

International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHOT)
Sein Lann So Pyay Garden Restaurant, Inya Road
Sunday, May 17, 2015

IDAHOT Remarks (as delivered)

- Thank you Colors Rainbow (thank you Aung Myo Min, UNAIDS) and thank you LGBTI community of Myanmar for inviting me to give opening remarks today, the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia.
- I am pleased to see the participation of the Myanmar National Human Rights Commission at today's event.
- It is wonderful the Commission recognizes that advancing equality for LGBTI persons is fundamental to promoting human rights and democracy in Myanmar, as it is throughout the world.
- President Obama and Secretary Kerry have made it clear that championing the human rights of LGBTI individuals worldwide is a foreign policy priority.
- Why have they made this a priority? It is quite simple – because we know from history that protecting human rights for everyone, without exception, is fundamental to truly stable and secure societies, which is the foundation of stability and security among nations.
- That means treating others as we would want ourselves to be treated. We in the West call that the Golden Rule. One would think something called the Golden Rule would find a natural home in the Golden Land.
- No group or individual – regardless of their race, ethnicity, faith, sexual orientation, gender, or gender identity– falls outside this framework of dignity and equality, these most basic principles of humanity.
- In fact, protecting the rights of LGBTI individuals requires that we acknowledge the beautiful diversity of human existence.
- It also requires overcoming the unfortunate but natural inclination of every human being – and I mean everyone -- to discriminate, separate, and feel negative bias towards those who are different.

- Such attitudes unfortunately are as human as our diversity.
- To overcome these attitudes requires education, understanding, a loving heart, and time. Unfortunately we all know old mindsets change slowly.
- But they can change. Perhaps nothing in my adult life has made me prouder of my country than the changes in my country's attitude toward our LGBTI community in recent years.
- To many, the changes may have come quickly. But in fact they were the result of enormous hard work, courage, and yes, suffering of many courageous individuals over decades. Unfortunately, that's often what it takes to bring change to deeply ingrained mindsets.
- It also took a new generation. Younger Americans are the ones driving the change in my country, assisted by popular culture like Hollywood, to overcome the narrow views of their parents and grandparents.
- Of course the United States still has a long way to go. Change here will also take continued hard work, patience, and probably some suffering.
- Ideally you will have the support of family as you move forward. But we all know that is not always the case.
- It is for that reason that events like this one are so important. Because as you deal with whatever difficulties ahead may await you, you need to know you are not alone. That while you may feel desperate and lonely at times, you are actually not alone.
- Know that millions around the world are with you in spirit. Look around you and know that the hundreds present here today represent many thousands more in your own country who could not be here but wish they could, and who will be inspired by this event.
- Please stand together. During the hard times, that will be your strength. In unity there is always strength. You may find you have to hold tight to each other for a while until the rest of society catches up.

- I experienced this first-hand in Yangon when I visited recently one of the TOP (Targeted Outreach Project) Centers that USAID supports here in this country. These TOP centers provide counseling and clinical services to those most at risk of HIV.
- The people I met felt isolated, alone, in pain. But in the midst of their fears and their pain, they stood together and they gained strength. It was one of the most emotional, inspirational experiences of my three years here as ambassador.
- My appearance here is just the beginning of a number of activities and events the U.S. Embassy will be undertaking to celebrate June Pride Month. For instance, if you leave here and drive by the embassy on University Avenue tonight, you will see we have marked today's occasion by flying the rainbow flag over the Embassy. I encourage you all to take a look.
- We will look to identify additional opportunities in the future to support the good work that you all are doing to advance the human rights of the LGBTI community in Myanmar, to extend your work to townships and villages in every corner of this country. For LGBTI individuals exist in every community.
- Although the road to equal rights and social acceptance for LGBTI individuals may be long, and will likely be paved with hardship, I wish you all the best.
- Because no matter who you love, no matter how you identify yourself, no matter where you are, you are worthy of love and respect.
- All who are taking part in today's event are courageous pioneers, and I am honored to be among you. Please remember to walk together with courage and in solidarity.
- Thank you for inviting me to speak today. Chezu tin ba deh!