

## Introduction

At the end of March, Burma is due to hold its first official census for almost thirty years. The census is being carried out by the government of Burma in conjunction with the United Nations and with significant other international technical and financial support, including more than sixteen million dollars from the British government.

On the face of it, holding a census is an obvious and important step to take. The information it provides will be important in making future economic plans, developing infrastructure, allocating resources for public services, and prioritising international aid.

Furthermore, some ethnic and religious minorities who have been suffering repression and discrimination see the census as an opportunity to be officially recognised, seeing this as a step towards asserting their status and rights.

However, in the current Burma context, the census could also lead to violent attacks against religious minorities, increase ethnic tensions, and provide inaccurate data. On balance, the potential risks appear to outweigh the potential benefits. As a result, Burma Campaign UK believes the census should be postponed to avoid these very real risks, which could include conflict and loss of life.

## About this briefing paper

This briefing paper seeks to draw together and highlight a wide range of concerns that people in Burma have articulated regarding the census. These are concerns that have been directly reported to Burma Campaign UK, or publicly expressed in meetings, statements and the media. Burma Campaign UK is not claiming that there are legitimate grounds for

## Risks from holding the census

- Renewed anti-Muslim violence
- Fuelling ethnic tensions
- Unfair to ethnic minorities
- Inaccurate data
- Reinforces illegal statelessness of Rohingya
- Negative impact on peace process
- Negative impact on 2015 elections

every one of these concerns, although there clearly are for the majority of them.

These concerns reflect the challenges faced by a fractured country after more than 60 years of conflict and 50 years of direct dictatorship. This history and context should have been carefully considered before plans went ahead with the census. Instead, it has largely been treated as a technical exercise without this context being taken into account.

It could be argued that some of the concerns highlighted in this briefing are groundless. Nevertheless, they are concerns that people have expressed, and as such are genuine concerns felt by people, are likely to have an impact on the census, and so still need to be addressed, even if it is just a matter of perception.

However, many of these concerns cannot simply be addressed by better communication or assurances. They are fundamental flaws creating significant risks. By compiling and reporting on the wide range of problems and risks associated with the census, Burma Campaign UK hopes that greater attention will be paid to these risks.

---

## About the census

Censuses in Burma have often been subject to dispute and controversy, meaning that any new census in Burma is going to face challenges in implementation and credibility in addition to the usual significant challenges in conducting a census. The last census to take place was in 1983, under the rule of the dictator General Ne Win. This census was not nationwide, and data on ethnic and religious groups was widely disputed and not considered credible.

The official night for which the 2014 census data will be collected is 29th March. From 30th March 2014, 100,000 enumerators are expected to visit all households in the country over a period of 12 days, ending on 10th April. There are some places where slight variations may take place in the collection of data.

Enumerators will interview people at their homes and are expected to take up to 30 minutes. 41 questions are on the form. Census forms are in Burmese (with the exception of some English language forms for foreign residents), and will be filled in by the enumerators, not household members. Most of the enumerators will be local teachers. A further 20,000 people will be involved in processing the information collected.

Promotional materials for the census published by the United Nations Population Fund state that it is: “only by being part of the census that your needs can be catered for in the planning of the country.”<sup>1</sup>

Preliminary results from the census are expected to be published in July 2014, and final results in March 2015.

## The essential role of the international community in the census

“The main purpose the UN recommends this is in line with a saying, ‘If you can’t measure something, then you can’t fix it’,” Fredrick Okwayo, technical advisor at the United Nations Population Fund.<sup>2</sup>

The responsibility for carrying out the census lies with the Department of Population within the Ministry of Population and Immigration. However, international technical expertise and finance is essential for the planning, implementation and analysis of the census. Estimates of the total final cost vary slightly, but

is expected to be around \$60 million.<sup>3</sup> Only \$15 million towards this cost has been pledged by the government of Burma. Britain’s Department for International Development is contributing more than the government of Burma, at slightly more than \$16 million.<sup>4</sup> Other contributors include the UN, Sweden, Australia, Finland, Germany, Norway, and Switzerland.

“UNFPA is providing technical assistance in mapping households, training enumerators, setting up data processing systems, and analysing and disseminating the results. The Fund is also helping to mobilize financial support from international donors.” UNFPA media release.<sup>5</sup>

The international community is not only providing the technical expertise and finance which has enabled the government of Burma to go ahead with this census. It has also played a role in encouraging the government to prioritise holding the census. Key international actors have described holding the census as ‘vital’ and ‘essential’.

