



## Press Release No. 1/ 2006

The Embassy of the Union of Myanmar, with reference to the recommendations made in 2006 by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) to the U.S. Secretary of State on “countries of particular concern”, would like to make the following observations and rebuttals:-

- (i) The Embassy of the Union of Myanmar very much regrets to see Myanmar on the said CPC list. Although 90 percent of the population in Myanmar profess Buddhism, it is not made the official religion of the land. The Myanmar people enjoy the right to freedom of religion and worship. The co-existence of a Buddhist shrine, the Immanuel Baptist Church, a Bengali mosque and a Hindu temple at the heart of Yangon attests to that long-standing practice.
- (ii) As befit the name, Myanmar is a Union made up of seven states and seven divisions where 135 national groups reside. The main groups are Barmars, Kachins, Kayins, Chins, Mons, Shans and Rakhines. Although Bamars are predominantly Buddhist, the majority of Kachins and Chins profess Christianity. The majority of the Sakaw Kayins are Christian whereas most of the Po Kayins are Buddhist. The Mons and Shans are mainly Buddhist whereas some population of Rakhines profess Islam. There are also people who profess Hinduism in the country.
- (iii) Inter-marriage among the national groups is very common. Therefore, in a typical Bamar family, a son could be married to a Christian Kayin and a daughter could be married to a Muslim Rakhine. In this kind of society/community, religious intolerance is non-existent.
- (iv) The entire country is dotted with edifices belonging to various religions. The custom of the land is that even if a Muslim enters a Buddhist shrine or monastery, he will be welcomed with food, water and shelter. So also with the Church or the Mosque in Myanmar to people of other faiths. Myanmar does not have a caste system either.
- (v) Generally speaking, the Report by the Commission on Myanmar has many sweeping statements, creating an impression for a person who does not know Myanmar well that they are true. This strategy is also useful in belittling the efforts of the Government of Myanmar for national reconciliation. For example, it was mentioned that “There have been some **attempts** (by the Government) in recent years to reach peace accords with armed **militias** ... but these efforts have not produced an improvement in the overall conditions for human rights, including religious freedom”. In reality, **because of the serious efforts** of the

Government, (17) **peace accords** have been reached with **armed ethnic groups** but not **militias**. Furthermore, there is no issue over religion between the Government and ethnic groups as alleged. The Government has launched military operations against armed insurgents but not on a group of particular faith, and the fallout has negative impact on all those living in the area, but not on a particular “ethnic group” only as alleged.

- (vi) The allegations such as “religious leaders suspected of supporting the NLD have been harassed, arrested and detained” are totally false. There is no hard proof for these sweeping accusations.
- (vii) As Myanmar is multi-ethnic and multi-religious, allegations like the Government’s “restrictions on certain religious practice, controls and censors of all religious publications and forceful promotion of Buddhism over other religions” are very dangerous. It has negative impact on the Myanmar society which enjoys religious harmony. Furthermore, it sows seeds of mistrust and hatred among various multi-ethnic and multi-religious groups. In reality, the following are some hard and verifiable facts that refute the allegations of religious intolerance in Myanmar:-
- The Government of Myanmar has facilitated those from various faiths to attend their respective religious gatherings abroad. The number of Islamic devotees who embarked on Haj pilgrimages in Mecca has increased from 250 each in the years 2004 and 2005 to 300 in 2006. Even in the era of absolute monarchy in ancient Myanmar, one Myanmar king, King Mindon, graciously built a peacock pavilion (resthouse) in Mecca for the welfare of Myanmar Muslim pilgrims that visited it.
  - The Government has also facilitated those from various faiths to undergo religious studies abroad. There are altogether about a hundred priests and nuns from Myanmar having graduate studies in the Vatican and other Christian institutions elsewhere. The Government has consistently allowed senior religious figures to attend religious conferences abroad in accordance with rules and regulations.
  - The Government facilitated representatives of Buddhist, Christian, Hindu and Islamic institutions in Myanmar to attend the Interfaith Dialogue held in Indonesia in the year 2005.
  - The Government has sanctioned the religious holidays such as Depawali, Eid, Christmas, Kayin New Year as gazetted holidays in addition to religious holidays for Buddhists.
  - The Cabinet-level officers regularly attend the religious festivities of Christian, Islamic and Hindu faiths.
- (viii) The Report also mentioned 3 or 4 incidents of communal violence in the years 2003, 2004 and 2005, alleging that “police and soldiers (who belong to all faiths) reportedly stood by”. In a multi religious society of (52) million population, the small number of incidents can also be taken as an indicator of religious harmony and tolerance in Myanmar. One should always bear in mind that (90) percent of the Myanmar society is Buddhist,

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- (5) percent is Christian, (3.8) percent is Islam and (0.5) percent is Hinduism, the rest is other deities.
- (ix) It is true that actions were taken against some religious institutions such as “the closing of (80) Protestant house churches”. The reason for closing them down was also given in the Report. They were closed because they did not have proper authorization to hold religious meetings. In the age of religious intolerance and terrorist acts sometimes in the name of religion, it is hoped that the Commission could understand the reluctance of the Government to allow religious gatherings at unregistered and unauthorized places. In Myanmar, churches and mosques abound for proper religious gatherings.
- (x) The Embassy of Myanmar categorically rejects an allegation in the Report that “government authorities offered financial and career incentives to ethnic Burman Buddhist soldiers to marry Chin Christian women”. This is very much unfounded. Action would be taken if this allegation could be substantiated.
- (xi) The Report also mentioned that “monks are not allowed to preach political sermons or make public views critical of SPDC (government) policies”. This is true because in Myanmar, there is clear separation of politics and religion and as such, the sanghas (monks) cannot be involved in politics. The Order of the Sanghas - a body made up of most senior monks, not the Government, is responsible for regulating the conduct of the monks.
- (xii) Finally, the Embassy of the Union of Myanmar would like to observe that the allegations contained in the Report are fed by none other than those who harbor malice towards the Government of Myanmar. In this context, the Embassy would like to invite the Commission to base its Report on Myanmar’s record in religious freedom by interviewing sources who entertain unbiased outlook toward Myanmar. Scholars/ Specialists on Myanmar and foreign diplomats who have been assigned to Myanmar will attest to the well-established fact in our part of the world that the Myanmar society enjoys religious tolerance as well as freedom of religion and worship.

**Embassy of the Union of Myanmar,  
Washington, DC.**

**Dated: 30 May 2006**