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Burma

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR
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Highly repressive, authoritarian military regimes have ruled the country since 1962. In May 2008 the Government announced voters had approved a new draft Constitution in a nationwide referendum. Democracy activists and the international community widely criticized the referendum as seriously flawed. The new Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, it also grants broad exceptions that allow the regime to restrict those rights at will. Although authorities generally permitted most adherents of registered religious groups to worship as they choose, the Government imposed restrictions on certain religious activities and frequently abused the right to freedom of religion.

There was no change in the Government's limited degree of respect for religious freedom during the reporting period. Religious activities and organizations were subject to restrictions on freedom of expression, association, and assembly. The Government continued to monitor meetings and activities of virtually all organizations, including religious organizations. The Government continued to systematically restrict efforts by Buddhist clergy to promote human rights and political freedom. Many of the Buddhist monks arrested in the violent crackdown that followed pro-democracy demonstrations in September 2007, including prominent activist monk U Gambira, remained in prison serving long sentences. The Government also actively promoted Theravada Buddhism over other religions, particularly among members of ethnic minorities. Christian and Islamic groups continued to struggle to obtain permission to repair existing places of worship or build new ones. The regime continued to closely monitor Muslim activities. Restrictions on worship for other non-Buddhist minority groups also continued. Although there were no new reports of forced conversions of non-Buddhists, the Government applied pressure on students and lower-income youth to convert to Buddhism. Adherence or conversion to Buddhism is generally a prerequisite for promotion to senior government and military ranks.

During the reporting period, social tensions continued between the Buddhist majority and the Christian and Muslim minorities. Widespread prejudice existed against citizens of South Asian origin, many of whom are Muslims. Although official religious discrimination was limited, de facto preferences for Buddhism remained.

The U.S. Government advocated religious freedom with all sectors of society, including government officials, religious leaders, private citizens, scholars, diplomats of other governments, and international business and media representatives. Embassy representatives offered support to local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and religious leaders and acted as conduits for information exchanges with otherwise isolated human rights NGOs and religious leaders. Since 1999, the U.S. Secretary of State has designated Burma as a "Country of Particular Concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. The U.S. Government has a wide array of sanctions in place against the country for its violations of human rights. The passage and signing into law in July 2008 of the Tom Lantos Block Burmese Junta Anti-Democratic Efforts (JADE) Act further strengthened these sanctions.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 261,970 square miles and a population the International Monetary Fund estimates at 50 million. The majority follow Theravada Buddhism, although in practice popular Burmese Buddhism coexists with astrology, numerology, fortune telling, and veneration of indigenous pre-Buddhist era deities called "nats." Buddhist monks, including novices, number more than 400,000 and depend on the laity for their material needs, including clothing and daily donations of food. The country has a much smaller number of Buddhist nuns. The principal minority religious groups include Christians (primarily Baptists, Roman Catholics, and Anglicans, along with several small Protestant denominations), Muslims (mostly Sunni), Hindus, and practitioners of traditional Chinese and indigenous religions. According to official statistics, almost 90 percent of the population practices Buddhism, 4 percent Christianity, and 4 percent Islam. These statistics almost certainly underestimate the non-Buddhist proportion of the population. Independent scholarly researchers place the Muslim population at between 6 and 10 percent. A tiny Jewish community in Rangoon has a synagogue but no resident rabbi and lacks enough resident believers to constitute a minyan, the quorum needed for certain religious rites.

The country is ethnically diverse, with some correlation between ethnicity and religion. Theravada Buddhism is the dominant religion among the majority Burman ethnic group and among the Shan, Arakanese, and Mon ethnic minorities in the east, west, and south. Christianity is the dominant religion among the Kachin ethnic group of the north and the Chin and Naga ethnic groups of the west, some of whom also continue to practice traditional indigenous religions. Protestant groups report recent rapid growth among animist communities in Chin State. Christianity is also practiced widely among the Karen and Karenni ethnic groups of the south and east, although many Karen and Karenni are Buddhist and some Karen are Muslim. Burmese citizens of Indian origin, who are concentrated in major cities and in the south central region, predominantly practice Hinduism, though some ethnic Indians are Christian. Islam is practiced widely in Rakhine State, where it is the dominant religion of the Rohingya minority, and in Rangoon, Irrawaddy, Magwe, and Mandalay Divisions,

where some Burmans, Indians, and ethnic Bengalis practice Islam. Chinese ethnic minorities generally practice traditional Chinese religions. Traditional indigenous beliefs are practiced widely among smaller ethnic groups in the highland regions. Practices drawn from those indigenous beliefs persist in popular Buddhist rituals, especially in rural areas.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Highly authoritarian military regimes have ruled the country since 1962. Since independence in 1948, many of the ethnic minority areas have served as bases for armed resistance against the Government. Although the Government negotiated cease-fire agreements with most armed ethnic groups after 1989, active Shan, Karen, and Karenni insurgencies continued. Successive civilian and military governments have tended to view religious freedom in the context of perceived threats to national unity or central authority.

