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Clinton should prioritize Burmese Army's increase in mass atrocities, violence against women during trip to Burma

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(Washington DC November 18, 2011) Today the U.S. Campaign for Burma welcomed the announcement of Secretary of State Hilary Clinton's trip to Burma scheduled for December 1, 2011. We urge Secretary Clinton to prioritize seeking an end to the Burmese regime's systematic and widespread use of rape as a weapon of war, forced labor, forced relocation, torture, extrajudicial killings, child soldiers and use of human shields and the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners.

In 2009, the Obama Administration announced it would pursue a dual-track policy of sanctions and engagement. With the confirmation of Derek Mitchell as the first Special Representative and Policy Coordinator for Burma four months ago, there has been an increase in the level of engagement between the U.S. Government and Burmese officials. Ambassador Mitchell has made three trips to Burma, most recently accompanied by Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Michael Posner. This is the first time in 50 years, an U.S. Secretary of State will visit Burma.

Since Burma's military regime put on the veneer of civilian government earlier this year, President Thein Sein has also shown an interest in engagement with the United States. In an effort to exhibit his interest in a better relationship with the United States, President Thein Sein agreed to a key issue for the United States by meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi once, releasing a small number of political prisoners and amending the political party registration law to allow former political prisoners to be part of a political party and participate in elections.

Unfortunately, President Thein Sein has not changed the Burmese army's actions against the country's ethnic minority civilians. In the past seven months there has been a serious uptick in human rights violations committed by the Burmese army, including the largest forced displacement in a decade of over 100,000 new internally displaced persons, renewed armed conflict with 3 separate decades old ethnic ceasefire groups, an increase in the use of rape as a weapon of war, forced labor and the use of

civilians as human shields. This is in addition to decades of attacks against ethnic minority civilians resulting in the displacement and destruction of over 3,700 villages.

“Secretary Clinton must take advantage of President Thein Sein’s interest in a better relationship with the United States to secure an end to the egregious crimes against humanity the Burmese Army continues to commit against ethnic minority civilians,” said Aung Din, Executive Director of the U.S. Campaign for Burma.

The dialogue between Aung San Suu Kyi and representatives of President Thein Sein is an encouraging development that must continue to be supported by Secretary Clinton. But we urge Secretary Clinton to prioritize reaching out to Burma’s ethnic minority leaders and encouraging Burma’s authorities to realize the international community’s longstanding call for a tri-partite dialogue between the regime, Aung San Suu Kyi, and ethnic nationality leaders. “Without a concerted high level engagement that includes Burma’s ethnic minorities, any hopes for true democratic reform will not materialize,” said Myra Dahgaypaw, Campaigns Coordinator at the U.S. Campaign for Burma. Dahgaypaw herself was an IDP/refugee for 20 years because of the military regime’s attacks against civilians in Karen State.

“Justice is a crucial part of national reconciliation in any country. Burma cannot move forward until these attacks stop and the rule of law are realized. said Aung Din, Executive Director of U.S. Campaign for Burma.

The U.S. Campaign for Burma is a Washington, DC-based leading coalition of Burmese activists in exile and American human rights campaigners working to promote freedom, justice and democracy and to end crimes against humanity and the culture of impunity in the Southeast Asian country of Burma.

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