



LAST MONTH IN BURMA

News from and about Burma

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EU lifts sanctions on Burma

On 22 April, the European Union lifted all sanctions on Burma except the arms embargo, despite the fact that not one of the benchmarks set by the EU has been met.

The EU suspended sanctions on 26 April 2012, in recognition of changes that had taken place in Burma. At the time the decision to suspend the sanctions was controversial, with concerns that a suspension of all sanctions was premature given that key improvements in human rights which had been demanded by the EU had not been met. On suspending the sanctions, the EU laid out four key benchmarks where it expected to see improvements in return for the suspension of sanctions. These were:

“...the EU still expects the unconditional release of remaining political prisoners and the removal of all restrictions placed on those already released. It looks forward to the end of conflict and to substantially improved access for humanitarian assistance, in particular for those affected by conflict in Kachin State and along the Eastern border, as well as to addressing the status and improving the welfare of the Rohingyas.”

However, not one of these benchmarks has been met, and in the case of the Rohingya the situation has significantly worsened. Hundreds of political prisoners remain in jail, and almost all of those who have been released have only been released conditionally. Humanitarian access is still restricted with significant problems in delivery of aid to displaced people in Kachin and Rakhine state.

Conflict in Northern Shan State and Kachin State continues and the Burmese Army launched a major offensive in December during which civilians were targeted. The Burmese Army is also frequently violating the ceasefire in Shan state. Around 130,000 Rohingyas have been forced from their homes and are now living in squalid camps, and President Thein Sein has ruled out reform of the discriminatory 1982 Citizenship Law. The United Nations has documented multiple on-going human rights abuses which could be classified as war crimes and crimes against humanity.

“The EU’s scrapping of targeted sanctions on Burma is premature and recklessly imperils human rights gains made so far,” said Lotte Leicht, EU director at Human Rights Watch. “EU member states are ditching measures that have motivated the current progress and gambling on the good will of Burma’s government and military to keep their word to keep reforms on track.”

Burma Campaign UK has produced a detailed analysis of the benchmarks and EU policy, available here: <http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk/index.php/news-and-reports/burma-briefing/title/the-european-union-must-not-abandon-human-rights-benchmarks>

‘Ethnic Cleansing’ of Rohingya Muslims – new report by Human Rights Watch

On the same day that the EU lifted sanctions on Burma, Human Rights Watch released a new report revealing how Burmese authorities and members of Arakanese groups have committed crimes against humanity in a campaign of ethnic cleansing against Rohingya Muslims in Arakan State since June 2012.

The report, “All You Can Do is Pray’: Crimes Against Humanity and Ethnic Cleansing of Rohingya Muslims in Burma’s Arakan State,” claims that Burmese officials, community leaders, and Buddhist monks organised and encouraged ethnic Arakanese backed by state security forces to conduct coordinated attacks on Muslim neighborhoods and villages in October 2012 to terrorize and forcibly relocate the population.

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The tens of thousands of displaced have been denied access to humanitarian aid and been unable to return home.

“The Burmese government engaged in a campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya that continues today through the denial of aid and restrictions on movement,” said Phil Robertson, deputy Asia director at Human Rights Watch.

Displaced Rohingya told Human Rights Watch how in October security forces stood by or joined with large groups of Arakanese men armed with machetes, swords, homemade guns, and Molotov cocktails who attacked their villages.

Human Rights Watch uncovered evidence of four mass-grave sites in Arakan State, three dating from the immediate aftermath of the June violence and one from the October violence.

Many of the displaced Muslims have been living in overcrowded camps that lack adequate food, shelter, water and sanitation, schools, and medical care. Security forces in some areas have provided protection to displaced Muslims, but more typically they have prevented access to markets, livelihoods, and humanitarian assistance, for which many are in desperate need.

“Ethnic cleansing,” though not a formal legal term, has been defined as a purposeful policy by an ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas.

