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BURMA | Secretary Urged to Raise Religious Freedom Violations with Government

Members of the US-based International Religious Freedom (IRF) Roundtable, a multi-faith informal group of organizations and individuals advocating for freedom of religion or belief, have written to US Secretary of State John Kerry ahead of his visit to Burma, urging him make it a priority to discuss reported violations of freedom of religion or belief with the government.

Despite some positive reforms in Burma over the past three years, including the release of many political prisoners, increased space for civil society, and the election to Parliament of Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy, the letter states “the most serious concern, alongside the lack of constitutional reform, is the rise of religious intolerance.”

“In the past two years, there have been a number of incidents of serious violence against Muslims, initially targeting the Rohingyas in Rakhine State but more recently affecting Muslims across the country, in Meikhtila, Oakkan, Lashio and most recently Mandalay, among other cities. Each incident has been preceded by the deliberate spread of false rumors and hate speech, and in each incident the security forces have failed to respond effectively to prevent violence or protect vulnerable communities. In some instances, elements of the security forces have been complicit.” The letter also highlights ongoing discrimination against Christians in Kachin and Chin State.

The letter continues, “In addition, the Government of Burma has drafted four bills which include legislation to restrict religious conversions and inter-religious marriages. These clearly violate freedom of religion and have been described by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom as “irreparably flawed” and contravening Burma’s international commitments.”

The 22 signatories of the letter recommend Secretary Kerry “impress upon the Government of Burma the need to address these grave concerns, to abandon the proposed legislation, and to work with the international community to promote freedom of religion and inter-religious harmony in Burma and to counter intolerance and hatred” and “encourage the Government of Burma to invite the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief to visit the country.”

CSW’s Chief Executive, Mervyn Thomas, said: “Together with the IRF Roundtable, we urge Secretary Kerry to engage fully with the recommendations in this letter. In the week when the US government released its Annual Report on International Religious Freedom, affirming its commitment to addressing violations of this right, we encourage Secretary Kerry to raise the very negative deterioration in freedom of religion in Burma. While acknowledging the recent positive developments in Burma, the Government of Burma must be left in no doubt about what

it must do if its new, positive relationship with the rest of the world is to be sustained and deepened.”