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Burmese Democracy Leader Meets with Party Elders

By VOA News

Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi was allowed to meet with three high-ranking elderly members of her political party outside her home Wednesday.

The Nobel Peace laureate was taken from her lakeside Rangoon home to a state guest house for a brief meeting with National League for Democracy chairman Aung Shwe, secretary U Lwin and Lun Tin, a member of the NLD's executive committee. All three men are either in their late 80s or early 90s.

Wednesday's meeting is the latest concession towards Aung San Suu Kyi since she wrote military ruler General Than Shwe in late September offering her help in getting international sanctions lifted against the regime.

She has held three meetings with junta liaison minister Aung Kyi since October, and was also allowed to meet with U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell last month at a Rangoon hotel.

Aung San Suu Kyi has spent 14 of the last 20 years under some form of detention, mostly house arrest.

She was convicted in August of violating the terms of her latest house arrest for giving shelter to an American man who swam to her house uninvited back in May. She was sentenced to an additional 18 months of house arrest.

The Burmese Supreme Court will hear a final appeal of the conviction next week.

The NLD won democratic elections in 1990, but the military refused to recognize the results. The regime has vowed to hold elections next year, but critics say the constitution ensures the military will remain in power.

Ambassador Bosworth Told North Koreans Benefits of Ending Nuclear Programs

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — U.S. Special Representative for North Korea Policy Ambassador Stephen Bosworth used his discussions with North Korean officials as an opportunity to present a vision of an improved bilateral relationship, as well as better relationships with its neighbors, if they agree to abandon its nuclear programs.

Speaking at the State Department December 16, Bosworth said his December 8-9 talks in Pyongyang, the first senior-level encounter between the two countries since President Obama took office in January, were "quite positive" and forward-focused, and established areas where the two countries could find agreement.

"In particular, they accepted the importance of the six-party process, and they accepted the critical role of the joint statement of principles of September 2005. So in that area there was very substantial progress," the ambassador said. The Six-Party Talks are discussions among North Korea, South Korea, China, Japan, Russia and the United States on ending the threat of nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula. In September 2005, the parties reached an agreement that North Korea would abandon its nuclear programs in exchange for energy assistance and other measures.

State Department spokesman Ian Kelly confirmed December 16 that Bosworth had brought a personal letter for North Korean leader Kim Jong Il from President Obama, which Kelly said likely "concerned what our very simple agenda was for the visit of Ambassador Bosworth, and that was to get North Korea to come back to the Six-Party Talks."

Bosworth said he had spent "a good deal of the time" in his discussions "elaborating and sketching out to them the ideas of this administration … as to the kind of bilateral relationship we could have … provided that North Korea proceeds down this road to denuclearization."

North Korea's relationships in the Northeast Asian region could also improve as it abandons its nuclear weapons and programs, he said.

"The point of engagement … is to try to change the other side's view of its own self-interest," Bosworth said.

The 2005 joint statement includes a commitment to move toward a peace treaty to replace the 1953 armistice on the Korean Peninsula. "When [the North Koreans] say that they view that as an important element, I can say with great sincerity, so do we," Bosworth said.

China, as the chair of the Six-Party Talks, will be taking the initiative to coordinate efforts "over the next few weeks" for a new round of talks, he said.

North Korea's recently disclosed uranium enrichment program will be on the agenda of future discussions, he said. "They put it there by making a public announcement that they had concluded the first experimental phase of a uranium-enrichment program."

The six countries will need to agree on "an overall sequencing" of the process when they next meet, including "the move toward a … peace treaty; the provision of energy and economic assistance;

normalization of relations; [and] the establishment of some sort of a structure for Northeast Asian security," Bosworth said.

"We're not going to negotiate on any of these issues until we're back at the table in the six-party framework," he added.

Following his talks in Pyongyang, Bosworth traveled to Seoul, Beijing, Tokyo and Moscow for discussions with the other participants in the Six-Party Talks.

