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Crosscurrents in Burma's ICT Signal Hopes, Pitfalls, for Openness and Modernization: RFA Report

WASHINGTON, DC – International development in Burma should be tied to measurable technology progress that advances freedom of expression, a report issued today by Radio Free Asia's Open Technology Fund (OTF) advises. "Internet Access and Openness: Myanmar 2012" evaluates Burma's existing ICT environment in light of recent political and media reforms. These developments have inspired the desire for greater transparency and sharing of information among its citizens. The report finds Burma "undecided" at this historic juncture, "in which a precarious ICT framework holds both the legacy of autocratic conditions and yet also clear efforts to modernize and democratize."

"The findings show Burma at a 21st century technological crossroads that pits its authoritarian past against the gleaming promise of recent reforms," said Libby Liu, Radio Free Asia (RFA) president. **"This report is an example of the kind of baseline data-collection and analysis needed to enable informed investments and sound policies for countries in transition, like Burma.**

"For RFA, Internet freedom is an essential part of our mission to provide people with the tools and information needed to make their own decisions and express their opinions freely."

Even as Burma's citizens demand greater Internet access and transparency from their government, the country's limited digital infrastructure is still out of reach for the vast majority of the population. In addition, concerns continue as to whether the government will relinquish operational control of the communications industry as outside investors and technologists are poised to seek opportunities in the country's emerging telecommunications market. Widespread poverty makes inaccessible many technologies, including owning a mobile phone or acquiring a SIM card for the majority of Burmese. These are among the many hurdles and challenges Burma faces as it seeks to reach 80 percent telecom coverage by 2016 (from 9 percent at present).

Using information gathered during an RFA-led technology delegation's visit to Burma in 2012, the report provides a technical analysis of Internet access, performance and GSM security, and information on obtaining access to smartphones and the mobile Internet. The report identifies a baseline of media and communications indicators during Burma's current transition, helping policymakers, investors, and civil society and human rights groups assess the country's progress in establishing communications infrastructure and freedom of expression.

Key findings include:

- The detection of deep packet inspection (DPI) software that could be used for Internet filtering and web censorship with Blue Coat, Cisco, and Huawei equipment, which were present.
- Of the country's 60 million inhabitants, only 5.1 percent (about 3 million) have mobile service.
- Only 6.7 percent of Myanmar's population has landline and wireless Internet capable subscriptions.
- 95 percent of voice calls and text messages in Burma are completely unencrypted.
- The cost of acquiring and activating an average smartphone in Burma is 563 $U.S. (The average monthly salary is close to 70 $U.S.)
- The most popular smartphone brand is Huawei, followed by Samsung and then imitation iPhones. The dominant smartphone operating system is Android.
- Internet penetration is less than 1 percent and mobile subscription is approximately 2 percent.
- Myanmar has three Internet service providers: MPT, which is completely government-owned; Yatanarpon Teleport, ownership split with 51 percent government and 49 percent privately held; and Red-link Group, owned by family members of government officials.

The full report may be accessed here.

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