The current military government, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), has governed without a constitution or legislature since 1988. In May 2008, the Government announced that its draft Constitution had been approved with 92 percent of the vote in a nationwide referendum. According to the Constitution, the SPDC will continue to "exercise state sovereignty" until the Parliament is convened sometime after the scheduled 2010 elections. The law governing the referendum stated that citizens and most ethnic minorities were eligible to vote; however, it excluded members of religious orders and individuals serving prison terms, including political prisoners.

Many diplomatic observers and human rights organizations criticized the lack of fairness and transparency of the referendum and questioned the validity of the results.

The new Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, it also grants broad exceptions that allow the regime to restrict these rights "subject to public order, morality, health, and other provisions of the Constitution." It specifically recognizes the "special position of Buddhism as the faith practiced by the great majority of citizens," but also recognizes Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and animism as religions "existing" in the country. It states that the Government shall "render assistance and protect the religions it recognizes."

The Constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion. Most adherents of recognized religious groups generally are allowed to worship as they choose; however, the Government imposes restrictions on certain religious activities and frequently abuses the right to religious freedom. The Constitution protects the right to seek redress for violations of freedoms but does not specify how such claims will be addressed. Moreover, anti-discrimination laws do not apply to ethnic groups not formally recognized under the 1982 Citizenship Law, such as the stateless Muslim Rohingyas in northern Rakhine State.

In addition, the Constitution forbids the "abuse of religion for political purposes" and asserts that any act that promotes discord may be punishable by law. It bars members of religious orders from running for public office. Burmese law criminalizes the "defamation" of religion for political purposes. The regime commonly employed nonreligious laws to target those involved in religious and political activism, including the Electronic Transactions Act, Immigration Act, and Unlawful Associations Act.

Although the country has no official state religion, successive military and civilian governments have supported and associated themselves conspicuously with Theravada Buddhism. In 1961 the Government's push to make Buddhism the state religion failed due to countrywide protests by religious minorities. In practice, the Government continues to show a preference for Theravada Buddhism through official propaganda and state-sponsored activities, including donations to monasteries and pagodas, encouragement of education at Buddhist monastic schools in rural areas, and support for Buddhist missionary activities. Promotions within the military and the civil service are reserved for followers of Buddhism. The Ministry of Religious Affairs includes the powerful Department for the Promotion and Propagation of Sasana (Buddhist teaching).

State-controlled news media frequently depict government officials and their family members paying homage to Buddhist monks; offering donations at pagodas; officiating at ceremonies to open, improve, restore, or maintain pagodas; and organizing ostensibly voluntary "people's donations" of money, food, and uncompensated labor to build or refurbish Buddhist shrines nationwide. State-owned newspapers routinely feature front-page banner slogans quoting from Buddhist scriptures. The Government has published books of Buddhist religious instruction.

The Government controls the organization and restricts the activities and expression of the Buddhist clergy (Sangha), although some monks have resisted such control. Based on the 1990 Sangha Organization Law, the Government has banned any organization of Buddhist monks other than the nine state-recognized monastic orders. Violations of this ban are punishable by immediate public defrocking and criminal penalties. The nine recognized orders submit to the authority of the State Monk Coordination Committee ("Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee" or SMNC), the members of which are indirectly elected by monks.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs Department for the Perpetuation and Propagation of the Sasana oversees the Government's relations with Buddhist monks and schools. The Government continues to fund two state Sangha universities in Rangoon and Mandalay that train Buddhist monks under the purview of the SMNC. The state-funded International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University (ITBMU) in Rangoon, which opened in 1998, has a stated purpose "to share the country's knowledge of Buddhism with the people of the world."

Buddhist doctrine remains part of the state-mandated curriculum in all government-run elementary schools. Students at

these schools can opt out of instruction in Buddhism and sometimes do, but all are required to recite a Buddhist prayer daily. Some Muslim students are allowed to leave the classroom during this recitation, but at other schools non-Buddhists are forced to recite the prayer.