"I found very strong agreement that the unity of the five is very important in trying to deal with North Korea," he said, as well as support for his mission and the need to continue to enforce United Nations sanctions that were imposed after North Korea conducted nuclear and missile tests earlier in 2009.

"The other participants in the process see the situation in the same way. We all want to get back to the negotiating table," he said.

Europe's Lisbon Treaty Welcomed by the United States

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — The United States welcomes the Lisbon Treaty, which came into effect December 1, as an important milestone for Europe and for its role in the world, Assistant Secretary of State Philip Gordon says.

The treaty, ratified on November 3, streamlines European Union institutions, expands the term of the European Council presidency, creates a new foreign affairs position, and, over time, will redistribute rights among member states.

"The United States faces a daunting array of global challenges that no one country can handle on its own," Gordon said. "For a variety of critical issues, from climate change to the Doha Round of trade talks, from the Balkans to Iran, solutions will require working in close concert with our European partners."

A strong and cohesive Europe is very much in the U.S. national interest, Gordon testified December 15 before a Senate subcommittee. And the United States looks forward to the development of these institutions and to engaging with their new leaders, incoming President Herman Van Rompuy (of Belgium), and the new high representative (for foreign affairs and security policy), Catherine Ashton, he added.

The treaty took effect after more than 20 years of give-and-take debate among the 27 member nations of the European Union, and will streamline and accelerate decisionmaking so that the EU will have a stronger and more coherent global voice and identity that will also include increased democracy and openness within the union, analysts with the U.S. Congressional Research Service (CRS) say.

"The Lisbon Treaty follows the failure of the EU constitutional treaty, a major reform effort that was shelved after its rejection in referendums held in France and the Netherlands in 2005," write Kristin Archick and Derek Mix, CRS European affairs analysts.

Gordon and a panel of nongovernmental experts testified December 15 before the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on European Affairs on the impact of the Lisbon Treaty on U.S. and European relations. The relationship with Europe goes back to a time before the United States was founded and has been close in every way since then.

"It goes to underscore the importance of our trans-Atlantic alliance and the strong foundation that both our bilateral relationship and our alliance relationship present as we work on many of the difficult issues ahead," Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said December 14 at a press briefing in Washington with Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos.

Gordon said the United States and the European Union cooperate closely on an array of "vitally important policy areas," including the Middle East peace process, curbing Iran's nuclear weapons development program, annual U.S.-EU summits, a deepening economic relationship through the Transatlantic Economic Council and the Group of 20 advanced and developing economies, promoting law enforcement and counterterrorism cooperation, energy security issues and global development assistance.

Gordon also said the United States is hopeful that the new permanent EU presidency will allow for development of a long-term consultative relationship at the highest levels. The presidency has a two-and-a-half-year term and is renewable once. He said the United States also believes the new permanent foreign affairs representative will heighten cooperation and consultation on the issues both face.

"Secretary Clinton spoke with High Representative Ashton after her selection and met with her during the secretary's December 4 visit to Brussels [to attend a NATO foreign ministers' meeting] to begin addressing the lengthy agenda of our shared priorities," Gordon told senators. And it was agreed at that meeting that Ashton would travel to Washington early next year for further talks.

Gordon also said that while some offices have been made more permanent, the role of member states in decisionmaking is undiminished. "We need to continue to engage our partners in Europe through its high-level officials, through the member states, through the EU institutions, and through NATO," he added.

GREATER DEMOCRACY, DECISIONMAKING

A trans-Atlantic policy specialist from the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University told senators that the Lisbon Treaty is the latest milestone in the decadeslong evolution of the EU.

"European leaders believe they have designed a treaty that can offer more efficient decisionmaking, more democracy through a greater role for the European Parliament and national parliaments, and increased coherence in EU engagement with other actors," Johns Hopkins' Daniel Hamilton testified.

"The European Union is the most important organization in the world to which the United States does not belong. It is a unique partnership of 27 democratic European countries, comprising 500 million people, with the aim of seeking 'ever closer union,'" Hamilton added.

