

## Remarks to the Media at U.S. Embassy Rangoon

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**AMBASSADOR MITCHELL:** Thank you. Good to see you all. I think I've met some of you in my past times in country. This is my fourth of five days here, and I've had an intensive series of discussions over the last few days in Nay Pyi Taw and here in Rangoon. I am going Mandalay tonight and tomorrow for the further conversations.

Let me say just a few comments or things to a few individuals or folks, first to the Embassy here. Since the Secretary of State's visit in December, there has been an avalanche of visits internationally, particularly from the United States. Many people have been eager to see or experience themselves the developments in this country. It has put an enormous burden on the folks here; they are not equipped for that kind of avalanche of people. But for Chargé Michael Thurston, DCM Eleanor Nagy, and Adrienne over here, among many others who have supported my visits, supported the many visits, I really wanted to say a note of thanks all of them for their tremendous hard work and dedication over many, many weeks. In fact, it has not let up. And hopefully they get a little bit of time off for Thingyan in the next month.

I also want to say a note of thanks to the government here. I continue to have very useful and productive discussions on a full range of issues, with ministers and others in Nay Pyi Taw. There is no issue that has been off limits on either side for which I continue to be grateful and continues to be the mark of a healthy and maturing bilateral relationships. I wanted to say particular thanks to the government for our discussions.

As many of you may have known I was accompanying here by representatives, other representatives of the US government, one was a senior official for the Agency for International Development, another from the State Department's Democracy, Human rights, and Labor Division, and other was a special representative for Labor issues. They also had excellent discussions, ways in which United States may assist in political and economic and social reform here. And I am grateful for their partnership and for their commitment. And I know that they had a wonderful time as I saw them off yesterday. Also thanks to them.

Again, I have addressed in my meetings in Nay Pyi Taw and here a full range of issues, and we can address them in Q&A as you would like. There are two particular issues I would like to single out. The first has to do with the developments in Kachin State, specifically the issue of humanitarian access to internally displaced persons, we call IDPs. We have seen progress in many ethnic minority areas over the last several months and weeks. And I know as the government has told me their commitments for national reconciliation, and the process of doing that in terms of ceasefire and outreach, hopefully toward political dialogue.

But, in Kachin State, the violence is sticking out and is inconsistent with a trend toward in dialogue in confidence building toward national reconciliation. But really the immediate concern that we have is on the issue of internally displaced persons who, by any definition, are innocents caught in the crossfire of conflict and we are entering as you all know better than I, the rainy season. And it can create even more complications for their lives and their well being, their security. During my time here, I met with representatives from the United Nations and others who have been granted limited access but are ready, willing and able to assist. I understand the political and security complications involved. But I very much encourage serious consideration by the government and dialogue with the international community to find a way to enable provision of much needed aid to these citizens. And I want to announce here that to that end the United States is going to provide 1.5 million dollars in additional funding to that UNHCR for that purpose to assist internally displaced persons.

Secondly is the issue that is coming up that is certainly dominating certain sectors of the country, which is the upcoming by-election. I commented on this yesterday when I was standing next to Aung San Suu Kyi. We are committed to a free, fair and transparent process. And this morning I met with several representatives from various political parties and yesterday, of course, with Aung San Suu Kyi. And I will go up to Mandalay and tomorrow I will meet with other representatives from the parties, some of whom are actually running for office up there. The outcome of the election, of course, is up to the people of this country. That is not what our interest is. Our interest is the process, that it be free, that it be fair, that it be transparent, and that it truly represent the will of the people of this country. We do see this—the international community, as well as the citizens here—we see this as a critical moment and a marker towards building trust and confidence on the road toward democracy.

So with that, let me open it up for questions. We have time for several. Thank you. Who will be first?

**QUESTION:** I'm Aung Hla Tun. I am from *Reuters*. You said that process is very important. So without any foreign observers, how would you consider the process?

