

## THE SITUATION IN BURMA AND AUSTRALIA'S RESPONSE

Opening Address by Senator the Hon Gareth Evans QC, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, to the International Seminar on Burma, Griffith University, Brisbane, 3 December 1992

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In October this year, a writer in the Burmese Working People's Daily - in what was clearly a reference to my efforts that month in New York to facilitate "talks about talks" between the Burmese Government and representatives of the main opposition groups - criticised the involvement of an unnamed foreigner in Burma's problems in the following graphic terms:

I am down on him who loves to apply an ointment to an unswollen part. He does not seem to understand anything about the Burmese people, the Burmese army and the history of the Burmese independence struggle.

Notwithstanding such protestations, there can be no doubt that Burma is not in good health either politically or economically. The question is not whether medication is needed, but rather what kind and will the Burmese wish to take it?

Griffith University is a very appropriate location for a seminar on the situation in Burma. The University has a high reputation for its contributions to the study of Asia and Australia's relations with the region. In the mid-1980s, the University was the site of a series of seminars on Indochina which made a significant contribution to international understanding of the situation in Cambodia and helped identify possible approaches to resolving the conflict in that country. Burma and Cambodia are, of course, different cases. But it is my hope that this seminar will also assist in promoting constructive discussion and study and produce some helpful suggestions as to how the complex problems of Burma might be tackled.

Burma is a country with enormous potential. Its natural endowments are extensive, both in terms of physical and human resources, with an impressive literacy rate and a large reservoir of talent in the Burmese diaspora. It is, moreover, adjacent to the economically fastest developing region in the world. There is little external threat to its security. And it has in the past been the recipient of considerable assistance and goodwill from the international community, not least from Australia since we commenced formal diplomatic ties forty years ago.

Yet in the forty-five years since decolonisation, Burma has manifestly failed to achieve its

potential and has, in many respects, slipped backwards. This state of affairs is all the more galling for the fact that it is clear that there are many capable and sophisticated Burmese working within the system as well as outside it who want positive change that will enable Burma to share in the rapid development occurring in its region.

Recent Burmese history has been a lamentable saga of frustration of popular aspirations. The emergence of a widespread movement for democratic reform in 1988 undeniably reflected a popular desire for change. In that year, a remarkable statement by Burma's leader for the preceding twenty-six years, Ne Win, acknowledged that Burma had been on the wrong path, that market-oriented reforms were needed in the economy, and that multi-party democracy had to be considered. Whether sincere or tactical in its conception, that statement reflected much that was in the popular will at that time.

The subsequent brutal crushing of the democracy movement in August 1988 and the introduction of direct military rule shocked the world and heralded a period of increasing international isolation for Burma. Major traditional donors and international agencies suspended or substantially reduced their economic assistance. A number of countries, including Australia, banned arms exports to Burma.

International condemnation gathered renewed force following the unconscionable decision of the military State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) to renege on its promise to honour the outcome of the election for a Constituent Assembly it initiated in May 1990. The detention of many political leaders and supporters of the winning party, the National League for Democracy - including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, probably now the world's most recognisable symbol of peaceful resistance - has been a major public relations disaster for the SLORC, and has helped ensure that Burma's problems have not been forgotten despite the fact that the calamities in Yugoslavia and Somalia have recently commanded centre stage.

The depth of international concern over Burma's situation was perhaps signalled most clearly by the resolutions of the UN General Assembly in 1991 and the Commission on Human Rights earlier this year, both of which were adopted by consensus (and both of which were strongly supported by Australia). These were important achievements, particularly considering the frequent disagreements in those bodies on the role of the UN in human rights situations in specific countries. By all accounts, their significance was not lost on the SLORC, despite the fact that its leaders customarily affect disdain for the views of the international community.

The change of SLORC leadership in April this year (evidently as a result of the ill health of General Saw Maung), has been followed by a number of adjustments to the SLORC's policies towards the political opposition. According to official announcements, more than 1,100 political prisoners have been released since April. The curfew and a number of

other measures introduced under martial law have been repealed. Consultations, albeit of a limited and greatly constrained sort, have been held with remaining registered political parties, and a date - 9 January 1993 - has been announced for the convening of a National Convention to draw up a mandate for a new constitution.

