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ARTICLE 19

PRESS RELEASE

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Burma: One Hundred Thousand March for Freedom

“The struggle for democracy and human rights in Burma is a struggle for life and dignity.” Aung San Suu Kyi

Reports suggest that more than one hundred thousand Burmese led by Monks have today taken to the streets of Burma’s cities and towns in peaceful demonstration against Burma’s military regime.

“Now is the time for action, not inaction. Now is the time to show the people of Burma that we care, that we listen, that we watch, and that we speak out with them. Now is the time to support them in their peaceful demonstrations and actions for democracy. We cannot and must not turn our backs on them yet again” said Dr Agnès Callamard, Executive Director, ARTICLE 19.

ARTICLE 19 calls:

- On the military regime to respond peacefully to the peaceful voices of the people of Burma, and to do what is right: release Aung San Suu Kyi and all other political prisoners, and allow for the establishment of a process leading to democracy;
- On the international community to join in full solidarity with the people of Burma and support their peaceful struggle for freedom of expression and democracy in Burma;
- On the European Union to meet as soon as possible and adopt an affirmative stance on Burma that includes full economic sanctions and proactive dialogue with regional superpowers China, India and Russia on Burma;
- On the United Nations Security Council to adopt an immediate and binding resolution on Burma which includes proactive dialogue with the Burmese Junta to secure the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and all political prisoners and a process leading to the establishment of democracy and respect for human rights, including freedom of expression.

Dr. Callamard adds: *“As across Burma where crowds of protestors have formed protective human chains around the monks in their march of protest throughout Burma’s cities, the international community as a whole must now join together in a chain of support for the Burmese protestors. Even despite the relentless freedom of expression restrictions imposed on them, the Burmese people have joined together in an ardent and determined expression of their dissatisfaction towards the regime. We must now use our own freedom of expression to do the same.”*

Background:

The protests first started on 19 August 2007 when hundreds of Burmese protestors took to the streets of Rangoon and other cities around the country to protest against the 15 August 2007 fuel price hike. Despite an ongoing crackdown by the regime, the protests have continued and were significantly strengthened last week by the country’s monks who, in response to

violence used against them during the protests, enacted *Pattanikuzana*, a ceremony which effectively amounted to the excommunication of the military regime from the Buddhist faith. The monks, now peacefully protesting en masse, have been joined by an increasing number of other protestors, including members of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party who, after being elected in 1990, were denied their rightfully won places in parliament.

On Saturday 22 September, in an extraordinary event, hundreds of monks marched to the house of Aung San Suu Kyi, Nobel Peace Laureate, honorary ARTICLE 19 board member and leader of the NLD, to see her emerge from her home, hands held palm to palm in a Buddhist gesture. The tearful meeting has done much to bolster the Burmese people's already burning spirit for change. The last time Suu Kyi was seen in public was four years ago, in 2003, and she has been held under house arrest for 11 of the past 17 years.

The military regime has used a range of tactics to restrict the circulation of information on the protests ranging from blocking telephone lines and the already heavily censored Internet to threatening journalists attending the protests and confiscating their cameras and other equipment.

The events of the last five weeks indicate enormous strength, bravery and determination on the part of the Burmese people who are standing up for their freedom. Activists inside the country, however, have indicated that immediate and affirmative support from the international community is essential to the success of their project to restore democracy. We, the international community, must show our support for them at this crucial moment.

The EU, which until now has had a weak and fragmented policy on Burma, should take immediate and collective action to urge regional superpowers China, India and Russia to use their influence on Burma to ensure that the peaceful demonstrations can continue, as well, ultimately, as the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and all other political prisoners, and a process leading to the establishment of democracy and respect for human rights, including freedom of expression.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

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- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.