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BURMA | CSW Releases New Report Detailing Human Rights Abuses

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) released a new report on May 13 on human rights in Burma following a four-week fact-finding visit to the country. The report welcomes signs of political change in the country, including “significantly increased freedom” for media, civil society and political actors and improvements in freedom of expression in some areas. The report warns against “premature euphoria” and highlights “many very grave challenges and concerns, particularly in respect to the protection of human rights, including freedom of religion or belief.”

In addition to visiting the capital, Naypidaw, and Rangoon, Burma’s major city, CSW visited Kachin State, in northern Burma, where a conflict has continued for almost two years, resulting in the displacement of at least 100,000 civilians. CSW also visited a Muslim community near Naypyidaw, three days after an attack by a militant Buddhist mob.

Noting a new “climate of openness” in Rangoon and other cities, the report also notes that “the testimonies provided by internally displaced Kachin people during the visit included some of the worst accounts of human rights violations CSW has ever documented.”

One Kachin former prisoner described the torture he endured during interrogation, including being hung upside down for a day and a night, beaten and attacked with knives. “They put a hand grenade in my mouth and threatened to pull the pin...then they put a plastic bag over my face and poured water over it,” he told CSW.

The wife of one current Kachin prisoner described seeing her husband after he had been tortured. She told CSW, “He was covered in blood, and his nose was broken...An iron bar was rubbed along his legs. He was forced to engage in homosexual sex...He was told that as he was a Christian, he should kneel on very sharp stones with his arms outstretched like Christ on the cross...He was beaten on his hands and arms.”

CSW was accompanied for part of the visit by Lord Alton of Liverpool, UK, a member of the House of Lords in the British Parliament. Lord Alton and CSW visited Ayeyarwady, where a Muslim community had been attacked on March 22. The madrassa had been completely burned down, and the mosque severely desecrated and damaged. "We Muslims have lived here for 200 years with no problems," a representative of the community said. "But now there is absolutely no communication with our Buddhist neighbors. We don't dare greet each other on the street."

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "Our findings show that while there are some very welcome reforms in Burma, which should be acknowledged and encouraged, there remains a culture of impunity which needs to be addressed. There is an urgent need for protection for religious and ethnic minorities, inter-religious dialogue and peace-building, humanitarian assistance for those displaced by conflict and violence and a meaningful process for political dialogue involving all the ethnic nationalities to end decades of war. The Government of Burma must address these grave concerns as a priority and the international community should develop a clear strategy to promote human rights and genuine democratic reform, counter religious intolerance, promote reconciliation and advocate protection of freedom of religion or belief in Burma. Failure to do so will result in hopes dashed, and further instability, conflict, fear, death and destruction."