

Baroness Catherine Ashton

Vice President of the European Commission and High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy

European External Action Service

1046 Brussels

Belgium

16 January 2013

Dear Baroness Ashton,

We are writing in connection with recent developments in Burma/Myanmar, and specifically with regard to the plight of ethnic and religious minorities in the country, whose situation is too often over-looked.

Under the leadership of President Thein Sein, the Government of Burma/Myanmar has initiated some important democratic reforms in the country such as the release of hundreds of political prisoners, and reaching out to various ethnic armed insurgencies to negotiate preliminary ceasefire agreements. While these are very positive steps and we commend such efforts, we remain gravely concerned about ongoing human rights violations against the country's ethnic and religious minorities.

As the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Burma/Myanmar, Mr. Tomás Ojea Quintana, noted in his recent report to the UN General Assembly, "Any durable political solution must address the root causes of the conflict and the particular concerns of ethnic minority groups... the Special Rapporteur has previously highlighted the discrimination faced by ethnic minority groups, including... restrictions on freedom of religion or belief." Current reforms have not yet extended to freedom of religion or belief, which will be key to long-term peace and stability in the country, given the intersection between ethnicity and religion for several of Burma/Myanmar's minority groups.

Since the Burma Army broke the ceasefire agreement in Kachin State in June 2011, at least 75,000 civilians have been displaced from their villages. There have been credible reports of human rights violations perpetrated against civilians by the Burma/Myanmar Army, including in Christian churches. Conditions are seriously deteriorating in Kachin refugee camps, and humanitarian access remains highly restricted. Since late December the Burma/Myanmar Army has employed jet fighters and helicopter gunships, in a serious escalation of the conflict. Just days after the President's office denied there was an air offensive, the military has acknowledged it was carrying out an air attack. This raises serious concerns about effective civilian control over the military. The Burma/Myanmar Army must immediately desist, and

withdraw. Meaningful political dialogue and a peace process that will result in a political solution for the conflict in Kachin State are urgently needed.

The appalling violence in Rakhine State, western Burma/Myanmar is also of deep concern. The Government of Burma/Myanmar has failed to end the conflict in Rakhine State between Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims. In recent months, thousands of homes have been destroyed, hundreds of people killed and 135,000 displaced. Mosques have been destroyed, and religious clerics arrested. Although violence has been committed by both communities, credible reports indicate that Burmese security forces have been complicit with Rakhine Buddhists in carrying out brutal attacks against the Rohingya people. The current separation of Muslim and Buddhist communities should not be maintained in the long term, and the Government of Burma/Myanmar must find constructive ways to confront deep-rooted prejudices and discriminatory attitudes based on ethnicity and religion.

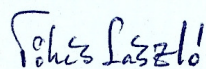
We would also like to draw your attention to the situation of the predominantly Christian Chin, which is not well-known. For several decades, Chin communities have been targeted for human rights abuses, causing tens of thousands to flee the country. A delegation from the Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO) came to Brussels in September to brief MEPs and their staff and several EEAS officials, including Georgios Antoniou, and COASI Chair Boguslaw Majewski. CHRO presented compelling evidence of systematic human rights violations against the Chin in their new report, *“Threats to Our Existence”: Persecution of Ethnic Chin Christians in Burma*. These included forced labour and torture targeted at Chin Christians; restrictions on construction of churches and church activities; orders for the destruction of large Christian crosses built by the Chin; and coerced conversion of Chin Christians to Buddhism at Government vocational training schools, as part of a nationwide policy of forced assimilation of ethnic and religious minorities. In our view, CHRO’s report is an important document and we hope that you and your officials will have an opportunity to study it carefully and act in response to its findings and recommendations.

Burma/Myanmar still has a long road ahead before it fully embraces democracy and human rights for all. In our engagement with the Government of Burma/Myanmar, the EU must call for the immediate cessation of human rights violations against ethnic and religious minorities. We were very pleased to note that President Obama made ‘freedom of worship’ a cornerstone of his speech during his recent visit to Rangoon. We urge you to follow suit. Ethnic and religious minorities must not be marginalized at this critical juncture in Burma/Myanmar’s nascent reform process. We would like to put forward a number of concrete recommendations for your consideration; we urge you to:

- Continue to express grave concern over the escalation of the conflict in Kachin State, and call on the Government of Burma/Myanmar to urgently prioritise political dialogue that will result in a political solution to the root causes of the conflict in Kachin State;

