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Challenging Christianity in Wa Special Region

On 13 September 2018, Myanmar's largest non-state armed actor, the United Wa State Army (UWSA), issued a statement saying it was curtailing the practising of Christianity. The statement said that all churches built after 1992 would be destroyed as they had been built illegally and that only churches built between 1989 and 1992 were legal. It also noted that authorities would also check on the number of Christian schoolteachers and students in the region.¹

In addition, it also said authorities would monitor the activities of organizations that support churches in the region and Evangelical Christians would not be allowed to proselytize at schools.² Only ethnic Wa would be allowed to train as religious leaders, and they would be under the authority of the UWSA central government.

Myanmar media quoted Kachin Baptist Convention (KBC) chairman Rev. Samson as saying that that action had been prompted by the work of 'extremist missionaries' and,

You can't call them typical Christians. They are just people who

want to attack established churches. They are against what we Christians believe.³

According to another media report, the UWSA detained 92 Lahu Christian leaders and 42 Wa students in Shan State, and the students were forced to serve as soldiers.⁴ There is an estimated 221,000 Lahu living in


Myanmar - 80% of whom are Christians with 43% believed to be Evangelical.⁵

In a statement dated Sept. 25, Lahu Baptist Convention (LBC) said that 52 churches had been closed and stripped of all Christian symbols. Three other churches were demolished, and religious schools shut down, the LBC

is based in Kengtung, eastern Shan.

In addition, to closing down LBC churches the UWSA have also closed those operated by the Kachin Baptist Convention and the Wa Baptist Convention.

On 5 October, 100 ethnic Wa Christians the UWSA had detained were freed, but the group continued to hold more than 100 ethnic Lahu Christians.



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Those who were freed had to sign a document saying that they would pray only at home and not in churches, said Rev. Dr Lazarus, general secretary of the Lahu Baptist Convention (LBC).⁶

A pastor identified as Rev. Lazarus, general secretary of the Lahu Baptist Convention in Kyaing Tong, told UCAnews.com that 17 male students fled the United Wa State Army, stating,

Some them did not have food for several days. Some are suffering from health problems and some now have psychological problems . . . They can't go back to their homes in the Wa hills, so we are arranging them to continue attending Bible school elsewhere,⁷

Twenty-four Christians who were forcefully recruited by the army remain at the Wa headquarters, including 20 females the report said which also noted that Three Salesians and a diocesan priest, eight nuns from Missionary of St. Paul and nine lay teachers had also been expelled.

Chinese Influence

A number of commentators have suggested the move to curtail Christianity is influenced by the Chinese Government. Respected commentator Bertil Lintner posits,

. . . does China aim to further consolidate its near-monopoly on Myanmar's peace process by squeezing out rival western nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and blocking potential western agents from accessing the area while masquerading as Christian missionaries?⁸

As Benedict Rogers, Christian Solidarity Worldwide's East Asia Team Leader notes,

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The influence, at some level, of the Chinese authorities appears to be a factor driving this persecution, which is an alarming indication of the extension of China's influence and repression beyond its borders. Religious and ethnic minorities in Burma are already facing a rise in persecution at the hands of the Burma Army and a militant Buddhist nationalist movement, but this particular crackdown appears to be related more to China's influence, with economic, security and political interests at play.⁹

Bertil Lintner also suggests that the move is related to the arrest and subsequent imprisonment of Rev. (John) Cao San-Qiang, Cao had apparently been crossing the border between China and Myanmar for three years without incident until his arrest on 5 March



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by the Yunnan Public Security in Menglian County.¹⁰

According to Christianity Today, a US-based website, Cao had helped to build 16 schools that serve around 2,000 children in the Wa Hills area. With the help of Christians in China, Cao was also able to bring in 100 tons of clothing and supplies to the poor region.¹¹

The UWSA's actions further illustrate the often understated internal divisions within individual ethnic states. While for the most part, these divisions are largely inter-ethnic in nature, the fact that there is an anti-Christian bias, Chinese inspired or not, in Wa Special Region should be of major concern.

Anti-Christian actions, perpetrated by the Myanmar military, are not new, Chin and Kachin States have especially been targeted, but the fact that such actions are now being taken by a heavily armed non-state actor should be especially disturbing given that the primary objective of the UWSA and its political wing is statehood within a federal union.

While more recent reports have suggested that the UWSA may be prepared to reassess its actions with local media quoting a spokesperson from the UWSA's liaison office in Lashio, northern Shan State, as saying, on 19 December, that a meeting of senior UWSA officials had decided to allow the reopening of Lahu and Kachin Baptist churches in Wa region, no official statements have been made.¹²

Background

The UWSA, the largest ceasefire group in the country, signed an agreement with the then military government on 9 May 1989. In return they were given de facto control over what has become known as Special Region 2, basing their Headquarters at Panghsang, the former CPB H.Q. It controls most of the Wa

hills along the border with China and maintains a southern command which stretches from Mong Hsat to Mong Yawn on the Thai border.

