

News Release

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OUELLET URGES MYANMAR AUTHORITIES TO FIND PEACEFUL SOLUTION TO INTERNAL STRIFE

Foreign Affairs Minister André Ouellet today urged Myanmar's State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) to work peacefully and seriously toward national reconciliation with the political opposition in Myanmar (Burma). The Minister also urged the authorities to refrain from escalating the armed conflict across the country and across the border with Thailand.

"Escalation of the armed conflict can only result in more human suffering within Burma, create more transborder refugees and impose a further burden on its neighbours and the international community," said Mr. Ouellet.

The Minister added that Canada remains concerned about the current situation in Burma, including continued human rights violations and the SLORC's refusal to abide by the results of the 1990 elections. Mr. Ouellet said that such concerns impede the development of full bilateral relations between Canada and Myanmar.

The Minister called on the SLORC authorities to release Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners, enter into meaningful negotiations with representatives of the democratic movement, set up a clear timetable and commitment to a transitional constitutional process, provide legal guarantees to minorities, abolish forced labour and facilitate access for humanitarian groups to needy communities.

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Attached is some background information on the situation in Burma and on Canada's response to the conflict in that country.

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Backgrounder

MYANMAR (BURMA)

Context

Since the military coup d'état in 1962, General Ne Win's Burma Socialist Program Party has controlled Burma and maintained it in isolation. In 1988, in response to civil unrest, the military established itself as the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). The SLORC promised to return peace and prosperity to Burma by ending internal political conflict, re-establishing democracy and normalizing relations with the outside world. The 1990 elections were won by the National League for Democracy, led by Nobel Peace Laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, who was placed under house arrest in 1989. However, the SLORC refused to allow the new parliament to convene and claimed that a new constitution must be adopted before the Council hands over power.

The SLORC established a National Convention, excluding most of the elected leaders, to work on a draft constitution that will formalize the military's role in Burma's political life. Two senior generals held talks last fall with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, but no progress has been reported and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is now in her sixth year of house arrest.

The SLORC has concluded military cease-fires with most of the ethnic armies that have been fighting the central government for decades. No political settlements have been reached. Last December, the SLORC renewed military action against the Karen National Union (KNU) forces along the border with Thailand. The main Karen stronghold in the town of Manerplaw fell in late January but the fighting continues along the Thai border. On February 16, Thailand placed its armed forces on full alert along the border after a series of incursions by Myanmar troops and allied Karen forces pursuing KNU rebels into Thai territory.

It is estimated that the fighting in Burma has created over 70 000 refugees, most of them in Thailand but some also in Bangladesh.

Canada's Response

To address immediate human suffering, Canada provides financial and material contributions to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, as well as other humanitarian aid groups operating directly in the refugee camps. Canada also assists groups such as Médecins sans frontières (Doctors Without Borders) and the Burma Border Consortium of humanitarian aid agencies working with

Burmese civilians, either within Burma or in the refugee camps. Canada has contributed almost \$3.5 million to these programs. Canada has also made several protests to the SLORC authorities against human rights violations in Burma and has repeatedly demanded the liberation of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

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