

Displaced Christians in Burma celebrate Easter in war zone

by [Antonio Graceffo](#)

May 22, 2024



On Good Friday, Catholics in a camp for internally displaced people in Burma's Karenni State gather for their first services since a January airstrike damaged the church. (Photo by Antonio Graceffo)

On a hill within an internally displaced people's camp in Burma's Karenni State, a solitary cross, scarred by a recent Burmese army airstrike, stands adjacent to a damaged Catholic church.

On Good Friday, Catholic residents of the IDP camp gathered in the church for the first time since it was bombed in January. Among the 3,200 camp residents, roughly 700 are Catholic, but only about 25 attended the service.

“The people are afraid to attend mass since the bombing,” said Robert, a Catholic member of the Kayan ethnic minority residing among the Karenni. (For security purposes, Christians in the IDP camp are identified only by their baptismal names.)

Since 1949, the Burmese military government has perpetrated violence against the country’s ethnic and religious minorities. It’s the world’s oldest [ongoing military conflict](#), the intensity of which has varied over the decades. Sometimes it’s sporadic fighting between ethnic militias and government forces in remote jungle provinces. But, at other times, it has escalated into broader fights involving multiple ethnic resistance armies and extending across regions.

While Burma, also known as Myanmar, doesn’t have an official religion, its constitution effectively elevates Buddhism to a privileged status. Buddhists—most of whom are also part of the Burman ethnic majority—make up approximately 88 percent of the population, [Christians about 6](#) percent, and Muslims 4 percent. Minority religions are more prevalent among the country’s 135 ethnic minority groups.

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Among the Karenni ethnic group, for example, roughly half are Christian—Catholicism being the predominant denomination, followed by Baptist.

In 2021, the Burmese military staged a coup against Aung San Suu Kyi’s democratically elected government. That coup [served as the tipping point](#) for ethnic minorities, strengthening their determination to end military dictatorship. After the coup, in an unprecedented shift, some of the Burman majority also began forming militias and joining the ethnic resistance armies.

Today, Burma is embroiled in a full-scale civil war, pitting most of the population against the military rulers. The unified efforts of the ethnic resistance armies and the Burman rebel groups have forced the military to retreat. At the end of 2023, rebels controlled roughly [70 percent of the country’s landmass](#). Yet religious repression by the Burmese army, the Tatmadaw, persists.

In January, the US State Department designated Burma a “[Country of Particular Concern](#)” under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. Since the coup, the Tatmadaw has [targeted churches](#), schools, hospitals, cathedrals, seminaries, mosques, and even Buddhist temples and monasteries with airstrikes and artillery

shells.

On Christmas Eve 2021, the Tatmadaw massacred [35 civilians in Hpruso Township](#), Karenni State, including four children and two Save the Children volunteers. A Catholic school within a monastery compound was bombed, resulting in the deaths of four children, and the Tatmadaw also raided and burned St. Matthew's Church near Demoso, Karenni State, and [planted landmines](#) around the area.

At this stage of the conflict, targeting places of worship offers little strategic or military advantage. Thaw Reh Est, a leader in the Karenni State's government-in-exile, believes these assaults are meant to instill terror and coerce submission.

"It seems like they want to create an environment where people are afraid and dare not work with the opposition," he said.

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Due to security concerns, no Catholic priest was able to make it to the Karenni camp for Easter. Consequently, worship was led by two catechists.

Marina, one of the catechists, told the CENTURY that life in the camp with her five children is incredibly difficult. While the United Nations offers protections for refugees, people displaced within their own country lack any kind of official status and are often left without aid. International organizations can only intervene with the Burmese government's permission.

Marina noted that some IDPs receive financial support from relatives abroad or by working illegally in neighboring Thailand. Currently, an [estimated 2 million](#) Burmese reside in Thailand—legally or illegally—working as laborers in construction or agriculture. Many also work as hostesses in red-light districts, employed by bars, massage parlors, and brothels.

Sotero, the other catechist, was deployed to the camp to minister to the faithful. The Tatmadaw's [bombing of churches](#) in his hometown of Hpruso drove many civilians to the IDP camp. Nonetheless, Sotero remains hopeful for the future.

"The Bible tells us that where there is unity, there is love," he said. "We must live and pray together, remaining united."

In another section of the camp, about 60 Baptists gathered in a large bamboo hut for their Easter service. Many considered it a pleasant day of fellowship and worship—a break from the constant reminders of war. However, late in the afternoon, the [Free Burma Rangers](#), a faith-based aid organization operating deep within the combat zone, reported a [massacre](#) in nearby Karen State.

A Tatmadaw airstrike claimed the lives of 6 civilians and injured 15 more.

Joshua, the Baptists' 32-year-old assistant pastor, said that while living in the camp, he sees his most important role as helping to preserve people's faith.

"I won't let the people lose their faith," he said. "Our faith brings us joy and peace amidst war."