

October 15, 2013

To:

EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Catherine Ashton

Copy to:

Commissioner for Development Andris Piebalgs

Commissioner for Agriculture Dacian Ciolos

EU Special Representative for Human Rights Stavros Lambrinidis

Dear Baroness Ashton,

We write to you regarding the EU-Myanmar Joint Task Force and its inaugural meeting scheduled to take place in Yangon and Naypyitaw in November. **We urge the full participation of civil society in the Task Force and that the developing EU-Myanmar partnership reflects commitments to civil society.**

Our organisations, based in Europe and elsewhere, work closely with Burmese civil society to ensure that EU policies toward Burma/Myanmar are informed by local concerns, and promote democracy and human rights.

The setting up of the task force confirms the importance that you, and Presidents Barroso and Van Rompuy, have placed in supporting Myanmar's transition. We welcome the Comprehensive Framework agreed to by EU Foreign Ministers in July that defines EU goals as supporting human rights, democracy, and inclusive sustainable development.

We recognise that the rapid rapprochement, lifting of sanctions, boosting of development funding, and the setting up of an EU Delegation in Yangon, have all absorbed political, financial and human resources. At the same time, we would like to recall the EU's commitments to engaging civil society in its external relations and request that the EU-Myanmar partnership reflects a balanced approach to the government *and* society.

The EU's Strategic Framework for Human Rights and Democracy from June 2012 promises a rights approach throughout foreign policy. It notes that "effective engagement with civil society is a cornerstone of a successful human rights policy." This echoes Council Conclusions from October 2012 that recognise civil society as "a crucial and integral component of any democracy" that fosters "pluralism and contribute[s] to more effective policies, equitable development and inclusive growth." The EU has also committed to supporting and promoting "an enabling environment for an independent, pluralistic and active civil society in partner countries."

In the context of Burma the EU has confirmed, through the Comprehensive Framework for Myanmar, that it "attaches great importance to the involvement of civil society in building the institutions that are necessary for a modern inclusive democracy." The EU will "strive to enlist the assistance of local and foreign NGOs where possible" and encourage the Burmese government and institutions in reaching out and supporting interactions between the state and civil society.

While these commitments are all welcome, at present they are not being met. Our discussions with civil society partners, NGOs and activists in Burma suggest that the EU has not been able to

effectively inform the people of Burma about EU policies and plans, or substantively engage civil society. As donor funds flood the country the EU should recognise that its added value is not just through additional funding but through its ability to include, engage with, and politically support the existence of an independent and vibrant civil society. At present the EU is seen as prioritising top-down engagement and the normalisation of relations with the government, above and beyond its commitment to civil society. This perception, fair or otherwise, undermines EU policies in the country, keeps civil society away from policy processes, and ultimately weakens the prospects of transition.

There are good examples of how the EU facilitates civil society dialogue with officials. The Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN), a project managed by the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO) and planned jointly by EPLO, the EEAS and the Commission, is one of these. It is with concern that we note the planned October CSDN meeting, the first to be held in Yangon, has been postponed. Rather than taking the opportunity to explore the EU's role in the peace process with civil society actors following an initial Brussels meeting in March, the EEAS has unfortunately given the signal that such a dialogue contains more risk than benefit.

Nonetheless, we welcome the EU-Myanmar Task Force's goal of helping the transition move forward in an inclusive manner. It will be an important opportunity for the EU to show the importance it places on civil society engagement. In this regard we would like to recall and support the European Parliament's resolution from 13 June 2013 that calls for a "strong and visible civil society component, in which the Rohingya are represented, to participate in the EU-Burma Task Force."

We urge you to ensure substantive civil society participation in *all areas* of the task force and not restricted to sessions on democracy and human rights; sessions on business and development will also need to have civil society represented. CSO participation in the joint task force should continue when the meetings move to Naypyidaw.

We also encourage the EEAS to upgrade its human resources in the EU Delegation in Yangon to reflect the priority placed on Myanmar. This includes **an identifiable and experienced human rights focal point, regular outreach to civil society by the new Head of Delegation and the prioritisation of engagement with a broad selection of civil society groups** in order to, *inter alia*, ensure an informed and robust EU-Burma Human Rights Dialogue.

Current EU policies toward Burma fall short of the Human Rights Strategic Framework and the commitment to civil society in external relations. We are convinced that the sooner the EEAS and member states start to fully engage with civil society in a manner commensurate to their own policies, the sooner the benefits of a partnership with the EU will be felt beyond Naypyidaw.

The EU-Myanmar Joint Task Force presents a good opportunity to realign the EU's top-down approach. We look forward to EU engagement that supports civil society inclusion in policy processes and illustrates the EU's commitment to deep and sustainable democracies.

Sincerely,

Actions Birmanie (Belgium)

Austrian Burma Center

Burma Action Ireland

Burma Aktion (Germany)

Burma Campaign UK

Burma Partnership

Christian Solidarity Worldwide

FIDH - International Federation for Human Rights

Info Birmanie (France)

Norwegian Burma Committee

Olof Palme International Center

Society for Threatened Peoples – Germany

Swedish Burma Committee