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Statement to the Beijing Plus Ten

United Nations Headquarters, New York USA

8 March 2005

Burmese military regime's health policies killing women in Burma

In 1975, the United Nations General Assembly marked March 8th as International Women's Day to honor the lives and struggles of women throughout the world. In some countries in the passed thirty years, there have been many improvements in the lives of women, but in Burma, women continue to suffer from oppression and systematic violence by the military regime. The policies of the military junta lead to thousands of deaths of women each year. The Women's League of Burma holds the Burmese military regime responsible for shockingly high maternal mortality rates in Eastern Burma.

Statistics gathered by the Back Pack Health Worker Team, which operates in Karen, Karenni and Mon States of Burma, reveal maternal mortality rates greater than 1000 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births. The UNICEF official figure for Burma is 180, while neighboring Thailand enjoys a rate of 36 deaths per 100,000 live births.

The high maternal mortality rate is attributed to lack of access to health services. Only 4% of births are attended by skilled birth attendants, far lower than the official figure of 57% in Burma. The regime is not only failing to provide services in these areas, but is regularly hindering the ability of indigenous health providers to access women. The regime's troops often fire on local health workers, in clear violation of the principles of medical neutrality, as codified in the Geneva Conventions.

The regime claims in its report on Myanmar's Implementation of the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action (Beijing +10), that it is making "unremitting efforts (...) to improve health services, particularly primary health care." In reality, the regime spends under 1% of GDP on health and education sectors combined, while spending over 40% of the national budget on its army.

The regime has doubled the size of its army to over 450,000 troops since 1988. It has spent billions of dollars purchasing arms and military equipment from foreign countries including China, India and Russia.

"The regime's excessive military expenditure is sentencing women in Burma to death," says Lway Aye Nang, Joint General Secretary (1) of the WLB.

The WLB is calling for an international arms embargo on Burma, and for international pressure on the regime to immediately stop its increasing militarization, and begin a process of meaningful political reform. Only within a genuine democratic society will women be able to enjoy their fundamental human right to health.

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