**AMBASSADOR MITCHELL:** In any election, foreign observers aren't the ones that are to say whether, you know, this election was acceptable or not. Actually, it is up to the people in the country in election to decide whether it is acceptable in terms of being a representation of a popular will, whether it is conducted freely and they were able without intimidation to exercise their right to vote. And our interest is, of course, is not just on voting day. Our interest is in the campaign season: whether the conditions are equal or as best as can be, whether to allow candidates to speak openly, for people to gather to see the candidates, to listen them. I have heard there are concerns about voter rules. There are concerns about voter rules in many countries. But if there are concerns, there should be a process as I believe there is. I talked to the Union Election Commission. I was encouraged they are taking it seriously, providing opportunities for parties to raise issues like voter rolls. There may also be questions like advance voting, whether there is adequate oversight on that front. But it is up to the parties and up to the people of the country to provide the necessary oversight and final word on

whether this does in fact represent their will and is acceptable. What international observers do though, and we encourage that as well, is that they provide the reassurance, an extra eye, an objective eye, to this. There are organizations in Asia and elsewhere, that are professionals that can assist and give recommendations after elections for how things can be done better. I think it would certainly be a point of reassurance to the international community that this was open for people to see for how it went and that there were professional observers at the scene. But I should say that you know we very much encouraged this when I was in Nay Pyi Taw. I know the ASEAN Chairman has. They are open to it. They have discussed it. There was no announcement to us. But we hope all together, by taking together, by April 8 perhaps, the people in this country will feel that it was acceptable, that it was a marker, we will do it better next time perhaps, but it is acceptable and is a way to build trust.

**QUESTION:** Would there be any obstacles to lifting sanctions on Myanmar? [INAUDIBLE] Even if you are satisfied with the outcome.

**AMBASSADOR MITCHELL:** The conditions for sanctions and other restrictions are more than these elections or democracy. There are specific issues that have to do with the release of all political prisoners, have to do with ethnic minority issues and have to do with other issues. So, we are taking this election very seriously. It is a tangible moment in the path to reform, just like the release of political prisoners in January, and before, it's a very tangible demonstration of the new approach to civil society development. So, we are not looking for one particular event in order to say everything is normal, everything is right and is not reversible. But we continue to see trends in the right direction. We could see momentum moving in the right direction. So we will respond after the elections in an appropriate fashion if we believe they were held free, fair and transparently, and consistent with our efforts to be partners in reform.

**QUESTION:** I am Nwe Nwe from *Mainichi* newspaper. If I am not mistaken, you have met with the Defense Minister. And I am wondering what kind of topics you raised and discussed with the minister?

**AMBASSADOR MITCHELL:** Well, I raised the issue of humanitarian access. I raised the development within the military and his observations on how the military fits into the notion of reforms. And we talked about the potential for more defense engagement between the two sides under the right conditions. And issues like that. Same as with other ministers, talking about broad observations of reform in the country and conditions in the country. And it was a very fruitful exchange. I mean, I met with him twice before. Again, very open, there was nothing held back on either side, about concerns on both sides about what the other was doing. But I was grateful for the opportunity.

**QUESTION:** [question inaudible].

**AMBASSADOR MITCHELL:** No, we didn't talk about that issue. No.

**QUESTION:** I am Thiha Saw from *Open News*. My question is about lifting of sanctions. Would this be a gradual and slow process? There is a really important part of the sanctions which is about financial transactions. Would it be on the top of the list when you are going to lift the sanction or will it be somewhere down on the bottom?

**AMBASSADOR MITCHELL:** Well, I am not going to comment on individual items that may be under consideration on the list of sanctions. What is interesting is you know we spent a lot of time over the past 20 years putting sanctions on for various reasons and there wasn't a lot of thought on how to unpeel them, how to work back. The fact is we have a commitment that we stated publicly and it's always been our policy to be partners in reform. If reform is occurring, we want to be working with the people here in that direction. So we are looking at sanctions and other restrictions that are potentially getting in the way of the reform process. That are not consistent with our desire to be partners in the reform process. What is getting in the way of reform? What are obstacles to reform and what we are doing? And do that in a way that is consistent with our values and consistent with our overall policy. So there remains to be seen how we decide to do that. But that is the principle by which we are examining our policy and approach to the country here.

**QUESTION:** I am Kyaw Hsu Mon from *Myanmar Times*. My question is what is the prospect of appointing ambassadors for both countries?

**AMBASSADOR MITCHELL:** Well, I can't speak for Nay Pyi Taw or what stage they're at. You can ask them where they are. But we are seriously looking at. This is ... we made an announcement in January. We think that that, among other things, can beef up our representation and certainly normalize the relationship. But, there is nothing to announce now. So, I can't give you any timeframe. But we want to move as rapidly as we can. In the United State, there is a fairly involved process—paper work and vetting, and then it has to go to the Senate for confirmation. So, by the time someone gets here it is a matter of months rather than weeks. But one hopes we can have an announcement as soon as possible.

