

## **Exile Groups Oppose Referendum**

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The Irrawaddy

Friday, February 29, 2008

Seven leading Burmese opposition groups, including ethnic organizations and an umbrella women's group, released a joint statement on Thursday calling on citizens in Burma to oppose May's referendum on the draft constitution on the basis that it is unlawful and one-sided.

The seven groups involved are: the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma; the National Council of the Union of Burma; the Forum for Democracy in Burma; the Students and Youth Congress of Burma; Nationalities Youth Forum; the Ethnic Nationalities Council; and the Women's League of Burma.

Nang Hseng Noun, a presidium board member of the Thailand-based Women's League of Burma said, "We absolutely do not accept an unlawful referendum. It didn't include the participation of the 1990-elected political party leaders or the ethnic leaders. It is not legal."

The Burmese military government recently announced it would hold a national referendum on the draft constitution in May and general elections in 2010.

Nang Hseng Noun said, "If citizens are forced to vote, we urge them to vote "no" in the referendum. All political opposition groups should have been included in the draft constitution process."

The joint statement also contended that the draft constitution is unlawful because it lacked the participation of 1990-elected parliamentarians, ethnic leaders and Burmese civilians.

The statement went on to say that instead of achieving the political dialogue suggested by Burma's opposition political parties, exiled opposition groups and the international community, the Burmese junta has continued on its unilateral "seven-step Road Map."

The national referendum is the fourth step on the junta's "Road Map" toward democracy in Burma. After step four, the Burmese regime announced that the fifth step would be implemented---multi-party elections, to be held in 2010.

The exiled groups said they would continue to fight against the regime's seven-step Road Map by cooperating with citizens inside Burma.

On Friday, Burma Partnership Working Group sent a joint open letter to the heads of state of all Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), the secretary-general of the United Nations, and other leading UN officials.

The letter called for Asean "not only to condemn the Burmese government on its decision, but also to reject its illegitimate constitution."

On Thursday, the main opposition group, the National League for Democracy (NLD), based in Rangoon, released a statement condemning the planned referendum, its lack of legitimacy and unclear process.

The NLD also said that May's referendum could not be free and fair as long as the junta retained the referendum law---decree 5/96---concerning obstruction of the referendum. Violators of decree 5/96---that is, persons who distribute statements or posters or who make speeches against the referendum---could face penalties of up to three years imprisonment and a 100,000 kyat (US \$77) fine.

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