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BURMA CSW urges international community to address impunity and maintain pressure for real change

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) today called on the international community to maintain pressure on the regime in Burma to implement significant and substantial change, release all political prisoners, stop war crimes and crimes against humanity and end impunity.

CSW also urges the United Nations to adopt measures to address violations of international law and ensure justice and accountability in the forthcoming General Assembly resolution on Burma. In his report to the UN General Assembly, released last week, the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Burma, Tomas Ojea Quintana, reiterated his call for a commission of inquiry into violations of international human rights and humanitarian law. An investigation, he argues, "is not only an obligation but would deter future violations and provide avenues of redress for victims."

Since President Thein Sein took office on March 30, at least 30 cases of rape and sexual violence perpetrated by Burma Army soldiers have been reported, and the International Labor Organization has received over 400 complaints of the forced recruitment of child soldiers. The regime has launched a new offensive against the Kachin ethnic people, breaking a 17-year ceasefire, while continuing attacks on civilians in other parts of the country, including Karen and Shan states, and severe violations of human rights in Chin, Arakan and Mon states. At least 35 civilians have been killed in ethnic states, and the widespread and systematic use of forced labor, forced displacement, religious persecution and torture continues.

On October 12, 6,359 prisoners were released, of whom only 220 were political prisoners. Almost 2,000 political prisoners remain in prison. CSW urges the Burmese regime to recognize the existence of political prisoners, erase the criminal records of activists wrongly charged under criminal law, and announce an unconditional general amnesty for all political prisoners. In particular, CSW reiterates its call for the release of 88 General leaders Min Ko Naing, Ko Ko Gyi, Ko Mya Aye, Shan National League for Democracy (SNLD) leader Khun Htun Oo, and U Gambira, a Buddhist monk who helped lead the 2007 pro-democracy demonstrations. CSW also urges the regime to relocate prisoners currently in remote jails to prisons closer to their families prior to their release, so that they can be reunited with their families more easily and quickly.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) should be provided unrestricted access to prisons to assess the conditions, meet prisoners and provide assistance. The regime should also open unhindered access for humanitarian organizations to all parts of the country.

CSW's East Asia Team Leader Benedict Rogers said, "President Thein Sein has made a few encouraging gestures, taken a few symbolic steps and adopted some reformist rhetoric. Such steps, such as meeting Aung San Suu Kyi, suspending the construction of the Myitsone dam and releasing 220 political prisoners, are in themselves welcome and should be encouraged, but they fall well short of amounting to meaningful change. President Thein Sein now needs to match his rhetoric and gestures with significant and substantive action. If real change is to occur in Burma, the regime must release all political prisoners, stop violations of international law, declare a nationwide ceasefire and enter into a meaningful dialogue with the ethnic nationalities and the democracy movement led by Aung San Suu Kyi towards national reconciliation. Until these steps occur, the

international community must maintain pressure, and consider measures in the General Assembly resolution on Burma for addressing violations of international law, ensuring justice and accountability, and ending impunity.”

Notes to Editors:

1. In his report to the General Assembly, available here: http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/66/365, the UN Special Rapporteur expressed concern that “a pattern of gross and systematic violations of human rights has existed for many years and continues today, although a new political system is being established.” He emphasized that “justice and accountability measures, as well as measures to ensure access to the truth, are essential”. While responsibility for ending impunity lies primarily with the new regime in Burma, if it fails to investigate crimes, the international community has a responsibility to act. He reiterated his recommendation for the establishment of a UN commission of inquiry “into gross and systematic human rights violations that could amount to crimes against humanity and/or war crimes.”
2. 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.