Official public holidays include numerous Buddhist holy days, as well as a few Christian, Hindu, and Islamic religious holidays. The Government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: the Full Moon Day of Tabauing, the four-day Thingyan (water festival), Buddhist New Year's Day, the Full Moon Day of Kason, the Full Moon Day of Waso, the Full Moon Day of Thadinkyut, the Full Moon Day of Tazaungmone, Christmas, Idul Alhwaha, and Deepa Vali.

Since the 1960s, Christian and Islamic groups have had difficulty importing religious literature. All publications, religious and secular, remain subject to control and censorship. It is illegal to import translations of the Bible in indigenous languages. Officials have occasionally allowed local printing or photocopying of limited quantities of religious materials, including the Qur'an (with the notation that they are for private use only) in indigenous languages without prior approval by government censors.

Virtually all organizations, religious or not, must register with the Government. Religious organizations register with the Ministry of Home Affairs with an endorsement from the Ministry for Religious Affairs. A government directive exempts "genuine" religious organizations from official registration; however, in practice, only registered organizations can buy or sell property or open bank accounts. Due to these requirements, most religious organizations seek registration. Leaders of registered religious groups also have more freedom to travel than those of unregistered organizations.

The Government discouraged proselytizing by non-Buddhist clergy. These restrictions most affected missionary religions, including some Christian denominations and Islam. The Government generally has not allowed permanent foreign religious missions to operate in the country since the mid-1960s, when it expelled nearly all foreign missionaries and nationalized almost all private schools and hospitals. The Government is not known to have paid any compensation in connection with these extensive confiscations.

Citizens and permanent residents were required to carry government-issued National Registration Cards (NRCs) that often indicated religious affiliation and ethnicity. There appeared to be no consistent criteria governing whether a person's religion was indicated on the identification card. Citizens also were required to indicate their religion on certain official application forms for documents such as passports, although passports themselves did not indicate the bearer's religion.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government selectively enforced existing legal restrictions on religious freedom. During the reporting period, the SPDC continued to rule by decree and was not bound by any constitutional or statutory provision concerning discrimination based on religion, race, gender, disability, language, or social status. Religious activities and organizations were subject to restrictions on freedom of expression and association. The Government's pervasive internal security apparatus imposed de facto restrictions on collective and individual worship through infiltration and monitoring of meetings and activities of virtually all organizations. The Government subjected all media, including religious publications, and on occasion sermons, to control and censorship. The Government at times interfered with the meetings of religious groups.

According to state-owned media reports, the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), a government-sponsored mass organization in which participation often is compulsory, organized courses on Buddhist culture that millions of people attended. It was not possible to verify this claim independently.

Churches in Chin State often needed to request permission to hold religious ceremonies two to three months in advance, although authorities generally approved these requests.

Authorities frequently refused to approve requests for gatherings to celebrate traditional Christian and Islamic holidays and restricted the number of Muslims who could gather in one place. For instance, in satellite towns surrounding Rangoon, Muslims were only allowed to gather for worship and religious training during major Muslim holidays.

The Government continued to discriminate against members of minority religious groups, restricting educational activities, proselytizing, and restoration or construction of churches and mosques.

Government authorities continued to prohibit Christian clergy from proselytizing in some areas. Christian groups reported that several times during the reporting period local authorities denied applications for residency permits for known Christian ministers attempting to move to a new township. The groups indicated this was not a widespread practice but depended on the individual community and local authority. In some instances, local authorities reportedly confiscated NRCs of new converts to Christianity. Nonetheless, Christian groups reported that church membership grew, even in predominantly Buddhist regions.

State censorship authorities continued to enforce special restrictions on local publication of the Bible, Qur'an, and other Christian and Islamic texts. The most onerous restriction was a list of more than 100 prohibited words the censors would not allow in Christian or Islamic literature, forbidden as "indigenous terms" or derived from the Pali language long used in Buddhist literature. Some Christian and Islamic groups in the country have used these words since the colonial period. Organizations that translate and publish non-Buddhist religious texts appealed the restrictions. In addition, censors sometimes objected to passages of the Bible's Old Testament and the Qur'an that they interpreted as endorsing violence against nonbelievers. There have been no reports of arrests or prosecutions for possession of any religious literature in recent years.

Authorities restricted the quantity of Bibles and Qur'ans imported into the country. Individuals continued to carry Bibles and Qur'ans into the country in small quantities for personal use. There were no reports that authorities intercepted or confiscated Qur'ans at border entry points.

