

## Meeting with Burmese Youth Leaders from Different U.S. Government-Sponsored Exchange Programs

### Transcript

Daniel R. Russel  
Assistant Secretary, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs  
Rangoon, Burma  
June 8, 2014

**Assistant Secretary Russel:** [...] to the United States, to see what we are doing, to learn alongside of us and to make your own judgments about what you want to bring back. Sometimes, you bring back ideas about how you can do exactly what your American friends and counterparts are doing. Sometimes, you come back ideas where you are deciding to do the opposite of what we do in the United States. That's okay. And one of the reasons that this support for you as the driver is important to us is because United States itself is a multi-cultural country. We have people from many ethnic backgrounds, of people with many different geographic loyalties, and people with many different religious faiths. That's one of the things that makes the United States and Myanmar similar. We also frankly want Myanmar to be successful. We want you to be successful in protecting your environment because we share this world. We want you to be successful in developing your economy because the richer you are, the better – the more Gap clothes you can buy. We want you to be successful in educating yourself and in creating the institutions that will keep the society and the country stable because the better your education, the more you contribute to the region and the world. The more stable Myanmar is socially and politically, the healthier and more prosperous South East Asia becomes. So, in all of these ways, we would like to facilitate your ability to drive progress. More questions? The President got a lot of very good direct questions. Yes?

**Question:** This is my great pleasure to meet you and to get this wonderful opportunity to become a voice. I have read the news that, right now in 2014, Burma is the top priority of the U.S. foreign policy. I heard like this. I am not sure it is right or wrong. (Laughter) That's why I want to know, you know, the United States is now promoting the education and human rights in Burma. In the same respect, the United State is now balancing the power with China in this kind of the foreign policy to balance the power with China. How the United States Government is going to promote and have Burma people to create their own economic development and youth employment in this region? How can you help us [inaudible] we can evaluate ourselves for our economic development? Thank you.

**Assistant Secretary Russel:** Thank you. I think you heard from Ambassador Mitchell that Burma is our very top priority. (Laughter) The fact that the President is coming back to Myanmar and the fact that Secretary Pritzker, Secretary of Commerce, was just here, Ambassador Froman is coming, Secretary Kerry is coming, the fact that so many high level U.S. Government visitors as well as important business leaders have come to Myanmar, to Burma is proof that the success of you and your brothers and sisters and your country is important to the United States.

We can't do it for you. But we can do it with you. And we can help. We are not trying to export our value or our way of life or our governmental system, enforce it on Burma. We are trying, however, to show you what our values are and to give you the opportunity to shape the future of your country in the way

you think is best. If I could summarize American strategy for Burma, for Myanmar, and frankly for Asia-Pacific, in one word, I would choose the word "Choices". We want you to be able to make your own choices. We want you to make your choices freely. We want you to make educated choices and we want you to have choices. We want you to have the ability and the right to choose your own leaders. We want you to have the ability and the right to choose where you go to school and what profession you enter into. And we want you and your country to have choice to trade and to do business with any partner in any country that you think is advantageous, is positive for Burma, for Myanmar. That means the ability to trade with China, but not only with China. It means the ability to trade and to engage with the United States, but not only with the United States.

Our relationship with China is very important. But our relationship with each of the ten countries in ASEAN, including Myanmar, and our relationship with ASEAN as a whole is also very important. And we will never trade one for the other as much as we value and work with China as a major economy, as a major regional actor. When there are actions by China, that we think are inconsistent with international law, or when we believe that China's behavior toward its smaller or weaker nations, neighbors, is unfair, we will act. We always have and we always will. So, our goal, very simply, is to help make it possible and to help make it easier for all of you and others, particularly the young people in Myanmar and throughout ASEAN to understand what the choices are, to build institutions that protect your freedom and your rights to make those choices, and to ensure that you have access to a good education that will allow you to make choices that ultimately are in the best interest of you, your family, your neighborhood, your country, and the region, not simply to do what we ask you to do.

**Question:** Hi, I just want to go back a little bit to your answer to Win Lei Lei's question. I know what you mean when you say you want our country to be richer and be able to build up a better education system – the institution. I can see that there are a lot of improvements in the education sector in my country as well. But, for the older generation youths like us, it might be a little bit too late. But, what will be your encouragement for us because youths in my country, for example, we are lucky enough to have education. But there are other youths who didn't even have the chance to study. And before we are talking about them, even us, we find it difficult to find out and pursue our interest in studying or career because of the way they are brought up, because of the limited education system. So, what will be your encouragement for us and how can we improve ourselves?