Karen Donfried, executive vice president of the German Marshall Fund, told the subcommittee that beyond the ceremonial aspects of the recent completion of the treaty, it seeks to improve how the EU, with its 27 member countries, will function.

"The hope in the United States is that the European Union will now look beyond Europe and capitalize on its more effective, efficient decisionmaking structures and institutional setup to help the United States meet the many global challenges confronting countries on both sides of the Atlantic," Donfried said.

India's Plan to Create New Southern State

By Anjana Pasricha
VOA News

New Delhi — India's plan to carve out a new state from southern Andhra Pradesh has triggered a political furor. It has also intensified similar demands in other parts of the country and led to a fresh debate on the issue of governance and regional identity for the huge country.

When the federal government agreed to create a new state, called Telangana, from the northern districts of Andhra Pradesh, it hoped to calm growing tensions about the demand that has been ongoing for decades.

But the move has had the opposite effect. It has triggered a wave of counterprotests from those who want Andhra Pradesh to remain united. More than 120 lawmakers in the state legislature have submitted resignations, demanding that the government scrap its plans.

At the same time, the government's concession on Telangana has revived statehood demands in other areas. In the eastern state, West Bengal, protesters have intensified a campaign for a new state in the hill regions, for the ethnic Nepalese population. In Rajasthan, activists have held demonstrations to demand a new state, Maru Pradesh. The chief minister of Uttar Pradesh wants three new states to be created out of the country's most-populous state.

History professor at Delhi University and political analyst Mahesh Rangarajan says many of the campaigns for separate states are born in poor and neglected areas. For example, supporters of Telangana want an independent state because they say the region is deprived of resources, jobs and opportunities.

"In many cases the regions that are backward or underdeveloped, there is a feeling among people that statehood within the Indian union will give them a better chance of living a life of material dignity," said Rangarajan. "Added to this, there is the view that there are cultural features which unify them as opposed to people in the rest of the state."

Political boundaries within India have been redrawn several times since it was divided into 18 states, on linguistic lines, in the 1950s. Today, India has 28 states and seven federally administered territories. The most recent division of states took place in 2000, when three new states (Chattisgarh, Jharkhand and Uttarakhand) were carved in north India to meet the aspirations of tribal and hill communities.

C.V. Madhukar is the director of the Delhi-based independent PRS Legislative Research. He says the model of linguistic states is being questioned as issues of identity come to the fore in the diverse country of more than a billion people.

"It [language] was relevant at that time and continues to be relevant, in large measure. But, beyond language, there are cultural, ethnic differences," he said. "There are development differences that people want to address and a lot of this is coming out in the agitations which we are now seeing."

Those who support splitting existing states point out that some Indian states are bigger than the size of many countries. The most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, has a population of 190 million — nearly the same as Brazil.

Political analyst Rangarajan says the demand for smaller

states is no surprise in a country where the population has grown threefold from the time it became independent.

"Today we have 28 states — but we must keep in mind, 28 states for 1 billion people. United States has 300 million people and 50 states," he said. "The European Union has 300 million people and 27 nation states. So it is not all that illogical."

Those who support the creation of smaller states also argue that they could promote better governance in a country where administration, in many regions, is ineffective. They say it could lead to better political representation for local communities. They point out that some of India's smallest states, such as Haryana in the north and Kerala in the south, are more developed than larger ones.

However, Madhukar says that size is only a small factor in good governance.

"I think the bigger logic needs to be that there should be a rationale for creating states. The point is small state or big state, unless you learn how to govern yourself, you don't have a solution," he said. "You cannot have small states as a proxy for good governance."

Indeed, as the protests and counterprotests about Telangana show, the issue of reorganizing states will be a contentious one with no easy answers.

The federal government has already put the issue of splitting Andhra Pradesh on the back burner. It says Telangana can only get statehood after the Andhra Pradesh state assembly passes a resolution for its creation — something that could take months, or even longer, given the polarization on the issue.

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