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Report on the Chin Association of Maryland Trip to Mizoram, India (April 6 to April 23, 2024)

May 16, 2024

Participants:

CAM Chairman Rev. Tim Siemens
CAM Executive Director Zo Tum Hmung

Trip Objectives:

1. To gather information on the overall political situation in Mizoram to better inform CAM's refugee advocacy and policy recommendations;
2. To explain the Further Consolidated Appropriations Act for Fiscal Year 2024 to local actors, in particular:
 - a. The inclusion of \$121 million in appropriations for Burma-related programs through the Economic Support Fund;
 - b. Of which \$75 million was appropriated specifically for humanitarian and cross-border programs in Thailand and India;
3. To explore avenues for U.S. humanitarian aid to reach refugee and host communities in Mizoram, as well as cross-border aid to IDPs in Burma;
4. To advocate more effective refugee policy to the Indian central government, including U.S. aid to the Mizoram host community as well as refugees.

Key Findings:

- Local political and civil society actors in Mizoram and Chin State, Burma are eager for U.S. assistance and cross-border aid, as well as the official presence of United Nations agencies in the area; their main question is how aid deliveries can reach them.
- U.S. assistance has gone mainly through the UN and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) in other parts of Burma, including via the Thai-Burma border. However, these actors do not have an official presence in Mizoram or unhindered access to Northwest Burma.
- The Indian government may be re-evaluating its policy on the refugee situation in Mizoram State and the conflict in Burma due to resistance victories, which could enable more direct aid delivery.
- The new Chief Minister of Mizoram is close to high-level policymakers in the center, in particular External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, and has made several efforts to get more support from New Delhi and to oppose suspension of the Free Movement Regime.
- The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has shown an increased interest in engaging and supporting its officials elected to state and local offices in Mizoram, particularly in the Mara Autonomous District Council and other ethnic minority areas.

Background:

Since its victory in the November 2023 statewide elections, the Zoram People's Movement (ZPM) has become the ruling party in Mizoram. This is the ZPM's first time in control of the state government, with Chief Minister Lalduhoma taking office in December 2023. The ZPM is also expected to win the state's single seat in the Parliament of India's Lok Sabha, or Lower House, in the ongoing nationwide election. The results will be [announced](#) on June 4, 2024.

The ZPM and its leadership are committed to maintaining the previous Mizo National Front (MNF) government's stance towards refugees, which saw it welcoming Chin refugees and allowing them access to the state's hospitals and schools. A previous CAM [report](#) released in January 2024 found that despite this welcome, there are insufficient resources to provide better than subsistence-level conditions for the state's estimated 40,000 refugees. The situation is further exacerbated by the lack of an official UN presence in Mizoram and the Indian government's strict regulation of INGO funding and operations. At the same time, the Indian central government has [suspended](#) the Free Movement Regime between India and Burma, which enabled visa-free travel between the two countries to residents living within 16 km of the border. Mizoram's state government and civil society organizations, including the Central Young Mizo Association, uniformly oppose this policy.

In March 2024, U.S. President Joe Biden [signed](#) the Further Consolidated Appropriations Act for Fiscal Year 2024, which provides \$121 million in funding for Burma-related programs through the Economic Support Fund. This figure includes \$75 million for humanitarian and cross-border programs in Thailand and for the first time, India. This legislation provides the administration with guidance to explore potential humanitarian operations along the Indo-Burma border area, which would require the permission of the Indian central government.

Mizoram State Politicians:

The CAM delegation began in Aizawl, the Mizoram state capital, where it met with Chief Minister Lalduhoma. CAM briefed the Chief Minister on the new FY 2024 appropriations, of which he had not been informed. CAM also provided the Chief Minister with a briefing on existing UN operations in India and the Northeast region as precedent for expansion to Mizoram. The briefing is available in Appendix C of this report.

In turn, Chief Minister Lalduhoma informed CAM about his recent meetings with high-ranking Indian policymakers. He emphasized his close ties with External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, a batchmate from the civil service, meeting with him in New Delhi and during his April 11 trip to Mizoram. In addition to Jaishankar, the Chief Minister has met with Home Minister Amit Shah and Prime Minister Narendra Modi in recent months to advocate for additional financial support for managing the humanitarian situation.

