

October 4, 2007: Burmese Government Must Be Held to Account for Crackdown

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Oct. 4, 2007

Contact:

Judith Ingram, Communications Director,

(202) 523-3240, ext. 127

WASHINGTON-The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom calls for immediate international action to condemn the Burmese government's brutal crackdown on peaceful demonstrators including Buddhist monks, to hold the government accountable for its actions, and to provide protection to Burmese citizens seeking to exercise their religious freedom and related human rights. The Commission urges an immediate, independent investigation into the crackdown.

The Commission also urges the United States to continue pressing for effective international condemnation of Burma's actions, including through the United Nations Security Council, and a clear timetable, with repercussions, for the junta if it does not act immediately to end all attacks on and arrests of peaceful demonstrators, release all political prisoners including Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, and hold accountable those in the military leadership who carried out the crackdown. .

The United States should demand an urgent investigation into disturbing reports that scores, and possibly more, peaceful demonstrators have been killed-far more than the death toll of 10 that the government has announced. The independent investigation should also quickly establish the fate of the thousands of monks and other demonstrators who reportedly have been seized and remain unaccounted for. According to a U.S. diplomatic source quoted in the press, many monasteries around the capital are ominously empty. .

The Commission is traveling to Southeast Asia in two weeks. We propose that the delegation be permitted to visit Burma to investigate the whereabouts and conditions of the Burmese who have disappeared. .

In addition to the action it has already taken on Burma-sending a special envoy, Ibrahim Gambari, to Burma and holding a special session of the Human Rights Council on Burma on Tuesday-the UN should establish a monitoring mission of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights inside Burma. .

Since 1999, the U.S. government has designated Burma as a "country of particular concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. In its 2007 Annual Report, the Commission detailed severe religious freedom violations in Burma including repression of ethnic minority Christians and Muslims and ongoing restrictions on Buddhist monks. .

The killing, jailing, and beating of Buddhist monks-who play an important public role as the keepers and protectors of Buddhist values for the nation-continue the pattern of serious religious freedom abuses perpetuated by the Burmese military. Over the past 15 years, the military junta has closely controlled the Buddhist hierarchy, jailed or defrocked monks who have criticized government policies, and used military courts to try monks who urged reconciliation with pro-democracy forces. In addition, hundreds of monks were among the more than 3,000 people who human rights groups estimate were killed during demonstrations in 1988 and 1990. Because of those actions, there is residual distrust of Burma's ruling junta among many of the younger monks, despite the government's attempts to promote Buddhism and court the favor of senior monks. .

"The decision to fire upon peaceful demonstrators and to kill and jail Buddhist monks shows the Burmese military's complete contempt for the most basic human rights," said Commission Chair Michael Cromartie. "The international community should hold the military leaders accountable. New sanctions need to be fully enforced and supported by Burma's neighbors, diplomats should have immediate access to all prisoners, and the UN should also establish a monitoring mission of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights inside Burma." .

Regrettably, the international response has not always been unified, as China, Russia, and South Africa have refused to support UN Security Council action against Burma. Moreover, members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations have in the past been reluctant to condemn human rights violations by member states, citing a desire not to interfere in their internal affairs. Still, effective multilateral strategies must be pursued. The Commission urges the U.S. government to press China to allow urgent UN Security Council action, including providing support for reconciliation talks between Aung Sang Sui Kyi's National League for Democracy Party (NLD) and the military junta. .

In addition, the Commission urges the U.S. government to construct a coalition of Asian democratic states such as India, South Korea, Japan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines to recommend joint action and construct a road map that outlines steps Burma needs to take before economic and political sanctions will be removed. By working with like-minded states on a common approach that pools collective sticks and carrots in a systematic way, the United States can help ensure that the military junta in Burma will find it harder to ignore its neighbors' collective will. .

"The U.S. cannot 'outsource' this diplomatic problem to China. Building a coalition of democracies that includes our closest allies in Asia will be a powerful voice for change over stability," Cromartie said. "Moreover, by building such a coalition to address government acts of violence in Burma, we will help move our allies toward strategies that strengthen the prospect for continued democratization, the protection of religious freedom, and the adoption of the rule of law across the entire region." .

The Commission, a bipartisan, independent federal agency, continues to urge the U.S. government to continue to enforce sanctions while providing assistance to empower Burmese civil society groups that organize humanitarian assistance, conduct human rights documentation efforts, and provide public advocacy, leadership, and legal training to Burmese and ethnic Burmese living outside Burma. .

Michael Cromartie, Chair • Preeta D. Bansal, Vice Chair • Richard D. Land, Vice Chair • Don Argue • Imad M. Haddad • Talal Y. Eid • Felice D. Gaer • Leonard A. Leo • Elizabeth H. Prodromou • Nina Shea • Ambassador John V. Hanford III, Ex-Officio