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BURMA Chin people face continuing poverty and human rights violations in aftermath of sham elections

Forced labor, religious discrimination and acute poverty continue to cause intense suffering in Chin State, western Burma, according to testimonial evidence received by a delegation led by Baroness Cox, Chief Executive of the Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust (HART), which returned last week from the India-Burma border.

The delegation, which included CSW's East Asia Team Leader Benedict Rogers, interviewed Chin community health workers and pastors, and heard personal accounts of the denial of health care and education, systematic religious discrimination of Christians, poverty and widespread forced labor. These factors have combined to create a dire humanitarian situation, causing the deaths of many Chin villagers from preventable and treatable diseases.

Chin community organizations also reported widespread intimidation, harassment and vote rigging in Chin State and Sagaing Division during Burma's recent sham elections, held on 7 November.

One Chin pastor told the delegation, "This regime has made us poor. In development, culture and psychologically we are poor. But if I stand against the military, they will catch my wife or my son or me – and so no one dares to speak out."

The release from house arrest of Burma's democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi on 13 November is widely welcomed by Chin people, but her release alone is no sign of meaningful progress. The Chin people are calling for tripartite dialogue between the regime, the democracy movement led by Aung San Suu Kyi, and representatives of the ethnic nationalities. "The Burma problem is not only democracy," one Chin representative told the delegation. "The main issue is the ethnic issue."

Benedict Rogers said, "During our visit, just over a week after Aung San Suu Kyi's release, we received overwhelming evidence that the severe human rights violations and chronic humanitarian needs continue to cause intense suffering in Chin State, one of the poorest and most neglected parts of Burma. We call on the international community to use every mechanism available to urge the regime to enter into dialogue with the democracy movement and the ethnic nationalities, and to cease abusing its own people. We also urge the Government of India to use its influence to encourage the UN Secretary-General to facilitate a dialogue process."

Baroness Cox said, "The humanitarian situation in Chin State is dire and desperate and requires urgent relief. We urge the international community, including governments, the UN and non-governmental organizations to make it a priority to support health and education in Chin State and to provide much-needed relief for people who are dying of treatable and preventable diseases. We also urge the UN to ensure that the ethnic nationalities are included in the political process in Burma, and that the abuses, some of which amount to crimes against humanity, end immediately."

Notes to Editors:

1. CSW also visited New Delhi and had meetings with Indian Members of Parliament, policy-makers, media and civil society organizations.
2. The HART delegation included the President of HART-Australia, Dr. Martin Panter.