Statement by Aung San Suu Kyi at the 101st International Labour Conference

Check Against Delivery

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The welcome that I have received this morning has forced me to move a little away from my prepared text, with apologies to interpreters.

Mr President of the Conference, Director-General, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen, before I start on my prepared address, I would like to thank you all for this totally unexpected very warm welcome. It has moved me profoundly and I hope that in the future we shall be able to work together to build a world where all of us can move closer to one another.

I was saying to Mr Somavia – he just told me how to pronounce his name correctly – I was saying to Mr Somavia that whenever I meet people from South America I feel as though I were meeting members of my own family because we have been through the same experiences, our countries. But I think this applies to many other countries besides the ones in South America. So coming here, it feels as though I have come back to meet long lost members of my family and I hope that this will, by no means, be the last meeting.

The International Labour Conference is a pioneer and an example of inclusiveness. Delegates of Workers and Employers as well as Governments coming together to find effective solutions to complex problems demonstrate the value of meaningful exchange between relevant stakeholders. However, I do not stand here as a representative of Workers or of Employers or of Government, not yet anyway. Perhaps you could accept me as the fourth element, I am one of those countless people whose lives are impacted by labour issues. I am also a politician so perhaps I could make a claim to be the fifth element as well, the element that represents the interests of the general public. I still feel a little self-conscious about referring to myself as a recently elected member of Parliament, which I presume is the correct formal definition of my status.

My association with the ILO, which goes back several years, has been based on my responsibilities as a politician, more precisely it is based on the activities of my party, the National League for Democracy, related to democracy and human rights. We cooperated, to the best of our ability, with the ILO and other interested organizations and individuals over the issues of forced labour and child soldiers. The report of the Committee on the Application of Standards sets down the progress that has been achieved in these areas since the situation was last reviewed, as well as remaining concerns. There is little I have to add to the contents of this comprehensive report.

Today I would like to address issues that have arisen as a corollary to changes that have been taking place in Burma over the last year. The initiatives towards democratization taken by President Thein Sein’s Government have been welcomed by the people of our country as well as by the international community. In addition to measures aimed at political reform there has been considerable effort to affect positive changes in the economic sector. One of the few remaining countries in the world with
vast potential waiting to be realized, Burma has attracted the acute attention of business interests as well as of governments and agencies desirous of encouraging and supporting the reform process.

The ILO is unique in that social, political and economic issues coalesce in its work. It is therefore appropriate for me to speak from this forum of concerns related to the opportunities offered by the changing situation in my country. As rights should be balanced by responsibilities, opportunities should be linked to probity if we are to avoid the dangers of exploitation. What I would like to see for our county is democracy-friendly development growth. I would like to call for aid and investment that would strengthen the democratization process by promoting social and economic progress that is beneficial to political reform.

The National League for Democracy has repeatedly emphasized the need for rule of law and an end to ethnic conflict in our country and unless these basic requirements are met, the foundation for healthy, social, political and economic growth cannot be laid down. Strong democratic institutions that will guarantee basic human rights are necessary to ensure good governance based on transparency, accountability and enhancement of integrity. Am I overly ambitious? Perhaps, yes, I think I am ambitious. But unless we aim at achieving the best that might be possible we will be in danger of having to make do with the least that is tolerable, in the short run. In the long run as powers of tolerance run out, unrest and instability will erode the progress that has already been gained.

The resolution adopted by the 101st Session concerning the measures on the subject of Myanmar, adopted under article 33 of the ILO Constitution, reflects positive steps that have been taken over the last year. The Ambassador of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar expressed the opinion that this resolution fell short of his Government’s expectations. The Worker Vice-Chairperson, on the other hand, stated that it was not easy for the Workers to accept the resolution. A good number of the provisions of the resolution have been met in law but much remains to be done, if they were to become reality in practice. A Worker member of the delegation from Burma however focused mainly on the creation of job opportunities and urged the lifting of suspension of all international sanctions and also invited investment.

Although I do not officially represent either workers’ or employers’ or government in the capacity of the fifth element, I met in preparation of my trip to Geneva, individuals and organizations that have been engaged in the promotion of workers’ rights over many years. Those I met in Burma expressed concerns that reflected the presentation made by the workers’ member to the Committee on the Application of Standards with regard to forced labour.

