

Remarks on Myanmar to diplomatic missions, UN agencies and non-governmental organizations

Yangon, Myanmar, 4 July 2009

Excellencies, Distinguished guests and colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

This is my second visit to Myanmar in just over a year. Both visits have been at critical times for the country's future.

My first visit was in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis. This devastating natural disaster, which took so many lives and created so much hardship, touched hearts across the globe. In Myanmar's moment of need, the world responded generously.

I want to personally thank everyone here today for your remarkable contributions to the relief and recovery effort.

You have saved lives, rejuvenated communities and made it possible for many thousands of people to reclaim their livelihoods. You have helped Myanmar to overcome adversity. It is important that this work continues.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I felt the tragedy of Cyclone Nargis deeply -- as a fellow Asian and as Secretary-General.

I am Asia's second Secretary-General. The first was Myanmar's U Thant. I revere his memory. I also recall his wise words.

U Thant said: "The worth of the individual human being is the most unique and precious of all our assets and must be the beginning and end of all our efforts. Governments, systems, ideologies and institutions come and go, but humanity remains."

This is why I have returned.

As Secretary-General, I attach the highest importance to helping the people of this country to achieve their legitimate aspirations.

The United Nations works for people – their rights, their well-being, their dignity. It is not an option. It is our responsibility.

I have come to show the unequivocal shared commitment of the United Nations to the people of Myanmar.

I am here today to say: Myanmar – you are not alone.

We want to work with you for a united, peaceful, prosperous, democratic and modern Myanmar.

We want to help you rise from poverty.

We want to work with you so your country can take its place as a respected and responsible member of the international community.

We want to help you achieve national reconciliation, durable peace and sustainable development.

But, let me emphasize: neither peace nor development can thrive without democracy and respect for human rights.

Myanmar is no exception.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The challenges are many. But they are not insurmountable.

We know from experience that securing Myanmar's peaceful, democratic and prosperous future is a complex process.

None of Myanmar's challenges can be solved on their own. Peace, development and human rights are closely inter-related.

Failure to address them with equal attention will risk undermining the prospects for democracy, durable peace and prosperity.

However, we also know that where there is a genuine will for dialogue and reconciliation, all obstacles can be overcome.

The question today is this: how much longer can Myanmar afford to wait for national reconciliation, democratic transition and full respect for human rights?

The cost of delay will be counted in wasted lives, lost opportunities and prolonged isolation from the international community.

Let me be clear: all the people of Myanmar must work in the national interest.

I said this yesterday when I met with representatives of Myanmar's registered political parties and with those armed groups that have chosen to observe a cease-fire. I encouraged them respectively to honour their commitments to the democratic process and peace.

Nonetheless, the primary responsibility lies with the Government to move the country towards its stated goals of national reconciliation and democracy.

Failure to do so will prevent the people of Myanmar from realizing their full potential.

Failure to do so will deny the people of Myanmar their right to live in dignity and to pursue better standards of life in larger freedom.

These principles lie at the core of the United Nations Charter, whose opening words are "We the peoples".

The founding Constitution of independent Myanmar echoes these noble words. We must work together to ensure that Myanmar's future embodies these principles too.

With this in mind, I bring three messages.

First, respect for human dignity is the precondition for peace and development everywhere.

Myanmar was one of the first United Nations Member States to adopt the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

It subscribed early on to the consensus that respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms is indispensable to political, economic and social progress.

Unfortunately, that commitment has not been matched in deed. Myanmar's human rights record remains a matter of grave concern.

The Government has articulated its goals as stability, national reconciliation and democracy.

The upcoming election –the first in twenty years – must be inclusive, participatory and transparent if it is to be credible.

Myanmar's way forward must be rooted in respect for human rights

This is why I say that all political prisoners, including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, should be released without delay.

When I met General Than Shwe yesterday and today, I asked to visit Ms. Suu Kyi. I am deeply disappointed that he refused.

I believe the government of Myanmar has lost a unique opportunity to show its commitment to a new era of political openness.

