

UN: “Profound crisis” continues in Arakan State

Following his trip to Burma in February, UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Tomás Ojea Quintana expressed his concern about the “profound crisis” in Arakan state.

He highlighted the lack of adequate health care in the Rohingya IDP camps and said that Taung Paw camp in Myaybon Township “felt more like a prison than a camp.” He warned that IDP camps “cannot become permanent settlements, and if necessary the government needs to allocate land” for the Rohingya communities.

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) have said that “tens of thousands of people are still unable to access urgently needed medical care.” Aid workers continue to face threats and intimidation, preventing them delivering aid.



Rohingya IDP camp. Credit: Refugees International

Serious human rights abuses continue to be committed. Quintana reported allegations of torture and deaths in custody of Rohingya in Buthidaung prison. On 12 February, Rohingya activist Aung Win was arrested and briefly detained in order to prevent him from meeting Quintana.

According to an article in The Guardian newspaper, at least 13 Rohingya women, including teenagers, were raped by Burmese security forces in February. An 18-year-old girl described how a group of uniformed soldiers from Burma’s border security unit, the Nasaka, entered her house in northern Maungdaw shortly after midnight on 20 February.

“They took us separately to different places and tortured and raped us,” she told The Guardian, referring also to her mother and younger sister, 15. “They came in and out of the house at least 15 times. They also beat my mother with a gun and dragged her outside to the road and beat her to the ground.”

Thousands of Rohingya continue to flee the desperate conditions and on-going abuses in Arakan State, making dangerous boat trips trying to reach neighbouring countries.

The Sri Lankan Navy rescued 32 Rohingya on 16 February after their boat started to sink off the coast of Sri Lanka. The survivors said that 98 people on the boat had died of starvation and dehydration and they had had to throw the bodies overboard into the sea. They had been adrift at sea for 25 days after their boat broke down.

Burmese Army continues attacks during peace talks

On 4 February talks were held between the government’s ‘Peace Making Committee’ and the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) at Ruili, China, on the border with Burma. The outcome of

the meeting was an agreement to hold further talks.

Talks were also held between the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC), a coalition of Burma’s armed ethnic groups, and government negotiators in Thailand on 20 February. The UNFC

delegation included representatives from KIO and 11 ethnic armed groups, including the Karen National Union, New Mon State Party, Kachin Independence Organisation, Karenni National Progressive Party and the Chin National Front.

Aung Min, who is leading the government's ceasefire negotiations, also met Lt-Gen Yawd Serk, President of the Restoration Council of Shan State / Shan State Army (RCSS/SSA).

Despite the talks, and a ceasefire announcement by the military-backed government in January, Burmese army attacks have continued in Kachin state.

The Burmese army also launched attacks in Shan state in February. The fighting is now reported to have stopped but government troops have not withdrawn.

On 5 February, the military-backed government announced that it would allow the UN and international aid groups access to deliver humanitarian assistance to all IDP camps in Kachin state. President Thein Sein has been blocking aid to KIO controlled areas.

In February, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) was able to deliver surgical and other medical supplies to both government-controlled territory and KIO areas. The UN has also been able to deliver some aid, but it is not clear if access is on-going.

Local NGOs, have also continued to experience difficulties. On 1 February, Burmese army troops stopped members of the Kachin Baptist Convention (KBC) when they attempted to deliver aid to IDPs near Hpakant, Kachin State.

Political Prisoner Committee announced

On 7 February, President Thein Sein announced that a Committee will be formed to review political prisoner cases in Burma.

The formation of the committee was originally announced in November, with a promise that arrangements would be discussed by the end of 2012.

The committee, which is led by President's Office Minister Soe Thane, held its first meeting on 23 February. The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners-Burma, Former Political Prisoners League, the National Human Rights Commission, and representatives from NLD and the 88 Generation Students attended the meeting.

Burma Campaign UK has been campaigning with the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners and others for the creation of a committee to review cases of political prisoners in Burma. However, key issues such as its mandate, budget and time-frame remain unclear. For example, it is not known if the committee is temporary and will close after submitting its report to the President. The committee needs to be permanent as almost every repressive law is still on the books, and people are now being arrested and jailed under new laws supposedly giving people more rights, such as the so-called right to protest law. Until all repressive laws are repealed, there will continue to be a need for this committee to review individual cases.

These issues will be critical in assessing whether this is a genuine attempt to resolve the issue of political prisoners in Burma, or merely yet another half-measure designed to alleviate international pressure without introducing fundamental democratic reforms and guaranteeing human rights.

