

WOMEN'S INTERNATIONAL FORUM

REMARKS

by

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“The UN and Myanmar: Which Way Forward?”

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Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Friends.

It is an honour and a pleasure for me to address you today on the topic of the UN's involvement in facilitating national reconciliation in Myanmar. Many of you have seen Myanmar in the news over the past months – peaceful protests in August and September of last year, led by thousands of Buddhist monks, and ultimately put down by the Government. These dramatic images captured the world's attention. They were a visible and unmistakable demonstration that the status quo in Myanmar had become unsustainable. As ASEAN leaders put it at their last summit in Singapore, Myanmar cannot go back, and it cannot stand still – it must move forward. At the same time, any path forward must be a credible one. The announcement this weekend by the Myanmar Government of its intention to hold a constitutional referendum in May and general elections by 2010, is a potentially positive development. Nonetheless, it also underlines the need to enhance the credibility of the Government's roadmap process.

The path ahead is not easy: Myanmar is a country facing not only socio-economic discontent and a lack of inclusive political dialogue, but also a history of internal armed conflicts, colonialism and isolation that has left the leadership wary of trusting the intentions of the international community. The General Assembly has requested the Secretary-General to use his good offices in facilitating national reconciliation in Myanmar. To succeed in this mission will require patience and persistence, the continued unity and engagement of the international community, and commitment by the Myanmar Government to the good offices as a process of mutual engagement.

Clearly, this is a mission with a unique set of challenges – but with equally unique opportunities: with access to the top levels of the Myanmar Government as well as detained opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, the good offices of the Secretary-General can make positive contributions to national reconciliation in Myanmar. They offer a unique opportunity not only for the Myanmar Government to rejoin the international community, for

Myanmar's neighbors to see continued peace and stability in the region, but indeed and most importantly for Myanmar's more than 50 million people to live in a country with a government of their choosing, with respect for human rights and the opportunity to take part in economic growth. Keeping in mind both the opportunities and the challenges of this mission, I wanted to share with you today a brief review of my work to date, and some thoughts on what the future may hold.

As the Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on Myanmar, I visited Myanmar twice in 2007, following on two earlier visits made in 2006 in my capacity as Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs. On behalf of the Secretary-General, I was able during these visits to re-establish direct contact with both the Myanmar leadership and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, a significant development after almost three years without any high-level dialogue between the UN and Myanmar. The urgency of the Secretary-General's good offices and my mission was heightened during my two most recent visits in the fall of 2007. At that time, thousands of people had taken to the streets to demonstrate against sudden increases in the cost of petrol, demonstrations that were an expression of deep and widespread discontent about socio-economic conditions in the country and a reflection of the worsening vulnerability of the population. As they continued, these protests also became a catalyst for renewed expressions of public aspirations for a speedy restoration of democratic governance and an all-inclusive national reconciliation process.

During my visit at the height of the crisis, I delivered clear messages on behalf of the Secretary-General to the Myanmar authorities at the highest level, expressing the Secretary-General's and the international community's deep concern, recommending immediate steps to de-escalate tensions, and emphasizing the need to address without delay the political and socio-economic factors underlying the demonstrations.

At the same time, I was able to continue the role I started playing during my earlier visits in promoting dialogue by conveying messages between the senior leadership and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. The fact that I was allowed to continue such efforts at a time of crisis for Myanmar suggests both parties found the UN good offices useful for engaging with each other.

Although my visits did not produce all the results I had hoped for, it is important to keep this process in perspective. Among the potentially positive results, I would like to mention the following to you:

- At our recommendation, the Government appointed a "Minister for Relations" to liaise with Aung San Suu Kyi, as a preliminary step towards dialogue.
- For the first time since she was put under house arrest in May 2003, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was allowed to pronounce herself publicly, through me, on her commitment in the interest of the nation to work with the Government through meaningful and time-bound dialogue, and on the necessary role of the UN in this regard.

- In November, Aung San Suu Kyi was also allowed, for the first time in four years, to meet with the leadership of her NLD party. She met them again on 30 January and has since then also met a further four times with the Minister for Relations Aung Kyi.
- The Government received the Special Rapporteur for Human Rights from 11 to 15 November, after denying access to him for four years.
- The Government further agreed in principle to consider the possibility of establishing a broad-based national development commission, while stressing the need to respect its sovereignty in this as in any other matter.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen.

