

Speech

by

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on

“Myanmar: A Country in Democratic Transition”

at

**Indian Council of World Affairs
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The Hon'ble Shri E. Ahamed, Minister of State for External Affairs,
Ambassador Shri S.T. Devare,
Director General of the Indian Council of World Affairs,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am greatly honoured and privileged to be given the opportunity to speak at this prestigious and renowned Indian Council of World Affairs. I would like to express my most sincere appreciation to the ICWA and the Ministry of External Affairs for so thoughtfully arranging this special occasion. I am doubly pleased and proud to be with you here to day as the first Myanmar Foreign Minister to talk about Myanmar since the founding of the ICWA.

Barely ten months ago, Myanmar started the process of transition to democracy after a constitutional based civilian government led by President U Thein Sein was formed in the new Republic. The President, in his inaugural statement, outlined far-reaching new policies and objectives of the new government with a view to building a modern and developed nation based on the principles of democracy which is the expressed will of the people.

The government has set immediate priorities to achieve good governance, clean government, fundamental rights of the citizens, rule of law, transparency, accountability, fight against corruption, reduction of income disparity, creation of harmonious society, economic reform and environmental conservation. Now major changes are taking place in Myanmar in an unprecedented scope and rapid pace.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Political Reforms

Myanmar's political transition from a military government to a democratically elected constitutional government was peaceful, systematic and in an orderly manner. The State Peace and Development Council took time to lay necessary foundations for the smooth transformation of the country into a democratic state. We now have a constitution based parliamentary democracy system. The government led by President U Thein Sein, the Pyidawngsu Hluttaw(Union Parliament) comprising Pyithu Hluttaw(People's Parliament) and Amyotha Hluttaw(National Parliament), the Judiciary body of the Supreme Court and central level bodies have been functioning harmoniously. States and Regions governments and parliaments have also been given substantial autonomy and power to freely serve the interest of the people of their respective States and Regions.

We are still a very young democracy. Notwithstanding this, members of the Parliaments have been fully exercising their democratic rights in the parliaments. The proceedings of the Parliament are transparent, robust and dynamic. They are free to raise any questions that may concern the interest of their constituencies. The Union Ministers are called up at anytime to give responses to the questions.

Although the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) won over 78 percent of seats in the Parliament, 28 percent of the seats are being occupied by representatives from another 21 parties and independents. The President has clearly stated that those who truly wish to serve for the interest of the State and the people must participate in the political process by taking part in the elections in accordance with the Constitution, setting aside differences. The Parliament is the only appropriate venue to discuss the future of the nation and its people.

We have taken extraordinary steps to ensure inclusive participation of all stakeholders in the political process of the country. The Election Law and Political Parties Registration law have been amended to pave the way for NLD to be able to participate in the national political process. Now, Aung San Suu Kyi and NLD are preparing to contest in the forthcoming by-elections after re-registered as political party. Other political groups remaining outside the political process will also be able to register and take part in the next elections.

The Third Regular sessions of the Hluttaw (Parliament) will resume later this month. By-election for the 48 vacant seats in various Parliaments will be held on 1 April. We are confident that we will be able to hold the up-coming by-election free and fair as in the last nation-wide general elections held in November 2010.

Economic Reforms

Economic development and well-being of the people are important prerequisites for democracy to thrive. Therefore, Immediately after its formation, the government undertook a series of economic, social and policy reforms to improve socio-economic life of the people. In the past few months, the government lifted some economic restrictions. A number of economic reform initiatives and structural adjustment have also been introduced to strengthen trade and economic activities. Investment law has been amended to create a new environment conducive to attract more foreign investments. International financial institutions have been invited for consultations to initiate financial and monetary reforms.

The government has given top priority to improve the livelihood of the people in rural areas who represent over 70 percent of the entire population. National Rural Development and Poverty Reduction Plan was adopted and being implemented. After the successful implementation of this plan, the current poverty

rate of 26 per cent is targeted to drop to 16 per cent by the year 2014-15 in order to meet the UN Millennium Development Goal.

Pension allowances for retired service personnel have also been increased commensurate with the changing economic and social conditions of the country. As a result, over 815,000 retired service personnel are now benefiting from this measure. With the aim of energizing the country's export trade, commercial tax on export goods has recently been reduced from 8 per cent to 2 per cent. In addition, all agricultural and timber export products are now tax-exempted to boost external trade. Under the government's Micro-finance scheme loans have been provided to farmers so as to expand comparable growth between rural and urban areas.

Plans are also made to create more job opportunity for the people, especially for the younger generation. To build a modern and economically vibrant country, we need capable and able work force. Therefore, the government is also taking great efforts in human resource development and capacity building

These economic policy reforms and structural adjustment programmes are already making their impact within a short period of time.

National Reconsolidation

Another area where the new government has achieved significant progress is the process of national reconsolidation. As you all are aware, multi-coloured insurgency was born with our independence as a legacy of the British divide and rule policies in Myanmar which had created so much mistrust among different nationalities in the country. These decades-long armed conflicts had resulted in economic backwardness and political stalemate in the country. Successive governments had tried various means to solve this problem with some success and with many failures.

