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Strengthening Cooperation for a Free Burma

Press Release: Burma Must Tackle Underlying Root Causes of Protests

(28 May 2015) The Burma Government should treat the underlying structural causes of the recent outbreak of protests in Burma rather than using violence against demonstrators, Burma Partnership said in a new briefing paper released today. "[Marching to the Same Tune? A Briefing Paper on Protests and Freedom of Assembly in Burma,](#)" produced by the Progressive Voice Policy Research Project under Burma Partnership, focuses on the right to freedom of assembly in light of recent and prevalent mass protests in Burma in an attempt to make positive policy solutions to the current crisis.

"While the Burma Government is not resorting to pre-2011 levels of violence, as this would deter donors, investors and other international goodwill, it is demonstrating that it still seeks to stifle dissent in any way possible." said Khin Ohmar, Coordinator of Burma Partnership. "Unless they show the genuine political will to respect the right to freedom of assembly, expression and association, the democratic development of the country will always be impeded."

The briefing paper describes how the violence, arrests, detentions, threats and intimidation against students, factory workers, farmers and other protesters points to the diverse portfolio of repressive tactics employed by the Burma Government, in the hope that the protestors will be disinclined to take to the streets.

The controversial Section 18 of the Peaceful Assembly and Procession Law enacted in 2011, criticized for its requirement to obtain permission before holding any assembly, has allowed Burma authorities enormous potential for abuse, using the Assembly Law as a legislative weapon to arrest those critical of the government, thus stifling, rather than protecting, the right to freedom of assembly.

Yet on 10 March 2015, over 100 student protesters and their supporters suffered a violent, coordinated and cold-blooded crackdown in Letpadan for protesting against the undemocratically adopted National Education Law (NEL). Close to 70 students and some of their supporters remain in Thayawaddy, Myingyan and Insein prison for the protest against the NEL. On Tuesday, 26 May, the students and their supporters attended their sixth pre-trial hearing at Thayawaddy court to face charges for expressing their fundamental right to freedom of assembly. In detention, their basic rights are being violated as they lack adequate medical attention and are enduring unsanitary conditions.

This resort to violence suggests that the authorities in Burma are panicking at the prevalence of mass protests, and no longer have confidence in the deterrent of Section 18 – judicial harassment that is characterized by arrests, charges, and jail terms.

In order to ensure the fundamental right to freedom of assembly, the Burma Government must engage with demonstrators in good faith, not to simply make the protests go away, but to tackle grievances with meaningful dialogue and negotiation. By listening to and acting upon peoples' voices, including those from the streets, the Burma Government can show it is serious about democracy, treating people as a stakeholder of democracy rather than subjects.

For more information contact:

Khin Ohmar: khinohmar@burmapartnership.org