

UN Expert: Human rights should lie at the heart of Myanmar's reform process

NEW YORK (25 October 2012) – The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Myanmar, Tomás Ojea Quintana, today highlighted the importance of keeping human rights on the agenda for Myanmar. This, he stressed, is particularly relevant in light of the ongoing violence in Rakhine State. The Special Rapporteur expressed concern that more lives have been lost in the violence and emphasised that the underlying causes of the tension and conflict between the Buddhist and Muslim communities in Rakhine State must be addressed as a priority.

“It is vital for the Government and all concerned to prevent further violence and to defuse tensions between the two communities,” Mr. Ojea Quintana said, presenting his report* on the situation of human rights in Myanmar to the UN General Assembly. The report considers, among other things, the situation in Rakhine State where violence between communities has left scores dead, over 850 people detained and tens of thousands displaced.

“Buddhist and Muslim communities continue to suffer from the violence in Rakhine State, so it is imperative that the Government pursues a policy of integration and long-term reconciliation between the two communities. This will necessarily involve addressing the underlying causes of the tensions, which includes the endemic discrimination against the Rohingya community.”

In his report, Mr. Ojea Quintana emphasizes that human rights should lie at the heart of the country's reform process, driving it forward and keeping it focused on improving the lives of the people in Myanmar, at a time when changes continue to move at a rapid pace and considerable progress has been made.

“Human rights considerations need to shape the process of economic growth, legislative reform and institutional change, while also guiding responses to ongoing serious human rights situations, including in Rakhine and Kachin States,” he stressed.

The Special Rapporteur welcomed the progress achieved in negotiating ceasefire agreements with ethnic armed groups, but expressed his grave concerns over continuing allegations of human rights violations in conflict-affected ethnic border areas.

“I have received allegations of attacks (in the Kachin State) against civilian populations, extrajudicial killings, sexual violence, internal displacement, torture, forced labour and portering, as well as the ongoing use of landmines and the recruitment of child soldiers, by all parties to the conflict,” he noted.

Mr. Ojea Quintana urged Myanmar authorities to address the situation and provide the UN and its partners with regular, independent and predictable access to all in

need of humanitarian assistance. “The Government should continue to engage ethnic groups in serious dialogue to resolve long-standing and deep-rooted concerns to forge durable political solutions,” he said.

The Special Rapporteur restated his call for the release of all remaining prisoners of conscience and stressed that none should be left behind. He called on the authorities to make a concerted effort to clarify exactly how many remain in detention and to take steps to ensure the reintegration of released prisoners into society.

The rights expert recommended the creation of a truth commission in Myanmar, emphasising the importance of truth, justice and accountability for past human rights violations. He also drew attention to the establishment of the rule of law in the country, assessing what this means in practice in terms of legislative and institutional reform, with particular focus on the judiciary.

Mr. Ojea Quintana acknowledged the dramatic economic development the country will experience over the coming years, but highlighted specific concerns over land and housing rights, including land confiscations and grabbing. He also made recommendations on private companies and foreign investment to help ensure a sustainable form of development that is not exploitative.

“In summary, my report highlights that Myanmar must address its human rights challenges for democratic transition and national reconciliation to progress,” the Special Rapporteur said. “The international community should also ensure that human rights considerations remain at the forefront of its engagement with Myanmar during this period of transition.”

(*) Check the full report on: <http://undocs.org/A/67/333>

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Mr. Tomás Ojea Quintana (Argentina) was appointed by the United Nations Human Rights Council in May 2008. As Special Rapporteur, he is independent from any government or organization and serves in his individual capacity. Learn more, log on to: <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/countries/mm/mandate/index.htm>

UN Human Rights, country page – Myanmar:
<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/countries/AsiaRegion/Pages/MMIndex.aspx>

*For more information and **media requests** please contact:*
In New York: Fred Kirungi (+1 917 367 3431 / kirungi@un.org) or Daniel Collinge (+41 79 444 4702 / dcollinge@ohchr.org)

For **media inquiries** related to other UN independent experts:
Xabier Celaya, UN Human Rights – Media Unit (+ 41 22 917 9383 / xcelaya@ohchr.org)

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