In private meetings, diplomats and UN agencies have been encouraging the government to start holding censuses again. UN engagement on the census has gone as high as the level of the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, who in April 2012 personally attended the signing of the agreement between the UN and Burma to co-operate on the census.

He stressed how important it is for Burma to hold the census: “At a time of historic change for Myanmar, a time when new prospects exist for ensuring the well-being of all the country’s people, it is essential to know just who those people are — how many, what age, what background, their economic status, their family size and their location. That is what the next census can and must achieve.”<sup>6</sup>

The British government has also been emphasising the importance of Burma holding a census. In January 2014 British government Minister Baroness Warsi told the British Parliament: “The British Government is providing significant funding support to the census in 2014 because it will be a vital source of data to inform better government service delivery, help the government manage public finances more transparently, and underpin private investment and job creation.”<sup>7</sup>

---

The crucial role of the international community in the holding of the 2014 census means that it has a special responsibility for outcomes, including any unintended and negative outcomes that result from the holding of the census. The United Nations, World Bank and other bodies and countries involved in the census process also have influence, and a duty to use that influence, if they have reason to think that negative outcomes could result from the census.

Concerns about possible negative outcomes of the census, including violence against Muslims and ethnic tensions, are widespread not just among many sections of the population of Burma, but also diplomats, aid workers and other observers based in and outside the country. However, for the most part, these concerns are not being expressed publicly, and there appears to be a reluctance to face up to just how serious the consequences could be and make the obviously very difficult and controversial decision to consider postponing the census.

Even when there is a public acknowledgment of the major potential problems which could, and in some cases already are being caused by the census, it is only referred to in fairly oblique terms. For example British Minister Baroness Warsi stating: “We, with other donors, have been lobbying the Burmese government and the UN to manage the political risks and ethnic tensions that could be associated with the census to ensure as complete and credible a process as possible.”<sup>8</sup>

It is revealing that the British government here states that it has also been lobbying the United Nations about concerns, not just the government of Burma. However, as ethnic tensions are already being created by the census and other problems remain to be addressed, it is clear that whatever behind the scenes lobbying has taken place, it has not been effective.

### **Fears of anti-Muslim violence**

There is deep seated anti-Muslim prejudice in Burma. This prejudice is not just directed at the Rohingya Muslim minority, but at the Muslim population of Burma as a whole. A key factor in the anti-Rohingya violence in Rakhine State in 2012 was their being Muslim, and anti-Muslim propaganda was allowed to spread unchecked

during this time. It spread across the country, leading to anti-Muslim riots taking place in many parts of Burma in 2013. Although there have not been any major violent anti-Muslim incidents outside of Rakhine State in late 2013 and early 2014, tensions remain high. Those preaching and spreading anti-Muslim hatred and encouraging violence continue to do so unchecked, and have even been defended by the President of Burma himself.

The last official census in Burma in 1983 is widely thought to have underestimated the number of Muslims in the country. The dictator at the time, General Ne Win, who was personally prejudiced against Muslims and ethnic groups, and wanted to use the census to emphasise Burma as a Burman Buddhist country, is believed to have insisted that the percentage of Muslims be reduced in official figures.

The United States State Department International Religious Freedom Report for 2011 on Burma also raised these concerns; “According to official statistics, approximately 90 percent of the population practices Buddhism, 4 percent practices Christianity, and 4 percent practices Islam. These statistics almost certainly underestimated the non-Buddhist proportion of the population. There has not been a census since 1983. Independent researchers place the Muslim population as being between 6 and 10 percent.”

The 1983 census listed Muslims as being 3.9 percent of the population.<sup>9</sup> Any significant increase in the number of Muslims in Burma compared to the previous census will be seized upon to try to justify their argument that Burma is being taken over by Muslims. The fact that previous figures may have been deliberately underestimated will not matter to those who are looking for ways to whip up hatred and violence. In the current climate of growing anti-Muslim sentiment in the country, the release of statistics showing an increase in the number of Muslims, for whatever reason, will be inflammatory and may lead to renewed violence against Muslims in Burma.

