



LAST MONTH IN BURMA

News from and about Burma

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Hillary Clinton visits Burma

On 30 November, Hillary Clinton arrived in Burma for a three-day visit. It was the first visit by a US Secretary of State for over 50 years.

During the visit, Clinton met President Thein Sein in Naypyidaw and had two meetings with Aung San Suu Kyi in Rangoon.

Before the visit, President Obama said in statement that “after years of darkness, we’ve seen flickers of progress in these last several weeks. President Thein Sein and the Burmese Parliament have taken important steps on the path toward reform.

“Of course, there’s far more to be done. We remain concerned about Burma’s closed political system, its treatment of minorities and holding of political prisoners, and its relationship with North Korea.”

Hillary Clinton also welcomed the steps the government has taken and announced a series of initiatives the US would take to encourage further reforms, including support for UN health and microfinance projects. However, she warned that the government needs to go much further if they want to see sanctions lifted, including the release of all political prisoners and a peace and reconciliation process to bring to an end to ethnic conflicts.

Speaking to reporters, she said, “While measures already taken may be unprecedented and certainly welcome, they are just a beginning. We’re not at the point yet where we can consider lifting sanctions that we have in place because of our ongoing concerns about policies that have to be reversed. But any steps that the government takes will be carefully considered and will be matched.

“We are prepared to go further if reforms maintain momentum. But history teaches us to be cautious. We know that there have been serious setbacks and grave disappointments over the past decades.”

After meeting Hillary Clinton, Aung San Suu Kyi said “If we go forward together, I’m confident there will be no turning back from the road to democracy. We are not on that road yet, but we hope to get there as soon as possible with our friends.”

At the beginning of the month, US Special Representative and Policy Coordinator for Burma Derek Mitchell and US Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Michael Posner made a four-day visit to Burma. During their visit, they met with various government ministers and officials in Naypyidaw and Rangoon and they met Aung San Suu Kyi and representatives of civil society groups.



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Government holds ethnic ceasefire talks but attacks continue

In November, the government held meetings with ethnic armed groups to discuss possible ceasefire agreements. On 19 November, the government Rail Transportation Minister Aung Min held preliminary peace talks with representatives from the Shan State Army-South (SSA-S), the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), the Karen National Union (KNU), the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), and the Chin National Front (CNF) on the Thai-Burma border. The Shan State Army (SSA) South reached a ceasefire agreement in principle, although the details of the agreement will require further discussion. However, no agreement was reached with the other armed ethnic political parties.

The government has held several meetings with representatives from Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) but no agreement has been reached. Brig-Gen Gun Maw, vice chief-of-staff of the Kachin Independence Army, told the Irrawaddy magazine, "The rulers of Burma always think of ethnic issues as armed conflicts and so the conclusion is a ceasefire. But actually the issue is civil war and political problems. Unless the government resolves problems politically, related conflicts can not be solved." Previous ceasefire agreements have not led to further dialogue about resolving the political issues.

David Mathieson, Burma researcher for Human Rights Watch, said "It's important to recognize that these preliminary peace talks are just that: they're preliminary. They're really just talks about continuing to talk. People should believe in the peace process when they actually see a discernible reduction in the number of human rights abuses perpetrated by the Burmese military in these areas."

Despite the talks, attacks by the Burmese army have actually increased. In November, fighting escalated between the Burmese army and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) in Kachin State and Northern Shan State causing at least 6,000 more civilians to flee their homes.

An estimated 30-40,000 civilians have been displaced by fighting since the Burmese army broke a 17 year ceasefire with the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), Burma's second largest ethnic armed group, in June this year.

In November, Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) released a new report, 'Under Siege in Kachin State, Burma', with the findings of an emergency investigation into reports of grave human rights

violations in Kachin State. They found that the Burmese army looted food from civilians, fired indiscriminately into villages, threatened villages with attacks, and used civilians as porters and human minesweepers.



Kachin villagers flee the fighting.

They also found that camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) are overcrowded with a lack of access to clean food and water. In one camp, 11% of children under five years old were found to be severely or moderately malnourished.

PHR reported that very little aid reaches IDP camps and that the most vulnerable populations - those in rural areas and near the border - have not received any official humanitarian aid. Instead they are only receiving aid from community-based organizations, which have largely been ignored by the international donor community.

