

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 21, 2019

Mark Zuckerberg
Chief Executive Officer
Facebook
1 Hacker Way
Menlo Park, CA 94025

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg,

We are deeply troubled by recent reports of Facebook's decision to ban the pages of four ethnic armed groups in Burma that have been involved in the country's peace process. While Facebook has recently taken some constructive steps to address online hate speech that has contributed to atrocities committed against the Rohingya, this recent decision risks undermining efforts to promote ethnic reconciliation. We ask that you explain your decision and your overall methodology in selecting which accounts in Burma to ban.

Following conclusions from the United Nations that hate speech on Facebook's platform played a "determining role" in instigating the violence against the Rohingya¹, and criticism from civil society that Facebook's response to the hate speech leveled against the Rohingya and other ethnic minorities was inadequate,² Facebook did act to curb online hate speech in Burma. The removal of 425 pages, 17 groups, and 135 accounts, including those of the Burmese Commander in Chief and the military's *Myawady* media network,³ was welcome but long overdue.

However, Facebook's February 5 decision to ban the Arakan Army, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) raises serious concerns. There is widespread agreement that members of these groups committed violence in Burma's ongoing civil war, including the Arakan Army's involvement (along with the Burmese government and military) in a recent escalation of violence in western Rakhine state that has displaced over 5,000 civilians; but engagement with these four groups is important to broader efforts at a lasting peace between the Burmese military and the country's approximately 20 ethnic armed groups. Banning the pages of these armed groups, which rely predominantly on Facebook to communicate with outside audiences, would cut off their external communications. It would prevent these groups from engaging with ethnic civil society, government negotiators, international observers (including

¹ United Nations Human Rights Council, *Myanmar: UN Fact-Finding Mission releases its full account of massive violations by military in Rakhine, Kachin and Shan States* (Sept. 18, 2018),

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=23575&LangID=E>

² Open letter from civil society to Mark Zuckerberg (Apr. 5, 2018),

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Rs02G96Y9w5dpX0Vf1LjWp6B9mp32VY->

³ Laura Stampler, *Facebook Purged Hundreds Of Accounts Linked To Myanmar's Military*, *Fortune* (Dec. 19, 2018), <http://fortune.com/2018/12/19/facebook-purge-myanmar-military-account/>.

the United States) facilitating the peace process, and international humanitarian groups accessing areas under their control, isolating them from any national reconciliation efforts.

Civil society organizations also have noted that Facebook's unclear explanation for its decision opens the door to serious misinterpretation of the company's policies on hate speech. For example, the Facebook press release announcing the decision stated:

- The company was banning the groups because they were “violent organizations.”⁴ It is unclear why Facebook identified only these four organizations as “violent,” and not the Burmese military, the Burmese civilian government, Buddhist nationalist groups encouraging violence against religious minorities, and other armed groups.⁵
- That, “all related praise, support and representation will be removed as soon as we become aware of it.” This could discourage civil society groups and communities that are ethnically tied to the banned organizations from engaging in public online discourse, and indirectly restrain the voice of ethnic minorities.

Given the potential negative impact of Facebook's policies in Burma, and the significant use of your technology by the Burmese population, we have several questions we would like you to answer in writing by March 1:

- 1) Why did Facebook designate the Arakan Army, MNDAA, KIA, and TNLA as violent organizations, but not the Burmese military,⁶ the Burmese government, or other ethnic armed groups?
- 2) Does the designation of the aforementioned ethnic armed groups as violent organizations, but not the Burmese military, reflect support for the Burmese government in the country's civil war?
- 3) Who at Facebook made the ultimate decision to ban of these pages? And who was involved in the decision-making process within the organization?
- 4) Numerous civil society groups stated that Facebook did not consult with them before the decision to ban the pages.⁷ Before making this decision, did Facebook connect with local activists within Burma who are documenting and analyzing hate speech on the platform? If yes, please name all parties consulted and describe the nature of this consultation. If no, why not?

⁴ Facebook Newsroom, *Banning More Dangerous Organizations from Facebook in Myanmar*, February 5, 2019, <https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2019/02/dangerous-organizations-in-myanmar/>

⁵ Helen Reagan, *Facebook wades into world's longest civil war, but does it know what it's doing?*, CNN (Feb. 9, 2019), <https://www.cnn.com/2019/02/08/asia/facebook-bans-myanmar-ethnic-groups-intl/index.html>.

⁶ Although Facebook has banned the accounts of certain Burmese military officials and entities under the military's command, it has not banned the institution itself.

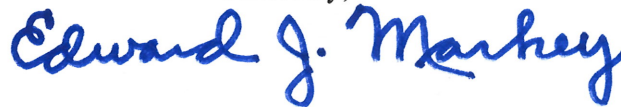
⁷ Julia Carrie Wong, *'Overreacting to failure': Facebook's new Myanmar strategy baffles local activists*, The Guardian (Feb. 7, 2019), <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/feb/07/facebook-myanmar-genocide-violence-hate-speech>

- 5) Many civil society activists as well as others who are outspoken on issues of human rights are facing threats both offline and online - including through Facebook. How is Facebook addressing the security of these activists?
- 6) How many Burmese translators do you currently have on your staff? Of the number of Burmese translators that you have, do any of these employees come from non-Bamar ethnic groups? If so, how many?
- 7) What is Facebook doing to identify other countries at risk of atrocities and develop locally informed strategies to ensure that Facebook is not implicated in future human rights violations elsewhere?

On March 12, 2018, while discussing Facebook's role in fueling the acrimony and division in Burma, the United Nations rapporteur for Burma, Yanghee Lee, said: "I'm afraid that Facebook has now turned into a beast, and not what it originally intended."⁸ In order to shed the current negative perception of your company in Burma, we strongly encourage you to explain your policies and approaches to address hate speech.

We thank you for your attention to this matter. Should you have any questions about this request please contact Satrajit Sardar of Senator Markey's staff at 202-224-2742.

Sincerely,



Edward J. Markey

⁸ Tom Miles, *U.N. investigators cite Facebook role in Myanmar crisis*, Reuters (Mar. 12, 2018), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rohingya-facebook/u-n-investigators-cite-facebook-role-in-myanmar-crisis-idUSKCN1GO2PN>