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Update on WCC response to Myanmar situation

Dear Friends,

I am writing with information about actions being taken with regard to the situation in Myanmar since the recent WCC executive committee meeting. As protests mounted in Myanmar, members of the committee followed the news closely and with deep concern. We are all continuing, I am sure, to hold the people and churches of Myanmar in our prayers.

In view of current circumstances in Myanmar, we ask that you treat this communication as a letter directly to you as leaders of the international ecumenical community. It is *not for circulation* and not for public information.

As you recall, during the executive committee meeting in Armenia we discussed and analysed the pros and cons of issuing a statement on the deteriorating situation in Myanmar. Staff were working each day to establish contact with the Myanmar church leaders to seek their advice on the various options available including the issuing of statements. This approach reflected the Myanmar church leaders' long-standing position that statements on Myanmar issued by the WCC will negatively affect them and will lead to isolation of the Myanmar churches. They stress the possibility of a hard-line policy of the military government towards them. It was in this context that we wanted to seek their opinion before we issued a statement on Myanmar in the current crisis.

As news reached us from Myanmar, we were heartened to hear that the churches were aware, once again, of the concern and solidarity of churches worldwide. We also thank God that the churches of Myanmar were able to partially observe their annual week of prayer for peace and reconciliation, 28 September to 4 October, before the observance was stopped by the authorities.

During the first week of October we established contact with Myanmar church leaders through an ecumenical colleague who was able to visit Myanmar. We received feedback from the church leaders that any statement from their partners in the ecumenical family outside the country will have wider repercussions. The military leadership is seriously engaged in scrutinising the involvement of overseas bodies and their linkages with churches and other religious groups in the country. Since they feel that the churches in Myanmar are in a vulnerable situation, they preferred to keep a low profile and also preferred their partners to do the same at this stage. They recalled how an ecumenical statement in an earlier crisis led to five years in which the churches in Myanmar were prevented from participating in that body. In their judgement, a certain balance now will help the ministry of churches there in the future.

My colleagues who have been monitoring the situation and seeking direct contact with Myanmar church leaders received information in the second week of October that Rev. Mar Gay Gyi, the president and also the acting general secretary of the Myanmar Council of Churches, had received an exit permit to travel to Bangkok. He arrived in Thailand on 14 October and I was able to talk with him over the phone on 15 October. During the long telephone conversation, we were able to discuss various issues with regard to the current situation in Myanmar and also questions on what would be an appropriate strategy for WCC to respond to the crisis in Myanmar. He informed me that the archbishop of the Anglican Church of Myanmar, on behalf of the Protestant churches in the country, and the archbishop of the Roman Catholic Church jointly signed a letter addressed to the military leadership expressing the following concerns and suggestions:

- Christians in the country are in favour of a peaceful and non-violent resolution to the ongoing problems through dialogue;
- Christians want unity among all people of the country;
- Christians are committed to praying for forgiveness.

As of our call, no response had been received from the military government.

In response to my question as to whether it is possible for WCC to send a team to visit Myanmar or the general secretary himself to visit, Rev. Mar Gay Gyi told me that this is not possible at this stage. At the same time he was hopeful that a representative group from Myanmar would be able to visit WCC in the near future.

I will be meeting with the UN secretary general at the end of this month and I asked Rev. Mar Gay Gyi whether to raise the possibility of the UN secretary general's representative to meet with all the religious groups of the country during his next visit to Myanmar. He was in favour of such an idea and felt that expressing this view to the UN secretary general during my meeting will help the Myanmar church leaders also to become part of an interfaith initiative in the country and express their concerns.

I am discussing with my colleagues to explore the possibility of organising a consultation of representatives from various ecumenical organisations and churches around the world who are concerned about developments in Myanmar. On the agenda would be an appropriate ecumenical strategy for advocacy on democratisation, peace and reconciliation in Myanmar.

Words the psalmist wrote in another time of trouble, below, serve to carry our hopes and concerns in this hour of need. Let us all continue in prayer to God and in actions to accompany and support our sisters and brothers in Myanmar.

"I will keep your law continually, forever and ever. I shall walk at liberty, for I have sought your precepts. I will also speak of your decrees before kings, and shall not be put to shame; I find my delight in your commandments, because I love them... Remember your word to your servant, in which you have made me hope. This is my comfort in my distress, that your promise gives me life." Psalm 119: 44-50

Yours in Christ,



Rev. Dr Samuel Kobia
General Secretary