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(Brussels)

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“WHAT ARE THE PERSPECTIVES ON BURMA?
HOW CAN THE SILENCE BE BROKEN?”

A Panel Discussion organized by the Association Suisse-Birmanie

Thursday 29 March 2007

Panelists:

- *Professeur Paulo Sergio Pinheiro*, United Nations Human Rights Special Rapporteur for Burma;
- *Harn Yawngnwe*, Director of the European Office for the Development of Democracy in Burma (Euro-Burma Office), Brussels; and
- *Dr Jean F. Freymond*, Director of the Centre for Applied Studies in International Negotiations (CASIN), Geneva.

Moderated by:

Claude Schauli, journalist and founding member of ASB.

The nearly two-hour public discussion at the University of Geneva, Switzerland, was attended by over one hundred people including members of the Burmese delegation to the UN Human Rights Council, expatriate Burmese, activists and the general public. The City of Geneva provided refreshments and food for the reception (Voice of America, Burmese Section, and Radio Cite Geneva carried reports on the event).

Ms Blooming Night Zaw, Joint-Secretary of the Karen Women's Organization, presented a copy of "State of Terror", the KWO's new report on the Burma Army's violence against Karen women, to Professeur Paulo Sergio Pinheiro.

Discussion points included:

SANCTIONS – It was generally agreed that it was not productive to argue over whether sanctions against the SPDC have worked or not. Sanctions were invoked as a symbolic measure to censure the SPDC over its failure to respect the will of the people of Burma in the 1990 elections, and for its gross abuse of the human rights of the people of Burma. As such, sanctions against the SPDC must be retained because the human rights situation in Burma has not improved and the elections results have not been honoured. Regardless of what happens politically in Burma, or who is in government, if human rights are abused by the authorities, it is the duty of the international community to report and highlight these abuses.

HUMANITARIAN AID – It was generally agreed that the dire situation of the people of Burma calls for the international community to deliver humanitarian aid. It was

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agreed that it should not be dependent on whether or not the SPDC agrees to allow the aid to be delivered. If people are suffering, they should be helped. Innovative ways and means to deliver aid to the most vulnerable populations should be explored even if it means crossing international boundaries.

TOURISM – The official position of the Burmese democracy movement towards tourism was pronounced by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in 1996. She said, “Do not come now.” This policy was set in the context of the SPDC’s then campaign to earn foreign exchange to sustain its rule through tourist dollars. The situation has changed drastically in the last ten years and it is now possible to visit Burma without giving funds to the regime. The SPDC is also no longer looking for tourist dollars. The sale of natural gas is now the regime’s mainstay. However, since Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is being held incommunicado, the movement’s tourism policy cannot be changed. The participants respected the movement’s existing policy but noted that under other dictatorships, tourism can be a factor in making people less dependent on the dictatorship by giving them an alternative source of income and information.

TRANSITION – It was generally agreed that the SPDC, which holds power in Burma, has to want a transition in order for it to happen. It was also agreed that the SPDC has to initiate and participate in any transition in order to minimize instability.

DIALOGUE – It was generally agreed that the SPDC does not want a dialogue with the opposition. However, it was felt that in order to bring about a transition and better conditions for the people of Burma, it is crucial to engage the SPDC in a dialogue. It was suggested that new approaches and entry points should be explored.

End

Harn Yawngwe, Director, Euro-Burma Office, Brussels