- Raise the issue of religious freedom with the Government of Burma/Myanmar as a key human rights concern yet to be addressed under the current reforms;
 - Strongly encourage the Government to issue a standing invitation to the UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion or Belief, to travel to the country to investigate reports of violations of religious freedom, and to be granted unhindered access to all parts of the country, including Chin State;
 - Advocate for unrestricted access to aid, regardless of ethnicity or religion, in Rakhine, Kachin, and Chin States;
 - Institute a policy that EEAS officials travelling to Burma/Myanmar must make time in their itineraries for meetings with leaders of ethnic political parties in opposition in parliament, as well as the National League for Democracy;
 - Ensure that EEAS officials travelling to Burma/Myanmar seek permission to visit ethnic border areas inhabited by ethnic and religious minorities, such as remote parts of Rakhine, Kachin and Chin States. Such requests would at least convey to the Government of Burma/Myanmar a high level of interest in issues affecting ethnic and religious minorities.
- We look forward to receiving your response, in particular regarding the progress of discussions on these issues with the Government of Burma/Myanmar.

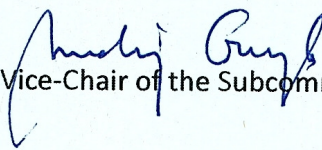
Yours sincerely,



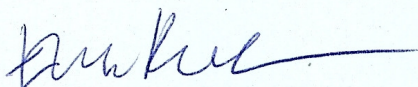
László Tőkés, Co-Coordinator of the Subcommittee on Human Rights, EPP



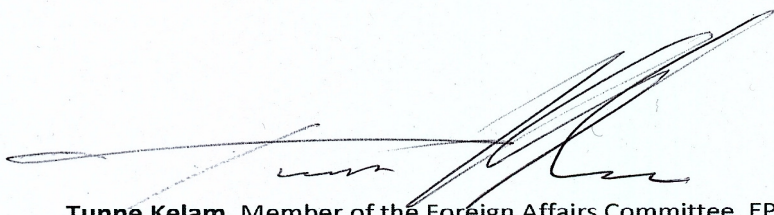
Inese Vaidere, Co-Coordinator of the Subcommittee on Human Rights, EPP



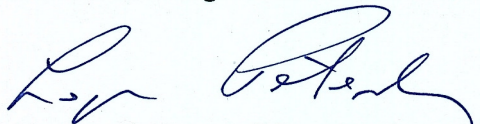
Andrzej Grzyb, Vice-Chair of the Subcommittee on Human Rights, EPP



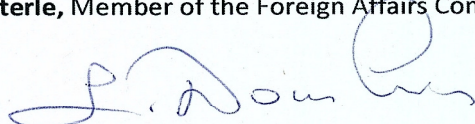
Eija-Riitta Korhola, Member of the European Parliament, EPP



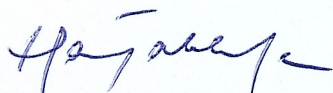
Tunne Kelam, Member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, EPP



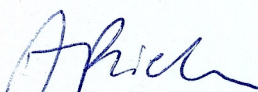
Alojz Peterle, Member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, EPP



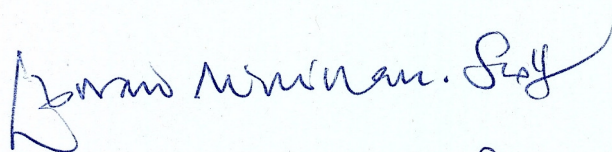
Leonidas Donskis, Member of the Subcommittee on Human Rights, ALDE



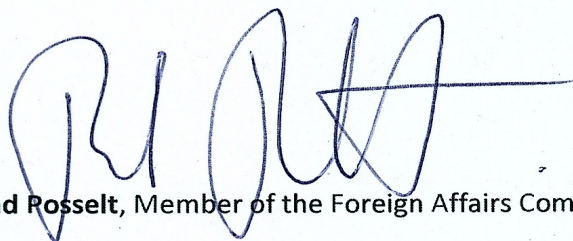
Hannu Takkula, Member of the European Parliament, ALDE



Adam Bielan, Member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, ECR



Edward McMillan-Scott, Vice-President of the EP,
Democracy and Human Rights



Bernd Rosselt, Member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, EPP

L. Andrikiene

Laima Liucija Andrikiene, Member of the Foreign Affairs Committee and of the Subcommittee on Human Rights, EPP

Cristian Preda, Member of the Committee of Foreign Affairs, EPP

Cristian Preda

Charles Tannock

Charles Tannock, ECR Coordinator on Foreign Affairs Committee and Human Rights Subcommittee