### **Risk of facilitating human rights abuses**

“A census is not inherently bad, but, due to our past experiences working with the villagers, local military officers could use the

.....

population numbers to carry out abuses - such as arbitrary taxation and forced labour. When the government has more information about villagers, it is easy for them to target them.” Saw Albert, Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG).<sup>10</sup>

In conflict and post-conflict zones, a key survival tactic for many villagers has been to try to keep a low profile and avoid contact with the Burmese Army. Many villagers have been displaced multiple times fleeing attacks from the Burmese Army, and moving to avoid their area of operations, in order to avoid forced labour, rape, looting, and other abuses.

Villagers often hide in the jungle when they know patrols are coming. Demands by the Burmese Army for people to be used as forced labour, or arbitrary taxation, or stealing crops and livestock, can partially be made on the basis of how many people live in a village, so villagers often try to hide the true number of people in the village. If the Burmese Army has detailed information of the numbers of people in villages or an area, this could result in them targeting these villagers and human rights abuses increasing as a result.

A feature of past and current ceasefire agreements is that the Burmese Army increases the number of soldiers in ethnic states. This carries with it the risk of them carrying out human rights abuses. Their order to ‘live off the land’ is seen as giving them licence to steal and impose arbitrary taxation. As well as providing data on numbers of people, the census form includes questions about economic activity, and access to valuable items such as TVs and phones. Even if information from the census does not give names and addresses, there is concern by some people in these areas that the Burmese Army could use the general data of an area to try to identify valuables worth stealing, or use it as an excuse to try to extract more from villages.

### **Increasing ethnic tensions**

Almost all ethnic groups in Burma have raised concerns about the way that ethnic groups and sub groups have been coded and categorised. This is already causing disagreements and tensions between and within these groups, and between ethnic groups and the Burman dominated government.

A question and answer document on the census published by the UNFPA states: “It is also important to know the ethnic composition of Myanmar, to acknowledge its diversity and ensure that the needs relevant to each ethnic group can be addressed.”

Initially there was certainly a feeling among some ethnic community and political leaders that the census could be used to ensure that at last they got the recognition of their ethnic identity which they felt had not been acknowledged in the past. However, the lack of consultation, top down nature of the process, inaccurate and Burman names, and various other problems with classifications and coding has been causing increasing controversy. Growing numbers of ethnic organisations are calling for major changes in the process, or postponement of the census.

The Nationalities Brotherhood Federation (NBF), an alliance of 20 registered ethnic political parties in Burma, has said the government needs to review its controversial census because the classification system divides Burma’s major ethnic groups into smaller subgroups, and this could lead to a disintegration of unity among the ethnic groups.<sup>11</sup>

In January 2014 a major meeting of Karen political and civil society leaders issued a statement highlighting many concerns with the census process and calling for significant changes.<sup>12</sup>

Twenty-three civil society groups have written to Parliamentary Speaker Shwe Mann, calling for a postponement of the census.<sup>13</sup>

A common complaint from many ethnic groups is the pre-coding or the pre-classification of ethnic groups. For example, the use of names for ethnic groups which they do not use for themselves. In some cases the government has used Burmanised names, or names that are not spelt correctly. The Karen have objected to being called by the Burmanised version of their name, the Kayin.

UN guidelines warning about this potential problem appear to have been ignored. They state: “Countries collecting data on ethnicity should note that the pre-coding or the pre-classification of ethnic groups at the time of data capture may have a tendency to lose detailed information on the diversity of a population.”<sup>14</sup>

---

Some ethnic groups are under categories of ethnic groups which they do not consider themselves to be in, or which other ethnic groups think are incorrect categories. For example, ethnic Zomi want to be registered as Zomi, but some Chin leaders say they should be registered as Chin. Red Shan have been categorised under Shan, when they are widely considered Kachin. The Khumi was spelt on the form as Khami. Palaung leaders have rejected Palaung being classified as a Shan race.

Chin representatives have complained that there are many errors in Chin categories on the form, with names incomplete and misspelt, among other concerns.<sup>15</sup> The Chin National Action Committee on the Census 2014 appealed to the central census committee to postpone the census by at least 30 days to allow more time for preparation.<sup>16</sup>

Some leaders from main ethnic groups are encouraging all subgroups only to register as the main ethnic group, for example Kachin or Chin, not as the sub group to which they belong.

