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BURMA CSW welcomes limited prisoner release but urges amnesty for all political prisoners

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has today welcomed the release of around 120 political prisoners but urges the regime in Burma to go much further and release all of the estimated 2,000 political prisoners still in jail.

The release of 120 political prisoners comes in the context of a wider amnesty of over 6,000 prisoners and includes the Burmese comedian Zarganar, imprisoned since 2008 and U Gambira, one of the leaders of the 2007 pro-democracy protests led by Buddhist monks. However, few other prominent political prisoners have been released and according to the information available, none of the leaders of the 1988 democracy protests, known as the '88 Generation, have been freed. Many political prisoners serving long sentences of 65 years or more remain in jail.

CSW describes the size and scale of the release as “disappointing”, following considerable speculation that the number of political prisoners released would be much higher. Some news agencies had reported the possibility of the release of many hundreds, perhaps even higher than the 427 freed when Burma’s previous leader, Than Shwe, came to power in 1992.

The releases come while a number of other unusual political developments are taking place in Burma, including President Thein Sein’s recent decision to abandon the Myitsone dam in the face of public opinion and his offer of peace talks with Burma’s ethnic groups. Burma’s democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi met Thein Sein in August, and has held several meetings with regime officials in recent months.

Meanwhile, the regime has escalated attacks on civilians in Kachin State and continues to perpetrate widespread and systematic violations of human rights, amounting to war crimes and crimes against humanity, throughout the country, particularly in ethnic areas.

CSW’s East Asia Team Leader, Benedict Rogers, said: “We welcome the release of any number of political prisoners, and for those individuals and their families this is a good day. Nevertheless, today will represent a serious disappointment for the families of the nearly 2,000 political prisoners who remain in jail, some with sentences of 65 years or more. While recent developments in Burma have given some room for relative optimism, the Burmese regime must match its reforming rhetoric with substantial action, including the release of all political prisoners, as well as ending the horrific human rights violations occurring in Burma’s ethnic areas. Only by releasing all political prisoners, including high-profile 88 Generation leaders such as Min Ko Naing, Ko Ko Gyi and Ko Mya Aye, and prominent ethnic leaders such as Khun Htun Oo, can the regime show that it really is serious about change. Until then, the international community, while being ready to respond positively, should maintain pressure for change. We call on Burma to go much further, but to be encouraged that bold and substantial action on their part will lead to a reciprocal response from the international community.”

Notes to Editor:

1. The 88 Generation Students Group includes student leaders who took part in Burma’s pro-democracy protests in 1988. Those from the Group who are currently detained in Burma have some of the longest prison sentences of all Burmese political prisoners.