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Dear Mr Steele

Thank you for your letter of 19 December to the Foreign Secretary's Office about the situation in Burma. We have been asked to reply.

We have strongly and repeatedly condemned the recent violent suppression of peaceful protests across Burma. The Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary, and other Ministers, continue their efforts to ensure that the international community does not forget the people of Burma.

We are alarmed by the reports of continuing persecution targeted at those who took part in the demonstrations. We want the regime to end ongoing arrests, release all political prisoners and engage in a genuine process of reconciliation and a dialogue that is fully inclusive, not least of the ethnic groups.

We are working to increase regional and international pressure on the regime while at the same time holding out the prospect of a better future for Burma should there be genuine moves towards political reconciliation, the restoration of democracy and respect for human rights.

We are applying pressure firstly through the United Nations. On 2 October, the UN Human Rights Council passed a resolution sponsored by the European Union, (EU) with the strong support of the UK, which expressed deep concern about the situation in Burma and requested that the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Burma, Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, be given

immediate access. Professor Pinheiro visited Burma from 11 to 15 November. He met senior regime figures, and a number of political prisoners.

Professor Pinheiro's report to the Human Rights Council on 11 December highlights the gravity of the human rights situation in Burma. It is evident that there are major concerns about abuses during the repression of the peaceful protests in September and October.

We welcome the Special Rapporteur's findings, and support the call for an early follow-up visit to take forward a more thorough investigation. It is imperative he is given free and unhindered access to both people and areas across Burma. We also support Professor Pinheiro's recommendations and urge the Burmese government to fully co-operate with him to enable him to continue his much-needed work in the country.

On 11 October, the UN sent a powerful signal that the international community would stand together in support of the Burmese people. The UK helped to secure a unanimous statement by the Security Council which strongly deplored the use of violence against peaceful demonstrations, called for the release of all political prisoners and underlined the need for the Burmese government to establish a genuine dialogue with all concerned parties and ethnic groups. This was the first formal action on Burma ever taken by the Security Council. It had the support of all the members of the Security Council including, crucially, China, and represents a significant shift in the political situation from their previous position.

The UN Secretary General's envoy, Ibrahim Gambari, made his most recent visit to Burma from 3-8 November. He met Aung San Suu Kyi, other National League for Democracy figures, representatives of ethnic groups as well as senior members of the regime and their proxy organisations. Aung San Suu Kyi subsequently issued a statement through Professor Gambari reaffirming her willingness to engage in a dialogue with the regime and representatives of the ethnic groups. We hope the regime seizes this opportunity to find a lasting settlement to the problems of Burma.

We are also taking the lead in the EU. We secured agreement to impose stronger restrictive measures against the regime. On 15 October, European Foreign Ministers agreed to implement sanctions targeting business interests in those sectors from which the regime draws much of its revenue – timber, precious metals and gems. The EU made clear that any decision on whether further measures are imposed will depend entirely on the regime's willingness to allow genuine political progress in Burma. The EU measures are focused on the generals and designed not to harm the Burmese people.

As a third means of pressure, we continue to keep in close contact with partners in the region, including the Association of South East Asian Nations, (ASEAN) to build up constructive pressure on the Burmese government. Ministers' personal engagement with their counterparts in the region helped lay the foundation for a strongly worded statement by

ASEAN on 27 September, in which they expressed their revulsion for the actions of the regime.

We looked to the ASEAN and East Asia Summits in Singapore on 18 - 21 November to send a clear signal to the regime that their regional partners expected political transformation and national reconciliation. In contacts with Foreign Ministers from across the region in the build up to the Summits, we underlined the importance we attached to this issue and Minister Meg Munn made these points person when she met ASEAN Ministers (as well as Professor Gambari and the EU Special Envoy, Piero Fassino) during the EU-ASEAN Summit on 22 November. We welcome ASEAN's reaffirmation of its support for the UN-led process, but were disappointed that Burmese objections prevented Professor Gambari from addressing the ASEAN Summit. We continue to call on our ASEAN partners to play a leading role in promoting fundamental political change in their fellow member state, Burma.

At the same time as applying this pressure on the regime, we have been clear that if a genuine political transformation gets under way, the international community should begin the work which will lead to substantial economic support for a new, democratic government of Burma. The Prime Minister has written to the UN Secretary General and other key colleagues proposing support for a recovery plan for Burma, strictly conditional on demonstrable and irrevocable progress towards reconciliation and democracy. The first meeting to discuss this initiative was held in Washington on 20 October. We have also announced that we will be doubling the humanitarian aid to Burma from £9 million this year to £18 million by 2010-11.

We have placed further information about Burma, as well as the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's Annual Report on Human Rights, on our website at www.fco.gov.uk.



P Lewis
South East Asia & Pacific Group