In addition, they highlighted the importance of ensuring legislation that would protect workers’ rights. They pointed out that although a number of laws relating to labour were theoretically in force at present, some were obsolete or anachronistic. Some have not been translated into Burmese and some, such as the Minimum Wage Act have neither been abolished, nor replaced, nor yet in force either. Further, they expressed concern that the newly enacted Workers’ Association Act did provide sufficient protection from government interference in the matter of trade union funding, and that strike regulations should be less restrictive to avoid bias in favour of employers. They also put forward their opinion that the Workers’ Association Act should be entitled, the Trade Union or Labour Union Act, and that it should cover other workers besides those in industry.

The above points related to new labour legislation indicate the need for greater transparency and the legislative process that the views of stakeholders could be taken into consideration before new laws are
promulgated. More democratic practices will offer greater protection for the rights of workers and of all citizens in general.

The creation of job opportunities was also a high priority for the advocates of workers’ rights. They submitted detailed recommendations, ranging from the kind of foreign direct investment they considered desirable to the role that Government should play to ensure the right kind of business practices. I list some of these below that this Conference might see that, despite many years of isolation and repression, our people can still boast a social, political and economic awareness that, given sufficient latitude, would bring our country in line with positive developments in the rest of the world.

I would still like to stress the problem of youth unemployment. As I have said repeatedly it is not so much joblessness as hopelessness that threatens our future. Unemployed youth lose confidence in the society that has failed to give them the chance to realize their potential. Problems related to drink and drug abuse and vagrancy are bound as restless, directionless youth agonize over the fruitlessness of their existence.

Vocational training links to job creation is imperative if we are to safeguard the future by giving our youth the capacity to handle effectively the responsibilities that inevitably fall to them one day which may not be that far away.

Foreign direct investments that result in job creation should be invited. Investors should adhere to codes of practices. Track records in regard to internationally accepted labour standards and environmental responsibility should be examined.

Sustainable benefits including the aquirement of modern technology should be the aim. Responsible foreign investment in agro-business could be beneficial with the right precautions taken to protect small holders. State enterprise is marked for privatization should be made more competitive and small and medium-scale enterprises, such as electricity products and spare parts of machinery encouraged.

Preferred FDI were those related to the tourism and to the development of efficient financial services and basic infrastructure. Investment in the extractive industries should be approached with particular care. These above recommendations inspired by representatives of workers are strikingly similar in many respects to those of an eminent economist who has studied the situation in Burma for many years. Development of the tourist industry, creation of a viable financial system, investment as a source of immediate job creation, as well as a source of new ideas, new techniques and new technologies. He also advises transparency and accountability in the energy sector, and the extractive industries in general.

The Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE), the state-owned company under the Ministry of Energy with which all foreign participation in the energy sector takes place through joint-venture arrangements, lacks both transparency and accountability at present. The Government needs to apply internationally recognized standards, such as the IMF’s Code of Good Practices on Fiscal Transparency. Other countries could help by not allowing their own companies to partner MOGE, unless it was signed up to such codes. This would also ensure that their own companies would subject to the above codes themselves, and to the various requirements of publish what you pay.

I support wholeheartedly the view that the domestic environment should be structured to make the best use of property investment: Property rights, rule of law, broad economic stability, functioning infrastructure which would include soft infrastructure, such as education and then honest, efficient civil
service. Greater accessibility to energy, transport and communications, including telephonic and electronic communications will need particular attention.

There is a wide range of reforms that could be undertaken in Burma, not just to make investment attractive, but to make it sustainable and truly beneficial for our people. A democracy-friendly development policy of coordinated social, political and economic reform will put our country once again on the map of the positive and the successful.

No country can claim genuine development until all its people can enjoy the basic freedoms, freedom from want and freedom from fear. In such a discussion of potential economic progress, we cannot leave out those of our people who are suffering from insufficient protection of their rights as workers in other lands than our own. During my recent visit to Thailand, I had the opportunity of meeting migrant workers and their representatives and individuals, and organizations dedicated to the protection of workers’ rights.

