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HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

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Written statement submitted by ARTICLE 19, Global Campaign for Free Expression, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status**Title: Burma: Crackdown on Protests and Disconnection of Internet Require Immediate UN Action****Text:**

ARTICLE 19, Global Campaign for Free Expression, is very concerned about current threats to freedom of expression and human rights in Burma. The protests carried out peacefully by tens of thousands of monks and civilians have been crushed by a heavy handed and violent army crackdown. The severing of the country's main internet connection late last week has severely and unacceptably limited the flow of information about events inside Burma to the international community. Protected against international scrutiny, ARTICLE 19 fears the military regime governing Burma may resort to whatever measures it deems necessary to silence any protest against their undemocratic rule.

ARTICLE 19 is also concerned that the push for democracy in Burma, which is massively overdue after 45 years of military or quasi-military rule, may, if the international community does not act decisively, have been in vain. The protests have been quashed, the leaders arrested and control of any expression of dissent reasserted by the military regime. In other words, Burma is once again the highly repressive, undemocratic State it was before the protests. The United Nations must take up the mantle of securing human rights and democracy in Burma. As the leading UN body responsible for human rights, it is essential that the Human Rights Council do what it can to promote democracy and human rights in Burma regime.

ARTICLE 19 wishes to bring to the attention of the Human Rights Council attacks on journalists, censorship and the severance of access to communications tools such as the internet and telephones that the recent protests have engendered.

Treatment of journalists

On 19 August, at the very beginning of the protests, a blackout on any discussion of the fuel price hike which originally inspired the protests was imposed on local media. When this was lifted on 29 August, a warning was issued to the effect that any coverage of fuel hike must be 'positive'. On suspicion of a possible strike action by the media, Tint Swe, the Director of Military Censorship, called a meeting on 23 September to threaten reprisals against anyone participating in a strike. He also ordered all newspapers to publish a statement denouncing the protests. A number of editors bravely refused, arguing that the public wanted to hear about the protests and if they weren't reported, the public simply wouldn't be interested in buying their newspapers. All publications refusing to publish an anti-protest statement were closed.

Journalists covering the protests were the target of special attacks during the violent crackdown last week. Min Zaw, the Burmese correspondent of the Japanese daily *Tokyo Shimbun*, and three young Burmese journalists, were arrested last week while covering the protests. They are apparently being held incommunicado. Even foreign journalists have not been spared. On 27 September, Japanese journalist Kenji Nagai, of the newspaper *APF News*, was shot dead at close range by a soldier while filming the protests. The assassination was caught on camera and disseminated around the world. The Japanese government yesterday sent the Japanese deputy foreign minister, Mitoji Yabunaka, to Burma to demand “a full explanation of the incident and demand safety for Japanese nationals.” Foreign press visas are severely restricted by the military and scores of journalists have been blacklisted. On 27 September, soldiers and police went to several Rangoon hotels to check the documents of the foreign journalists staying there.

Communications Technologies:

One of the most striking differences between the 2007 protests and those of 1988 has been the use of new communications technologies to get information out to the international community, prompting a strong reaction and compelling many to speak out against the regime. Photos and videos taken on cell phones and cameras were sent by ordinary protestors from internet cafes in Rangoon to Burma’s media in exile in countries around the world. Others uploaded their images direct to blog sites. Although the junta did its best to prevent this by slowing internet connections and blocking sites, the protestors persisted, using proxy servers, coded messages and alternative sites. Telephones were likewise employed both as a tool to organise protests and to convey information to the international community.

On 28 September, however, communications from Rangoon to the outside world fell eerily silent; the main internet link to the country had been disconnected, rendering it very difficult to get pictures and videos out. The leading Internet Service Provider (ISP) shrugged it off as a technical hitch with an underwater cable. Calls to the ISP’s headquarters have reportedly been left unanswered while troops have taken up position outside the building. The connection was restored on 30 September but disconnected again hours later and, as of today, had not been restored. Although most landlines and some mobiles are still working, the disabling of the internet has led to a drying up of communications from the country. ARTICLE 19 is concerned that the military regime will take advantage of this cover of secrecy to perpetrate further abuses on those who dared challenge its (illegitimate) rule.

ARTICLE 19 very much welcomes the statements of condemnation against the regime by various governments, including ASEAN countries and China. However, their actions clearly indicate that the military regime in Burma have paid little heed to these statements. In order to prevent further violence, it is essential that the UN Human Rights Council issue a strong condemnation of the Junta’s actions against the protesters. It is now clear that condemnation is not enough. The Human Rights Council should also call on all UN members, including major investors China and India, to impose a comprehensive arms embargo on Burma, as well as sanctions targeted at the military regime’s economic lifelines. Conditions for lifting sanctions should include the immediate and unconditional release of all those detained or imprisoned for the peaceful expression of their views, including monks and other civilians arrested in connection with the protests, and Aung San Suu Kyi, as well as the adoption of a timetable for political dialogue between all parties with a view to establishing electoral democracy.