

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave, NW
Washington, DC 20500

September 12, 2016

CC: Secretary John Kerry; Secretary Jack Lew

Dear Mr. President,

We, the undersigned organizations, write to express our concern regarding the recent report by Human Rights Watch that reveals that the U.S. government “plans to announce the lifting of key sanctions during Burmese leader Aung San Suu Kyi’s visit to Washington, DC,” beginning on September 13.¹ Despite the marked democratic progress and peacebuilding activities that have taken place in Burma since last November’s election—which we applaud—there remain a number of pressing issues threatening the stability of the country and its most vulnerable people. These issues are deeply concerning as they include the severest of human rights abuses, and progress on these dire matters should be required to lift further sanctions.

In February 2016, UNHCR recorded 1.53 million people of concern in Burma, approximately 120,000 of whom are persecuted Muslim Rohingya people living in squalid camps since they were displaced by violence in 2012.² Another million Rohingya continue to be persecuted throughout the country with heavily restricted rights, including on their freedom of movement, ability to marry and have children, and access to medicine. This group is particularly vulnerable as the government of Burma fails to recognize them as citizens, rendering them stateless. While the appointment of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, led by Kofi Annan, is welcome, there must be demonstrated progress well before the Commission releases its report a year from now. As the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and others have warned, the Rohingya remain at a high risk of genocide.³

Elsewhere in the country, the Burmese army continues to both commit human rights abuses against ethnic minority civilians and cut communities off from the state economy and basic social and health services. UNHCR has recorded 96,000 IDPs in Kachin and northern Shan States, though because of lack of access to remote areas, this number is likely far higher. The three ethnic armed organizations barred from the Peace Conference last October—Taang National Liberation Army, Arakan Army, and Kokang National Democratic Alliance Army—are still clashing with state troops, and immediately prior to the recent peace conference the

¹ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/09/06/burma-us-should-retain-key-sanctions>

² People of Concern refers to internally displaced people (IDPs), returned IDPs, and stateless people. 96,000 IDPs are recorded in Kachin and northern Shan States; 120,000 in Rakhine State; 200,000 in the southeast region; 170,000 in Bago, Shan (East), and Shan (South); and 940,000 people lack citizenship. This data is available at <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/protection/operations/50001cf99/myanmar-fact-sheet.html>

³ Fortify Rights: http://www.fortifyrights.org/downloads/Yale_Persecution_of_the_Rohingya_October_2015.pdf; US Holocaust Memorial Museum: <https://www.ushmm.org/m/pdfs/20150505-Burma-Report.pdf>

Burmese military launched new attacks on ethnic armed organizations in Shan and Kachin states. In addition, women continue to be systematically excluded from peace talks.⁴

Furthermore, the government and military have repeatedly responded to ethnic armed organizations' insistence on concrete political reforms on ethnic rights before consideration of disarmament by cutting off civilian access to water, food, and aid, and have forcibly relocated entire communities, denying them their fundamental human rights. Sexual violence perpetrated by the Burmese Army is also an ongoing problem for minority communities. Though many women have reported sexual assault at the hands of the Burmese Army, the government often fails to investigate these charges and punish offenders. The military remains highly corrupt and extortive.

As you know, in July 2012, in response to the country's democratization efforts, the U.S. government began easing sanctions on Burma to support investment in the country. Today, the sanctions that remain are targeted at the richest and most corrupt members of Burmese society and do little to hinder the country's overall development, rather limiting the military power of groups contributing to the destabilization of the country.

We echo the sentiments of Aung San Suu Kyi, who said in August, "there's no reason to discuss [the lifting of sanctions], because the sanctions are imposed for those who are obstructions to the country's democratic movements, not for the [whole] country. So the parliament doesn't need to urge to ease them." In support of the Burmese people, and in particular, ethnic minority groups who have been sidelined for years, we urge you to retain the remaining sanctions in Burma until:

- a) the Burmese Army ceases violations of international humanitarian law;
- b) there is substantive and observable progress in peace talks, prioritizing civil society, women, and youth inclusion;
- c) the Burmese government addresses the lack of citizenship for Rohingya and proves willing and capable of protecting the Rohingya from persecution;
- d) natural resource dividends are managed properly and shared between regional governments and the national government and;
- e) the 2008 constitution is reformed to give full power to the people of Burma.

While incremental progress is being made in Burma, it is vital that the U.S. continue to act in support of Burma's people, particularly those still suffering under the current government. To lift sanctions prior to tangible change for suffering communities would be a disservice to those vulnerable peoples who deserve international protection.

Sincerely,

⁴ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/08/25/gentlemans-agreement>

1. ALTSEAN-Burma
2. American Jewish World Service
3. Arakan National Congress Party
4. Association Suisse-Birmanie
5. Burma Action Ireland
6. Burma Campaign UK
7. Burma Link (Thailand)
8. Burma Partnership
9. Burma Task Force USA
10. Burmese Rohingya Organisation UK
11. Carl Wilkens Fellowship
12. Christian Solidarity Worldwide
13. Franciscan Action Network
14. Free Burma Campaign (South Africa)
15. Genocide Watch
16. Global Witness
17. Harry Potter Alliance
18. Info Birmanie (France)
19. International Campaign for the Rohingya
20. Jewish World Watch
21. Just Foreign Policy
22. Fortify Rights
23. IFI Watch Myanmar
24. Institute of Liberal Arts and Sciences
25. Kachin Peace Network
26. Kachin Women Association Thailand
27. Kachin Women Peace Network
28. Karen American Association of Wisconsin
29. Karen Association of Iowa
30. Karen Culture Organization of Arizona
31. Karenni-American Association
32. Peacebuilding Connections
33. Refugees International
34. Rohingya American Society (RAS)
35. Rohingya Federation of Arakan (RFA)
36. Rohingya National Coalition (RNC)
37. STAND: The Student-Led Movement to End Mass Atrocities
38. Stop Genocide Now
39. Swedish Burma Committee
40. Tayovan Women's Union
41. Together We Remember
42. U.S. Campaign for Burma
43. Wan-Lark Foundation
44. Watchers of the Sky Initiative
45. Women Peace Network-Arakan
46. World Rohingya Organization (WRO)