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BURMA CSW urges UK Foreign Secretary William Hague to highlight human rights violations in ethnic states during visit

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has today written to the British Foreign Secretary William Hague, welcoming his forthcoming visit to Burma next month and requesting him to use the opportunity to “urge the regime to stop attacking ethnic people, declare a nationwide ceasefire, release all political prisoners, and engage further in a meaningful process of dialogue with the ethnic nationalities and the democracy movement led by Aung San Suu Kyi”. These steps “must be priority benchmarks of progress”.

William Hague’s visit, announced this week, follows recent visits by the British Secretary of State for International Development Andrew Mitchell and the U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

Earlier this week, Burma’s President Thein Sein reportedly ordered the military to stop attacks on civilians in ethnic states, particularly Kachin State, although reports from the ground indicate that attacks are continuing. In June, the regime broke a 17-year ceasefire with the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and launched a military offensive against civilians.

In its letter to the Foreign Secretary, CSW highlights specific incidents of rape, forced labor, torture, killings and attacks on churches in Kachin State. “We are deeply concerned about the continuing grave violations of human rights perpetrated by the Burma Army in the ethnic areas, and in particular Kachin State. There is little sign of the situation in the ethnic states improving, and in some areas the human rights and humanitarian crisis is deteriorating.”

CSW specifically cites cases of violations against religious adherents, including attacks on Christian pastors, priests and churches in Kachin State. The continued detention of Buddhist monks, including U Gambira, one of the leaders of the 2007 pro-democracy protests, and continuing discrimination against the Muslim Rohingyas are also major concerns. “Despite having lived in northern Arakan State for generations, the Rohingyas are denied citizenship in Burma and are effectively stateless,” CSW notes. “They continue to face severe restrictions on movement, marriage, religion and access to education.”

Benedict Rogers, CSW’s East Asia Team Leader said: “We welcome the forthcoming visit of William Hague, because it is absolutely vital that the international community seize the moment and use the possible window of opportunity that appears to be emerging in Burma to encourage significant, substantial and long-lasting change. We welcome the possible signs of change that we have seen in recent months, but there is still a long way to go towards ending impunity and establishing a political system in which the rule of law, basic human rights and democracy are protected, upheld and respected. We hope the Foreign Secretary will seek answers to the specific cases we have provided, and impress upon the regime the message that if it does want to convince people beyond any doubt that it is serious about change, it must stop raping and killing people, stop using people as slave labor, stop attacking churches, declare a nationwide ceasefire, release prisoners of conscience, and engage in talks that will lead to a lasting and peaceful political solution for the ethnic nationalities, the democracy movement and all the people of Burma.”