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BURMA | Assassination of Lawyer Condemned

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) condemned the assassination of U Ko Ni, a prominent lawyer and advisor to the National League for Democracy (NLD), and expressed condolences to his grieving family and friends.

U Ko Ni, a constitutional expert advising Burma's State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and her party on constitutional reform, was shot dead outside Rangoon airport upon his return from a visit to Indonesia. He was holding his grandson in his arms at the time of the shooting. He was an outspoken critic of the military's continuing involvement in politics.

U Ko Ni was also one of the most prominent Muslims in Burma and a consistent advocate for freedom of religion or belief and inter-religious harmony. He was a rare voice among Burma's political leaders in defending the persecuted Rohingyas, who are not recognized as citizens, once saying, "If someone is born in Burma and lives there all their lives, we have to regard them as a citizen of Burma. It is harmful if people are divided into 'classes'."

It is not yet known who was behind the murder and whether the motivation was political or religious, or a combination of the two. Anti-Muslim sentiment has been rising throughout Burma over the past five years, involving periodic outbreaks of violence and widespread hate speech.

In 2014, the European Burma Network, an alliance of human rights organizations across Europe, of which CSW is a member, called on the government of Burma and the international community to take practical measures to counter religious intolerance in the country. In a statement to mark the first anniversary of anti-Muslim violence in Meikhtila, the European Burma Network warned, "Unless greater priority is given to tackling this growing problem, we fear that further violence and more laws and other policies which persecute and discriminate against religious and ethnic minorities in Burma are inevitable."

On Jan. 27, Ma Ba Tha, the Buddhist nationalist movement, warned against any attempt to amend the Protection of Race and Religion Laws which were introduced by the previous government in 2015, and which include measures that restrict religions conversion and inter-religious marriage. The Burmese Parliament is reportedly considering legislation to address violence against women which may entail amendments to the race and religion protection laws.

In an article in Mizzima on Jan. 30, CSW's East Asia Team Leader Benedict Rogers wrote, "Yesterday's horrific assassination of U Ko Ni is a severe blow to the prospects for peace and democracy in Myanmar, as well as of course a tragedy for his family. It robs the country of one of its most knowledgeable constitutional experts, the National League for Democracy (NLD) one of its most valued advisors, and the Muslim community of one of their most prominent advocates. For such an attack to occur so brazenly in broad daylight at Yangon airport, while U Ko Ni was holding his grandson and hailing a taxi, suggests a direct assault on Myanmar's democratic transition by forces bigger than the gunman himself ... As they mourn, the NLD must now reflect on what to do next to address constitutional reform, ethnic conflict and religious nationalism. The international community must stand ready, with ideas, expertise and funding, to help the government. Failure to do so, through fear, prejudice or complacency, would mean that it was not only U Ko Ni who was killed yesterday, but dreams of a better, more democratic, peaceful Myanmar for all – and that is a tragedy we must prevent."