During the Chin National Conference, which took place in November last year, participants agreed that the term Chin should be used to represent every tribe, regardless of their geographic location in Chin State.<sup>17</sup> Naga representatives have rejected inclusion as Chin.

Requests by Karenni political parties, that ethnic people use their own ethnic titles were rejected by the government.<sup>18</sup>

Many smaller ethnic groups see recognition of their tribe/sub group as a distinct ethnicity as very important. Some smaller ethnic groups feel that they have faced not only repression from the Burman dominated central government, but also pressure from the main ethnic group to which they belong to be subsumed into them. They want to be able to self-identify as the ethnic group to which they believe they belong.

Many Karen organisations have supported this approach, and say all Karen sub groups should be able to register under any name they want to be, whether listed on the census form or not. At the same time, they want assurances that all Karen subgroups will also be registered as Karen to ensure proper acknowledgment of the Karen as a national race is given.

The Burmese government is not following this approach, even though UN guidelines on censuses state that they should: “The method and the format of the question used to measure ethnicity can influence the choices that respondents make regarding their ethnic backgrounds and current ethnic identification. The subjective nature of the term (not to mention increasing intermarriage among various groups in some countries, for example) requires that information on ethnicity be acquired through self-declaration of a respondent and also that respondents have the option of indicating multiple ethnic affiliations.”<sup>19</sup>

The census does not clearly give this option. Although there is an ‘other’ category, coding of different ethnic groups encourages those questioned to try to fit in with these groups. There are also concerns that to make things simpler for themselves, the enumerators will arbitrarily put people down in one of the existing categories which they decide the person best fits into.

There are complaints, dating back to when the 1982 Citizenship Law was introduced by General Ne Win, that the specific classification of ethnic groups was part of his divide and rule policy. The use of 135 different ethnic groups deemed as native to Burma also excludes some groups which have been in Burma for centuries. Some Chin leaders, for example, dispute the government’s listing of 52 different tribes in Chin state, saying the distinction was often purely geographical, not tribal. These concerns never went away, and are being exacerbated significantly by the Burmese government’s use of ethnic coding and classification.

The Kachin Baptist Convention cite as an example that they recognise six subgroups under the Kachin, but the government is registering 12 under the Kachin. They are concerned this will divide the Kachin and lead to underrepresentation. Even under the six sub-groups recognised by the Kachin, there is dispute, with some Lisu for example rejecting being categorised as Kachin.

These many examples demonstrate how the census is already causing division within and between ethnic groups. These tensions can impact on the peace processes currently underway.

---

Another likely result is that any outcome of the census will lack credibility. It could be rejected by large sections of Burma's ethnic population, who feel the process was unfair and discriminatory.

### **Increasing tensions between ethnic groups and the 'Burman' government**

The history regarding ethnic relations in Burma is extremely sensitive. There is a justified perception from many ethnic groups that their identity as ethnic groups is not readily accepted by successive Burman dominated governments, which perceive Burma to be a Burman Buddhist country with ethnic minorities, rather than a multi-ethnic multi-religious country. Addressing issues of ethnicity in the census was always going to have to be handled very sensitively. Sadly, this has not been the case.

There has not been proper consultation with different ethnic groups in Burma, and this is causing problems and suspicion. The government has arbitrarily decided what to call different ethnic groups, including for example using a Burman name for the Karen ethnic group, which they have rejected. This goes against the UN's own recommendations that ethnic groups be allowed to self-identify.

The forms are also only in Burmese, with the exception of a few English language forms for foreigners. This again reinforces the perception that many ethnic people have, that ethnic people are not being treated equally in the census.

The United Nations guidelines on censuses states: "Special provision will have to be made if two or more languages are used in the country. Several methods have been used to deal with this situation, such as (a) a single, multilingual questionnaire; or (b) one version of the questionnaire for each major language; or (c) translations printed in the enumerators' manual of the questionnaire in the various languages."

The failure to produce multi-lingual forms or versions of the questionnaire even for the major ethnic languages reinforces suspicion about the census, both in terms of it not recognising ethnic people as equal, and in terms of people being unsure whether they can trust that the information being written down is actually what they are saying. The decision not to produce forms in other languages contrasts sharply with

practices in other countries, including the UK for example, where forms for the last census were printed in 57 languages.<sup>20</sup>

Memories of injustices from past censuses are being revived. This is a context which should have been taken into account when planning the 2014 census. An example which is commonly cited to Burma Campaign UK by ethnic people is the 1931 census, which automatically categorised many people who were Buddhists as Burman.