**Assistant Secretary Russel:** Ok, well, I have two suggestions -- two pieces of advice. Number one - you have a huge advantage now in the technology revolution. And whether or not you go to Yangon University or Harvard University or no university, if you have a computer or a laptop or a mobile phone with access to the internet, you have access to unlimited opportunities to research, to study, to communicate, to network, to ask questions and to take initiatives. Now, I don't mean that the answer to educational problems is Google Search. But, because you can now communicate so easily and find other people who have something to share, you have the ability to create your own network, your own study group, your own trading system where maybe you are teaching someone something that you know and learning from them something that they have to offer. It's an opportunity to develop skills, a way of pooling your talent, and teaching yourself. Now, in addition or one part of that community effort could be trying to build up the educational system. That includes tutoring. That includes finding tutors. That

includes sharing resources and the American Center here and other actors are very supportive of those kinds of enterprises.

My second piece of advice is “follow your heart”. People will learn and remember what they are interested in. And the opportunity that you have now is to explore areas and find out what interests you, what excites you, what motivates you and to work together with other people that share that interest to try to deepen and broaden your own education. My observation and my experience is that very successful people like Ambassador Mitchell are people with passion, people who are hungry to do more and people who are doing what they love. I think if you ask Ambassador Mitchell, if he could do anything in the whole world if, he could have any job, what would he do? I think he’ll say he would do what he is doing right now. There is no greater joy and no greater honor than to be able to answer that question the same way. And you all now have the opportunity to discover what it is that makes you happy, what it is you want to do and to rise to the very, very top in your area of passion.

**Ambassador Mitchell:** First of all, I think that’s extremely eloquent what the Assistant Secretary just said. And I’d add one more point to your specific question which is the idea that you are too old to get educated. Education is endless. Education will continue if you are interested, as long as your heart is beating and you are interested. As the Assistant Secretary said, one hopes the access to information and resources online, which hopefully will increase here in coming years and will enable lifetime education.

So, I would say you never quite lose or may lose a particular moment in your education when you are young. But, that doesn’t mean you can’t continue to educate yourself, continue to learn because I would say I learned more outside of school, than inside in my life. So, don’t feel like you have missed anything even if you feel some time has passed.

**Assistant Secretary Russel:** Please.

**Question:** Regarding the suggestions of the Assistant Secretary like choices, first I’d like to discuss and second, I’d like to ask some questions. For example, I agree that Myanmar has come to some extent; Myanmar has made some progress, like the political development and economic development in the recent years. But, at the same time, Myanmar got the position of ASEAN Chairmanship this year. But, at the same time, Myanmar also is facing many challenges, including the human rights violations in the rural areas of Myanmar, and the ongoing civil war in the Northern part of Myanmar as we all know well. So, those are the challenges.

At the same time, even like inside of Myanmar, we’re also facing like the conflict, social conflict or like a potential religious conflict inside of the country at the same time. At the same time, the participation of young people in the political arena are like, how can I say, relatively kind of low because generally, young people, they do not know how to engage in the political arena of Myanmar and like a more importantly and like how to systematically approach. So, those kinds of issues are ... I would like to ask are what will be the U.S. concerns to those kind of issues like conflicts inside of Myanmar and human rights violations and the challenges of the current transition period?

**Assistant Secretary Russel:** Thank you. Well, maybe two pieces to what you are discussing: one is the question of what you can do ... what each of you can do. And frankly, I think that's the place to start. When you look at the history of the United States or other countries, real change comes from people. And often, those people are not presidents and kings. Often, they are humble citizens – who with passion and with ideas and principles dedicated themselves to a cause, organized and found ways to explain or articulate a goal that their neighbors and countrymen agreed with.

In the United States in the 1950s and then into the 1960s, there was a very powerful grass roots civil rights movement. And when we think back now to the many great heroes of the civil rights movements, the drivers of change were people like Rosa Parks, a housewife, a domestic worker who took a courageous stand, people like Reverend Martin Luther King, a religious figure. Yes, ultimately, President Kennedy, President Johnson had a role to play. But constructive change in addressing serious flaws in our society was driven by individual people a lot like you and me.