**QUESTION:** I am from *Sky Net TV*. Regarding the sanctions, can I talk again? In Vietnam, after the war, the Vietnamese shook hands with the Americans, their enemies. Later, in 1995, the sanctions were lifted and they opened up doors. And your president Clinton visited from America. And then later, Vietnam became a very powerful economy. So, actually, we are friends. When are you going to lift the sanction? Because we want to catch up to our friend's emerging economy because we cannot wait. The sooner than later is better.

**AMBASSADOR MITCHELL:** I think I have answered that in terms of how we think about this issue. But, I think the government even knows here that the sanctions are not the primary problem in terms of development. There are a lot of things the government itself needs to do in order to make it worthwhile for businesses to invest here or for companies to consider this as a place that they want to operate. So, we all have to think hard about creating the condition to do exactly what you say. To insure there is a development in this country, the long needed development, that there be justice and that there would be sort of equitable progress in the

country. And as I said, we are looking at ways which we can do that and ways which we may be blocking ourselves from being able to do that. But nothing else to say on that today.

**QUESTION:** I am Aye Mya Kyaw from *7 Day Journal*. I would like to ask about the Kachin IDP. As you said in your previous talk, you will donate to the UNHCR, 1.5 million. And there are some areas that are UN organizations cannot go to, the areas where IDPs are living and they are still fighting. They need health and humanitarian. Did you discuss with that the government to have direct help to that area for the IDPs?

**AMBASSADOR MITCHELL:** I did. And I raised that many times during my meetings in Nay Pyi Taw. As I said in my statement, this is an issue that is of some concern. The main message was the international community has the ability to help here. These are citizens in need. And again, we understand the sensitivity of the issues of the politics and security and such. But we made the offer and I hope we can continue the dialogue to get to the point where we can provide necessary assistance.

Any other questions? One more?

**QUESTION:** I am Arthur with the *People's Age Journal*. Can you describe the level of cooperation with the traditional partners like UK, Australia and EU with the sanction and other issues on Myanmar?

**AMBASSADOR MITCHELL:** We are in close contact, not in terms of sanctions necessarily, but in terms aid and assistance. A big danger with all the pent-up desire to help here—because there really is a pent-up desire to help—because what's happening in the country is one of the great news stories happening in the world. And truly... when you look around the world, there's a lot that's not going right. And what's happening here is something quite remarkable, obviously at the early stages and there is a long way to go, and there's still a lot of problems. But the trends are in the right direction and the world would really like to help. So, everyone is looking to provide assistance and what we need to make sure is we are not stepping on each other's toes and we are not running haphazardly, and we run in ways into the country that can cause complications to reform. And we have seen this in other countries. If you move too quickly and start throwing money around, you foment more corruption and you have a lot of waste, and you create inflation and all kinds of dangers. I think we have the opportunity to do this right and we need to be reactive and responsive to what's happening here. We need to make sure people feel tangible that their lives are getting better in the immediate term. But speed can be the enemy if we're not being strategic over the long term of how we do this. And that goes toward every type of aid assistance and investment and whatever. And this is where we're working with Australia, the UK, and Europe. I will be going back to Europe in early April to talk about broad policy issues. They're our close allies, and we talk together. But we want to get this right and not just with countries but with the UN, with the World Bank, and others. This is important.

And I should say, there is a tremendous appreciation for the leadership of Thein Sein and what he has done here. It has taken a good deal of courage, I think to take many of the steps he has taken. I read his speech from a month ago. It was a tremendously visionary speech. I think it echoes what the NLD has been saying for some time, but I think he himself has put it in his own words, and he seems committed toward that same path. And I hope that partnership not just with NLD, but with people in the society and government are moving in the same direction. And that's important. There are going to be differences in policy; that happens in democracies. It happens in every society. But coordination within the government here, coordination with the international community is going to be essential to the success of the transition here. And that is what we're committed to. That is what we seek to continue. And we look forward to the by-elections as being a marker on that path—a really important one—because it could lead to people in the parliament that will be partners in this process. I think that partnership that has been established tacitly we hope will continue, both with the international community, the government, and within society at large here. That's the work that we're trying to assist. Every time I come here I have very good exchanges with people. And I have optimism, but there are so many dangers and challenges ahead and we have no illusions about the complicated way forward. But we hope that this country continues to be a beacon of promise in a world that is otherwise undergoing many challenges.