These examples of divisions and ethnic tensions being caused by the census affect ethnic to ethnic relations and relations with the Burmese government. They are creating anger and mistrust of the government. This in turn could impact on the peace process and any future process of national reconciliation.

### **Pressure for Burman registration**

Concerns have also been raised about pressure, overt, indirect, and more subtle, to register as Burman in the census.

Pressure for ethnic people to register as Burman on official forms is nothing new. It takes place everywhere from school registration to wedding certificates.

Many people have raised concerns that ethnic people will feel it is safer to register as Burman, or be pressured or simply listed as such by enumerators. This is especially the case if they are mixed ethnic and Burman, as the census ignores mixed identity. Mixed ethnicity people are already advised to just put Burman on official forms, and are told it is simpler to do so. If choosing between Kachin and Burman, someone living outside Kachin state may feel it is safer to just put Burman.

Some people have been told they can register as two, for example Burman and Karen, although they are confused about whether this means ticking two categories (which could lead to errors) or being listed in the other column. Some people have been told they cannot register under two ethnicities.

Some people have been told two is the maximum, so for example if their father is Burman and their mother is part Karen and part Shan, they have to pick between Shan and Karen.

---

As the academic Elliot Prasse-Freeman has argued, problems relating to registering mixed ethnic identity could have serious political consequences.<sup>21</sup> “People who are mixed ethnicity where one of the ethnicities is Burman may for different reasons, choose to put only Burman. This would enable nationalists in Burma and others to say the census proves that ethnic issues are exaggerated and overstated and use this to counter demands from ethnic people for greater control over resources and greater rights and protection as ethnic groups.”

Conversely, if a larger than expected number of ethnic people is recorded, this could lead to an alternative narrative which Elliot Prasse-Freeman illustrated as; “We Burmans, the rightful sons of Burma’s soil, are being bred out by the ethnic minorities. We must fight back.”

Registering as Burman only could also impact on political representation in Parliament.

The census planning does not appear to have considered and addressed these problems.

### **Accepting statelessness of the Rohingya**

“The structure of the census is totally unacceptable to us... We are simply asking for equal rights for all ethnic minority groups.” U Kyaw Min, Democracy and Human Rights Party.<sup>22</sup>

The Rohingya of Burma have been described by the United Nations as: “the most vulnerable and marginalised group in Myanmar.”<sup>23</sup>

Burma’s 1982 Citizenship Law is racist, breaks Burma’s treaty obligations, and so violates international law. It does not recognise Rohingya as an ethnic group in Burma. It helps render the Rohingya stateless, and helps underpin discrimination against them. Ethnic Rohingya are excluded from being listed as an ethnic group in the census form on the basis of this lack of recognition.

Diplomats engaging with the government of Burma on this issue saw as a success agreement that Rohingya would be able to register as Rohingya in the ‘other’ column in the census form. Some Rohingya see this as at least a small positive step forward, while others reject this as accepting the current unacceptable status quo.

The UN’s own census guidelines on ethnic classification are not compatible with the process of the census it is supporting in Burma. They state: “Broadly defined, ethnicity is based on a shared understanding of history and territorial origins (regional and national) of an ethnic group or community, as well as on particular cultural characteristics such as language and/or religion. Respondents’ understanding or views about ethnicity, awareness of their family background, the number of generations they have spent in a country, and the length of time since immigration are all possible factors affecting the reporting of ethnicity in a census. Ethnicity is multidimensional and is more a process than a static concept, and so ethnic classification should be treated with movable boundaries.”<sup>24</sup>

They also state: “The classification of ethnic groups also requires the inclusion of the finest levels of ethnic groups, self-perceived groups, regional and local groups, as well as groups that are not usually considered to be ethnic groups, such as religious groups and those based on nationality.”<sup>25</sup>

The United Nations is consistently looking at problems associated with the census as being outside their responsibility, taking a blinkered approach that it is just a technical operation, as if it were not happening in a country with significant religious and ethnic tensions.

An example is a comment by Werner Haug from UNFPA reported in DVB stating: “the census is essentially a statistical operation,” and “could not solve other related problems such as registration cards or citizenship.”<sup>26</sup> Werner Haug also appears to be misunderstanding concerns of the Rohingya. It was not expected that the census itself could solve problems relating to citizenship, but at the same time it should not be doing harm by reinforcing current discriminatory practices by the government of Burma.