Some Christian theological seminaries and Bible schools continued to operate, along with several Islamic madrassahs. Some of these institutions did not register with the Myanmar Council of Churches but were able to conduct affairs without government interference. The Government allowed some members of foreign religious groups to enter the country to provide humanitarian assistance, as it had done after Cyclone Nargis in May 2008.

Some Muslims paid large bribes to receive NRCs and passports. Authorities often refused to issue NRCs to Muslims who claimed to belong to one of the country's recognized indigenous ethnic groups, such as the Shan or Karen.

Muslims across the country, as well as some ethnic minority groups such as Chinese and Indians, often were required to obtain permission in advance from the township authorities to leave their hometowns. Authorities generally did not grant permission to Rohingya or Muslim Rakhine to travel for any purpose; however, permission was sometimes obtained through bribery. Non-Rakhine Muslims were granted more freedom to travel. Muslims residing in Rangoon could visit beach resort areas in Thandwe, Rakhine State, but could not return to Rangoon without the signature of the Regional Military Commander. Some were able to bribe local officials to allow them to return. Muslims residing outside Rakhine State often were barred from return travel to their homes if they visited other parts of Rakhine State.

Authorities did not allow Muslim government employees, including village headmen, to grow beards and dismissed some who already had beards.

Muslims in Rakhine State, particularly those of the Rohingya minority group, continued to experience the severest forms of legal, economic, educational, and social discrimination. The Government denied citizenship status to Rohingyas because their ancestors allegedly did not reside in the country at the start of British colonial rule, as the country's citizenship law requires. The Rohingya asserted that their presence in the area predates the British arrival by several centuries. In November 2008, the U.N. Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women urged the Government to review its 1982 Citizenship Law. After completing missions to the country in August 2008 and February 2009, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar specifically noted the Rohingya in his call for the Government to repeal discriminatory legislation and practices. Many of the approximately 21,000 Rohingya Muslims registered in two refugee camps in Bangladesh and the approximately 200,000 Rohingya Muslims living outside those refugee camps refused to return to the country because they feared human rights abuses, including religious persecution.

Rohingya Muslims were not eligible for NRCs. Although essentially treated as illegal foreigners, they were not issued Foreigner Registration Cards (FRCs). Instead, the Government continued a program with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) that issued Temporary Registration Cards (TRCs) to stateless persons in northern Rakhine State, the majority of them Rohingyas. At the end of the reporting period, the UNHCR estimated that approximately 385,000 stateless persons over the age of 10 possessed TRCs. Authorities insisted that Muslim men applying for TRCs submit photos without beards. From March 7-12, 2009, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees visited the country, including Rakhine State, and pledged to expand the organization's efforts to meet current humanitarian needs.

Without citizenship status, Rohingyas did not have access to secondary education in state-run schools because the Government reserved secondary education for citizens. Muslim students from Rakhine State who completed high school were not permitted to travel outside the state to attend college or university. Authorities continued to bar graduation of Muslim university students who did not possess NRCs. These students were permitted to attend classes and sit for examinations, but they could not receive diplomas because they did not have NRCs, which they could not obtain unless they claimed a "foreign" ethnic minority affiliation. Rohingyas were also unable to obtain employment in any civil service positions.

In 2006 a prominent Muslim religious organization asked the Rakhine State Peace and Development Council Chairman, the Regional Military Commander, and the Ministry of Religious Affairs to lift marriage restrictions for Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State. At the end of the reporting period, they had not yet received a response.

Some Muslims also had difficulty obtaining birth certificates. A local official in Sittwe, Rakhine State, reportedly issued a verbal order in 2005 prohibiting the issuance of birth certificates to Muslim babies born in the area. In Rangoon, Muslims usually obtained birth certificates for newborns, but local authorities refused to allow parents to record the names of the babies on their household registers. Rohingya Muslims who returned to Rakhine State faced difficulty when attempting to register births of their children.

There are still original-resident Muslims living in Thandwe, Rakhine State, but newcomers who are Muslim are not allowed to buy property or reside in the township. Authorities do not permit Muslims to live in Gwa or Taungup.

The Government allowed members of all religious groups to establish and maintain links with coreligionists in other countries and to travel abroad for religious purposes, subject to the country's restrictive passport and visa issuance practices, foreign exchange controls, and government monitoring, which extended to all international activities by all citizens regardless of religion. The Government sometimes expedited its burdensome passport issuance procedures for Muslims making the Hajj or Buddhists going on pilgrimage to Bodhgaya, India, although it limited the number of pilgrims. An estimated 2,000 Muslims went on the Hajj in 2008, 500 fewer than in 2007. More than 1,000 Buddhists made pilgrimages to Bodhgaya in 2008.

