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ARTICLE 19

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Burma, ASEAN: Small Concession Masks Significant Obstruction

Whilst welcome news, the Burmese regime's release of prisoners and their promises of more to come masks the forcible way in which they obstructed any development of a human rights agreement at the recent ASEAN Summit.

Over the weekend news emerged that the Burmese military regime had released 23 prisoners, including one MP from Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy. The release was accompanied by an announcement on Friday that 6,313 prisoners would be freed over the coming days.

"ARTICLE 19 welcomes the releases and calls on the Burmese authorities to deliver on its promises to free more political prisoners. We particularly urge the authorities to release Aung San Suu Kyi and all other political prisoners imprisoned for the peaceful expression of their political opinions." said Dr. Callamard, ARTICLE 19 Executive Director.

Unfortunately, the timing of these releases could not be more significant. They coincided with the Burmese authorities' strenuous efforts to block and veto any human rights agreements on the ASEAN Summit agenda over the weekend.

The Summit held in Thailand brought together the ASEAN member states, all of whom have ratified the ASEAN Charter containing a provision (Article 14) to establish a regional human rights body, similar to those already in existence in Europe, Africa and the Americas. Led by Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, Thailand has been pushing for such a body to be agreed during its chairmanship of ASEAN: *"We need to make ASEAN more people-centred...Protection and promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms is a key feature of our community."*

Deplorably the Burmese regime undermined any possibility for agreement on a new charter, vetoed the attendance of human rights campaigners and blocked dialogue with civil society.

"The ASEAN member states must do more for human rights protection in Burma and must do it better. The lack of courage in addressing what constitutes one of the major human rights crises in the world reflects badly on all member states and on ASEAN and does not augur well of its human rights commitment and capacities." adds Dr. Callamard.

Unsurprisingly the current draft of the human rights body leaked to The Associated Press over the weekend is similarly reportedly weak with no powers to investigate or

prosecute rights abusers and complete with provisions that reject external interference.

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.