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BURMA CSW welcomes release of Aung San Suu Kyi and calls for dialog in Burma

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) welcomes Aung San Suu Kyi's release from house arrest. It is not yet clear if any conditions are attached to her release. CSW continues to call for the unconditional release of the estimated 2,100 other political prisoners currently in jail. CSW urges the military regime to end its offensives against civilians in ethnic states and renews its call for the international community, led by the UN, to convince the regime to enter into a meaningful dialogue with the democracy movement led by Aung San Suu Kyi, and the ethnic nationalities.

Nobel Peace Prize winner and pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi was detained by the military junta for over 15 years, most of it under house arrest. Her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), won 82% of the parliamentary seats in the election in 1990, but the regime rejected the results, imprisoned the victors and intensified its grip on power with a campaign of violence. Her latest period of house arrest began in 2003 following an attack on her and her supporters in Depayin by pro-regime militia, and was extended in 2009 after an American, John Yettaw, swam across the lake to her home.

Burma's sham elections on November 7 were contested under new electoral rules, which excluded Aung San Suu Kyi from participating and resulted in the NLD being banned. CSW has received reports of harassment, intimidation, violence and arrests in several of Burma's ethnic states, both on polling day and in the days afterwards. Shortly after polling began, fighting between the Burma Army and a faction of the pro-junta Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) resulted in tens of thousands of refugees fleeing across the border with Thailand.

The election results have not yet been released, but the regime's party unofficially claims to have won over 80 per cent of the nationwide vote. The new constitution guarantees the military 25 per cent of the parliamentary seats and immunity for past, present and future crimes. It also offers no meaningful autonomy for ethnic nationalities and no genuine protection for human rights.

Benedict Rogers, CSW's East Asian Team Leader and author of *Than Shwe: Unmasking Burma's Tyrant*, said, "We have campaigned for Aung San Suu Kyi for many years, so we welcome her release today. But her release alone is no measure of progress, unless it is accompanied by the release of all other political prisoners, an end to attacks on ethnic civilians including rape, forced labor, torture and killings, and the beginning of a meaningful dialogue between the regime, the democracy movement and the ethnic nationalities. The regime in Burma should seize the moment of Aung San Suu Kyi's release to begin a dialogue with her, leading to a transition to true democracy and national reconciliation. The UN Secretary-General should lead efforts to encourage the regime in this direction. Her release after 15 years of house arrest is very welcome, but there is still a very long way to go."