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BURMA CSW welcomes Foreign Secretary's call for release of political prisoners while recognizing "momentum for change"

As the Foreign Secretary William Hague concludes his visit to Burma today, Christian Solidarity Worldwide welcomes his assessment that although there is "momentum for change" in Burma, that "much more is needed to be done" before EU sanctions are lifted.

Mr. Hague told reporters, "It is not possible to say a country is free and democratic while people are still in prison on the grounds of their political beliefs. It is vital that they be released if [sanctions] are to be removed." During his two-day visit the Foreign Secretary met with government officials, Aung San Suu Kyi and representatives of ethnic political parties which are not banned by the government.

CSW wrote to Mr. Hague ahead of his visit, the first by such a senior British official since 1955, requesting him to use the opportunity to "urge the regime to stop attacking ethnic people, declare a nationwide ceasefire, release all political prisoners, and engage further in a meaningful process of dialogue with the ethnic nationalities and the democracy movement led by Aung San Suu Kyi". These steps "must be priority benchmarks of progress".

The letter highlighted specific incidents of rape, forced labor, torture, killings and attacks on churches in Kachin State, as well as the continued detention of Buddhist monks, including U Gambira, one of the leaders of the 2007 pro-democracy protests, and continuing discrimination against the Muslim Rohingya.

CSW's East Asia Team Leader Benedict Rogers said, "William Hague's visit to Burma was an historic opportunity to deliver a clear message to the regime, that if they introduce genuine, substantial and long-lasting reforms, end the systematic and widespread violations of human rights, especially the attacks on ethnic civilians, and release all political prisoners, the international community will be ready to respond positively. Until that happens, pressure must be maintained, while encouraging every step towards reform and welcoming every indication of progress. That is absolutely the right message to deliver at this crucial and potentially very exciting time for Burma. The Burmese government's words about reform are very welcome, but they must be matched by action."