Non-Buddhists continued to experience employment discrimination at upper levels of the public sector. Few have ever been promoted to the level of director general or higher. There is no stated policy of religious exclusion or discrimination within the Burmese military, but there were no non-Buddhists who held senior positions in the armed forces, although a few Christians reportedly achieved the rank of lieutenant colonel. The Central Executive Committee of the National League for Democracy (NLD), the largest opposition group, did not include non-Buddhists either, although there is widespread support for the NLD among most religious groups. The Government discouraged Muslims from enlisting in the military, and Christian or Muslim military officers who aspired to promotion beyond the rank of major were encouraged by their superiors to convert to Buddhism. Some Muslims who wished to join the military reportedly had to list "Buddhist" as their religion on their applications, although they were not required to convert.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs has stipulated in the past that permission to construct or repair religious buildings "depends upon the population of the location;" however, there appeared to be no correlation between the construction of pagodas and the demand for additional places of Buddhist worship. The Government openly supports Buddhist seminaries and permits them to construct large campuses. Buddhist groups generally have not experienced difficulty in obtaining permission to build new pagodas, monasteries, or community religious halls.

In most regions, Christian and Islamic groups that sought to build small places of worship on side streets or other inconspicuous locations were able to do so only with informal approval from local authorities. When local authorities or conditions changed, approvals have been rescinded and, in some cases, authorities have demolished existing religious buildings. Formal requests encountered long delays, generally were denied, and even when approved could subsequently be reversed by a more senior authority.

Christian groups continued to have trouble obtaining permission to buy land or build new churches in most regions. In some cases authorities refused because they claimed the churches did not possess proper property deeds, but access to official land title was extremely difficult due to the country's complex land law and government titles to most land. In some areas, permission to repair existing places of worship was easier to acquire. In Chin State, authorities have not granted permission to build a new church since 2003.

In February 2009 authorities in Kachin State halted the construction of a Christian orphanage supported by the Shatapru Baptist Church in Myitkyina because it had not obtained official permission for the building, according to media reports. Church sources told the press that they had asked for permission but proceeded with construction since there were no official procedures or guidelines to obtain permission.

It remained extremely difficult for Muslims to acquire permission to build new or repair existing mosques, although internal renovations were allowed in some cases. Historic mosques in Mawlamyine, Mon State and Sittwe, Rakhine State, as well as other areas, continued to deteriorate because authorities would not allow routine maintenance. A number of restrictions are in place on the construction or renovation of mosques and religious schools in northern Rakhine State. In some parts of Rakhine State, authorities cordoned off mosques and forbade Muslims to worship in them. The Government's border security forces continued to conduct arbitrary "inspections" of mosques in northern Rakhine State, demanding that mosque officials show permits to operate the mosques. In some cases, when mosque officials could not produce the permits, officials reportedly ordered congregation members to destroy the mosques.

In the wake of Cyclone Nargis, authorities permitted the caretaker of Rangoon's only synagogue to repair storm damage and restore other parts of the building.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

The Government continued its efforts to control the Buddhist clergy (Sangha). It tried Sangha members for "activities inconsistent with and detrimental to Buddhism" and imposed on the Sangha a code of conduct enforced by criminal penalties. The Government did not hesitate to arrest and imprison lower-level Buddhist monks who opposed the Government. In prison, monks were defrocked and treated as laypersons. In general, they were not allowed to shave their heads and were not given food compatible with the monastic code. Like other political prisoners, they were often beaten and forced to do hard labor.

The Government also subjected the Sangha to special restrictions on freedom of expression and association. Members of the Sangha were not allowed to preach sermons pertaining to politics. Religious lectures could not contain any words, phrases, or stories reflecting political views. The regime told Sangha members to distance themselves from politics, political parties, or members of political parties. The Government prohibited any organization of the Sangha other than the nine monastic orders that fall under the authority of the State Clergy Coordination Committee. The Government prohibited all clergy from being members of any political party.

According to the Assistance Association of Political Prisoners in Burma (AAPP), at the end of the reporting period approximately 200 monks were imprisoned, many of them arrested after the September 2007 peaceful pro-democracy demonstrations. During the reporting period, the Government transferred some of the monks, as well as other political prisoners, to remote jails away from their family members, limiting their access to basic necessities and medicines that visiting relatives generally provide.

