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BURMA | CSW Urges European Union Urged to Prioritize Human Rights in Burma

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) today urged the European Union (EU) to ensure that continuing grave violations of human rights, including religious freedom, in Burma remain a priority, despite the decision on April 22 to lift all EU sanctions on Burma apart from the arms embargo.

The EU suspended sanctions on Burma a year ago, setting out four specific benchmarks for progress, which would provide the conditions for complete lifting of sanctions. In the Council of the European Union conclusions on Myanmar/Burma, April 23, 2012, announcing the suspension last year, the EU said that it "still expects the unconditional release of remaining political prisoners and the removal of all restrictions placed on those already released. It looks forward to the end of conflict and to substantially improved access for humanitarian assistance, in particular for those affected by conflict in Kachin State and along the Eastern border, as well as to addressing the status and improving the welfare of the Rohingyas."

In the past year, the conflict in Kachin State has escalated, with the Burma Army launching air strikes against civilians in December. Over 100,000 Kachin civilians are internally displaced, and cases of rape, torture, forced labor and killing of civilians have been documented. Access for humanitarian assistance to Kachin State has not improved significantly. The plight of the Rohingyas has deteriorated dramatically, with mass violence erupting in Rakhine State in June and again in October last year, displacing over 130,000. Within the past few days, fresh evidence has come to light of mass atrocities in Rakhine State and of the security forces' inaction in the face of shocking anti-Muslim violence. Several hundred political prisoners remain in jail, and many of those who have been released are subject to conditions. On a recent visit to the country, CSW saw a burned-out madrassah and a desecrated mosque near the capital, Naypyidaw, and heard accounts of appalling human rights violations in Kachin State.

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "It is right to welcome the positive changes that are taking place in Burma, including increased space for civil society, media and democratic political actors, improvements in freedom of expression, the release of the majority of political prisoners, and the participation of Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy in the parliamentary process. It is right to recognize and encourage the efforts of reformers. However, very grave human rights violations continue, and none of the EU's own benchmarks have been fully met, so we regard the decision to lift all sanctions, without condition, as premature. Burma is just at the very beginning of fragile change, and until there are significant improvements in human rights, and an end to mass atrocities and the culture of impunity,

pressure should be maintained. Given its decision to lift sanctions, we urge the EU to spell out new ways in which it will prioritize, protect and promote human rights in Burma. We urge the EU to use all human rights tools at its disposal, including its forthcoming Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief, as part of its Burma policy, and to send a strong message to the Government of Burma that although sanctions have been lifted, the EU is not turning a blind eye to the continuing widespread violations of human rights.”