

**Acceptance speech for the
ACFID Sir Ron Wilson Human Rights Award 2010
Alison Tate
21 October 2010**

Dear colleagues and friends,

I am sorry I cannot be with you tonight at the ACFID Council dinner. I am now living in Brussels, working for the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) which is made up of union in 156 countries and territories, representing 187 million workers. My role at the ITUC is taking up an agenda we all share..... working with civil society organisations and the multilateral system.

I have had the privilege of working for and with many outstanding people: workers, activists and global leaders in promoting and defending fundamental human rights, social justice, peace, democracy and sustainable development. Indeed I believe you cannot have one without the other. Each of these should be a right for all people, not the chance happening, for some.

I was nominated for the Sir Ron Wilson Human Rights Award based on my work in promoting workers rights, especially in the Asia-Pacific and my support for the struggle for democracy and human rights in Burma. These include the rights of refugees and migrant workers, and of calling for, and demanding, corporate social responsibility and corporate accountability. I have learnt that to be effective, individuals, agencies, institutions, companies and governments need to understand the inter-linkages, own our responsibilities, respect the rule of law, and acknowledge the universality of workers rights as fundamental human rights.

As you meet, we are one week away from the national elections in Burma, to be held on November 7. However, election laws issued in March and a systematic crackdown against pro-democracy activists since 2007 have already predetermined the outcome. Trade unions are banned. Forced labour is widespread. The number of political prisoners has doubled since 2007, currently around 2,200.

Despite intense repression, the people of Burma continue to resist and act courageously. 20 year old Bo Min Yu Ko, sentenced in January 2009 to 104 years gaol for distributing human rights leaflets and “immigration offences”, and who was denied access to a lawyer during his trial, called out when sentenced, “is that all?”.

The laws and conduct of the election have caused the dissolution of parties that won the 1990 election. Polls will not be held in 3,327 villages in the ethnic states, disenfranchising 2 million ethnic voters, some in the areas where the majority voted against the regime’s 2008 Constitution. Most regular people in Burma could not raise the money to pay to register as a candidate, way more than their annual income.

The post-election scenario remains dire. The 2008 Constitution justifies impunity, intensifies the root causes of conflict and guarantees military control over national, state and regional governance. The chances of genuine national reconciliation look even more remote. This is why there is a particular sense of urgency in the push for a UN Commission of Inquiry into serious international crimes in Burma. The Commission's aims are to prevent more crimes, to obtain justice for victims and survivors and to increase pressure for national reforms to combat impunity.

This week the UN Special Rapporteur on Burma presented in his report to the General Assembly and said, "Justice and accountability are the very foundation of the United Nations system rooted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which calls for an international order in which the rights and freedoms set out in the Declaration can be fully realised. Failing to act on accountability in Myanmar will embolden the perpetrators of international crimes and further postpone long-overdue justice."

I am honoured to have been awarded the Sir Ron Wilson Human Rights Award for 2010. I take this opportunity to acknowledge the important role the aid and development sector in Australia plays in bringing to the attention of agency supporters, political leaders and the general public, the issues that impact people in developing countries and the stories of real people's lives and their struggles.

It is the role of ACFID as the peak body and you, the member agencies to stand up for accountability, to highlight the impact of good and bad government and corporate behaviour on development and to advocate for good legislation, good policies and programs, in order to fulfill Australia's development and foreign affairs objectives.

Australia should take an international leadership role in campaigns like that of the Commission of Inquiry for Burma, as well as leading strong international and regional stands against forced labour, discrimination, racism, xenophobia, those things that drive violations of our human rights.

In presenting me with this award, I thank ACFID for your acknowledgement of these struggles and of the importance of not being silent on these issues. Diplomacy and advocacy are important. Campaigning too is essential. These are long struggles. Decades long and more...way beyond the project cycle. Australians, Australian agencies and the Australian government need to be a part of these global campaigns if we are to be effective.

I want to acknowledge the privilege it has been for me to work for Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA for more than 8 years and for the ACTU for the past 6 years. Decent work, underpinned by labour rights is vital to delivering economic and social development. Not just in Australia, but all over the world we need to strengthen and secure workers' rights to employment and income security, to decent wages, wages that promote social inclusion, and improve fairness and equity. Decent work should be a central pillar of Australia's overseas aid commitments.

I enjoyed being a part of the Australian-based Burma Campaign over many years. I hope you will all continue to support their important work. Practical and financial support to Burma's democracy movement delivered to those in the border areas and cross-border, is fundamental to a future free and democratic Burma. The links between agencies and activists is the foundation of the work of the aid and development sector, and each strengthens the other.

My parents, Marjorie and Norman Tate are with you tonight to represent me and to meet my colleagues. It was the example of their contributions to indigenous communities and trade union principles that were the foundation of my childhood and I thank them.

I dedicate this award to the Burmese labour rights activist Su Su Nwe and democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Aung San Suu Kyi reminds us: "Please use your liberty to promote ours".

Thank you.
Alison