

MYANMAR: THE CONFLICT IN KACHIN - OVERVIEW

1. Who are the Kachin Christians and why is the Burmese military persecuting them?

The Kachin are one of Myanmar's more than 100 recognized minorities (the number alone points to the fact that the military/government split them on purpose to make them weaker). There is a decades-old insurgency, originally striving for independence, but now for autonomy.

2. Why are the Kachin and government forces fighting?

A ceasefire which lasted for 17 years broke down in 2011. Since then, fighting increased, displacing more than 100,000 people, mostly Christians. In the last months alone, at least 5,000 were added. Apparently, the military is trying to make progress before the next rounds of peace talks, started by Aung San Suu Kyi, begin. They were planned for May, but might be postponed. Another reason for fighting is money. Kachin, Shan and Karen States are famous for high value timber, jade and – illicit – opium trade (being part of the Golden Triangle). Both parts of the conflicts earn vast quantities of money with it and there are even rumors that they tacitly cooperate in order not to stop the money flow.

When the army attacks posts of the KIA (Kachin Independence Army), civilians have to flee. 90% of the Kachin population are Christian, 80% of them Baptists, but there are some 200,000 Catholics as well.

3. Is the Catholic Church being targeted by the military? If so, why?

The army targets any church if it suspects that insurgents are hiding in them (often, churches hosting civilians were shelled, the army claiming that they were insurgents). Christians can be snatched for forced porter and trailing services. There are several reports that Christians were killed indiscriminately, not by shelling, but by soldiers. Others were imprisoned, especially when they tried to guide journalists to attack sites. IDP camps are cut off from all support on purpose (local or international help). Catholics are not especially targeted, but are included in this situation.

4. Why does the plight of Kachin Christians receive so little attention in Western media?

There are two main reasons: One is that the Rohingya suffering is simply so much bigger and so much more public. You cannot hide it when 700,000 people are fleeing abroad. Kachin is much more remote and has been a war area for so long. It is much easier to cut them off from everything; the frontlines are also sometimes blurry and the ordeal is not so massive. Basically, Myanmar has had a civil war simmering in Kachin for so many decades that it simply does not make news anymore. The war there is on a much smaller scale and difficult to report on.