

## **Myanmar Labor Initiative Holds First Stakeholder Forum**

**Chatrium Hotel, Yangon**

**Tuesday, May 19, 2015**

- It is a pleasure to be here with you all this afternoon. Appreciate the opportunity.
- First, I have a whole host of thank you's to all of you here.
- On behalf of the Myanmar Labor Initiative partners – the Governments of Myanmar, the United States, Japan, and Denmark, the International Labor Organization, and most recently, the European Union—I would like to thank you all for taking part in the Stakeholders Forum over the past day and a half.
- Many of you, particularly our international participants, have traveled quite far to be with us today. We truly appreciate your commitment to this initiative to help improve worker conditions of this country, and the wealth of experience you have brought to the forum.
- As the U.S. ambassador, you'll have to forgive me for singling out specifically the official US representatives here for their contribution: Sarah Fox for the State Department; Eric Biel from the Labor Department; and Tim Wedding, from the US Trade Representative's office. Thank you.
- For our local partners here in Myanmar, including labor unions, local businesses, and civil society organizations, we honor and thank you for your dedication to your country, to building a prosperous, just, and healthy Myanmar economy based on strong protection of labor rights. And we thank you for sharing your invaluable perspectives.
- I would also like to acknowledge the International Labor Organization for the work it has done to organize this event. In particular, let me thank my good friend Steve Marshall, ILO's Liaison Officer, and his entire team for the months of preparation, and their continued tireless dedication to promoting labor rights in this country.
- Finally, I would like to thank the Government of Myanmar, and particularly Deputy Minister of Labor, U Htin Aung, and the Ministry of Labor, Employment, and Social Security, for its partnership on this Initiative, its

work in hosting this Forum, and for its sustained efforts to improve conditions for laborers in this country. I also appreciate your sincere commitment to partnership, as I understand you engaged in sensitive discussions with local stakeholders on issues like child labor and minimum wage.

- This specific initiative was born out of interest within the US Trade Representative's office last year to pursue a labor initiative in this country, driven in great part by Tim of USTR. I was and am very pleased that through our collective hard work – USTR, my embassy, ILO, all in partnership with the Myanmar government here -- we were able to finalize the agreement during USTR Michael Froman's visit last August.
- The discussions over the past two days have provided a strong foundation for the work ahead. I am sure the inputs and discussions have helped everyone to better understand the quite complex conditions on the ground in Myanmar for both workers and for businesses.
- I also hope the challenges you have shared will help the Government to prioritize its labor reform work going forward.
- In the end, working together will be key to this process.
- Nothing profound or special here: as with most things, the journey is just as important as the destination. I have personal experience with this when I worked strategic issues at the Pentagon. I found the outcome of strategic discussions was important, but the process of getting there was an extremely valuable exercise for success.
- The discussions you have will build bonds of trust, and a unified perspective on the issues and challenges you will face together going forward.
- We particularly welcome the Government's commitment to working with civil society on labor law reform. Building a strong economic foundation for the country, one based on transparency and responsible business conduct, will require that business, labor, civil society, and the government all maintain strong channels of communication.
- This Stakeholder Forum thus serves as an important initial step in establishing a practice of sustained multi-stakeholder engagement.

- I know that all Initiative Partners are committed to engage together as we all continue this work in coming years.
- The goal for this work we are doing now together under this Initiative will underpin future inclusive economic growth and sustainable development in Myanmar. By protecting Myanmar's workers and supporting its businesses, we all can play a role in helping make Myanmar an attractive sourcing and investment partner, and ensure a balanced economy that provides benefits to all.
- In turn, that form of economic justice built on consultation, cooperation, and partnership can serve to underpin the stability and unity of this country going forward, during what is likely to be an otherwise complicated period to come.
- We all – everyone in this room – has an interest in the success of this country. The presence of those who have come long distances to participate over the past day – to share experiences and expertise -- represents just a fraction of the enormous desire and commitment around the world to play a constructive role here.
- We all know change will not come overnight. But with continued dedication, change will come.
- So again, I want to thank everyone for sharing your time at this Stakeholder Forum, the first of what I hope will be many more steps together to many more multi-stakeholder dialogues on behalf of labor rights in this country in the months and years ahead.