While the outcomes of my last two missions to Myanmar are welcome, it is clear that they remain modest when measured against the high expectations that continue to be borne out of the recent crisis. Indeed, the Government has yet to meet its own commitments, particularly in terms of addressing serious human rights concerns such as reports of continued arrests of political activists and the detention of political prisoners. Similarly, the Government has yet to provide any assurance that it will release or at least lift restrictions on Daw Aung San Suu Kyi so that she can become a full partner in dialogue. And while the ongoing process of dialogue between the Government and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is a welcome development, it is also clear that preliminary discussions are only useful if they lead to substantive dialogue with concrete outcomes within an agreed timeframe. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has made this clear in her comments after her latest meeting with the NLD leadership. Making the dialogue process more substantive and time-bound would be critical challenges as we move forward.

Moreover, important as the dialogue process with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is, we must also remember that Myanmar is a country which has experienced nearly sixty years of armed conflict between the Government and multiple armed opponents. There remain more than two dozen armed groups in the country, the majority of which the Government has agreed to ceasefires with in the past fifteen years. The Government is currently engaged in a constitutional process which could and should provide an important vehicle to move relations between the Government and the many ethnic armed groups from ceasefires to a just and sustainable peace.

But while the Government's National Convention concluded its work in September, after 14 years, the exclusion of key stakeholders, such as the NLD, and the failure to fully meet the expectations of critical participants, such as ethnic ceasefire groups, risks undermining the credibility and legitimacy of the Government's own political roadmap. The announcement by the Government of a constitutional referendum in May makes it all the more important to make the constitution-making process inclusive, participatory and transparent in order to ensure that any draft constitution is broadly representative of the views of all the people of Myanmar.

In cooperation with the parties concerned, the UN remains ready to support this process.

Furthermore, while much of the focus has rightly been on the need for political progress in Myanmar, we cannot pay less attention to the deteriorating socio-economic conditions and hardship faced by large parts of the population in their everyday life. I have discussed with the Government possibilities to increase their dialogue with the humanitarian assistance community in-country, with the goal of ensuring free and unhindered access for humanitarian aid to all parts of the country.

The good offices of the Secretary General seek to work on these issues in partnership with the Government of Myanmar. In that context, I welcome Myanmar's declared commitment to cooperate with the United Nations as a "corner stone" of its foreign policy. I also welcome Myanmar's clear signals, which was confirmed at the ASEAN Summit last November in Singapore, that it regards the United Nations as its primary interlocutor in addressing the concerns and expectations of the international community. We therefore look forward to further demonstrations by the Myanmar authorities of their willingness to work together as partners through concrete results toward those shared goals. In that context, I look forward to returning to Myanmar soon to continue to work on these issues.

At the request of the Secretary-General, I have also engaged in high-level consultations with key interested Member States, including China, India, and Japan; ASEAN members Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam; and Russia, France, the UK, the US, and the EU. The international community, including especially Myanmar's neighbors and ASEAN member states, have a special interest and responsibility in supporting the emergence of durable solution to the situation in Myanmar.

In that context, I am encouraged by the evolution in the international context since I began my assignment. Today, international interest in the issue of Myanmar is perhaps at an all time high: I have briefed both the General Assembly and the Security Council on multiple occasions, and in these briefings and discussions, I have been encouraged by the strong and broad support for the good offices expressed by Member States. Never has the international community been so united in its support for the overall objectives of UN good offices efforts in Myanmar. Yet, while there is a shared commitment to the goals of a peaceful, democratic, and prosperous Myanmar, further efforts are needed to identify a common approach to meet these goals and for those with greater influence on the authorities in Myanmar to use it help move the country forward.

In this regard, in December of last year, the Secretary-General convened and personally chaired the first meeting of the "Group of Friends of the Secretary-General on Myanmar." This group – which will meet again this afternoon – brings together a balanced group of Member States with a diversity of views on the situation in Myanmar with the aim of developing a shared understanding and shared approaches to support the implementation of the Secretary-General's good offices. The United Nations is at its

strongest when Member States act in concert, and this group provides a forum to develop ways for Member States to do this, in pursuit of our shared objectives.

In conclusion, let me observe that in today's world, no country can afford to stay outside the irreversible trend towards stability, prosperity and democracy, and it is the responsibility of every Government to listen to its people, respond to legitimate popular demands and respect in full the human rights of its citizens. In my discussions with the Myanmar leadership, they have emphasized the historical and political complexity of the situation in the country. Indeed, nobody can determine the future of Myanmar better than the people of Myanmar. However, the UN can help in this process, and this remains our goals: to work in partnership with the Government and people of Myanmar towards a stable, prosperous and democratic Myanmar that can meet the needs and aspirations of its people, and fully contribute to the growth and prosperity of the region.

Thank you.

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