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BURMA Kachin conflict escalates as talk of change grows

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) is deeply concerned by reports of a deteriorating humanitarian situation in Kachin State, Burma. Information received by CSW from Kachin sources indicate an escalation in the Burma Army's offensive against Kachin civilians, at a time when the regime in Burma is talking about peace and national reconciliation. Over 20,000 Kachin civilians have been displaced as a result.

In the past two months, the Burma Army has repeatedly attacked Kachin villages. Civilians have been taken for forced labor, raped, tortured and killed. At the same time, Burma's new President, Thein Sein, has met democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, called for peace talks with ethnic nationalities, and responded to popular opinion by suspending plans for a major dam project at Myitsone, Kachin State, worth over \$3 billion.

On August 20, Burma Army soldiers stationed in Je-U village, Man Si Township fired mortars at Nam Gau village. The village school teacher's house was hit by a mortar shell, while the teacher, Mai Awng, was tutoring students inside. A six year-old child, Hpaula Htu, was killed and four people injured, including the teacher, her seven year-old daughter, and two children, aged seven and six.

On September 16, soldiers from Light Infantry Unit 387 arrested 12 Kachin villagers aged between 14 and 70, from Namhpathka village, Momauk Township, ten miles from a hydropower project at Taping. The villagers, accused of supporting the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), were tied with ropes, detained at the army base and severely tortured, before being released on September 19.

On September 21, Mr. Tam Gam and his wife Roi Lam Ja Ngai, both aged 24, were seriously injured by landmines on a Roman Catholic prayer mountain near Jahtuzup, Phakant Township, while they were gathering bamboo. Roi Lam Ja Ngai's right leg was blown off below the knees and her left leg was seriously injured. Her husband was injured in his face and chin.

These reports have been confirmed by the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), along with reports of increasing battles between soldiers of the Burma Army and the KIA. In June, the regime launched a new offensive against the Kachin, ending a 17-year ceasefire. According to the Kachin Relief Action Network for IDPs and Refugees (RANIR), at least 21,298 villagers have been displaced by the new conflict.

On September 26, the Chairman of the KIO's Central Committee, Lanyaw Zawng Hra, wrote to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, calling for international help to end the conflict in Burma. "The civil war ..., which is based on ethnic conflict, directly affects the regional development and stability of the neighboring countries as well. Therefore KIO is humbly calling for all stakeholders and international communities, such as United Nations, ASEAN, and our bordering countries, to help us find a solution towards ending our civil war and finally achieving national reconciliation."

CSW's East Asia Team Leader, Benedict Rogers, said: "The escalation in attacks in Kachin State is in marked contrast to the regime's rhetoric about peace, and the signs of change that may be seen in other aspects of Burmese politics. We warmly welcome the talks between the regime and Aung San Suu Kyi, President Thein Sein's recent decision to abandon the Myitsone dam in the face of public opinion, his offer of peace talks with the ethnic nationalities and the prospect of a general amnesty for political prisoners. We encourage President Thein Sein to continue on this path and, if there is substantial change, the international community must be prepared to respond positively and proportionately. However, if the regime is genuine, it must match rhetoric

with action, end the horrific human rights violations in the ethnic areas and declare a nationwide ceasefire. We urge the military to stop its attacks on Kachin civilians, end its campaign of terror in all ethnic states, and engage in a meaningful dialogue with the ethnic nationalities to bring an end to decades of war and suffering in Burma. We also call on the international community to provide urgently needed humanitarian assistance to the tens of thousands of Kachin displaced along Burma's border with China. There is much talk now about an opportunity for change in Burma. It is time to seize that opportunity, and turn it into an opportunity for peace, reconciliation and rebuilding."