

Mon

Profile

While some Mon groups contend that there are between 4 million and 8 million in Burma, 2007 estimates from sources such as the US State Department are much lower, being in the vicinity of 2 per cent of the country's total population, or just below 1 million. The latter estimates appear much too low though, perhaps because they may refer to speakers of Mon, whereas higher estimates may be of those who have Mon ancestry. Most ethnic Mon live in or near Mon State, wedged between Thailand to its east and the Andaman Sea coastline to its west.

Mon is a Monic language from the Mon-Khmer group of Austro-Asiatic languages, though many also use the Burmese language and are literate only in Burmese. The vast majority of Mon are Theravada Buddhists, with some elements of animist practices.

Historical context

The Mon are one of the first groups to settle in Burma, possibly even before the first millennium BCE. They gradually expanded eastward into Thailand, reaching as far as present-day Laos, but were stymied in this movement after the eighth century when they encountered the Khmer kingdom of Angkor. A series of Mon kingdoms ruled much of Burma for a large portion of the next 1,000 years, but their dominance was increasingly eroded as ethnic Burman and Tai began to move into the region and assert themselves, as in the year 1057 when the Burman established the kingdom of Bagan after having defeated the Mon.

The ensuing centuries were to see a flurry of competing Burman, Mon and Tai kingdoms emerge, but by the eighteenth century Burman supremacy was firmly established after the fall of the last independent Mon kingdom in 1757. There followed massacres which still loom large in the collective memory of the Mon: after his victory, Burman king U Aungzeya is said to have had tens of thousands of Mon killed, including 3,000 Buddhist priests in the capital city alone. Much of the Mon literature was destroyed, the use of the Mon language was forbidden, and large numbers of Mon fled to Thailand.

Less than a century later, the British arrived and incorporated all of what is now the Mon State into Burma by the end of the Second Anglo-Burmese War in 1852. There are claims of British promises to re-establish a Mon kingdom and (some) Mon assistance for the British in the war against the Burman. Large numbers of Mon returned from Thailand (Siam) after the defeat of the Burman. In the end, there was no Mon kingdom was restored and, by 1886 and the end of the Third Anglo-Burmese War, all of Burma was annexed by the British.

During the colonial period Mon territory was to a large degree administered as part of 'Burma Proper', or what was sometimes referred to 'Ministerial Burma' as opposed to the Frontier Areas. While some minorities had a degree of autonomy or feudal rule preserved as part of this arrangement the Mon were essentially left out of any form of autonomy or representation altogether.

Largely excluded from the historical Panglong Agreement as to the shape of the soon-to-be-independent Burma, the first Mon armed organization soon appeared. The Mon National Defence Organization (MNDO) was formed in 1948 as a response to what was seen as the growing threat of a Burman-dominated state established without any consideration of the rights or claims of the Mon. In the same year, the MNDO carried out its first violent offensive by seizing weapons and a police station alongside Karen armed groups – though the Mon and Karen insurgencies are usually dated from a later event, in January 1949.

Together with many other armed ethnic groups, the majority of the Mon insurgents agreed a ceasefire with the U Nu civilian regime in 1958. However, the New Mon State Party (NMSP) continued to fight the military government. To address some of the Mon demands a theoretically autonomous Mon State was established under the 1974 Constitution. NMSP armed activities against the Burmese government continued nevertheless until a ceasefire agreement in 1995.

The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) and then the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) army did not cease their operations after 1995. Since then the human rights of Mon civilians have continued to be breached by the Burmese state and military. However, over the past decade a number of Mon community groups have rejuvenated Mon civil society.

The Mon National Democratic Front won five seats in the 1990 elections, but was then deregistered by the SLORC.

Current issues

There was initially some optimism after the ceasefire agreement of 1995, with the NMSP for example expanding its Mon-language community school system and hoping to be able to operate relatively freely in party-controlled areas in the districts of Moulmein, Tavoy and Thaton. It was also hoped that the region would be opened up to development opportunities and receive greater assistance from international aid organizations.

While the first steps towards these goals have been taken, the situation remains highly problematic and has more recently suffered setbacks. The SPDC has imposed greater restrictions on the NMSP over local development projects, and reports indicate the government maintains a ban on the Mon language after primary level in state schools. In addition, since 1998 there have been reports of government and military officials forbidding even Mon community schools from also using the Mon language as medium of instruction, despite the NMSP's initial successful efforts in building up this system of private schools.

The Burmese army has continued to conduct occasional raids in those Mon areas where the ceasefire has not held. Severe human rights violations have been registered, including enforced labour, displacement, rape and murder, and widespread land confiscation. As a result, there has been a mass exodus of Mon to Thailand. Indeed, the SPDC's military presence has increased dramatically since 2000: the number of army regiments in Ye Township increased from two to ten by 2007. This has also continued to hamper efforts to redress the number of internally displaced persons in Mon State, which after the 1995 ceasefire rose to 20,000.

Due to increasing government restrictions, Médecins Sans Frontières pulled out after four years of work in parts of Mon State. As a result, Mon resettlement sites appear to have run out of basic medical supplies by mid-2007 and had to seek other sources. Other UN and international agencies based in Yangon (Rangoon) continue to have very limited access to the Mon ceasefire areas.

The Mon continue to be vastly under-represented in most state institutions, which seems to be partially due to discriminatory government policies and practices in hiring and promotion processes which favour ethnic Burman.