

Chins in Mizoram state, India: a faith-based response

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The faith community in Mizoram state in India has played an instrumental role in providing social services, changing public attitudes and perceptions towards refugees, and providing access and assistance, reaching the most vulnerable where there is no international presence.

Since the 1988 pro-democracy uprising in Burma, ethnic Chin refugees have fled to India's Mizoram state, which borders Burma's western Chin state. Because of the remote location and government-imposed restrictions on foreigners' travel to Mizoram state, the Chins in Mizoram have been largely out of sight and out of mind of the international community. In the absence of UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) and any international humanitarian assistance, the Chins face protection challenges and lack humanitarian assistance, while placing a burden on the resources and infrastructure of Mizoram.

While the Indian government provided the refugees with shelter and food upon their

arrival in the late 1980s, these services were stopped after a few years, and the Chins have faced many difficulties. Even though the Chins have fled persecution, they are not recognised as refugees by India; residents of Mizoram state ('Mizos') view them primarily as economic migrants because they are perceived to be fleeing generalised poverty, and point to the burden they create for Mizoram.

Despite some positive changes in the Burmese government in recent years, voluntary repatriation to Burma on the whole remains not viable, and the safe, humane integration of Chins will be necessary through Mizoram churches, NGOs and state government, with support from central government and the

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international community. During a temporary lifting of the travel restrictions in April 2011, I visited Mizoram and witnessed how the church has played a critical role in this regard, providing key social services to both Mizo and Chin populations, identifying and serving the under-served refugees in the community, and ensuring there is a sense of commonality and welcome for the Chin people living in their state.

The Mizoram church, government and community leaders speak of the Chins as “brothers and sisters” because they are fellow Christians and come from the same ethnic roots. One can hardly overstate the influential role that Christianity plays in the daily life of Mizoram, especially as Christian denominations in Mizoram focus on serving not just the spiritual needs of the community but also the physical, emotional and intellectual needs through church-run hospitals, clinics, nursing homes, orphanages, hostels, schools and community development and assistance programmes.

Contributions of FBOs

One of the main questions I asked during my trip was what role civil society – in particular, faith-based organisations (FBOs) – played in providing assistance and protection to refugees in an area where there is no international protection or assistance. Faith-based groups in Mizoram have provided key social services for refugees, and church-run hospitals and clinics complement the government health and education systems and fill gaps to ensure that those who are especially poor – which includes most refugees – receive health care and an education in Mizoram. Many such hospitals and clinics also absorb the health-care costs of indigent Mizos. Since the Chins and Mizos share a common religion,



A group of Chin refugee pastors sharing their stories in a local church in Saiha, Mizoram state, India.

the church has long worked to serve both Mizos and Chins in development projects.

The Baptist Church of Mizoram (BCM), for example, started the Lydia Project in 2011 to assist displaced Chins and low-income local people, in partnership with two other denominations, the Lairam Jesus Christ Baptist Church and Zomi Baptist Church. BCM started by surveying 10,000 individuals – collecting names of the displaced, analysing their humanitarian needs and determining why each one had come to Mizoram – and

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focusing on developing programmes to serve the most vulnerable and the long-stayers in Mizoram. They developed 33 self-help groups (80% of the members being Chins and 20% local people), with 7 to 15 per group. Members contribute funds monthly which are deposited in a bank in their names. There is also a programme for youth development and one for community counselling.

The Lydia Project focuses on small income-generating projects for these groups, and also works to build awareness of, for example, government-funded opportunities. The project also includes education and reconciliation activities. BCM's relief and development department provides overall coordination with churches and Chin communities in areas of Mizoram with high concentrations of Chin refugees, while project leaders emphasise how critical it is not to separate out the Chins from the local population for humanitarian assistance.

Despite the refugees not having legal recognition, the Lydia Project has helped to empower the refugees and provide a safe space in which community dialogue can begin to address tensions between the refugee and host communities. By not singling out the refugees as a population in need, the project has greater acceptance in the local community, and with Chins and Mizos being trained together, the project has created working relationships that will help to foster a more positive environment for the refugees. The project has also identified and reached some of the most under-served areas and populations in Mizoram, working through the three denominations' networks of churches in areas that are hard to reach even by local government officials.

FBOs provide holistic community care by coupling assistance with promoting more favourable attitudes towards and perceptions of migrants in their communities. Fundamental to the basic protection of refugees is not only their legal recognition and protection but also their acceptance by the local community. In a state where almost all law enforcement officials, elected officials and

civil servants attend a church, the influence of the church to change public perception of immigrants cannot be overstated.

As well as trying to meet the physical and educational needs of refugees by offering assistance through their hospitals and schools, the churches have also engaged in educational efforts to help the Mizoram community better understand the Chin community and, from a faith perspective, why they should welcome and care for the Chins living among them. The Baptist Church in Mizoram, for example, has run various educational events around a theological perspective on caring for the immigrant. They have handed out pamphlets at churches, conducted public educational events, and in some churches have talked from the pulpit about a Christian response to immigration. The Mizoram Presbyterian Church Synod hired a minister to reach out specifically to Chins in Aizawl, the state capital; his duties include mission, evangelism and social services, and he also coordinates a monthly prayer gathering called 'Prayer for Burma' which includes all Chin churches and fellowships in Aizawl.

By speaking out for the vulnerable in their community the churches have helped to prevent anti-Chin activities in the past, and they continue to provide critical teaching to ensure the community is not only merely accepting but actively welcoming of the Chin refugees among them. During Burma's current period of change, there is a great opportunity to pursue a newly framed regional approach that will provide protection and long-term durable solutions for the Chins by working through local FBOs that are trusted and have been operational in the region for decades. These organisations can not only provide critically needed relief and development activities but also be influential in shaping attitudes and perceptions of host communities to welcome the refugees among them.

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