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Amnesty International Press Release
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Clinton's Visit to Myanmar Should Be Measured in Human Rights Improvement, Says Amnesty International

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(Washington, D.C.) -- The success of the U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton's visit to Myanmar should be decided by whether the authorities respond immediately by undertaking bold and far-reaching human rights reforms, Amnesty International said in a statement today.

On Thursday Secretary Clinton will begin a two-day visit to Myanmar, the highest-level visit by a U.S. official in more than 50 years.

"What steps will Secretary Clinton take to ensure that the so-called 'improvements' in Myanmar are not reversed," asked T. Kumar, Asia and the Pacific advocacy director for Amnesty International USA. "There are over 1,500 political prisoners, including some in cells designed to hold dogs. Abuses in ethnic minority areas are continuing, including rape. What is disturbing is that the regime in Myanmar seems to have taken for granted that the U.S. government has other priorities than promoting respect for human rights and freedoms in the country."

Myanmar has released at least 318 political prisoners this year, but more than a thousand remain behind bars, many of whom are prisoners of conscience. Their release should not be, in words of several Myanmar government officials, part of a "process" but should be immediate and unconditional.

"Myanmar's human rights situation has improved modestly in some respects but is significantly worsening in others," said Benjamin Zawacki, Amnesty International's Myanmar specialist. "The U.S. Secretary of State's visit sets a clear challenge for the government to respond with bold and meaningful steps, including the release — once and for all — of every remaining prisoner of conscience, and ceasing atrocities against ethnic minority civilians."

In several ethnic minority areas, including in parts of Kayin, Kachin and Shan States where conflict has reignited or intensified over the past year, the Myanmar army continues to commit human rights violations against civilians on a widespread and systematic basis.

The United States has long advocated the establishment of an international Commission of Inquiry into alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity against ethnic minority civilians in Myanmar. Article 445 of Myanmar's Constitution codifies immunity from prosecution for officials for past human rights violations.

Previous Myanmar governments successfully cited visits by foreign governments and international organizations as evidence of human rights progress or concessions to human rights concerns.

"The United States must not allow Myanmar to mischaracterize Clinton's visit as a reward, rather than a challenge," said Zawacki. "The United States is taking a gamble, but much of the outcome rests on its own insistence on human rights progress in Myanmar."

Background on political prisoners

There is debate over how many political prisoners are actually being held in Myanmar, and over the definitions of political prisoner and prisoner of conscience.

Ko Ko Hlaing, a senior political adviser to President Thein Sein, was reported on October 19 as saying that there were "about 600" remaining prisoners of conscience in Myanmar. But in an interview with the Irrawaddy magazine eight days later, he conceded that he did not "have exact figures." There are significant differences between the government's figures for prisoners of conscience and those put forward by some opposition groups.

Ko Ko Hlaing also said that differences may "depend on how people define prisoners of conscience and ordinary prisoners."

On November 21, Myanmar President Thein Sein was quoted by the Democratic Voice of Burma as recently saying that "There are a lot of people in prison for breaking the law, so if we apply the term ['prisoner of conscience'] to just one group, then it will be unfair on the others."

Amnesty International has previously expressed concern that many political prisoners — some of whom are members of armed opposition groups — may be classified as 'common criminals' in the country's extensive prison system.

Amnesty International has called on the government to clarify who they classify as political prisoners, by convening a panel to reconcile differences in numbers and definitions. In order to ensure that all political prisoners are identified, Myanmar authorities should include the National League for Democracy in such a panel and seek and receive help from the United Nations.

Amnesty International is a Nobel Peace Prize-winning grassroots activist organization with more than 3 million supporters, activists and volunteers in more than 150 countries campaigning for human rights worldwide. The organization investigates and exposes abuses, educates and mobilizes the public and works to protect people wherever justice, freedom and dignity are denied.

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