By supporting the census in its current form, the UN and donor countries are in effect supporting a process which enshrines and reinforces discrimination against the Rohingya.

There is also concern that as the form is only in Burmese, and is filled in by the enumerator, not members of the household themselves, enumerators who are not Rohingya could write something other than Rohingya in the

---

'other' space. Hope has been expressed that enumerators for Rohingya will be Rohingya, but this does not appear to be guaranteed.

Another concern regarding the census and the Rohingya is similar to that of Muslims in general around Burma; that the census results will be misused by extremists to try to make their case that the Rohingya are taking over Rakhine State, and so may also contribute to increased tensions and even violence.

### **Errors can disenfranchise**

Underestimates of ethnic groups in Burma could also have serious consequences resulting in their being disenfranchised.

An example of this is how the Election Commission rejected a bid by Mon parties to contest the 2010 election in Rangoon, citing as the reason not enough Mon people lived in Rangoon. The Mon Literature and Culture Committee in Rangoon contests the Mon population figures used by the commission, which they say is an underestimate.<sup>27</sup>

Political representation in Parliament and even the administration of self-administered zones in Shan State relate to population numbers and ethnicity.

Conducting the census in ethnic states at the current time is the most challenging part of the census, and where errors are most likely to occur, especially relating to underreporting numbers.

Combined with disputes over coding and categorisation of ethnicity, the potential for underreporting of ethnic people is higher than the risk of underreporting the Burman population. This in turn can lead to underrepresentation for ethnic groups, or even no representation for some ethnic groups.

### **Concerns about resource grabbing**

There are already major concerns among many ethnic populations that the central government is engaging in major resource-grabbing, especially using ceasefires as an opportunity to seize control of valuable natural resources. Most high profile is the issue of land confiscation.

Given these pre-existing controversial problems, there have also been concerns expressed that the government may try to use the census to increase its control over both people and natural resources in ethnic states. These concerns have been fuelled by comments from government officials, including by Dr Nyi Nyi, Director General of Burma's Department of Population and Immigration, who was reported by Democratic Voice of Burma as saying that the census would allow the government to gauge what type of investments were feasible in different ethnic regions.<sup>28</sup>

While he may have meant this purely innocently in terms of directing government assistance, in the current climate where the Burmese government has a clear agenda of using development assistance and investment to undermine ethnic support for political reform, such comments feed into general suspicion about the census.

### **Registration of IDPs**

In Eastern Burma, there are concerns relating to the registration of hundreds of thousands of Internally Displaced People (IDPs). Some are concerned that it will not be possible to register them given the difficulties of doing so in conflict and recently post-conflict areas, and also often in very difficult terrain.

Many are also in areas not under direct control of the government of Burma, and permission and assistance is needed from a variety of armed ethnic political organisations. These challenges may mean that IDPs are not registered, and therefore miss out on aid and development resources that they desperately need.

There does not appear to be adequate time to ensure all people, not just IDPs, are properly registered in the census. Training for enumerators working in KNU controlled areas, which face some of the biggest challenges in collecting data in terms of lack of infrastructure, landmines and other accessibility problems, was only expected to begin six weeks before the census.

Another concern is that they are registered, and this puts at risk their security, as already partially outlined earlier in this briefing regarding data helping the Burmese Army better identify where IDPs are.



---

## **No trust in government leading to inaccurate data**

A census law passed in July 2013 is supposed to protect personal data to keep it confidential, but in a country ruled by direct dictatorship for 50 years, and now ruled by the same people, although in civilian clothing, there is not much trust among many people in Burma that data genuinely will be kept confidential.

One major concern is that census data could be based on or compared to the household list. (The household list is a list of every inhabitant of every home, which has to be provided to the authorities). The UN is aware of this concern, and has tried to allay it. One spokesperson has stated: "This misconception is that the census will be looking for the names on the household registration form, but it will not."<sup>29</sup>

The problem is, on the ground, this is not what people are always being told. Burma Campaign UK is aware of incidents where township authorities have told people that when they come round for the census they will be using the photograph taken with the household list and comparing the two.

