

Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network Statement on the visit of the US president to Myanmar

The Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN) views the recently announced visit of the President of the United States Barack Obama, to Myanmar a historical event of considerable significance. Under President Thein Sein, Myanmar has embarked upon a long road towards democratic reform, which is commendable. However, Myanmar is still to prove whether it is truly committed to transitioning to a democratic system that upholds human rights and the will of its people.

APRRN urges the President to emphasise that the United States and the International community requires considerably more to be done by Myanmar towards establishing institutions of responsive democratic governance, and the respect for human rights.

The United States should impress on the Government of Myanmar the need to:

End the violence and discrimination in the Rakhine State

Outbreaks of violence in Rakhine State between June and October, disproportionately targeting the Rohingya and Kaman, have left hundreds of dead, thousands of houses destroyed and more than 100,000 displaced. The government of Myanmar has been slow and prejudiced in its response to the violence, which has adversely affected Muslim minorities. The displaced have been accommodated in make-shift camps and temporary sites, segregated from other communities. Humanitarian agencies continue to face obstacles in assisting the displaced and other affected populations. Survivors have also been forced to seek refuge in neighbouring countries. The Government of Myanmar should demonstrate its will in ending the conflict, in prosecuting the perpetrators and instigators, in protecting all people in the Rakhine State equally and without prejudice and in ensuring unfettered humanitarian access and assistance.

Repeal the 1982 Citizenship Law

The Citizenship Law introduced in 1982 is incompatible with Myanmar's legal obligations under international treaties. It arbitrarily stripped the Rohingya and other minorities in Myanmar of the right to citizenship. The 1982 Citizenship Law should be repealed and replaced with a new law that is inclusive and founded on international human rights standards and on principles of equality and non-discrimination.

Urge Myanmar to strengthen its efforts to resolve Burma's ethnic conflicts and expand humanitarian access in these areas

The Myanmar government should cease all military operations against ethnic nationalities, particularly in Kachin State, expand humanitarian access in these areas, and engage in meaningful peace negotiations. Of paramount importance should be the inclusion of women, particularly those from ethnic minorities in the peace building and repatriation planning process per commitments

Ensure the safety and dignity of returning refugees

The hundreds of thousands of refugees from Myanmar live on the borders of the country. No refugee should be forced to return. The US government should maintain its support for refugees and continue to offer resettlement to refugees who cannot return to Myanmar.

Prior to the commencement of any voluntary repatriation program for refugees, the international community and the government of Myanmar have to ensure that the refugees are able to return to a land that is safe, where their rights are respected, and they do not face any threats of persecution, revenge or discrimination.

Returning refugees should, at a minimum, have access to sustainable livelihoods, education and healthcare.

It is imperative that comprehensive mapping of landmines be conducted and demining operations commence and declared safe before any return of refugees and IDPs are considered.

APRRN hopes the visit of the US president will result in positive outcomes for the people of Myanmar.

About Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN)

The Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN) comprises a network of more than 120 civil society organizations and individuals from 21 countries committed to advancing the rights of refugees in the Asia Pacific Region through information sharing, mutual capacity building and joint advocacy.

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While APRRN statements are prepared in consultation with APRRN members, they do not necessarily reflect the views of all APRRN members.