The Government took no action to investigate or punish those responsible for extrajudicial killings of at least 30 persons during the regime's violent suppression of September 2007 demonstrations. The Government did not investigate reports that security forces took large numbers of residents and monks from their homes and monasteries during numerous nighttime raids following the protests.

AAPP-Burma estimated that security forces raided at least 52 monasteries between September 26 and December 31, 2007, in retaliation for the monk-led demonstrations. Opposition activists and members of the clergy reported soldiers forcibly entered the monasteries at night and deployed tear gas, fired rubber bullets, and beat monks with batons and bamboo sticks. International NGOs estimated that at least 150 monks were arrested between September and October 2007.

On April 22, 2009, authorities arrested NLD members U Chit Phay and U Aung Soe Wai from Twuntay Township at their homes after the two had led a prayer meeting for the release of activist leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Similar to the well-known Tuesday Prayer Group that meets weekly at Rangoon's Shwedagon Pagoda, a group of about 50 NLD members had convened to pray April 21 at a pagoda in Zee Phyu Gone village. Shortly thereafter, officials charged both men under Section 295a of the Penal Code, which prohibits acts and speech intended to offend religious beliefs. The charge carries a prison sentence of up to two years.

In March 2009 U Gambira's brother and brother-in-law, Aung Ko Ko Lwin and Moe Htet Hylan, were sentenced to five years' imprisonment with hard labor under the Immigration Act. Authorities arrested them after they allegedly made plans to commemorate the one-year anniversary of the formation of the All Burma Monks Alliance (ABMA), in which U Gambira reportedly played a leading role.

On February 20, 2009, state media announced a general amnesty for more than 6,313 prisoners, including several monks. Among the prisoners released were seven Rangoon monks arrested in 2003 for refusing to accept alms from then-Prime Minister Khin Nyunt. AAPP-Burma also confirmed the release of U Kaythara (also known as U Kyaw Min Thet), U Ingura (U Aye Tun Thar), U Thireina (U Kyaw Moe), U Marlaina (U Min Zaw Aung), U Ardatesa (U Aung Ko), U Takekanateya (U Maung Zaw), U Damitika (U Tun Tun), U Nandathiri (U Htay Ye Tun), and U Sandima (U Zaw Min Htet). Authorities also freed Daw Ponena Mee, at 80 years old, the oldest imprisoned nun.

Human rights observers believed the leader of Maggin Monastery, Sayada Aindakaat, remained in detention, as well as other monks arrested in 2007, including U Sanda Wara.

On January 28, 2009, prison officials reportedly ordered an inmate to beat monk U Kelatha at Henzada Prison, Irrawaddy Division, for wearing his prison uniform in the style of monk robes. Authorities had arrested U Kelatha after the September 2007 demonstrations and sentenced him to 35 years in prison.

On January 22, 2009, monk U Arnanda of Thita Tharaphu Monastery, North Okkalapa Township, died in Insein Prison of unknown causes. He was 61 years old.

On January 17, 2009, authorities transferred U Gambira from Mandalay Obo Prison to Hkamti Prison in Sagaing Division, about 1,200 miles north of Rangoon. U Gambira reportedly staged a hunger strike the week before. On November 21, 2008, authorities convicted U Gambira of several charges, including offenses under the Electronics Transactions Act, Immigration Act, and Unlawful Associations Act. Officials sentenced him to 68 years in prison. U Gambira and his brother were held without charge until January 2008. Authorities arrested him on November 5, 2007, and his younger brother Ko Aung Kyaw Kyaw on October 17, 2007.

In January 2009 it was widely reported that authorities threatened some Christian house churches in Rangoon with closure if they did not halt regular services. Authorities also forced leaders of those house churches to sign pledges that they would cease worship. At least eight house churches were closed in Rangoon. According to foreign press reports, Muslim clergy in Rangoon were likewise told to stop worship services and readings of the Qur'an at gatherings in private homes.

In November 2008 the Government handed down sentences to several activists, including monks. According to Human Rights Defenders and Promoters (HRDP), authorities sentenced U Thadamma to two years' imprisonment for alleged participation in the 2007 pro-democracy protests. In addition, authorities sentenced six unnamed monks from Ngwe Kyar Yan Monastery to 11 and a half years in prison. During the crackdown that followed the demonstrations, security forces conducted a pre-dawn raid at the Ngwe Kyar Yan monastery in Rangoon and removed an estimated 70 monks. Journalists and foreign diplomatic representatives visited Ngwe Kyar Yan monastery in Rangoon and found bamboo batons, riot control munitions, broken windows, and pools of blood on the floor of the monastery's dormitory.

