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Myanmar: Clinton's visit should be measured in human rights improvement

The success of the US Secretary of State'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 Hillary Clinton will begin a two-day visit to Myanmar, the highest-level visit by a US official in over 50 years.

"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 US 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".

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.

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.

"Clinton should make it abundantly clear to the authorities that she expects nothing less than to see political prisoners freed and ethnic minority civilians protected," said Benjamin Zawacki.

The US 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.

"Clinton should reiterate the US's commitment to accountability in Myanmar through an international commission if the authorities do not draw a line under decades of impunity," said Benjamin Zawacki.

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

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 19 October 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 21 November, 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