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BURMA | CSW Urges UK Minister to Prioritize Human Rights During Trade Mission to Burma

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) today urged the British Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Hugo Swire MP, to highlight the continuing grave human rights abuses in Burma, including violations of freedom of religion or belief, as he leads a trade delegation to the country next week.

CSW urges the Minister to press the government of Burma to engage in a genuine political dialogue with the representatives of ethnic nationalities and to allow unhindered access for international humanitarian aid to those displaced by conflicts in Rakhine and Kachin States.

The Minister is expected to visit Rakhine State, where violence between the Buddhist Rakhine and Muslim Rohingya communities has resulted in the displacement of at least 100,000 and hundreds of deaths. Although violence has been committed by both sides, the Rohingyas have been subjected to a systematic campaign of persecution and ethnic cleansing. CSW urges the Minister to press the government of Burma to take steps to repeal the 1982 Citizenship Law, which stripped the Rohingyas of citizenship. There is also a need for longer-term initiatives to promote inter-religious and inter-racial dialogue, and promote peace and reconciliation in the area.

CSW also calls on the Minister to highlight the continuing conflict in Kachin State, where serious violations of human rights have been perpetrated, including the killing of civilians, rape as a weapon of war, torture and the destruction of villages. Churches have also been attacked. The current conflict in Kachin State started in June 2011 when the Burma Army broke a 17-year ceasefire. Since then, over 100,000 people have been displaced

Religious freedom is seriously violated in Chin State, where the majority, Chin Christians, face a systematic government policy of discrimination and persecution, involving the destruction of crosses, the forced construction of Buddhist pagodas, and forced conversion to Buddhism. CSW calls on the Minister to raise these concerns with the government of Burma, and to recommend that the government invite the UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion or Belief to visit the country.

Andrew Johnston, CSW's Advocacy Director, said, "We welcome the Minister's visit as an opportunity to deliver some clear messages to the government of Burma. Although it is primarily a trade mission, human rights cannot be ignored. For foreign investment to be secure, investors

and trading partners need to be assured of stability in Burma, and that can only be achieved through the establishment of a genuine peace in the country and respect for human rights. We welcome the reforms introduced by the government of Burma so far, but we believe if Burma is to really change and achieve genuine freedom and peace, a political dialogue with the ethnic nationalities is essential. The political system must address the grievances and desires of the ethnic nationalities, who collectively account for 40 percent of the population. Many of the ethnic nationalities are non-Buddhist religious minorities, and their right to freedom of religion or belief must be protected. We hope the Minister will raise all these concerns, and urge the government of Burma to stop these serious violations of human rights. Furthermore, we urge the Minister to press the government of Burma to release all remaining political prisoners, including U Gambira, the monk who was recently re-arrested.”