So, the first point I would make is that accepting responsibility for our community and for our country is the starting point for addressing the challenges you described. When the problem is as big as the problem that confronts Myanmar in terms of religious tension and conflict, in terms of the challenges to the development and peace in Rakhine state, in terms of the transition and transformation of the political system steadily in the direction of a democratic arrangement that you and your neighbors feel is fair and just. When the challenges are that big, we have to break them down into small pieces and ask ourselves “What can I do?” “What's important to me?”

Now, the second part of your question is what does the U.S. think and what are the U.S. concerns. Our policy aims to support the positive reform developments in your country because we believe in universal value of human rights and fundamental freedoms and also because we believe that a just society, an open society, a tolerant society has resilience. And Myanmar needs the strength, the resilience to deal with the long term development of the country and of your resources. Burma is very rich in natural resources. Everyone knows that. But, what you can't lose sight of is that the number one resource, the greatest source of wealth in your country isn't underground – it's not growing, it's you. It's the people. And that's why education is important. That's why activism and community action is important. That's why good communications are important. We have an ongoing dialogue through Ambassador Mitchell, through Secretary Kerry in Washington, in Naypyitaw, in Yangon with the leaders of your political system. And we are very open and very clear about the importance we placed on continued and accelerated progress on human rights, on justice, on rule of law. But ultimately, the responsibility rests with you to decide what kind of country you want to live in and to make it to that country.

Yes?

**Question:** Hi, I am strongly interested in diversity and I am an alumni of IEA programs. So, I found that America has a multiculturalism and diversity. And I do love to see that. As for me, I'm a Buddhist, but I grew up within a Christian community and most of my friends are Muslims. So, I am interested in diversity and I do love diversity. But, right now, some hate speech and conflict based on the religious

diversity are spreading around Myanmar. And how do you think on that conflict? Do you think Myanmar will unit as one someday? Thank you.

**Assistant Secretary Russel:** I have great hope. I have great faith and I have a great belief that Myanmar will unit as one. And that faith is based in part on my observation of the courage and determination of the people in this country. But also, because of the American experience, many ethnic groups, many nationalities, many religions, the denominations, the geographic spread throughout Myanmar creates, as you say diversity, creates the opportunity for the society to grow, in my opinion, faster and in more dependable and a sustainable way than it might be the case in a very unified, homogeneous cultural society. That's not science. But, it's my experience and it's my belief.

Let me make a couple of points, again from my experience. When people are afraid, they tend to find comfort and shelter in groups who are similar. Maybe this dates back to when we lived in caves and had to protect ourselves. So, helping people not to be afraid, helping people to have courage is one remedy, one medicine for that negative trend.

Secondly, I think you have a big advantage because normally, people are worried and concerned about different and remote cultures. But, in one country, you have so many cultures and so many different ways of beliefs and ways of life that is close to you that you have access. Familiarity creates confidence and understanding. So, each of you, one by one, can and should reach out to other people – people who come from a different background.

Thirdly, you are all involved in one way or another in educational exchange programs. I believe that taking a step outside your own country helps you for the very first time understand where you come from. Until you see your country from the outside, it's very difficult to understand it and to take an objective look. So, I think that based on your exposure to the United States and to other countries your ability to leave and return, to leave and to look back at Myanmar, at the society, you have an ability to size up what strengths derive from diversity. From my part, the American diplomatic service, unlike the diplomatic service in so many other countries where everyone in an embassy, everyone in the foreign ministry went to the same university, and if you graduated in this year, you are at that level, if you graduated two years earlier, then you are the boss. If you graduated ten years earlier, you are the big boss. And everyone move step by step. That's very common in most diplomatic services.

The United States, because we are so diverse, has a very different diplomatic service. We all come from different parts of the country. We all went to different universities. It doesn't matter if someone went to the most famous university, or went to a small university, they could walk to from their home, we are all equal; we are all different; and we all make our own contribution. We all move ahead at our own pace and according to our own skills. To me that's the power of diversity and I think that Myanmar has a huge advantage because of yours. Any comment?