Allowing a visit to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi would have been an important symbol of the government's willingness to embark on the kind of meaningful engagement that will be essential if the elections in 2010 are to be seen as credible.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi must be allowed to participate in the political process without further delay.

Indeed, all the citizens of Myanmar must be given the opportunity to contribute fully to the future of this country.

National reconciliation cannot be complete without the free and active participation of all who seek to contribute.

The country must embark on a process of genuine dialogue that includes all concerned parties, all ethnic groups and all minorities.

People must be free to debate and to engage in political dialogue, and they must have free access to the information that will help them participate meaningfully in the democratic process.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Any transition is difficult. Myanmar has already undergone transitions from sovereign kingdom, to occupied colony, and now independent State.

This history carries a twin legacy of armed conflict and political deadlock, including recent painful events: the repression of demonstrators in 1988, the cancellation of the 1990 election results, and the clampdown on peaceful dissent that continues to this day.

At the same time, there have been some positive efforts that should be recognized.

Although still fragile, the cease-fire agreements between the Government and armed groups have reduced the level of conflict. The United Nations has wide-ranging experience in making such gains irreversible.

Sovereignty, territorial integrity and national unity are legitimate concerns for any government.

We contend that opening and broadening the political space is the best way to ensure that each group and each individual becomes part of the greater collective project.

The military, all political parties, ethnic minority groups, civil society, and indeed every son and daughter of Myanmar has a role to play in this country's transition.

Only mutual compromise, respect and understanding can lay the foundations for durable peace, national reconciliation and democracy.

My second message is on addressing the humanitarian needs of Myanmar's people.

I am glad I have been able to return to see the progress made in the Irrawaddy Delta. The loss of some 130,000 people was tragic, but the rebuilding I saw today was impressive.

The tragedy showed the resilience of the people of Myanmar. It also demonstrated that people throughout the world care deeply about Myanmar and its people.

Above all, the response to Cyclone Nargis proved the value of engagement over isolation.

The unprecedented cooperation between Myanmar, the United Nations and ASEAN through the Tripartite Core Group, with the support of the donor community, has demonstrated that humanitarian imperatives and the principles of sovereignty do not conflict.

Humanitarian assistance -- in Myanmar as elsewhere -- should never be held hostage to political considerations. We can and must work together to ensure access to humanitarian and development assistance to all those in Myanmar who need it.

This brings me to my third message. It is time for Myanmar to unleash its economic potential.

Myanmar sits in the middle of Asia's economic miracle. Harnessing Myanmar to the rapid advances taking place around it is the surest way to raise living standards.

I welcome the Government's policy of opening up to outside trade and investment, and its efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, control HIV, combat human trafficking and curtail opium production.

But the reality is that millions continue to live in poverty. Standards of living in Myanmar remain among the lowest in Asia.

The people of Myanmar need jobs, they need food security and they need access to health care.

We must work to ensure that the people of Myanmar can benefit from and contribute to the regional and global economy.

We must recognize that the region and the world have much to gain from a stable, prosperous and democratic Myanmar. We must work together for that goal.

The Government of Myanmar must seize the moment.

It must take advantage of the opportunities that the international community is prepared to offer to the people of Myanmar.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I came here as a friend.

My duty is to uphold the ideals and principles of the United Nations Charter.

My role is to encourage all of you -- the Government, political parties, ethnic groups, civil society -- to move forward together as one people and one nation.

Nothing is insurmountable or impossible when the people's interest is placed above divisions.

The region and the world are changing fast. Myanmar only stands to gain from engagement -- and from embarking on its own change.

The Government of Myanmar has repeatedly stated that cooperation with the United Nations is the cornerstone of the country's foreign policy.

We ask it to match deeds with words.

The more Myanmar works in partnership with the United Nations to respond to its people's needs and aspirations, the more it affirms its sovereignty.

Similarly it is incumbent on the international community as whole to work together to help Myanmar meet our shared goals: a united, peaceful, prosperous and democratic future, with full respect for the human rights of all the country's people.

Kyae zoo tin bar tae.