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Burma - Country of Concern: latest update, 31 December 2014

0.1 Latest Update: 31 December 2014

The human rights situation in Burma remains difficult, with mixed progress on the government's reform agenda witnessed over the past three months.

The UK continues to raise strong concerns about the human rights situation in Burma, both with Burmese ministers and officials (at national and state level), and through international bodies including the UN and EU. In November, the UN General Assembly adopted by consensus an EU-drafted resolution detailing the human rights situation in Burma, which the UK co-sponsored. The resolution welcomed the improvements made over the last few years toward political reform, reconciliation, and the protection and promotion of human rights. However, it also urged the government to end all remaining human rights violations and abuses. In particular it called for action to address the abuses in Rakhine, particularly against the Rohingya. While the resolution welcomed the release of some prisoners of conscience, it called for the unconditional release of them all, including all political activists and human rights defenders detained or convicted recently.

In October, Minister for Asia, Hugo Swire, and Minister of State for International Development, Desmond Swayne, met U Khin Yi, the Burmese Minister for Immigration, and Maung Maung Ohn, recently appointed Rakhine Chief Minister during the latter's visit to London. During those meetings, Ministers Swire and Swayne stressed our concern about the situation in Rakhine, including for the Rohingya community, and urged the Burmese government to work towards a long-term solution that brings peace and reconciliation.

There was continued heavy fighting in Kachin and Northern Shan States in November. On 19 November, 23 cadets from several ethnic armed groups were killed by Tatmadaw (Burmese Army) shelling of a training camp in Kachin State. Ethnic armed groups also attacked and killed Tatmadaw soldiers in Northern Shan. We are in frequent contact with the UN and local organisations about the humanitarian implications of recent fighting and are continuing our programme of humanitarian assistance for the 100,000 people in Kachin and Northern Shan States, many of whom have been living in camps for displaced people for over three years since the fighting restarted. We have urged an end to the violence, and are encouraged by the recent resumption of talks between the government and ethnic armed groups. We continue to support meaningful negotiations towards a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement.

Two political prisoners were released in October, but at the end of December an estimated minimum of 164 remain behind bars, with a further 203 awaiting trial following arrests throughout 2014. We continue to encourage the government to maintain a mechanism for reviewing cases that involves civil society, and to update legislation to international standards.

There were also a number of legal cases involving the media, including four journalists and the CEO of the defunct Unity journal who were sentenced in early October to seven years in prison with hard labour; their appeal to have this reduced to five years was rejected in late November. Following his detention at the end of September, freelance journalist Ko Par Gyi was killed while in military custody in Mon State some time in early October. We welcome the National Human Rights Commission's decision to investigate the circumstances of Ko Par Gyi's death and continue to stress the need for impartial investigations into such instances.

On 22 December, a villager was fatally shot by the police and 17 others injured while protesting at the Letpadaung copper mine project. Protests have since continued at the site and elsewhere in the country with further altercations between the police and demonstrators. There has been widespread criticism of the failure to follow up and implement the recommendations made by the Letpadaung Investigation Commission in early 2013, following a major crackdown against protesters in November 2012.

We welcome the release of a further 80 child soldiers on 24 November, who were demobilised in a ceremony witnessed by UN bodies and international NGOs. Coming after the discharge of 91 child soldiers in August and 109 in September, this brings the number of those discharged to more than 500 since 2012.

Also in November, a civil court in Northern Shan State convicted a Burmese soldier of the kidnap and rape of a Kachin minor, sentencing him to 13 years' imprisonment. Such cases have traditionally been heard by military tribunals only with few (mostly minor) convictions resulting. We are encouraged by this conviction and the fact the case had been transferred by the military for trial in a civilian court.

On 24 November, the Women's League of Burma released their report "[If They Had Hope They Would Speak](#)" which highlights ongoing sexual violence in ethnic communities across the country. We continue to support and fund activity to improve access to justice for survivors and raise awareness in the community. Burma is one of six focus countries for the UK under our [third National Action Plan on Women, Peace & Security](#). [The Implementation Plan](#) for this was launched in December, and aims to capture the diverse set of initiatives across our diplomatic, development and defence work to put women and girls at the centre of our efforts to prevent and resolve conflict, to promote peace and stability, and to end all forms of violence.

We remain concerned about the situation in Rakhine State. Although there have not been major large-scale incidences of inter-communal violence in the last three months, there has been increased intimidation, harassment and arbitrary detentions of individuals from within the Muslim community. Despite signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the government in August, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) have only been able to restart very limited operations, and the provision of healthcare and other services across the State for all communities remains perilous. We will continue to work closely with MSF and other partners to lobby in support of a return to full coverage.

As reported in the last quarterly update, a pilot exercise in an Internally Displaced Persons camp in Myebon resulted in some Muslims having their citizenship status verified and confirmed. However, little has changed in their circumstances since. In addition, we are concerned that only those who identified themselves as "Bengali" were able to take part. We continue to urge the Burmese authorities to protect the human rights of all communities within Rakhine regardless of citizenship status. The Rakhine Action Plan has not yet been finalised, but we have made clear to the government our concerns that drafts do not do enough to ensure peace and reconciliation in the State.

State media announced that the four controversial "Protection of Race and Religion Bills", which put restrictions on interfaith marriage, religious conversion, polygamy and population control, will be debated in parliament in early 2015. The proposed laws are potentially discriminatory against religious and ethnic minorities and women, and could contravene a number of Burma's own laws and international human rights standards; we have expressed our concerns and will be following developments closely in the coming year.