More than 80 per cent of migrant workers in Thailand are from Burma. It was presented to me that in spite of the 2003 MOU and the 2009 nationality verification process to change irregular workers status to legal status through issuing of Burmese passports, migrant workers are still facing frequent and significant rights violations because neither Burma nor Thailand has adopted a rights-based approach to managing migration, as exemplified in numerous ILO conventions, and most importantly, in the comprehensive 1990 UN Convention on the Rights of Migrant Workers and their Families. Both countries continue to have no clear migration policy, and migration management body, and neither country has taken a lead in ensuring the finalization of the stalled ASEAN framework on migrant workers.

I understand that representatives of the State Enterprise, Workers’ Relations and Confederation will be making a detailed submission on the plight of migrant workers in Thailand to this Conference. I would merely like to point out here that concerns related to migrant workers should receive similar consideration to those related to labour issues in our own country.

So many of the migrant workers I met in Thailand told me, “we want to go home”. All of us have a responsibility to make that home one to which they can come back in peace and in security.

I appeal to the ILO to join in efforts to build a home that is a true sanctuary for all our peoples. Here I would like to acknowledge with appreciation the members of the Thai administration who are participating in the resolution of migrant workers issues with understanding and resolution. Host countries also deserve consideration and assistance that labour and international relations might be improved the world over.

I welcome the resolution of the 101st Session, in particular sections 7 to 12 that will enable the ILO to work more effectively to resolve all labour issues outstanding in our country and in countries where there are migrant workers from Burma.

And here I have left myself an opportunity to make more work for our interpreters.

Coming to this Conference, I have learned that we can all work together. As I said earlier, I felt at home, I felt I had come back to meet members of my family. We are not just a family of nations, we are a family of peoples. People to people relationships are the most important kind of relationships. I would
like you to think of Burma, not just as a nation but as peoples – human beings, like all of you. I would like you to think of our young people especially as your own young people, your own children.

I have threatened the Governing Body this morning with boring the audience about my views on our young people and I think I am going to carry this threat out. During the campaign for the by-elections of April, I had the opportunity to meet young people from all parts of the country. We were trying to raise political awareness in our country and it was amazing with what intelligence our young people responded to this campaign. And, when I say young people, I can start with toddlers. I was explaining how in many places we would see little children barely able to walk coming out running unsteadily to wave little flags to let us know that they supported us – and this is amazing. And they would, those that could hardly talk could repeat slogans related to our work for democracy and human rights. I am not sure they understood every word they were saying but I think the spirit of political participation had been instilled in them. They were learning early in life that they must take part in the political process of our country if we are to make a meaningful future for them. And, this encouraged me more than the results of the elections – which were of course very gratifying – but, it was the conviction that our people are on the way to creating a society that is worthy of the potential that put such heart into me and to other members of my party.

I would like all of you to come to Burma – not just to look at investment opportunities or to investigate workers’ problems but just to judge how much potential there is for good for the whole world.

Our young people, as I said earlier, have such spirit in them but they have not been educated, they have not received the kind of basic education that will enable them to take their rightful place in their country and in the world. We need to improve our education system. And, as I said earlier, we need vocational training to be linked to job creation. We would like potential investors to think for us as well as for themselves. We understand that investors do not come purely for altruistic reasons, we accept that investments must pay off – investments must lead to profits. But we would like these profits to be shared between the investors and our people. And, most of all, we would like to invite the kind of investment that would share the skills of the rest of the world with our young people in Burma.

So, when you go back to your own countries please encourage your governments, your businesses, your workers to help us to build the kind of society that will ensure the future of our country. This is my request to all of you and, having seen the warmth with which you regarded me as a representative of the people who want democracy and human rights in Burma, I am certain that I can count on you to do your best.

It is 30 years since I was last in Geneva. I am not sure I recognize it but my heart recognizes it as my heart recognizes that we will be meeting again and again to resolve the problems that pose a threat to the future – not just of my country but of the whole world.

Now I will go back to the prepared text like a good speaker before I conclude.

With the lifting or suspension of sanctions and with the restoration of the general system of preferences (GSP), we will have an unprecedented opportunity for economic development that should be part and parcel of democracy-friendly human rights development growth that would bring peace and prosperity to our country.
I thank the ILO and the organizers of this Conference for making it possible for me to stand here and call on workers, employers, governments, international businesses, international agencies and organizations to join us in our efforts. Thank you.

I do not understand why people say that I am full of courage, I feel terribly nervous, thank you.