While in Aizawl, CAM held meetings with former Chief Minister Zoramthanga and Indian Rajya Sabha (Upper House) MP K. Vanlalvena, both from the MNF. The MNF still has a role in national politics through holding this Upper House seat and participation in the center-right National Democratic Alliance coalition along with the BJP.

CAM met with former Speaker of the Mizoram State Assembly Lalrinliana Sailo, who defected from the MNF to the BJP ahead of the November 2023 elections. When External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar came to Mizoram to campaign for the Lok Sabha elections on

April 11, Sailo briefed him on FY 2024 Appropriations and the need for increased humanitarian funding in Mizoram, as well as advocating a UN presence in the state. CAM has previously invited Sailo to the United States and arranged a meeting for him with the State Department, where he advocated for U.S. assistance to refugees in Mizoram.

In Siaha District, CAM met with Chief Executive Member M. Laikaw of the Mara Autonomous District Council. The Mara Autonomous District Council provided the BJP with both of its seats in the state legislature. In August 2023, Mr. Laikaw and other BJP officials from Mizoram met with Home Minister Amit Shah in New Delhi. Mr. Laikaw provided Minister Shah with CAM's June 2023 report on refugee conditions and stressed the need for more support from the center. After his briefing with CAM on this trip, Mr. Laikaw relayed information about the FY 2024 Appropriations in an April 17 meeting with Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, who visited Siaha for the electoral season.

Mizoram Civil Society:

CAM met with a number of non-governmental actors during its trip, including the Central Young Mizo Association (Central YMA), Mizoram's leading civil society organization. The Central YMA helped lead the humanitarian response to the refugee crisis in its first year, building shelters and donating supplies. CAM also met with the Mizoram Students Association, Central Young Lai Association, and Mara Youth Association. In the absence of large-scale humanitarian efforts, Mizoram's churches play a key role in assisting refugees. CAM spoke with a number of these churches, including the Baptist Church of Mizoram, Lairam Jesus Christ Baptist Church in Lawngtlai, and Evangelical Church of Maraland. Finally, CAM met with Mizoram University officials, who discussed the possibility of collaborating with CAM to hold a workshop on humanitarian issues in the state.

Chin State Politicians:

During its trip to the border area, CAM met with members of the Chin political leadership in Burma. In December 2023, the Chin National Front along with allied Chinland Defense Forces (CDFs) and Chin MPs [founded](#) the Chinland Council in an attempt to establish a single statewide authority. In January 2024, the Council formed a Chinland Government including 15 ministries headed by Chief Minister U Pa Thang, a former MP from Matupi township. In a meeting with CAM, the Chief Minister expressed interest in the full range of programs funded by FY 2024 appropriations for Burma.

CAM also engaged in discussions about local governance with MPs from the Chinland Council and Government. In addition, CAM met with CDF-Zophei, who maintain local administration such as hospitals and schools in the Zophei local region. As local administrators, CDFs such as CDF-Zophei would be key partners for any cross-border humanitarian aid. Finally, CAM had conversations with members of the Interim Chin National Consultative Council, a separate Chin political grouping. The ICNCC is supported by the six members of the Chin Brotherhood Alliance, who do not participate in the Chinland Council or Government.

New Delhi:

While in New Delhi, CAM met with UNHCR headquarters, the U.S. Embassy, and leaders of the city's Chin refugee community. CAM was able to meet with Indian Joint Secretary of External Affairs Smita Pant on April 23 for a substantial conversation on the political and humanitarian situation along the Indo-Burma border. Pant expressed her awareness of the

situation, as well as the U.S. appropriations and political developments in Chin State. She expressed interest in observing how U.S. aid was channeled through the Thai-Burma border. Pant has since been appointed Ambassador to Uzbekistan.

