

## **Oscar winning actress and activist Emma Thompson witnesses change in Burma with anti-poverty agency ActionAid**

*For immediate release Monday 24 October:* Global anti-poverty campaigner and ActionAid ambassador Emma Thompson has just returned from a fact finding visit to Burma – Myanmar – where she met with Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and a range of community and political leaders against a backdrop of increasing change in the country.

Travelling with ActionAid International Chief Executive Joanna Kerr and Emma's son Tindy, they were in Myanmar to see ActionAid's innovative development work with young people and learn about the current political and economic reforms.

Myanmar has had a military-led government since 1962 but recent elections and the appointment of the country's new president has seen the release of some political prisoners, the easing of censorship and a greater sense of hope for the future.

Everyone Emma, Joanna and Tindy met wanted to share their enthusiasm for the reforms that are taking place and urge their continuation including Aung San Suu Kyi herself, former political prisoners, diplomats, government officials, artists and academics and the ordinary people ActionAid reaches directly through its work.

Commenting on her visit Emma Thompson said: "I was in Burma to listen to the opinions of a very wide selection of people representing all sections of society. They were all giving me the same message which was that the story coming out of Burma had been very black and white and for good reason, but that over the last few months control has begun to relax, that the Burmese story is changing.

"There are difficulties and a large number of challenges, A tiny percentage of government spending has been spent on health and education for example. There are also ethnic divisions that exacerbate problems. I saw deep, wrenching poverty but felt that there is a genuine dialogue beginning to start between the people and the government. The trip left me feeling hopeful.

"Meeting Aung San Sui Kyi was a remarkable experience. She is an extraordinary woman with a wise, witty dignity. She is very perspicacious about what is happening in her country, cautious but optimistic."

ActionAid has worked in Myanmar for eleven years supporting local initiatives concentrating on helping women and young people. The anti-poverty agency specifically trains young volunteers to work with some of the poorest communities. The volunteers help people identify their priorities such as new schools, water sources, health services or peace processes and then network with local government and others to help achieve this.

In the changing political context of Myanmar, ActionAid has worked hard to encourage investment in education, health, agricultural services and social cohesion that benefits ordinary people and to address the social and economic differences that exist in the country.

ActionAid believes that change is coming in Myanmar and that there are strong indications that it is real.

The agency also believes it is important that poor people be involved in the reform process which needs to be consistent, coherent and properly phased. It says that the international community should support the Myanmar government's first small steps towards greater democracy and human rights – including the rights of women – as an encouragement towards continuing reform and to reducing poverty.

ActionAid International Chief Executive Joanna Kerr concluded: "The future development of the country will depend on carefully phased reforms to ensure democracy, peace and sustainable equitable development. The international community needs to ensure young Myanmar men and women are part of this."

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