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BURMA | Religious Conversion Bill “Major Setback for Religious Freedom”

Christian Solidarity Worldwide expressed profound concern that a new law restricting religious conversions, passed earlier this week by the upper house of Burma’s parliament, will be a major setback for religious freedom and human rights in the country.

If implemented, the law will require anyone wishing to change his religion to apply for permission to an 11-member committee, consisting of officials responsible for religious affairs, immigration, women’s affairs and education.

The law is one of a package of four bills aimed at the “protection of race and religion,” originally drafted by the Committee for the Protection of Religion and Nationality, known as “Ma Ba Tha,” led by Buddhist monks but developed by a 12-member commission appointed by the President, and submitted by the government to parliament last year. The other three bills focus on restricting inter-faith marriage, monogamy and population control.

The legislation has been opposed by civil society in Burma and the international community. The UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Burma, Yangjee Lee, highlighted the “significant human rights concerns” relating to the proposed legislation on religious conversions and inter-faith marriage in a statement earlier this month. She warned that if these bills are passed they will “legalize discrimination, in particular against religious and ethnic minorities and against women.” At the end of her recent visit to Burma, she described the process for registering religious conversions proposed in the bill as “onerous and potentially intimidating. The freedom to practice religion and to convert is a fundamental human right, a very personal one.”

Earlier this week, U Wirathu, a high-profile extremist Buddhist monk who has been at the forefront of stirring up anti-Muslim hatred, referred to Yangjee Lee as a “whore.” His remarks were denounced by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, who urged Burma’s religious and political leaders “to unequivocally condemn all forms of incitement to hatred, including this abhorrent public personal attack.”

In a statement released Jan. 22, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, which has previously described the legislation as “irreparably flawed,” warning it risks stoking violence and discrimination against religious minorities, reiterated that it will “further restrict religious freedom and discriminate against all non-Buddhists, particularly male Muslims, in religious conversions and marriages.”

Religious intolerance has increased in Burma very significantly in the past three years, with

outbreaks of serious violence against Muslims in different locations around the country in 2012 and 2013. In December 2014, a New Zealand bar manager, Phil Blackwood, was arrested along with his two Burmese colleagues and charged with insulting religion after using an image of Buddha to promote their bar in Rangoon. In a separate case, Htin Lin Oo, an author and former official of the National League for Democracy (NLD), was arrested and imprisoned for criticizing extremist Buddhist monks for preaching hatred. He argued that religious intolerance spread by groups such as Ma Ba Tha is incompatible with Buddhism, but he was charged with religious defamation under Article 295(a) and Article 298 of Burma's penal code.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "The developments in Burma in regard to freedom of religion or belief, and inter-religious conflict and intolerance, are profoundly disturbing. The proposed law on religious conversion would be a major setback for religious freedom and human rights in Burma, and the arrest of Htin Lin Oo represents a very serious denial of freedom of expression. We appeal for the release of Htin Lin Oo and for all charges to be dropped against him, and for the release of Phil Blackwood and his colleagues. We urge the government of Burma to abandon its proposed laws on religious conversion and inter-faith marriage. We call on the international community to do everything possible to address concerns over religious freedom in Burma, including offering assistance and expertise to deal with incitement to hatred and violence. Burma's progress towards political reform and greater openness is in peril if such religious intolerance and restrictions on freedom of religion are allowed to continue."