Government Commission releases report on violence in Arakan State

On 29 April, the government-appointed commission released its report into violence in Arakan State in June and October last year.

The Commission, which did not include any Rohingya on its panel, recommended that the “temporary separation” of the two communities should continue and called on the government to double the number of security forces in Arakan State, despite the fact that security forces have been implicated in the violence.

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the human rights, Tomás Ojea Quintana, said in March, “I have received reports of State involvement in some of the acts of violence, and of instances where the military, police and other civilian law enforcement forces have been standing by while atrocities have been committed before their very

eyes, including by well organised ultra-nationalist Buddhist mobs. This may indicate direct involvement by some sections of the State or implicit collusion and support for such actions.”

However, the report did not recommend holding anyone accountable for human rights abuses committed during the violence. The Commission also refused to use the name Rohingya, instead referring to ‘Bengalis’ or provide recommendations to effectively tackle discrimination against the Rohingya.

The report highlighted concern about “rapid population growth” among Muslims in Arakan State and discussed mandatory family planning for Rohingya Muslims.

Aung San Suu Kyi, who has faced criticism for failing to speak out on the issue, called for Burma’s 1982 Citizenship Law to be revised in accordance with international standards during her trip to Japan in April.

“We have to find out whether our citizenship law is fair or not; if it meets international standards, and based on the findings, if necessary, the [law] must be revised,” she said.

Political Prisoners released

On 23 April, 59 political prisoners were released, a day after the EU lifted sanctions on Burma.

The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) joint-secretary Bo Kyi said that political prisoners “are somewhat like bargaining chips, used by the government to gain some achievements” from the international community.

Shan villagers flee Burma Army atrocities in Shan State

The Burmese Army continues to commit grave human rights abuses against civilians in northern Shan State, according to The Shan Human Rights Foundation.

Despite ongoing peace talks with the Shan State Army-North (SSA-N), troops from nine Burmese battalions have since last month been conducting a fierce offensive to drive the SSA-N from their bases south of Tangyan.

On 15 April, during the annual Water Festival, Burmese troops launched new attacks, deliberately targeting civilians in several villages.

Mortar shells were fired at two villages, injuring two children, and damaging a school and several

houses. Burmese troops detained and beat civilians, including children in at least nine villages, causing serious injury.

A group of about fifty young men and women were used as human shields, forced to walk in front and behind Burmese troops, to ward off attacks by Shan troops.

Burmese troops have burned vehicles of villagers attempting to flee, and have also threatened to burn down entire villages where fighting takes place with Shan troops.

As a result of these abuses, it is estimated that nearly 2,000 villagers have now fled to Tangyan, where they are taking refuge in temples and in relatives' houses. Some have also fled east across the Salween River to Wa-controlled areas.

Copper mine protesters beaten and arrested

Protests against the Letpadaung copper mine in Monywa continued in April.

About 100 farmers in Sete Village, Salingyi Township, began ploughing the land that had been confiscated for the Monywa copper mine. On 25 April police fired shots and used batons to disperse the farmers. At least seven villagers were injured in the crackdown and police arrested two villagers and activist Aung Soe.

The Letpadaung project is a joint venture between China's Wan Bao Company and the military-owned Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings Ltd. The project resulted in land confiscations and environmental damage. Protests started in June 2012 by a group of farmers who demanded compensation for confiscated land and suspension of the activities of the copper mine, which is located in Monywa, central Burma.

Protesters arrested after pipeline demonstration

In April, several hundred people held a demonstration in Madaya Island, Arakan State against the Kyaukpyu-Kunming oil and gas pipeline built by China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC). Protesters called for proper compensation for land confiscation and protested about the environmental damage caused by the project.

On 19 April, the local police charged 10 local villagers under the Peaceful Gathering and Demonstration Law for participating in the protest without obtaining prior official permission. Protest organisers said they went ahead with the demonstration after authorities twice refused to grant a protest permit.

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**for Human Rights, Democracy
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