Another problem causing suspicion and mistrust is the structural survey (the assessment of buildings being carried out to identify where enumerators need to go) carried out in advance of the census, in order to prepare for the census and allocate enumerators. There are numerous anecdotal incidents of those carrying out what appears to be this survey using or referring to household lists, and telling people that they are there preparing for the census, leading to people connecting the two in their minds.

Burma Campaign UK has been told of cases where people have been told by officials that while the enumerators are there, they will take the opportunity to also update household lists, which can be out of date because of deaths in the family. This further links the two in people's minds.

People who have a family member who is on the household list but is actually in another part of the country working, or abroad without permission as a migrant worker or refugee, have told Burma Campaign UK that they are too afraid of getting into trouble if they tell the truth about the household list not being accurate and that the person is not there. They will lie, saying that they are there. This will lead to inaccurate

data. Given that millions of people from Burma are actually living outside Burma, this could lead to very serious inaccuracies in the data collected.

There is also still very little awareness about the census among the general population. Salai Bawi Thang, a spokesperson for the Chin Human Rights Organisation, has criticised the government for not doing enough to educate the residents of rural areas on the census process, making the whole enterprise ripe for mismanagement and abuse.<sup>30</sup> It also means that many people simply do not understand why the census is being held, and assume that the government will use the data in ways that officially, the government is not meant to.

Some people have also been told by officials that there will be eleven questions, not forty-one.

Even in Rangoon, where there is better access to media and information, many people appear to have little knowledge about the census, and many have misconceptions about it.

It appears that the vast majority of enumerators will be Burman teachers. They will need to access difficult areas of Burma, and places where there are many different ethnicities and languages. This includes places where Burmese is not spoken, or is not a first language. Translations will need to be made, leading to increased possibility of inaccuracies in the data collected. This approach also creates problems as there will be suspicion of giving data to someone perceived as an outsider, especially if they are Burman with an ethnic translator, meaning accurate data may not be given.

Another common concern relates to questions about household economic activity and access to valuables such as cars and televisions. Burma has a significant off-books economy and the lack of trust in the government, as expressed to Burma Campaign UK, means that it appears many will not provide accurate data for fear it can be used for taxation purposes, or other ways of extracting money from them. Concerns range from car permits to not having TV licences.

Also expressed to Burma Campaign UK was the concern that data may be used against them in other ways. For example, laws have

---

often have been misapplied in order to target people who have upset the government in some way, and this practice continues under Thein Sein. People fear that even something like not having a TV licence, when in the census they say they do, could later be used against them.

No-one that Burma Campaign UK has spoken to in Burma has said that they trust the data will be kept confidential and only used for statistical purposes. In the current context, where there is so little trust in the government, many people are simply not willing to trust that government with key data. This suspicion is so widespread that it will likely have a very significant impact on the data collected. Lack of trust in the current reform process is an important factor.

Even among some of those who have more faith in the current government regarding confidentiality of data, there is a lack of confidence that the current government will last.

A concern expressed to Burma Campaign UK was that if there was a coup in the future or a more hardline government came to power, they might use that data. More time is needed to build trust and deeper and more fundamental reforms are needed for trust in the government to increase to a level where they would be more willing to reveal key data about themselves and their families.

These issues taken together give great cause for concern about the accuracy of data which is collected. Combined with other concerns about the unintended negative outcomes from the census, it adds to the argument that the benefits will not outweigh the potential risks.

## **Conclusion**

Burma's census is not simply a technical exercise, but that appears to be how it is being treated by the United Nations. The complex and violent situation in Burma, both past and present, is not receiving the attention it needs to. The International Technical Advisory Board, which UNFPA proudly boasted had given the census a "thumbs up",<sup>31</sup> is exactly as the name says, technical. Members visiting Burma did not look at the wider history and current context, or meet with those who have concerns about the census.

Perhaps the most serious possible outcome of the census is the potential for anti-Muslim violence, but there are many other concerns as well. These include exacerbating ethnic tensions, increasing mistrust of the government, continuing discrimination against the Rohingya, disenfranchising some ethnic groups, human rights concerns, and the accuracy of the data collected. These factors will lead to the data collected facing significant credibility problems. There could also be negative impacts on the peace process. Ethnic and religious tensions caused by the release of the data just months before the election in 2015 could even lead to the election process being disrupted.