Also in November 2008 the international and exile press reported that nine Muslim activists were sentenced in Rakhine State. These arrests have not been confirmed.

In the weeks before the 2008 anniversary of the September 2007 protests and crackdown, security forces temporarily occupied some monasteries in the cities of Rangoon and Mandalay and in Rakhine State that were suspected of involvement in pro-democracy activities.

In September 2008 on the eve of the one-year anniversary of the 2007 protests, state media reported that the State Monk Coordination Committee issued a directive to all monasteries and colleges in Chauk, Magwe Division, warning monks not to participate in political activities.

AAPP reported that on September 5, 2008, authorities raided Marlayon monastery. In the early morning, 20 persons allegedly entered the monastery, ordered monks to lie on the floor, searched the buildings, and removed the abbot. A few days later the abbot publicly denied the account.

On August 23, 2008, authorities arrested monks U Damathara and U Nandara, both from the Thardu monastery in

Rangoon. Officials did not acknowledge their arrests, although human rights observers believed they may have been detained as a precaution against future protests. They likely remained in custody.

In August 2008 the State Monk Coordination Committee publicly reminded monks of a 2006 directive that banned monks in Rangoon Division from leaving their monasteries between 10 p.m. and 4 a.m. According to sources, authorities did not strictly enforce this policy.

In August 2008 authorities sentenced nine monks to two years' imprisonment for "the deliberate and malicious...outraging of religious feelings." On July 15, 2008, police arrested the monks at Rangoon Central Railway Station.

On March 30, 2008 the army arrested 11 Muslim community leaders in Maungdaw, Rakhine State. Among those arrested were the president of the Maungdaw District Myanmar Muslim League, U Than Tun (aka Muhammad Solin), community leader Dr. Tun Aung, and local businessman, U Niramad. While authorities did not provide any explanation for the arrests, local residents reported to the media they believed the arrests were the result of the regime's paranoia about alleged organized Muslim political activity in the area. It was believed that the 11 leaders continued to be held at the end of the reporting period, although no information on their condition has been released.

In October 2007 authorities detained approximately 90 monks, including the head monk of the Ngwe Kyar Yan Monastery, at a monastery in the Kaba Aye monastery complex, where authorities interrogated them. Many novices had departed earlier to avoid arrest, and parents had retrieved other novices.

On September 26, 2007, soldiers and police raided at least six large monasteries in Rangoon and arrested an estimated 100 monks, including Sayada Aindakaat, the leader of Maggin Monastery.

Beginning in 2004 and continuing through the reporting period, a group of Buddhist laypersons known as the Tuesday Prayer Group attempted to gather every Tuesday at Rangoon's Shwedagon Pagoda to pray for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi. Authorities sometimes used the pro-regime USDA to block the group from entering the pagoda grounds and make them pray outside the entrance or to shout and clap to drown out their prayers.

On the morning of October 12, 2007, authorities briefly detained Tuesday Prayer Group leader Naw Ohn Hla. Authorities released her later that day but confined her to her Rangoon neighborhood for one year, preventing her from leading the Tuesday Prayer Group.

In January 2007 USDA members verbally and physically attacked Naw Ohn Hla and the Tuesday Prayer Group as they tried to enter Rangoon's Shwedagon Pagoda. Witnesses reported that approximately 100 men in plain clothes surrounded Naw Ohn Hla and demanded that she and the other members immediately depart. When they refused, witnesses reported that USDA members beat several of the Prayer Group members. Uniformed police at the scene did not attempt to stop the attack, and authorities did not investigate the incident or pursue a complaint Naw Ohn Hla filed.

In July 2006 authorities from Thandwe, Rakhine State, arrested Abbot Wila Tha and his assistant, Than Kakesa, from the Buddhist monastery of U Shwe Maw village, Taungup Township, closed the monastery, and forced 59 monks and novices to leave. Local sources claimed the reason for the arrest was that the abbot refused to accept donations from or conduct religious ceremonies for the authorities. Authorities claimed that the abbot was endangering local stability by talking to monks and novices about democracy, that he was a supporter of the NLD, and that he had supported the visit of Aung San Suu Kyi several years earlier.

There continued to be credible reports from various regions of the country that government officials compelled persons, Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike, especially in rural areas, to contribute money, food, or materials to state-sponsored projects to build, renovate, or maintain Buddhist religious shrines or monuments. The Government denied that it used coercion and called these contributions "voluntary donations" consistent with Buddhist ideas of earning merit.