Recommendations to the U.S. Government:

Engage with the Indian central government:

- ❖ to enable more direct humanitarian assistance to Mizoram’s host community and refugees as well as cross-border aid to Chin State, Magway, and Sagaing Region
- ❖ to allow the official presence of UN agencies and international NGOs in Mizoram

Consult with local Mizo and Chin actors as well as the Chin refugee community when developing plans for allocation of funds, aid delivery, and facility expansions, in particular:

- ❖ the Chinland Council and Chinland Government
- ❖ the Interim National Chin Consultative Council
- ❖ local Chinland Defense Force administrators

Appendix A: Map of Mizoram and Chin State



Esri, TomTom, Garmin, FAO, NOAA, USGS | Map data © OpenStreetMap contributors, Microsoft, Facebook, Inc. and its affiliates, Esri Community Maps contributors, Map layer by Esri | Esri, Michael Bauer Research GmbH 2022, Central Statistical Organization | Esri, Michael Bauer Research GmbH 2022, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation

Map of Mizoram State, India and Chin State, Burma. Source: Created by CAM Staff using ArcGIS Online.

Appendix B: Photos from the CAM Trip



CAM with Mizoram Chief Minister Lalduhoma, April 2024. Source: CAM Delegation



CAM with Rajya Sabha MP K. Vanlalvena, April 2024. Source: CAM Delegation



CAM meeting with Chief Executive Member M. Laikaw, April 2024. Source: CAM Delegation



Former Speaker Sailo meeting with External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, April 2024. Source: Mr. Sailo

Briefing on UN and INGO Presence in Northeast India

April 18, 2024

In 2022, the United Nations spent \$192 [million](#) on programs in India. While there are not many examples of a UN presence in Northeast India, the UN funds multiple programs and works with implementing partners in the region. According to the UN Sustainable Development Group, in 2023 the UN had 33 programmatic [interventions](#) in Northeast India.

In Mizoram, the three interventions were **1. immunization** (UNICEF), **2. malnutrition** (UNICEF, UNHCR, World Food Programme, World Health Organization), and **3. agricultural value chains, food supply chains and infrastructure** (WFP, International Fund for Agricultural Development). The UN has made the two immunization and food supply interventions in all Northeastern states and has made all three in Manipur and Assam.

Assam is home to the most robust UN activity, with a total of 17 programmatic interventions made in 2023. Assam also has a UNICEF office that covers the entire Northeast.

While the food supply intervention has been made in all Northeastern states, the Government of Meghalaya is the only one to sign a Memorandum of Understanding with the World Food Programme to become an implementing partner.

What Services Could the UN Provide in Mizoram?

In 2021 the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the Indian Ministry of Development of the Northeast Region, and NITI Aayog produced their first [report](#) on Sustainable Development Goals progress in the Northeast.

According to this report, Mizoram's progress on the sixteen included SDGs is relatively strong for the region. While Mizoram does well on most SDGs, it lags behind on SDG 5 (Gender Inequality), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), and SDG 13 (Climate Action).

However, since this study was completed before the Burma refugee crisis hit its peak, it may not fully represent the humanitarian gaps and strained resources of the state today. The following are some examples of UN programs and their benefits in the Northeast:

UNICEF- In 2023, nearly \$40 million in funding went through UNICEF in India. UNICEF's 2023 [targets](#) included having 8,900,000 people access primary healthcare at UNICEF-supported facilities, ensuring 310,000 children could access education, providing 544,000 people with clean drinking water, and enabling 2,955,500 households to access new or additional social assistance from the government with UNICEF technical support. In Assam specifically, one of UNICEF's programs supported the [education](#) of children living on tea estates. The previous year, UNICEF used its existing presence in Assam to enable emergency relief after flooding. This included technical assistance and the dispatch of experts to affected areas. Even so, UNICEF relied on partnerships with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to distribute aid.

World Food Programme- In Meghalaya, where the state government has signed an MOU with the WFP and become an implementing partner, there are many examples of successful

collaborations. According to the 2022 Annual Country Report, 2.1 million people in Meghalaya [benefitted](#) from WFP-developed information campaigns on One Nation One Ration Card and grievance redressal mechanisms. In 2023, the WFP helped create a monitoring [system](#) to track the price of essential commodities in the state. The WFP also helped [improve](#) the public distribution system through a pilot program with an automated grain-dispensing machine.

