



## **US suspends economic sanctions without meeting human rights benchmarks - joint statement by WLB, FDB, NY-Forum, SYCB**

*The economic sanctions of the US on Burma were originally adopted because of the disregard for democratic principles and grave human right violations committed by the Burmese government. These violations continue but the pressure for the Burmese government to stop them is now removed.*

On May 20, 2012 the United States suspended all of its economic sanctions against the new military-led government in Burma. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced that new U.S. investment will be allowed in Burma for the first time in 15 years, highlighting that the progress in Burma toward democratization and national reconciliation is irreversible. The announcement to suspend its economic sanctions on Burma will dramatically impact the people of Burma, particularly in ethnic minority areas.

Lifting sanctions is in part the result of releasing a number of well-known political prisoners in January 2012, however, hundreds of political prisoners remain behind bars. Their release is not prioritized in the current political reforms by a government that denies the existence of political prisoners or prisoners of conscience in Burma.

The government has reached preliminary ceasefire agreements with eleven ethnic armed groups. However, various forms of human rights violation, including forced labor, land confiscation, extortion have still taken place in Karen and Shan States. After breaking a 17 year-long ceasefire agreement with the Kachin Independent Organisation (KIO), the Burma Army intensified military operations in Kachin State resulting more than 70,000 Internally Displaced Person.

The United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC), consisting of 12 ethnic armed groups called for the cessation of all military offensives in Kachin State by 10 June 2012. The statement warned that failure to secure peace in the area would result in a “review of the peace process and future programs, including the preliminary ceasefire agreements reached”, which could result in a breakdown of all ceasefire agreements.

The heinous human right violations and sexual violence against women continue to occur in Kachin State. On May 18, 2012 the Kachin Women Association – Thailand (KWAT) released a statement, *Gang-rape in church highlights Burma Army impunity for sexual violence in Kachin State*. The statement, which refers to the abuses that occurred on May 1, 2012, confirms the continuous use of rape as a weapon of war and the judicial system’s protection to perpetrators of sexual violence.

It is our great concern that while the fierce attacks in Kachin State are ongoing the international community is applauding President Thein Sein’s approach to peace and reform far beyond the current improvements. We do not want to gamble on the lives of Burma's ethnic people who have suffered for five decades under military rule. The current regime’s reform towards democratization and national reconciliation are reversible and leverage must be exercised alongside a system of checks and balances to realize enduring reforms. Political prisoners who continue to languish in Burma’s jails and displaced women and children in Shan and Kachin States who are living in fear, do not yet share the jubilation of these preliminary political reforms.

It is our concern that once the floodgate has been opened for massive increases in private investment and development aid, this historic opportunity for genuine democratic change may be lost in the frenzy to embrace a government quickly rewarded for releasing prisoners who should

never have been imprisoned, and taking important –yet still superfluous steps at resolving deeply rooted inequities in ethnic areas.

We sincerely hope that an invitation to participate in and widen these first steps towards democracy in Burma will be extended to all of our people – ethnic and Burman – inside the country and in exile – who share this common dream of freedom for our country men, women, and children.

We therefore believe that there is a strong need to push forward until the following benchmarks are met:

1. Immediate and unconditional release of all remaining political prisoners and the full restoration of their civil and political rights
2. Nationwide ceasefire leading to sustainable peace and put an end to impunity for ongoing human rights abuses, particularly on the rape of women in ethnic nationalities areas
3. A genuine and inclusive dialogue with all political parties, other pro-democracy forces, and ethnic nationality groups
4. Justice and accountability for past and present human rights abuses

The United States and international community must press for urgent steps to meet these benchmarks and to initiate substantive reforms without delay. These steps are the real litmus test of whether the Burmese government genuinely intends to build a lasting peace and ensure the protection of all human rights.

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