**Question:** Regarding your discussion and answer, you talked something about economic development. How economic development is very important to integrate a community to be more prosperous. So, right now, it's very popular to talk about ASEAN economic community because, it can bring many opportunities and advantages within ASEAN community. So, my question is "Do you think ASEAN

community can be formed in 2015 as soon as it has planned?” “If so, what kind of challenges can developing countries like Cambodia and Myanmar face?” “And what should they prepare before 2015?” Thank you.

**Assistant Secretary Russel:** That’s a difficult question. I feel like I’m taking a test. (Laughter) The way to think about it, in my opinion is this: your nine neighbors represent close partners with whom you have now in 2015, the opportunity to create a kind of trading community that will allow you to have advantages in their market in doing business, in selling your product, in marketing, shopping your ideas the same as if you are a citizen of that country. So, what you’re doing is expanding your borders. You are increasing your diversity. You are bringing together some of the unique assets that Singapore offers, some of the huge market that Indonesia offers, some of the products and the stores and the businesses that Malaysia and Thailand and Vietnam and others offer, some of the experiences of the Philippines and much with they have to offer.

So, it’s both you are acquiring both markets and you are acquiring customers and you are acquiring investors. The lesson of United States and the lesson of the modern liberal economy has been again and again that lowering barriers, expanding markets and opportunities, unleashing the positive and creative strengths of individuals and companies, creating an atmosphere that is supportive of innovation and entrepreneurship, but, at the same time, maintaining good and enforced rules so that the business engagement is fair, so that property including intellectual property is protected. Whether I’m designing clothes, or inventing a new machine or writing a song, I want what I make to belong to me. The expanding ASEAN economic community widens the borders, increases the opportunity, adds to the pool of talent and helps ensure that all of the countries those that are more developed and those that are less developed can play by the same rules. The other thing I would add is that by creating an economic community, ASEAN has more influence, more clout, as they say, more strength to compete, to compete with the United States, to compete with European Union, to compete with China. And that’s a good thing. Don’t forget what makes each of us stronger is competition, as long as that competition is healthy, as long as that competition is fair.

**Moderator:** We will have one more question.

**Question:** Good morning. I’m Amy and I’m 2014 BYLP alumni. You know now our country is developing country and changing to democracy. Can you give some advice for our country to develop and to change the democracy and may I know how the U.S. government and citizen change the United States to the democracy country? Thank you.

**Assistant Secretary Russel:** I’ll leave it to you to study the history of the development of democracy in the United States. But, I will give you the two secrets of creating democracy in Myanmar. Number one – listen – listen to other people, listen to what other people are saying. You never know, sometimes, someone with a different point of view might be right. Sometimes, if you listen hard and carefully, you may find that you agree with them. And sometimes, if you listen to them, you may figure out how it is that you are going to explain to them where they are wrong, or why you have a better idea. In addition,

it's been my experience that other people will listen to you, if first, they feel like they've been able to express themselves and that you heard them that you took their points onboard.

So, step number one is "listen". Step number two is "speak up". Your voice has to be heard for Myanmar to be a true democracy. I don't mean you have to protest. I don't mean you have to yell. But, you have to have something to say. You have to have some passion and you have to have a goal. What is it that is important to you? What's important in your neighborhood? How can you make better? What's important in your school or your work place? How can you make it better? The greatest success ultimately will go to the people and the group with the best ideas and the ability to explain them. To be able to get your message out is not a matter of volume. It's a matter of skill in advocating and in articulating. So, to speak can mean to prepare an argument. To speak can mean to participate in a debate. To speak can mean to talk to your elected representative, or go to the political parties and volunteer. To speak can mean to write an article and post it online or try to get it published. To speak can mean bringing back an idea or organizing a conference. There's an infinite variety of ways that you can make your voice heard. But, if you want to guide and own the future of your own country, you have to speak out. You have to find ways to communicate and as I said at the beginning, the secret to effective communication is to start by listening to others.

**Question:** Sorry, I just have a very short comment. I would like to make a final like a short comment. I think like when we learned about the U.S. experiences while I was in the U.S., for example in the Philadelphia conference, or we, I see the beauty of compromising so that I think, how today U.S. engage in the politics, in the political participation, will be the legacy for the future political arena of Burma, so that, to have such kind of situation, it will be very great to have many helps of as much as possible from other countries which has already experienced about the democratic transition, especially for example, like the liberal arts education to see the different perspective, to understand the different perspective and to have a tolerance in the diverse community. So, I think, my country's political development depends on how young people today engage to the politics with the culture of compromising or with the culture of confrontation. So, it will be very great to have such help from other experienced countries as well to develop such kind of situation. Thank you.

