

November 28, 2011 | by USCIRF

The Honorable Hillary Rodham Clinton
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
Washington, DC

Dear Madam Secretary:

As you prepare to travel to Burma, I am writing on behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) to urge you to raise concerns about freedom of religion publically during your trip. Religion drives serious human rights abuses in Burma, particularly against ethnic minorities and Buddhist monks who participated in peaceful protests in 2007. We believe improvements in religious freedom should be a critical benchmark for gauging the government of Burma's commitment to genuine reform.

After almost fifty years of brutal military rule, there may be "flickers of progress" occurring in Burma, as President Obama recently stated. We commend the administration for sending you to assess the government's commitment to reform. We note, however, that serious human rights violations continue to occur daily in Burma and any recent positive steps can easily be

reversed. We hope you will maintain pressure on the regime to match its reformist rhetoric with concrete initiatives to release all political prisoners, call an immediate ceasefire in ethnic conflict areas, end attacks and discrimination against minority religious groups, and improve religious freedom and related human rights.

The Burmese government's actions thus far have not improved religious freedom conditions, which remain acute. Since 1999, Burma has been designated as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for particularly severe religious freedom abuses. Burma's military continues its brutal attacks on Christian churches in Chin minority areas in Kachin State, as it also has in Karen, Karenni, and Naga areas. Rohingya Muslims continue to face severe discrimination and restrictions on their religious activity, causing large refugee problems in Bangladesh and elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Hundreds of Buddhist monks, such as U Gambira, continue to serve long sentences. In addition to raising these concerns with Burma's government, we encourage you to discuss religious freedom issues during meetings with representatives of Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim communities.

We believe it would be premature to consider lifting existing economic or political sanctions, like the CPC designation, until there is concrete and verifiable progress on the benchmarks cited above. However, if Burma pursues genuine reform, then the international community should respond proportionately and positively. We urge you to coordinate diplomatic actions with allies such as India, Japan, Thailand, and any ASEAN nation interested in religious freedom, democracy, and the rule of law in Burma.

We hope your mission to Burma is successful and would welcome the opportunity to discuss religious freedom concerns in Burma with you upon your return. We have included the USCIRF 2011 Annual Report chapter on Burma for your reference.

Sincerely,

[Leonard Leo](#)
Chair

cc: Michael Posner, Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor
Suzan Johnson-Cook, Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom
Derek Mitchell, Special Representative and Policy Coordinator for Burma