After the signing of the 1989 ceasefire agreement, the UWSA used money from the lucrative narcotics trade and invested in a number of casinos, hotels, and other entertainment enterprises. One of the five largest banks in Myanmar, Mayflower Bank, prior to its suspension by the Myanmar Government¹³, had been linked to the UWSA and was subsequently accused of money laundering by the U.S. which has designated the UWSA as significant narcotics traffickers under the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act.¹⁴ In addition, the UWSA also set up a number of other businesses including the Hongpang Group, founded in 1998, and involved in import/export, general trading, production of textiles, wires and cables, electric appliances and agricultural goods. It is also engaged in livestock breeding, gem mining and highway construction.¹⁵ In addition to its more legitimate concerns, the UWSA has also been implicated in the arms trade supplying both Naga and Maoist rebels.¹⁶

Between 1999 and 2002 the UWSA was responsible for the displacement of over 48,000 Shan, Lahu and Akha villagers in the south of Shan State opposite Thailand's Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai Provinces. The move was necessitated by the UWSA's relocation of over 125,000, over a quarter of the entire population, of ethnic Wa (as well others including Lahu and Haw Chinese) from the north-east to the more fertile south. Both the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), then the name of the government, and the UWSA leadership claimed that the move was necessary to decrease further opium cultivation along the eastern border with China. However, there is much speculation that the move was most

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likely engineered for the purpose of expanding territory and increasing business opportunities with neighbouring Thailand. It is also claimed that the SPDC may have sought to use the UWSA as a proxy against the Shan State Army-South which has headquarters in the area.¹⁷

Its heavy involvement in the narcotics trade and varied business dealings allowed the UWSA to develop a number of small villages into what have become fairly prosperous towns. The most remarkable of which is Mong Yawn which, since 1999, has seen a major transformation, including the construction of a dam, roads, water and electricity supplies, fuel storage, a new military school, a new hospital, new fortified houses for leaders and wooden houses for soldiers and their dependents, in addition there are also experimental rice fields and fruit orchards.¹⁸

However, such progress did not come cheaply for the local Shan population in these areas. Due to the large-scale migration from the north to the south, the UWSA began confiscating land from the original Shan inhabitants resulting in a number of them being forced to flee to Thailand.

Despite the UWSA's uses as a proxy militia, the SPDC stepped up attempts to reduce the Wa's influence in the areas it controlled and asserted its own authority. In March 2006, a

major financial gateway from Panghsang to Yunnan was closed, preventing the Wa from exporting minerals and timber – a closure resulting from a joint SPDC-PRC initiative. During negotiations with the SPDC to have the crossing reopened the Burmese had insisted on the Wa accepting SPDC controlled customs and immigration offices in the region and the adoption of the Burmese language curriculum - requests that were immediately refused.

People under the control of the UWSA in its northern territories have also seen further deterioration in their livelihoods due to the group's imposition of a ban on opium cultivation. The ban, enforced since June 2005, has left the populace with little or no alternative income. It was estimated that over 75% of the population in northern Wa areas didn't have enough food to eat and have been forced to subsist on rice supplied by the World food programme and China.¹⁹

Much to the SPDC's ire, the UWSA became more closely aligned with China than the central government in Myanmar. The local economy is Chinese as is the main language of administration. Most schools teach Chinese and China is responsible for most of the investment and immigration into the area.

Notes

¹ <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/uwsa-cracks-church-construction-recruitment-extremist-christians.html>, accessed 25 November 2018

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/uwsa-detains-lahu-christian-leaders-forces-students-military-service-baptist-group-says.html>, accessed 25 November 2018

⁵ https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/12949/BM, accessed 27 November 2018

⁶ <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/myanmar-ethnic-army-releases-detained-wa-christians-10052018162924.html>, accessed 25 November 2018

⁷ <https://www.ucanews.com/news/bible-students-escape-from-china-backed-militia-in-myanmar/83861>, accessed 26 November 2018

⁸ <http://www.atimes.com/article/why-china-fears-myanmars-christians/>, accessed 26 November

⁹ <https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/10/18/press/4124/article.htm>, accessed 25 November 2018

¹⁰ <https://www.change.org/p/u-s-house-of-representatives-release-of-rev-john-san-qi-cao-from-detainment-in-china>, accessed 26 November 2018

¹¹ <http://www.atimes.com/article/why-china-fears-myanmars-christians/>, accessed 26 November

¹² <https://www.ucanews.com/news/lahu-baptists-ask-myanmar-militia-to-re-open-churches/84181>, accessed 2 January 2019

¹³ The Bank was finally closed in early 2005 after an investigation into the U.S. Accusations.

¹⁴ <http://a257.g.akamaitech.net/7/257/2422/14mar20010800/edocket.access.gpo.gov/2003/03-29288.htm> accessed on 16/5/07 the UWSA, as an organization, was designated a 'Drug Kingpin' in 2003.

¹⁵ <http://www.shanland.org/drugs/2005/Wa-business-firm-signs-removed/> accessed on 16/5/07

¹⁶ ibid

¹⁷ 'Unsettling Moves: The Wa Forced relocation program in eastern Shan State', LNDO, April 2002

¹⁸ 'Wa army tries to build an empire with drug money', Bangkok Post, 1/3/99

¹⁹ 'Wa Sacrifice at what price.', Drug Watch, June 2007, SHAN