

September 30, 2008: Burma: Marking Anniversary of Brutal Crackdown, USCIRF Recommends More Active Response to Combat Burma's Continuing Human Rights Violations

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Contact: Judith Ingram,

Communications Director,

(202) 523-3240, ext. 127

communications@uscirf.gov

WASHINGTON—One year ago, the Burmese government brutally ended peaceful protests by Buddhist monks leading the “Saffron Revolution” in Burma. Hundreds of monks were beaten and detained, monasteries were raided and closed, and tight restrictions were placed on all forms of religious practice in Burma. Arrests and monastery closures continue a year later, and other egregious and systematic restrictions on human rights remain in place. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom recommends that the U.S. government continue to make Burma a major diplomatic priority, to work with allies in Europe and Asia to intensify diplomatic engagement and tighten the enforcement of sanctions, and to urge the United Nations, in advance of a reported visit by General Secretary Ban Ki Moon, to set clear timelines and benchmarks that the Burmese military must meet in order to end their nation’s isolation from the international community. The international community should come together a year after the “Saffron Revolution” and demand real freedoms for the Burmese people, not more empty promises.

“Burma’s military junta has presided over a human rights and humanitarian disaster that is deepening, not receding,” said Felice Gaer, Chair of the Commission. “The military’s many human rights abuses are a direct challenge to every Burmese, as well as to international human rights law and regional security. The international community must coordinate its efforts to free all prisoners, distribute disaster relief, begin the process of democratic transition, end the abuses targeting ethnic and religious minorities, and convince Burma’s neighbors to stop propping up the junta. The United States has much more to do—beginning with creating a formal interagency task force in the National Security Council and appointing a Special Envoy on Burma. The U.S. must also take the lead in encouraging more effective U.N. efforts than have occurred in the past, including the release of all prisoners before the end of the year and the beginning of a concrete dialogue between the government and opposition groups.

UN Special Envoy Ibrahim Gambari has visited Burma and held talks with Burmese officials numerous times, and the UN Security Council passed a resolution "deploring the use of violence against peaceful demonstrators." Nonetheless, UN efforts thus far have not lead to any meaningful reform, the reduction of human rights abuses, the effective distribution of disaster relief following Cyclone Nargis in May 2008, or the release of Aun Sang Sui Kyi or other prisoners. China, India, and Thailand continue to invest in closer ties with the Burmese military, through trade and security arrangements they are circumventing many of the sanctions placed on the junta by the EU and the United States. In addition, though individuals members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have worked to address the Burma problem, ASEAN as a whole, continues to follow publically a strict "non-interference" policy.

Since last year, human rights conditions have deteriorated steadily. Since August 2007, when the junta first initiated steps to quell dissent among activists and monks, at least 15 individuals have received sentences of more than nine years in prison. At least 70, including many monks, also remain unaccounted for following the government crackdown. Muslims and ethnic minority Protestant groups continue to face severe and ongoing abuses. Renewed government attacks on minority villages have resulted in severe human rights violations, including killings, rapes, forced labor, communal violence, displaced persons, and forced renunciations of faith. Christians and Muslims have been forced to engage in the destruction of mosques, churches, and graveyards and to serve as military porters. Muslims continue to face communal violence and active discrimination in education, marriage, building permits, and religious practice. The junta also blocked effective and immediate distribution of humanitarian aid following a devastating cyclone in May that killed thousands and left millions homeless. Seven political prisoners were released earlier this month, though one was reportedly arrested a day after his release and nine members of the National League for Democracy (NLD) were arrested on September 27, 2008 for holding a ceremony marking the League's founding. There are approximately 2,000 prisoners of conscience behind bars in Burma.

"The number of political and religious prisoners in Burma has doubled in the past several years. The release of a few does nothing for the thousands who remain in prison for their peaceful activities to promote human rights and political freedoms. Their release must be the most urgent demand of the U.S. government and its allies," Gaer said. "In addition, because of the continued reluctance of some of Burma's neighbors, and some members of the U.N. Security Council, to firmly to condemn the military junta's egregious human rights abuses, the United States must also play an active role, working together with European and Asian allies, to urge more effective multi-lateral diplomacy, coordinate sanctions, and agree on potential incentives needed to foster political reconciliation, reform, and a democratic transition. At its core, U.S. diplomatic efforts must firmly endorse the aspirations of the Burmese people for democracy, human rights, and the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief."

Since its inception, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has recommended that Burma be designated a "country of particular concern," or CPC. The State Department has followed this recommendation and consistently named Burma a CPC.

For a full list of Commission recommendations on U.S. policy toward Burma, see the Burma chapter of the 2008 Annual Report: http://www.uscirf.gov/images/AR2008/burmaar2008_full%20color.pdf