here that this upcoming trade relation should not be used as an excuse to brand most Chins in Mizoram and elsewhere as economic migrants. The general situation of Chin children’s access to education is appalling. The interviewees claimed that many children are out of school for various reasons including financial problems and a lack of proper documentation, for example, birth certificates (this is particularly the case in Champhai district). However, exact figures are not possible as the data has never been recorded.

Regarding the Chins access to health care, they do access the Government health facilities but most cannot afford private clinics.

Social and cultural factors:

The push factors from Myanmar in all the above-mentioned three districts cause the influx of Chins into Mizoram. Champhai is a town with a sizable Paite population that populates the stretch from Champhai in Mizoram up to Tiddim and Falam areas of Myanmar.

Saiha District is predominantly Mara dominated and seemed to tolerate Maras from the other side inhabiting Saiha. Maras of Burma populate on the Indo Burma border alongside their Mara counterparts in Mizoram. This may be a reason
why Mizoram has many potential refugees among the Maras who may have continued staying in Saiha rather than approach Delhi.

Similarly Lawngtlai has the Lais from the Chin State. Their own autonomous district councils govern Saiha and Lawngtlai Districts. Both Maras and Lais claim historical, cultural and linguistic differences unique from that of the Mizos. The Maras have what they call Mara Thalai Pawl (MTP), an equivalent of YMA. Thus, MTP has some influence over the Maras, YMA over Mizo dominated areas (particularly northern Mizoram), and Young Lai association over the Lais.