

Christian Group, Congress Urge Obama to Raise Religious Freedom in Burma

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has urged President Barack Obama to raise constitutional and legislative reform, religious freedom and the need to end conflicts and begin a peace process with ethnic nationalities, during his official trip to Asia this week, which will include a visit to Burma.

CSW is also calling on Obama to press for the release of all remaining political prisoners in Burma. According to media reports, last week the Burmese government released more than 450 prisoners as a goodwill gesture ahead of Obama's visit, however there are concerns that no political prisoners are among them.

Reuters reports that Obama is expected to raise the issue of ongoing ethnic violence in Burma's Rakhine State "directly with the leadership." U.S. Congressman Trent Franks (R-AZ), along with 20 other members of the Senate and House, have written a bi-partisan letter to Obama urging him to underscore current human rights atrocities in Burma that threaten future peace and stability.

CSW urges Obama to press the Burmese government to intervene decisively to end the violence in Rakhine and Kachin states and allow unhindered access for international aid and humanitarian assistance to the affected areas. A peace process and political dialogue between the government and ethnic nationalities must be established in ethnic states where there are ongoing conflicts.

Religious freedom is also a concern in the predominantly Christian Chin State, where the Chin are often discriminated against or ill-treated on the dual basis of ethnicity and

religion. A recent report by the Chin Human Rights Organisation outlined a decades-long pattern of religious freedom violations, including more than 40 separate incidents of torture or ill-treatment.

The Burmese government should also be encouraged to continue with constitutional and legislative reform in the interests of democracy, including the repeal of the 1982 Citizenship Law, which effectively stripped the Rohingya of their citizenship and rendered them stateless.

Mervyn Thomas, CSW's Chief Executive, said, "We welcome President Obama's visit as a valuable opportunity to deliver some very clear and key messages to the Government of Burma: that the reforms already underway deserve recognition and encouragement, but that there is still a very, very long way to go.

"Until the conflict in Kachin State and the violence in Rakhine State end," Thomas continued, "until there is a genuine peace process with ethnic nationalities, involving a political dialogue to find a political solution to decades of civil war; until the citizenship of everyone born in Burma is respected and protected; until all prisoners of conscience are released; and until there is freedom of religion or belief for all people in Burma, we cannot speak of true and lasting change.

"The situation is fragile, and we urge President Obama to use his visit to promote peace and human rights for all the people of Burma. We welcome the letter by members of the U.S. Congress, and hope that the president will take up the issues raised as a priority during his visit.

"There are two dangers at the moment: premature euphoria, and entrenched cynicism—both of which could undermine the chance of genuine change in Burma. President Obama has a unique opportunity to really make a difference for the people of

Burma who have suffered so much for so long.”