**Assistant Secretary Russel:** Thank you. My one complaint is that I didn't get to ask you any questions. (Laughter) So, I'll ask Ambassador Mitchell to find a way when I come back to have a second session. So, we can, I can do the listening that I was recommending. Well, thank you very much. I enjoy the chance to talk with you and I very much admire and respect what you doing and I thank you for your activism and I encourage you to keep going. Thank you.

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### **Question and Answer with Media**

**Question:** I'm your fan because we have been translating your articles and paraphrasing your speeches in most of time. Your testimony in the House [of Representatives] for the Budget 2015, I'm aware of that your proposed budget for Burma is 88.45 million. Out of that, you are going to propose the budget for the military training. So, how significant is this budget?

**Assistant Secretary Russel:** Well, rather than talk about dollars and cents, let me say that the U.S. has a number of programs that support democracy and support the growth of Myanmar, Burma because we have a large stake in the success of the reform effort. We have limits that are, on the one hand, mandated by Congress. On the other hand, our reflective of our values and our priorities, we want to ensure that there is progress in reform including in the transition from military rule to full democracy and we hope that our policies and our programs will foster that. The U.S. is very proud of our AID programs. We are very proud of our economic engagement. And we are also proud particularly of our educational and people-to-people programs.

The session that I just had with these great, young people is part of our YSEALI – Young South East Asia Leaders Initiative. This is an idea that comes from President Obama and the White House. It promotes unity not only within Myanmar, but within all of ASEAN. And we believe that the steady progress in creating ASEAN identity, along with ASEAN economic community, benefits the region, benefits the United States, benefits the world. That's one of the points I tried to underscore in my testimony before Congress.

**Moderator:** Just a quick reminder, we are going to have a call where you will ask any questions you want about ASEAN and Assistant Secretary's visit. We are hoping today maybe to focus more on the youth event.

**Question:** I'm Aye Thu San from *7 Day News Journal*. I would like to ask one question for Interfaith Law. As you know, Myanmar Parliaments are going to propose the Interfaith Law. Our country has many diversity of religious. Most of the people are very concerned the complication for the Interfaith Law. How do you say about the U.S. attitude for policy for the Interfaith Law?

**Assistant Secretary Russel:** Well, in my conversation today with the students and the young people, many of the questions and many of the comments that I got were about diversity. We believe that one of the great strengths of Myanmar is diversity. We also believe that creating an open and a free society in which people can practice their faith and people can express their beliefs, their hopes and their views freely and without fear of retaliation, without intimidation is a critical element for both stability and growth. So, it is very much our hope consistent with the universal principles that America supports that the leaders and the parliament in Myanmar as well as at the local level in each of the states will take actions that expand and not limit the freedom of your citizens to participate whether it is in religious activities or in social activities in a free and constructive way.

**Moderator:** Only one more question.

**Assistant Secretary Russel:** One more question.

**Question:** I'm from *Myanmar National TV*. According to the Myanmar-ASEAN Chair, the problem about the South China Sea, how do you think of Myanmar solve? Yes, Nay Pyi Taw draft? Nay Pyi Taw declaration, sorry, Nay Pyi Taw declaration. How do you think of Myanmar solving scale?

**Assistant Secretary Russel:** Well, no one country can solve the problem of territorial or maritime disputes. But, the responsible and active and creative chairmanship, Myanmar is surely a contributing factor towards an ultimate solution. There are two sets of issues. One issue is the longer term challenge of resolving the territorial disputes themselves. That resolution should be diplomatic and should comport with international law. But, the second element is the behavior of the countries concerned, particularly the claimants. It's so important that the behavior be peaceful, be responsible, be restrained, and be respectful of others' interests and of the neighbors. There is still a long way to go on the South China Sea problem. There is still a long way to go in Myanmar's chairmanship of ASEAN. But, I have a great deal of respect for the officials here who are leading the ASEAN chairmanship. And, I'm looking forward to meetings this afternoon, and tomorrow as well as the ministerial and ultimately the leaders meetings in November. Thank you very much.