"It is important now that the international community doesn't just welcome this committee as good enough and forget about political prisoners. They must apply pressure to ensure it genuinely addresses the problem," said Wai Hnin, Campaigns Officer at Burma Campaign UK.

You can see Burma Campaign UK's list of ten key questions on the committee here: www.burmacampaign.org.uk/index.php/news-and-reports/news-stories/burma-political-prisoner-committee-welcome-but-serious-questions-remain/8



Child soldiers released but child soldier recruitment continues

On 15 February, 24 child soldiers were released by the Burmese Army at an official ceremony in Rangoon.

Speaking at the ceremony, Bertrand Bainvel, UNICEF's representative in Burma, said that "a series of discharges just like this must accelerate in the coming months in order for the Tatmadaw [Burmese Army] to quickly achieve the double objective of zero under-age recruitment and full

discharge of those that are under 18 in the armed forces.”

A report released by Child Soldiers International in January shows that despite nearly a decade of international engagement and an action plan to end the use of child soldiers signed with the UN in June 2012, children continue to be recruited and used as soldiers by the Burmese army and the Border Guard Forces (BGFs).

It also found that effective safeguards to prevent future recruitment of child soldiers have not been implemented.

“Long term prevention of underage recruitment will only be possible if the Myanmar government demonstrates genuine political will to end underage recruitment, and it is supported in taking the necessary steps to achieve this by the international community,” said Richard Clarke, Director at Child Soldiers International.

UN Human Rights Rapporteur highlights “significant human rights shortcomings”

On 16 February, following a five-day mission to Burma, UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Tomás Ojea Quintana stated; “...there are significant human rights shortcomings that remain unaddressed...”

The Special Rapporteur highlighted continuing use of torture in Burma’s jails and the “ongoing practice of arbitrary arrest and torture” in Kachin state.

However, despite these serious on-going human rights abuses, and the fact that Burma still has one of the worst human rights records in the world, the European Union has been discussing whether to downgrade Burma as a priority for the United Nations Human Rights Council.

Discussions have been taking on whether Burma should continue to be listed under Item 4; ‘Human rights situations that require the Council’s attention’, or changed to Item 10, ‘Technical assistance and capacity building.’ Germany is understood to be privately supporting moving Burma to Item 10.

Draft media law condemned as new censorship

A new draft media law has been condemned by journalists in Burma and international media watchdogs as an attempt to bring in new censorship laws.

According to news reports, the new draft legislation bans reporting on several topics, including any news

or commentary critical of the military-drafted 2008 constitution and material that could “disturb the rule of law”, “incite unrest”, or “violates the constitution and other existing laws”. It also threatens six-month prison sentences for publications that fail to register with the government. The draft law was drawn up by the Ministry of Information without input from media groups.

Burma’s Eleven Media Group condemned the law as “the most serious threat the country’s media has faced.”

The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) said that “if passed in its current form, the draft law will essentially replace Burma’s old censorship regime with a similarly repressive new one.”

Religious attacks in Rangoon

Violence erupted in a Rangoon suburb in February, when a mob of around 300 Buddhists attacked a Muslim school and several businesses, according to reports in Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB).

A few days previously, hundreds of Buddhist nationalists attacked a religious school in Tharkata township, Rangoon. Reports suggested that the mob believed the building was being developed into a mosque.

There is growing concern about a rising tide of anti-muslim sentiment in Burma. Tensions have been exacerbated by inflammatory anti-muslim statements and literature from some government and Buddhist leaders.

Protests against the Monywa copper mine continue



Riot police near Latpadaung mine in November 2012. (DVB)

Local villagers have continued to protest against the the Letpadaung copper mine in Monywa.

On 13 February, hundreds of villagers gathered near the Monywa copper mine site to demand a complete halt to the project.

In November last year, the government launched a violent crackdown on peaceful protesters, injuring over 100 monks and villagers.

The government-appointed commission investigating the Monywa copper mine has still not submitted its findings, missing its 31 January deadline.

On 14 February, an investigation by the Upper Burma Lawyers Network and the US-based Justice Trust into the Monywa copper mine and the November crackdown, found that government officials used fraud and coerced villagers to sign contracts to hand over their land for the mine's expansion. The report also found that authorities had used "excessive force" on protesters, including the use of white phosphorus, which resulted in peaceful protesters suffering severe burns.

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