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President Obama Must Renew Burma Investment Sanctions

The Burmese government's ongoing persecution of ethnic minorities, detentions of political prisoners, and recalcitrance on constitutional reform mandate renewal of sanctions

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(Washington, D.C.) – Today, the U.S. Campaign for Burma (USCB), along with 28 other human rights organizations, called on President Obama to continue the national emergency with respect to Burma. The national emergency provides the authority for the ban of U.S. investment in the Burmese military and the authority for the Reporting Requirements for Responsible Investment in Burma. This authority is set to expire this month. Last week, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom also pressed for the renewal of the national emergency.¹

“President Obama must renew Burma investment sanctions to make clear that the U.S. supports democratic progress and constitutional reform that will ensure free and fair elections in 2015,” said USCB Policy Director Rachel Wagley.

The concerns and rationale for continuing the national emergency in 2013 persist and have even worsened. Last year, the Obama Administration cited persisting concerns such as continued arrests and detentions, ongoing conflict and human rights abuses in ethnic minority areas, efforts to undermine or obstruct the political reform process, and the country's military relationship with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Throughout 2014, journalists, farmers, activists, human rights defenders, and ethnic minorities have continued to be arrested at alarmingly high rates. Earlier this year, four journalists and the CEO of the Rangoon-based *Unity Journal* were arrested, and some sentenced, for reporting on a chemical weapons factory.² Freedom to scrutinize the government is fundamental to building a democratic state, but in Burma, those who critique the government face detention and harsh penalties.

¹ See *Annual Report 2014: Burma*, USCIRF, Apr. 30, 2014, http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Burma%202014_0.pdf.

² See *Burma holds 4 journalists for chemical weapons report*, Committee to Protect Journalists, Feb. 3, 2014, <https://www.cpj.org/2014/02/in-burma-4-journalists-held-for-chemical-weapons-r.php>.

The government also continues to commit human rights abuses against vulnerable minorities. In Rakhine State, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims are being denied access to life-saving medical care and humanitarian aid, subject to discriminatory restrictions and policies of apartheid and ethnic cleansing, and trapped in inhumane internment camps.³ In Kachin and northern Shan States, conflict and abuses are increasingly severe, including sexual violence, human trafficking, torture, and extrajudicial killings. In March, the UN Secretary-General called for an investigation into these past and ongoing violations and abuses, specifically including crimes of sexual violence.⁴

Government actors also continue to deliberately undermine and obstruct the political reform process. The government is actively backsliding on its high-profile press reforms by tightening restrictions on domestic and foreign media through law, censorship, and underhanded surveillance practices. At the behest of President Thein Sein, the government is also drafting highly discriminatory laws to allegedly protect the country's "national race and religion."⁵ These laws would criminalize marriage between Buddhist women and non-Buddhists,⁶ restrict religious conversion, and restrict childbirth [for Rohingya women].⁷

Moreover, the government continues to maintain good relations with North Korean diplomats in Naypyidaw, and reportedly works with North Korea on military weapons programs.⁸

"It is imperative to send a strong message that the persecution of ethnic minorities, detention of political prisoners, political backsliding on crucial reforms, and drafting of new repressive laws will not be tolerated by the U.S. Administration," said Policy Director Rachel Wagley. "We must ensure that all people of Burma are beneficiaries of reform, not victims of preventable abuses."

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³ See e.g., *Policies of Persecution*, Fortify Rights, Feb. 2014, http://www.fortifyrights.org/downloads/Policies_of_Persecution_Feb_25_Fortify_Rights.pdf.

⁴ See *Conflict-related sexual violence*, Report of the Secretary-General, S/2014/181, United Nations Security Council, March 13, 2014, <http://burmacampaign.org.uk/media/UNSG-SV-UNSC-2014.pdf>.

⁵ Shwe Aung, Speaker urges laws to protect Burma's national race, religion, Democratic Voice of Burma, Feb. 27, 2014, <http://www.dvb.no/news/speaker-urges-laws-to-protect-burmas-national-race-religion-burma-myanmar/37855>.

⁶ See *Burma: Scrap Proposed Discriminatory Marriage Law*, Human Rights Watch, Mar. 25, 2014, available at <http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/03/24/burma-scrap-proposed-discriminatory-marriage-law>.

⁷ See Yen Snaing, *Draft Law on Religious Conversion to Be Finished by June: Deputy Minister*, Irrawaddy, Apr. 2, 2014, <http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/draft-law-religious-conversion-finished-june-deputy-minister.html>.

⁸ See Angus Watson, *Burma's VP meets N Korean envoy in Naypyidaw*, Democratic Voice of Burma, Feb. 19, 2014, <https://www.dvb.no/news/burmas-vp-meets-n-korean-envoy-in-naypyidaw-burma-myanmar/37465>.