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BURMA CSW welcomes “significant and positive” prisoner releases

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) today welcomed the release of several high-profile political prisoners in Burma, including Min Ko Naing and Ko Mya Aye, leaders of the failed pro-democracy uprising in 1988, and continued to call for the unconditional release of all remaining political prisoners.

According to Burmese State Television, an estimated 651 prisoners are expected to be released, though the exact number of political prisoners released is not clear. Ethnic Shan leader U Khun Tun Oo and the dissident Buddhist monk U Gambira are also among the political prisoners to be released, along with five reporters from Democratic Voice of Burma.

This latest round of prisoner releases come a day after the government agreed a landmark ceasefire with rebels from the Karen ethnic group at talks with the Karen National Union (KNU) in Hpa-an, capital of eastern Karen state. The Karen have fought for greater autonomy for more than 60 years.

On his recent visit to Burma, Foreign Secretary William Hague acknowledged the “momentum for change” in Burma, but stressed that “much more is needed to be done” and that the release of all political prisoners in Burma was “vital” if EU sanctions were to be lifted.

CSW’s East Asia Team Leader Benedict Rogers said, “We warmly welcome the release of political prisoners today as a positive and significant sign of progress in Burma. We urge the Burmese government to release all remaining political prisoners, and to allow all those who are released to participate actively and without restriction in the political process. We also welcome the ceasefire announced yesterday in Karen State and in other ethnic states previously, and urge the military to reduce its presence and withdraw its troops from these areas. The international community must continue to monitor this situation very closely, ensure that the military respects and abides by the ceasefire, and that an absence of fighting can be turned into a genuine peace. We call on the Burmese government to ensure that human rights violations such as rape, forced labor, torture, the use of human minesweepers, and religious discrimination and persecution stop, and to begin a process in which a political solution is established that addresses the needs and desires of the ethnic nationalities in a federal democracy guaranteeing equal rights and autonomy. Burma today moved a step closer towards the change we want to see, but there is still further to go and we encourage President Thein Sein to continue along this path and establish genuine peace and freedom in the country.”