

UN rights expert 'deeply concerned' about reprisals against those she met on official visit to Myanmar

24 January 2017 – A United Nations expert warned today about possible reprisals against the people she met during her recent visit to the country, noting that she was particularly struck by the fear of some she spoke to “who were afraid of what would happen to them after talking to me.”

“There is one word that has hung heavily on my mind during this visit – reprisals,” the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, Yanghee Lee, said in a press statement wrapping up her 9 to 21 January mission to the country.

She said she is deeply concerned about those with whom she met and spoke, “those critical of the Government, those defending and advocating for the rights of others, and those who expressed their thoughts and opinions which did not conform to the narrative of those in the position of power.” Moreover, she noted the increasing use of section 66 (d) of the Telecommunications Law against many, “merely for speaking their minds.”

“It is particularly alarming to learn that the security forces’ counter operations in the villages of Maungdaw north in Rakhine state have reportedly been resumed following a brief lull, with raids conducted in several villages including nearby the villages I visited,” Ms. Lee stressed.

There are further allegations of arbitrary arrests and detention in relation to these latest reported raids.

The expert was especially dismayed to note that during the visit, feelings of optimism and hope had appeared to be fading among the country’s ordinary people – just one year after nationwide elation over the last general elections.

The Special Rapporteur regretted that due to security reasons, she was only allowed to go to Myitkyina, and not Laiza and Hpakant in Kachin, stating that the situation “at the northern borders is deteriorating.”

“Those in Kachin state tell me that the situation is now worse than at any point in the past few years. Whilst I was not able to travel to the areas most severely affected, the situation is now such that even in Myitkyina, the capital of the state and home to over 300,000 people, residents are afraid – and now stay home after dark,” the UN expert explained.

In visiting a hard labour camp in Mon state, Ms. Lee was concerned over prisoners’ living conditions, pointing to the use of shackles as a form of additional punishment and the lack of transparency regarding their transfer to the hard labour camp. Without an individual complaint system in prisons

she was “struck by the fear of those prisoners who were afraid of what would happen to them after speaking to me.”

A report from the visit will be presented in March to the UN Human Rights Council, the largest body of independent experts in the UN Human Rights system. Ms. Lee’s position is honorary and she does not receive a salary for her work.