Forced Religious Conversion

Although authorities appear to have moved away from a campaign of forced conversion, there continued to be evidence that other means were being used to entice non-Buddhists to convert to Buddhism. Authorities pressured Christian Chin to attend Buddhist seminaries and monasteries and encouraged them to convert to Buddhism. Christian Chin reported that local authorities operated a high school that only Buddhist students could attend and promised government jobs to the graduates. Christians had to convert to Buddhism to attend the school. An exile Chin human rights group claimed local government officials placed the children of Chin Christians in Buddhist monasteries, where they were given religious instruction and converted to Buddhism without their parents' knowledge or consent. Reports suggested that the Government also sought to induce members of the Naga ethnic group in Sagaing Division to convert to Buddhism through similar means.

There were no reports of forced religious conversion of U.S. minor citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States or who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Preferential treatment for Buddhists and widespread prejudice against ethnic South Asians, particularly ethnic Rohingya Muslims, were key sources of social tensions between the Buddhist majority and Christian and Muslim minorities. There were no reports of anti-Semitic acts.

The Government tightly controlled the limited number of private academic institutions and their curricula. Similar controls

extended to Buddhist monastery-based schools, Christian seminaries, and Muslim madrassahs. During the reporting period, the Government cracked down on private tutoring and attempted to ban the practice. Aung Pe, a private teacher and NLD supporter, remained in prison, reportedly in poor health, and was serving a three year sentence for an alleged violation in 2005 of the Private Tuition Act.

Since 1994, when Buddhist members split from the Karen National Union (KNU) to organize the pro-government Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), there have been armed conflicts between the DKBA and the predominantly Christian anti-government KNU. Although the DKBA reportedly includes some Christians and there are many Buddhists in the KNU, the armed conflict between the two Karen groups has had strong religious overtones. There were also unverified reports DKBA members continued to expel villagers who converted to Christianity.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Government restrictions on speech, press, assembly, and movement, including diplomatic travel, made it difficult to obtain timely and accurate information on human rights in the country, including freedom of religion. Information about abuses often becomes available only months or years after events and it frequently is difficult or impossible to verify.

The U.S. Government continued to promote religious freedom in its contact with all sectors of society as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. During the reporting period, U.S. Embassy officials discussed the importance of improving religious freedom with government and military authorities, private citizens, scholars, representatives of other governments, and international business and media representatives. Embassy representatives met regularly with leaders of Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, and Muslim religious groups, including ethnic minority religious leaders, members of the faculties of schools of theology, and other religiously affiliated organizations and NGOs. These meetings included regular invitations to the U.S. Chargé d'Affaires' residence to build understanding and tolerance among the groups.

Through outreach and travel, when not blocked by regime officials, Embassy representatives offered support to local NGOs and religious leaders and exchanged information with otherwise isolated human rights NGOs and religious leaders. Members of many of Burma's ethnic groups and religions participated in English language and current events studies at the Embassy's American Center. The American Center regularly translated statements and reports by the U.S. Government and NGOs on violations of religious freedom in the country and distributed them via its frequently visited library. The U.S. Government continued to support the UNHCR effort to work with the Ministry of Immigration and Population to issue TRCs, fairly and without bribes or unreasonable requirements, to undocumented Rohingyas. In addition, the Embassy worked closely with Buddhist, Islamic, and Christian NGOs involved in education and teacher training.

The country was first designated a CPC in 1999 and most recently was re-designated on January 16, 2009. As the action under the International Religious Freedom Act, the Secretary of State designated the existing ongoing arms embargo referenced in 22 CFR 126.1(1), pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act. The U.S. Government has a wide array of financial and trade sanctions in place against the country for violations of human rights. The passage and signing into law in July 2008 of the Tom Lantos Block Burmese Junta Anti-Democratic Efforts (JADE) Act further strengthened these sanctions. The United States has also opposed all assistance to the Government by international financial institutions and urged the governments of other countries to take similar actions. U.S. sanctions include a ban on imports from the country, a ban on the export of financial services to the country, a ban on bilateral aid to the Government, a ban on the export of arms to the country, and a suspension of General System of Preferences benefits and Overseas Private Investment Corporation and U.S. Export-Import Bank financial services in support of U.S. investment and exports to the country. The U.S. Government also ended active promotion of trade with the country, limited the issuance of visas to high-ranking government and military officials and their immediate family members, and froze SPDC assets in the United States. U.S. citizens have been prohibited from engaging in new investment activities in the country since May 1997.

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