Given all of these significant problems, on balance, it appears that the potential risks associated with going ahead with the census are greater than the potential benefits of going ahead. Now is not the right time.

Burma's census should be postponed.

The census should only go ahead when the political climate is more conducive and a 'do no harm' strategy is in place. There needs to be adequate consultation with ethnic and religious representatives regarding any registration of ethnicity, including allowing people to self-identify.

With so much money and political capital already invested in the census, the decision to postpone at this late stage is obviously a difficult and controversial one. It is, however, the best decision for Burma.

The United Nations, international institutions, and countries involved in the census process must use their influence to persuade the government of Burma to postpone the census.

## Footnotes

1. [http://countryoffice.unfpa.org/myanmar/drive/Handbook\\_English\\_14Nov\\_WEB.pdf](http://countryoffice.unfpa.org/myanmar/drive/Handbook_English_14Nov_WEB.pdf)
2. <http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/9362-why-take-a-census.html>
3. <http://www.mizzima.com/opinion/analysis/item/10103-myanmar-calls-on-stake-holders-to-cooperate-in-census/10103-myanmar-calls-on-stake-holders-to-cooperate-in-census>
4. <http://devtracker.dfid.gov.uk/projects/GB-1-204129/>
5. <http://www.unfpa.org/public/home/news/pid/13683#sthash.6DoOXE7g.dpuf>
6. <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2012/sgsm14262.doc.htm>
7. <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201314/ldhansrd/text/140120w0001.htm>
8. <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201314/ldhansrd/text/140120w0001.htm>
9. <http://www.moh.gov.mm/file/COUNTRY%20PROFILE.pdf>
10. <http://www.irinnews.org/report/97609/challenges-ahead-of-myanmar-s-first-census-in-30-years>
11. <http://www.bnionline.net/index.php/news/kng/16710-ethnic-party-says-census-needs-reworking.html>
12. <http://karenkwenewsgroup.blogspot.co.uk/2014/01/ethnic-karen-nationals-position.html>
13. <http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/burmas-ethnic-minorities-decry-census-jostle-advantage.html>
14. Page 140, Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses, Revision 2, published by the United Nations Economic and Social Affairs Department, 2008
15. <http://chinlandguardian.com/index.php/chin-news/item/2080-complaint-over-errors-in-chin-category-for-burma-census>
16. <http://chinlandguardian.com/index.php/chin-news/item/2090-chin-ask-to-postpone-census-dates-in-burma>
17. <http://www.mmfreedom-daily.com/?p=14596>
18. <http://www.irrawaddy.org/ethnic/census-raises-issue-of-ethnic-identities.html>
19. Page 139, Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses, Revision 2, published by the United Nations Economic and Social Affairs Department, 2008
20. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/8344411/Census-forms-to-be-printed-in-57-languages.html>
21. [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/12/19/burmas\\_senseless\\_census](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/12/19/burmas_senseless_census)
22. <https://www.dvb.no/news/rohingya-parties-call-on-govt-for-inclusio-in-census-burma-myanmar/36023>
23. <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=13391&LangID=E>
24. Page 139, Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses, Revision 2, published by the United Nations Economic and Social Affairs Department, 2008
25. Page 139, Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses, Revision 2, published by the United Nations Economic and Social Affairs Department, 2008
26. <https://www.dvb.no/news/burmese-census-will-offer-ethnicity-of-choice-burma-myanmar/36402>
27. <http://www.irrawaddy.org/ethnic/census-raises-issue-of-ethnic-identities.html>
28. <https://www.dvb.no/news/burmese-census-will-offer-ethnicity-of-choice-burma-myanmar/36402>
29. <http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/9362-why-take-a-census.html>
30. <http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/9360-minorities-want-survey-delayed.html>
31. <http://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/international-experts-give-thumbs-myanmar-census-plans>

**More briefings are available here:**  
[www.burmacampaign.org.uk/burma-briefing](http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk/burma-briefing)

**Did you find this useful?**

If so, please make a donation to support our work: [www.burmacampaign.org.uk/donate](http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk/donate)

Thank you

**Published by Burma Campaign UK, 28 Charles Square, London N1 6HT**  
**[www.burmacampaign.org.uk](http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk) [info@burmacampaign.org.uk](mailto:info@burmacampaign.org.uk) tel: 020 7324 4710**



**for Human Rights, Democracy  
& Development in Burma**