

U.S. Statement on SR Pinheiro's Report on Burma

The United States thanks Mr. Pinheiro for his very thorough but also very troubling report. It provides important details of the Burmese authorities' crackdown on demonstrations by monks and democracy activists and severe reprisals that continue today. Mr. Pinheiro has shown great determination and persistence in pursuing objectively the facts of the human rights situation in Burma. His recommendations of the immediate steps that the Burmese authorities should take to address the serious human rights issues deserve the strong support of this Council.

The Special Rapporteur's report notes the excessive use of force against civilians, including the use of unnecessary and disproportionate lethal force, by military and police forces, as well as by non-law enforcement but officially sanctioned organizations. Mr. Pinheiro notes how the regime's excessive use of force against peaceful demonstrators led to a still-to-be determined number of killings, disappearances, detentions, and severe injuries. Through its actions, the Than Shwe regime demonstrated to its own people and the international community that it will show no restraint to repress dissent and to preserve its power.

The reports the Special Rapporteur has received of a large number of bodies being burned September 27 – 30 at the Ye Way Crematorium are particularly concerning. We are also deeply concerned by the accounts of "hostage taking," in which the regime has resorted to arbitrarily and unlawfully detaining family members, close friends and suspected sympathizers of the protestors and activists thought to be in hiding.

The international community has repeatedly called for the Burmese authorities to improve their human rights record, release all political prisoners, and engage in genuine dialogue with the democratic opposition and with ethnic minorities about transition to democracy. These calls have been met with empty gestures, which, in the light of the overwhelming evidence, seem designed to buy time in the hope of returning to the status quo ante. Even while receiving the visit of the Special Rapporteur, the regime has relentlessly continued to arrest democracy activists, harass monks, and close down monasteries, including the Maggin Monastery in Rangoon that served as a hospice and treatment center for HIV/AIDS patients. Incredibly, the junta's Information Minister briefed the diplomatic corps little more than a week ago and callously dismissed as "trivial" the popular demonstrations in August and September that were so brutally suppressed. The Minister asserted that these mass protests in no way indicated popular dissatisfaction with the regime, and despite mounting poverty and social problems throughout the country, insisted on blaming the demonstrations on a conspiracy between "destructive elements" and unspecified "external powers."

Mr. Pinheiro's report highlights the callousness of the regime. As First Lady Laura Bush noted on December 10, in her remarks on Burma in honor of International Human Rights Day, "It seems the generals are indifferent to the Burmese people's suffering, but the rest of the world is not."

Improvement of the human rights situation in Burma must begin with the acceptance and implementation by the authorities there of the UN's recommendations. We call on the Human Rights Council to closely examine the Special Rapporteur's report and recommendations and to support adoption of a strong resolution that will send a clear message to the regime: It is time to unconditionally release all political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi, cease arrests of all democracy activists, and establish a formal dialogue with the democratic opposition and the ethnic minorities.