Colleagues and friends:

Over the past half century, few American diplomats have set foot in Burma’s mountainous Kayah State. But CSO’s Jessie Evans, based in the U.S. Embassy, has traveled there five times since March. Ethnic armed groups have been fighting with the government in Kayah State, off and on, for more than three decades. She is determined to help build trust among its citizens and the Burmese government and military. We believe that building trust in Kayah and elsewhere can broaden support for peace and help set the stage for sustainable national reconciliation.

How can Jessie and others help such long-standing adversaries make progress? Both sides see landmines as an impediment to peace and prosperity in Kayah. Our theory is that if they work together to tackle a common challenge—in this case, that posed by landmines in Kayah, they will develop a shared vision and will cooperate on other problems. That success could build their confidence to go beyond today’s fragile ceasefire agreement to other tangible improvements and a national political dialogue.

To promote this, Jessie has helped organize discussions that draw a wide range of stakeholders. In October 2012, armed group leaders in Kayah State said that peace was too tenuous to discuss demining. However, with U.S. support, community members and Burmese officials met in May to discuss landmines, and in June the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) and the Burmese government officially agreed on an area in which to pilot a landmine clearance project. “Their willingness to cooperate on an issue that has long been a source of tension is an encouraging sign of increased trust,” Jessie said.

In Burma, as elsewhere, we work closely with many partners. U.S. funds help groups like the Karenni Health Workers Organization, whose prosthetic workshop I visited earlier this year. To support such groups, we have teamed up with three other State Department bureaus: East Asian and Pacific Affairs (EAP); Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM); and Political-Military Affairs (PM)'s Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement. We also are working with USAID's Leahy War Victims Fund, USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI), and other sections at our embassy.

U.S. funds have been set aside to bring together and train community leaders to collaborate on mine action and provide mine-risk education. We will support many more local organizations through the embassy’s Landmine Stabilization Initiative Small Grants Program. Our list of partners in Burma is long and includes the European Union, Norway, and Danish Church Aid, among others.

In addition to promoting trust-building in Kayah State, CSO has been actively involved in the embassy’s efforts to encourage the broader peace process in Burma. CSO's other embassy-based officer, Cecily Brewer, traveled widely to consult with local government, ethnic armed groups, civil society, political parties, and community leaders to determine the greatest threats to peace and the
groups' hopes for national political dialogue. CSO's findings have informed U.S. policy and programming.

While the Government of Burma and ethnic groups have been making progress, conflict between some Buddhists and Muslims has turned violent in Rakhine State and elsewhere. U.S. Ambassador Derek Mitchell has prioritized Rakhine State. Under his leadership, Cecily made four trips there during her six months in Burma to build relationships on the ground, assess citizens' security needs, and identify opportunities to bridge the divide between communities. "There are deep-seated grievances on all sides, and they are not going to vanish overnight," Cecily acknowledged.

As part of CSO's work to bolster community resistance to violence, we are supporting the embassy's Public Affairs section and working with OTI to organize a peace-oriented TechCamp modeled on one we supported in Honduras. This two-day event intends to build civil society capacity to advocate for peace by linking established advocacy organizations with nascent peace groups. The camp will help them use new technologies to advance peace.

In Burma, as in other countries, CSO is looking for ways to empower women who are committed to reducing violent conflict. Embassy officers and CSO staff designed a series of five roundtables, conducted around the country, on women's roles in social, political, and economic life. These sessions identified opportunities for the U.S. to leverage policy and resources to advance peace.

This is a historic time for Burma. We are excited to be part of the U.S. team supporting the Burmese people's efforts to build peace. We are dedicated to bringing innovative approaches to conflict-prevention and response throughout the State Department. We welcome your ideas on how we can help nations beleaguered by conflict. You can write us at CSOPublic@state.gov. We also encourage you to forward our news to people you think would like to join this conversation. Previous dispatches can be found here. You can also find us on Twitter at @StateCSO or on Facebook at www.facebook.com/StateCSO.

Best,

Ambassador Rick Barton
Assistant Secretary for Conflict and Stabilization Operations

P.S.: With all the dramatic news involving chemical weapons, the behind-the-scenes work that our team has been doing to help the Syrian opposition has largely escaped notice. Newsweek, however, took a look and wrote about it a couple of weeks ago. We have provided training and funding to help Syrians set up about ten independent radio stations that provide news and counter the messages put out by stations controlled by the Assad regime. The "underlying message is one of moderation and civility," Newsweek's Mike Giglio wrote. "Think National Public Radio in Arabic."

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