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Human Rights and Democracy Report 2015 - Chapter IV: Human Rights Priority Countries - Burma

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There was progress on human rights in Burma during 2015, particularly in the areas of civil and political rights, but significant challenges remain. The 8 November parliamentary elections were an important milestone in Burma's democratic transition. For the first time in over 50 years, the people of Burma elected parliamentary representatives. Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) won with a substantial majority and a real mandate for further reform.

But, while the vote was peaceful, credible and competitive, there were several flaws: the Rohingya community was disenfranchised and prospective Muslim candidates were disproportionately excluded. In 2015, the democratic space for freedom of expression and assembly contracted. March saw the violent break-up of student protests, political prisoners continued to be charged and detained and, as elections approached, there were a succession of arrests following social media posts mocking the military. Relations between Buddhist and Muslim communities became increasingly tense and politicised with the passing of four discriminatory "Race and Religion" laws. Instances of hate speech and arrests on religion-based charges increased. More positively, there were further discharges of child soldiers, and the government ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

UK human rights priorities in 2015 centred on encouraging credible elections as well as upholding political freedoms and maintaining stability, including in Rakhine, Shan and Kachin States. UK support helped the Union Election Commission deliver a credible election with strengthened integrity measures. UK funding also enabled the first systematic and nationwide domestic observation effort in Burma's history. The UK remained an important supporter of the peace process, which saw substantive progress when the government and eight of the 16 main ethnic armed groups signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in October. However, fighting continued in Kokang and other parts of Shan and Kachin States, with the associated lack of humanitarian access, targeting of civilians, and acts of sexual violence. The UK continued to press for improvements to the treatment of the Rohingya community, both bilaterally and in multilateral fora. FCO Minister for Asia Pacific, Hugo Swire, visited Rakhine for the second time in July. While there was no repeat of the violence of 2012, there was no improvement in the situation for the Rohingya in 2015. The ongoing dispute over citizenship rights and desperate living conditions led to an increase in the number of Rohingya leaving Burma by boat for other countries, causing a regional refugee crisis in May and June.

April 2016 should see the historic transfer of power to a more democratic and civilian government. Constitutionally the military will, however, retain control of the key Ministries of Defence, Borders and Home Affairs, controlling the police, paramilitary groups and security forces, as well as the powerful General Administration Department. The incoming NLD government will face many serious challenges, not least in the field of human rights. Our policy will be to support and encourage the incoming administration across the whole human rights agenda. In particular, we will support a long-term sustainable plan to address the political and development issues in Rakhine and the plight of the Rohingya. We will also seek to build on the gains made in the peace process in 2015, encouraging the other armed groups to engage, and for all parties to work towards a political dialogue.

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