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## **An Open Letter to President Thein Sein and President Benigno Aquino III on the Struggle for True Peace and Democracy in Burma (Myanmar)**

5 December 2013

**Dear Presidents Thein Sein and Benigno Aquino III,**

In light of Burmese President Thein Sein's state visit to Manila, we in the Free Burma Coalition-Philippines (FBC-P), a solidarity and advocacy movement of people's organizations, NGOs, and individual activists in the Philippines that aims to promote democracy, peace and human rights, call on the leaders of the two ASEAN countries to include in their ongoing bilateral agenda the pressing need to uphold and advance Burma's transition to real peace and democracy now.

The bond between the peoples of the Philippines and Burma is anchored on parallel histories of oppression under and of collective resistance against colonial powers— Burma under Britain and Japan, the Philippines under Spain, United States and Japan— and repressive military dictatorships— Burma under a military junta, and the Philippines under Marcos' dictatorial regime. In the decades of struggles in both countries, tens of thousands of people were imprisoned, went missing, injured, sexually abused, tortured and executed; with hundreds of thousands of peoples uprooted from their homelands, displaced and marginalized. Despite these repressions, in both these countries the people's movement for democracy and freedom endured.

However, while both countries tread the path of transformation, genuine peace is yet to be achieved. In the Philippines, while we have made notable feats in resolving armed conflict in the Bangsamoro, the burgeoning and deepening social inequalities remain to be insufficiently responded to. In Burma, while there are new spaces and opportunities for engagement, human rights and labor rights violations as well as injustices against ethnic peoples still persist and continue to worsen. These prevailing injustices frustrate the attainment of all-encompassing and sustainable peace in the ASEAN region.

It is in our common yearning for genuine peace and freedom that we, along with the peoples of our countries find solidarity. It is also in this context that we call on President Thein Sein to take decisive steps towards achieving genuine peace and democracy in Burma (Myanmar). In support of the struggle of the peoples of Burma, we call on the Burmese government to:

**First**, release all political prisoners, abolish all repressive laws and formally recognize the peoples' fundamental human rights in Burma's Constitution; stop the military policy on the sexual assault against women and children in the ethnic states; agree to and pursue an international inquiry on the crimes against humanity by the previous regimes to indemnify all victims;

**Second**, speed up the political dialogue and the peace processes between the Burmese government and the ethnic armed groups based on the comprehensive and inclusive framework for peace and the ethnic peoples' right to self-determination; and to completely stop the continuing military offensives against ethnic communities of the Kachin and Shan peoples; stop violent and sustained military-backed attacks on the Rohingya people; uphold the peoples' right to freedom of religion; and immediately address the Internally Displaced People's (IDPs) return and rehabilitation;

A truthful peace process and progress toward national reconciliation will remain elusive without first putting an end to all violence and impunity.

**Third**, guarantee women's and civil society participation in all decision-making and political processes;

**Fourth**, ensure transparency, accountability, the protection of the environment, and "free, prior and informed consent" processes for all economic investments, especially those in the extractive industries and essential services; protect the rights of workers to freedom of organization and to collective bargaining, to a living wage, to safe working conditions, and to security of tenure, especially with the forthcoming inflow of foreign direct investment and mushrooming of industrial zones; stop and reverse the endemic and arbitrary land confiscations by the Burmese government, the Army and big businesses;

**Fifth**, end elite military rule and support genuine democratization through transparent, accountable and participatory governance that will deliver real social and economic justice for all.

We call on President Aquino to urge President Thein Sein to heed his peoples' calls, and to lead the strengthening of the relations of the Philippines and Burma (Myanmar) on the basis of supporting the true struggles of the peoples in Burma, one anchored on justice, democratization and the protection of human rights of all peoples.

While the Philippines is also still a young democracy and while peace and security remains to be a real challenge, the clamor for peace in the Bangsamoro, and the country as a whole, teaches us that it is the exclusion of stakeholders and relevant sectors of society from decision-making processes and progress that continues to cultivate conflict in society; that it is also this lack of inclusiveness in peace processes and in development that deters the realization of lasting peace and democracy.

It is our hope that as the peoples of our two countries, Burma and the Philippines, finds solidarity in their similar past; that our leaders also galvanize the relations of our peoples in this common vision of enduring peace and democracy.

Yours sincerely in solidarity with the peoples of Burma,

**Free Burma Coalition - Philippines (FBC-P)**

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*Free Burma Coalition-Philippines (FBC-P) is a solidarity and advocacy movement of people's organizations, NGOs, and individual activists in the Philippines that aims to promote democracy, peace and human rights. FBC-P is a member of the **Asia Pacific Solidarity Coalition or APSOC**, a regional formation of national movements and solidarity groups advocating for human rights of peoples in the region as enshrined in the human rights conventions of the United Nations, for the rights to self-determination of peoples in accordance with the UN general principles, and for the prevention and resolution of armed conflicts in the region.*