UNHCR- UNHCR offices in New Delhi and Chennai [provide](#) refugees with registration, financial assistance, and third country resettlement to countries such as the United States and Australia (with the permission of the Ministry of Home Affairs). CAM does not advocate UNHCR's resettlement of refugees in Mizoram, but for UNHCR to provide registration for the purposes of protection and assistance. UNHCR has not been permitted to operate directly in Mizoram.

UNHCR's formal implementing [partners](#) in India include ActionAid (AA), Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), Bosco Organization for Social Concern and Operation (BOSCO), Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI), Development and Justice Initiative (DAJI), Gandhi National Memorial Society (GNMS), Modern Architects for Rural India (MARI), and Socio-Legal Information Centre (SLIC).

India is not a [signatory](#) of the 1951 Refugee Convention. Signatories such as the United States provide protection and even work authorization to refugees, who have a pathway to permanent residency after one year and eventually citizenship.

However, India's non-signatory status does not prevent it from working with UNHCR. In Malaysia, another non-signatory state, refugees do not receive work authorization and cannot seek citizenship. Malaysia does still [allow](#) UNHCR to register refugees and supports resettlement to other countries, including the United States. UNHCR partners in Malaysia provide assistance to refugees while they are in-country.

Similarly, Thailand has both a UNHCR [office](#) in Bangkok and two field offices in Mae Sot and Mae Hong Son, which support temporary shelters for refugees from Burma. Among their services are refugee status determination, health care support, access to education (including Thai language courses), and cash-based assistance.

There is no legal obstacle to UNHCR playing a similar role in Mizoram except for the central government's reluctance to permit access. If the central government permitted UNHCR to operate in Mizoram, then refugees in the state would be able to receive protection and assistance as in other countries. Similarly, UNHCR's partner NGOs should be able to operate openly in Mizoram to provide assistance to both the refugees and local community.

Local and international NGOs- Local non-governmental organizations have played a key role in supporting refugees since 2021, providing services and humanitarian assistance. Groups such as the Central Young Mizo Association (Central YMA) raised and donated large sums to build shelters and provide supplies in the first year of the crisis. However, organized efforts to provide aid have since been [affected](#) by a lack of funds.

International NGOs are often better-funded but less able to access Mizoram and the refugee camps. Because of the Indian central government's strict regulation of INGOs and their finances,

some have avoided coming to Mizoram. Crucially, the Central YMA is in the process of getting the registration needed to access international funding.

For local NGOs with the knowledge and presence needed to work in Mizoram, the U.S. government may be able to provide resources. In March 2024, President Biden [signed](#) the Further Consolidated Appropriations Act for Fiscal Year 2024. At least \$121 million was directly appropriated for Burma-related programs; of this amount, \$75 million is supposed to go to “assistance and cross-border programs, including in Thailand and India.” This is the first time that assistance and cross-border programs in India were mentioned in Burma appropriations.

In the past, CAM has arranged meetings with the U.S. State Department for Mizoram state government officials, including the Speaker of the Mizoram Legislative Assembly, and leaders from the Central YMA. To receive direct funds from sources such as the State Department’s Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM), Mizoram’s NGOs will need to submit applications for grants.

Recommendations

1. Explore deeper partnership with UN offices such as the World Food Programme, including a role as an implementing partner with an Memorandum of Understanding and physical presence in Mizoram.
2. Advocate for the presence of a UNICEF office similar to the one in Assam, which would provide assistance to the Mizoram host community as well as child refugees.
3. Explore opportunities to collaborate with UNDP on [localization](#), particularly for the Sustainable Development Goals where Mizoram’s progress has been slower (SDG 5, SDG 12, SDG 13).
4. Advocate with the Indian central government to allow international NGOs, including UNHCR partners, to operate openly in Mizoram.
5. Encourage and provide technical support for local NGOS, such as the Central YMA, to apply for grants from the U.S. government and access the \$75 million in humanitarian funding [appropriated](#) for Burma crisis response in India and Thailand.
6. Encourage and facilitate cross-border assistance to Northwest Burma, where large populations of internally displaced people do not have access to aid.

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