NLD decides to re-register the party

On 18 November, the National League for Democracy (NLD) held a meeting of over 100 Central Committee members from across the country at the party headquarters in Rangoon where they decided to re-register as a political party. The NLD also agreed to contest the by-elections for 48 vacant parliamentary seats. Aung San Suu Kyi said she would stand for a seat at the by-elections.

Last year new election laws were introduced which were designed to stop the NLD taking part. They required the NLD to expel convicted members

(political prisoners), and to support and defend the military drafted constitution. Those laws have now been changed, which means the NLD can register as a party again, and take part in elections.

The date of the by-elections has not been announced but Shwe Mann, speaker of the lower house of parliament, has reportedly said that elections will not take place before the end of February 2012.



Aung San Suu Kyi speaking at the NLD meeting in November

Burma given ASEAN Chair in 2014

At their meeting in Bali in November, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) voted to award Burma the Chair of ASEAN in 2014. Burma was forced to miss its turn to chair ASEAN in 2006 after Western countries threatened to boycott meetings chaired by the dictatorship in Burma.

The ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus (AIPMC) called on ASEAN to ensure it closely monitors Burma's progress and take action if it fails to implement fundamental democratic reforms.

Eva Sundari, AIPMC President and Member of Indonesian Parliament said "ASEAN needs to set a benchmark on the progress of reform and human rights improvements in Myanmar. It should also set a timetable for these advancements."

British International Development Secretary visits Burma

On 15 November, British International Development Secretary Andrew Mitchell began a three-day visit to Burma. He met President Thein Sein and other government officials. He also met Aung San Suu Kyi and opposition and ethnic parties.

Speaking to the BBC, Andrew Mitchell MP said, "There are grounds for cautious optimism but there is still a long way further to go. This is a country where judgements are made on the actions they take rather than the warm words they give. But

again this underlines the point that there are plenty of grounds for optimism but there is still a long way to go before the international community can be able to signal deep progress has been made."



Andrew Mitchell MP and Aung San Suu Kyi during a visit to a school in Rangoon.
Credit: Department for International Development

Further political prisoner releases stalled

Despite reports in early November that more political prisoners would be released very soon, by the end of the month there was still no sign of another prisoner amnesty.

Starting on 16 November, several high-profile political prisoners, including SNLD Chairman Hkun Htun Oo, 88 Generation Student leader Min Ko Naing and Buddhist monk U Gambira, were moved to jails slightly closer to their families, although some of them are still more than 300 miles from their families. Sithu Zeya, a journalist for Democratic Voice of Burma sentenced to 18 years, was moved to a prison much further from his family members.

There was also disappointment that at the ASEAN summit in Bali, President Thein Sein denied there were any political prisoners, saying "we punished them because they violated the law."

There are also reports of ongoing violations of civil and political rights. The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners reported that on 14 November U Myint Naing, a leader of the Human Rights Defender and Promoter's Network (HRDPN), was arrested for filming a protest staged by over 200 farmers in Rangoon about land confiscation by state and private companies.

In October and November, there were 2 hunger strikes in Insein prison. The first, beginning on 26 October, was staged by 15 political prisoners in protest that political prisoners are commonly denied the reductions in their sentences which are allowed to criminal prisoners. There were reports that some

of the strikers were punished by being denied drinking water, and held in cells designed to hold dogs. The strike ended on 7 November.

The second hunger strike started on 10 November to demand a reform of the prison healthcare system to comply with domestic and international standards. The prison health care system in Burma falls dangerously below international minimum standards and remote prisons often have no doctor and no hospitals or clinics nearby. Political prisoners are also often denied medical care.

'Peaceful Gathering and Demonstration Bill' passed in Parliament

Burma's Parliament has approved a new law, the 'Peaceful Gathering and Demonstration Bill', that guarantees the right to hold demonstrations.

The law says permission must be sought five days before the event and organisers must give details about speakers and slogans. Protests are prohibited at factories, hospitals and government offices and holding a protest without permission carries a penalty of one year in prison.

However, there are many caveats in the law, and other security laws are still in place which would allow the government to ban any protests it doesn't want on security grounds.

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