

Letter to President Obama Regarding Trip to Burma

November 15, 2012

The Honorable Mr. Barack Obama
President of the United States of America
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama:

We, the undersigned NGOs, are writing to express our grave concern regarding continuing abuses against ethnic groups in Burma and the implications of your planned trip. By going under current circumstances, you take on a lot of responsibility for the future human rights situation in Burma.

We therefore urge you to use your trip to visit ethnic groups suffering under the policies of the Burmese government and to enable the deployment of United Nations mandated observers in Rakhine state where Rohingya have been overwhelmingly targeted in recent weeks.

U.S. policy of lifting economic pressure and restoration of full diplomatic relations with the government of Burma following some economic and political reforms has failed to bring any relief to those lacking humanitarian aid in Kachin state or to prevent further violence and abuses against other ethnic groups, particularly recently against the Rohingya. Some 75,000 people remain displaced in Kachin and Shan states with limited access to urgently needed international aid. At least 180 Rohingya have been killed and over 100,000 displaced as the government has tacitly or overtly supported abuses and the devolution of communal violence into systemic, largely one-sided, targeting of the Rohingya. Rather than acting to quell violence and protect civilians, Burmese officials have promulgated hatred and even encouraged a policy that amounts to ethnic cleansing at the highest level. President Thein Sein asked the United Nations to arrange for 800,000 Rohingya to be placed in refugee camps or removed entirely from Burma.

A presidential visit at this point is a reward too far and sends the wrong message, especially if conducted in ignorance of these immense human rights failures. A change of course is needed, first in the need to avert the most immediate threat of further systematic violence against Rohingya and, second, in reintroducing the threat of consequences in the dialogue with Burmese authorities. The first can be done through pressuring the Burmese government to do more to grant humanitarian access to displaced populations, revise citizenship laws and to protect Rohingya as well as through the deployment of UN mandated observers in order to investigate the violence, deter escalation, and ultimately hold perpetrators accountable. The second can be done by maintaining the import ban on gems, the material most closely linked with abuses in ethnic areas, and by reiterating the fact that sanctions have not been removed, but rather suspended and can be put back in place if egregious human rights abuses continue.

As decade long abuses continue and new ethnically motivated violence threatens to spread, the United States should recognize that the incentives offered to this point bring a special responsibility to use U.S. leverage to avert further catastrophe.

Sincerely,

Burmese Rohingya American Friendship Association
Physicians for Human Rights
Rohingya Concern International
United to End Genocide
US Campaign for Burma

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Hillary Clinton, U.S. Secretary of State
Timothy Geithner, U.S. Secretary of Treasury
Thomas E. Donilon, National Security Advisor
Ambassador Derek Mitchell, U.S. Special Representative and Policy Coordinator for Burma,
Department of State
Michael Posner, Assistant Secretary of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor,
Department of State
Kurt Campbell, Assistant Secretary of State, Bureau of East Asia and the Pacific, Department of
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Ambassador Melanne Verveer, Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women Issues, Department of
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Jake Sullivan, Director, Policy Planning, Department of State
Cheryl Mills, Chief of Staff to Secretary Clinton, Department of State