Soon after taking responsibilities, the Government held out an olive branch to all national races armed groups and invited them to start peace talks with the Government. The Government has been relentlessly working to achieve peace agreement with the (11) nationalities armed groups who are still holding their arms. We have successfully conducted peace talks at State and Region level with 10 groups. Peace talks at Union (Central) level are being conducted and we are hopeful that final agreements for sustainable peace will be achieved soon. Most significant among these being the peace agreement reached with the Karen National Union (KNU) a few weeks ago. This would end one of the longest insurgency in the modern world which has lasted for over sixty years.

Preliminary peace talks with KIA in the North have also been started. The President has instructed the Tatmadaw to cease all offensive against the KIA. We are confident that a comprehensive peace with all armed groups would also be achieved in not too distant future.

The President himself met Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and they had agreed to find out potential common grounds for cooperation for the interest of the country and the people, setting aside different views.

With a view to fostering peace and national reconsolidation, the President has granted amnesty four times in the last 10 months since he took office in March last year. The last time was on 12th January when 651 were granted amnesty. Among these people include a great majority of individuals who were categorized as “political prisoners” by some western countries and dissident groups.

The President will continue to exercise his power bestowed upon him by the Constitution to grant amnesty as and when appropriate taking into account public security, peace, stability and the interest of the people and the state.

On Human Rights

With regard to human rights, Myanmar attaches great importance to the promotion and protection of human rights. With a view to further promoting and safeguarding fundamental rights of the citizens described in the Constitution, a 15-member Myanmar National Human Rights Commission was formed. People are free to file complaint to the Commission if they consider their fundamental rights have been violated. Commission members are independent experts from all strata of life and they are well respected by the community they represent. The Commission will submit its annual report directly to the President of the Republic. The Commission will also actively co-operate with international organizations such as the United Nations, the Human Rights Council, and other regional groups.

In legal sector, legal reform is being carried out to ensure the rules of law. Over 300 laws have been reviewed; new laws have been enacted in line with the State Constitution and in commensurate with the need of the time. Village and Town Act (1907) which has long been a problem in our relations with ILO, was reviewed. A new law has been drawn up and now waiting for approval by the Parliament in the next session. The new law adequately captures the spirit of ILO Convention 29 and prohibits the possible sources of forced labour. I hope this new law would pave the way for further cooperation with ILO.

New laws have also been passed to allow trade union activities and guaranteeing freedom of assembly. Media censorship has been largely eased to give more freedom to the media.

These are the steps taken by the government of Myanmar to establish a democratic state under the rule of law.

Foreign Relations

The Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar will continue to pursue an independent, active and non-aligned foreign policy. We will maintain friendly relations with all countries particularly with our neighbours based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence. We will continue our active participation and cooperation with regional and international organizations such as ASEAN, BIMSTECS and the United Nations.

We have been intensifying our efforts to reach out to the international community. The dramatic changes that taking place in the country have received overwhelming recognition and support from many countries around the world including countries that used to be critical and even hostile to our country in the past two decades.

The historic visit of the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to Myanmar in December last year, the first of such a visit in the past over 50 years, marks the new beginning of our relationship with the Western world. Her visit was followed immediately in January by the British Foreign Secretary William Hague, also the first in fifty years, and French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe, the first ever French Foreign Minister to visit Myanmar. Moreover, a number of US law makers including prominent US Senators such as Mitch McConnell, John McCain, Joe Liberman and Congressman Joseph Crowley have visited and observed the progress in Myanmar.

The United States and the European Union have expressed their recognition and support of the democratic reforms undertaken by the Government of Myanmar. Now there are signs that they are willing to review and reconsider to lift the sanctions and restriction that they have unilaterally imposed upon Myanmar in the last 20 years. We welcome all these positive responses and hope to see concrete and tangible results as soon as possible. As our relations improve, we are confident that we will be able to work together with the international community and the developed countries for the well-being of the people and economic development of the country.

At the same time, we have spared no efforts in maintaining and further consolidating close cooperation and cordial relationship with our neighbouring

brothers and friends in the region and beyond. With our neighbours, we shall always maintain good neighbourly relations. We shall resolve any difference or dispute peacefully and amicably.

We will also intensify our active involvement in the region as we are going to take the turn to chair ASEAN in 2014. We will be hosting the BIMSTECS Summit in Nay Pyi Taw this year. Moreover, we shall continue to participate actively in the United Nations and other international forums such as Non-aligned Movement as a responsible member in the community of nations.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

Conclusion

Myanmar has entered into a new era. The new constitutional government is pursuing the national goal of building a modern, developed and democratic nation in accordance with the will of the people. The reform process that we have started is irreversible. There will be no turning back or derailment in the road to democracy. The reforms process will be incremental, systematic and dynamic. Our transition to democracy is indeed not without challenges. We are prepared and resolute to overcome all these challenges and continue our endeavour until we achieve our stated goal.

At this critical juncture of national transition, the international community can best assist Myanmar by providing encouragement and support. We are willing and ready to work hand in hand with the international community in our nation building endeavours as well as for the development, peace and stability of the world.

In conclusion, I would like to take this opportunity to express my Government's deep appreciations to all our friends around the world, and particularly the Government and people of India, for your understanding and valuable supports to the government and people of Myanmar in this vitally important period of time. We are confident that we can count on the continued support of our friends and the international community in the future as well. I thank you all for your kind attention.