However, it is still clear that the SLORC is not considering the early introduction of the kind of democratic reform which could and would satisfy the international community and facilitate a general improvement in the human rights situation. The unhappy reality is that:

- . Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and a large number of other political prisoners remain in detention;
- . there is no timetable for the framing of a new constitution or the holding of the new elections the SLORC has promised;
- . the SLORC has announced that the new constitution should ensure the continued participation of the armed forces in what they call "the leading role" in national political life; and
- . there also continue to be persistent allegations of human rights abuse including torture, detention without trial, arbitrary execution, rape and forced relocation.

The situation on other fronts after three years of SLORC rule is also mixed at best. Despite the ceasefire declared earlier this year by the SLORC in its war with the Karen National Union (KNU), sporadic incidents of conflict have continued. There are indications that the Burmese Army is preparing for a renewed onslaught in the current dry season, which augurs particularly badly for non-combatants living in these areas, whose human rights are inevitably the first casualty in this long-running conflict. The economy is still deteriorating, with inflation reportedly at 60 per cent, income from exports below expectations and foreign investment a bare trickle.

Another - though obviously unintended - effect of the SLORC's policies, has been to foster an historic new relationship between the Burman opposition groups and the ethnic minorities seeking varying degrees of autonomy from Rangoon. This process of cooperation, which essentially commenced when students fleeing repression in Rangoon, Mandalay and other centres in 1988 joined forces with the minorities on the Thai border, has given rise to a growing coalescence of anti-SLORC forces. The result - increasing political polarisation - may nevertheless bode well for improved understanding and cooperation between Burmans and other ethnic groups in a future Burma. For the present however - and I will return to this point later - the most important objective is to get the SLORC and the various ethnic opposition groups talking to each other, without imposing

restrictive prior conditions, in a way that will set a constructive path for the future and stave off the prospect of imminent bloodshed in the border areas.

What chance is there of the SLORC delivering on its promises of political reform, and following through with reforms adequate to build a reasonable degree of national consensus? In late 1992 there is still insufficient evidence to judge whether Burma under the SLORC is proceeding - as it would have us believe - by taking two steps forward and no more than one step back, or the reverse. There seem to be at least three broad scenarios which suggest themselves as possible outcomes from the current situation.

The first scenario clearly would be the optimal result, for which Australia is hoping and working: release of all political prisoners, early transfer of power to a democratically elected civilian government, respect for human rights and peaceful reconciliation with the ethnic minorities.

The second scenario, and the most depressing one, would involve no significant political reform, but the use of increasing repression to maintain the military's grip on power. The likely result would be a continuing cycle of opposition and repression, economic decline, and international isolation. Such a patently bleak scenario could conceivably lead to the ultimate collapse of the regime in the manner seen in Eastern European states in recent years, with an associated negative effect on regional stability.

The third possible course which the SLORC could pursue would involve limited gradual reform, including a degree of civilianisation of the machinery of government, with the military maintaining control through indirect mechanisms. Such a scenario would draw on models of political development adopted elsewhere in the region. The particular balance which the regime might strike between relaxation and retention of political control would be a crucial determinant of its success, and of the international community's response. There is a risk the SLORC will seek to exploit that response, seeking creeping international acceptance in return for minimal or cosmetic reforms.

There are, of course, flaws in any strategy which does not address the basic issue of genuine popular participation, for which the Burmese people overwhelmingly voted in 1990. To start with, there is no indication that the SLORC is considering reaching a settlement - or even embarking on a dialogue - with Aung San Suu Kyi. It is difficult to believe that a program of even limited reform in Burma could produce a stabilising political consensus without a significant role for her. To insist - as the SLORC does - that she has by marrying a non-Burmese forfeited her rights not just to be a Burmese political leader but, in effect, to be a Burmese, is to deny the reality of both her own tenacity and the feeling of the great mass of Burmese people.

It might also be asked whether a strategy of emulating the development paths of countries

which were at Burma's current stage in the 1950s or 1960s will again be successful in the 1990s. Although I won't delve further into the debate about the link between political pluralism and development, it can at least be said that without significant political reform, Burma is simply unlikely to attract significant foreign investment. The fact is that other Asian countries - even those under authoritarian rule such as China and Vietnam - are able to offer foreign investors a greater degree of certainty, in terms of both political stability and economic policy. The SLORC's aversion to the influx of foreign cultural influences, and its reluctance to follow through in any systematic way to genuinely reform and open up its economy, will also be a disincentive for foreign business interest.

The outcome of the current state of flux in Burma is of considerable significance to Australia and other countries in the region. Burma has not historically been in the front rank of Australia's foreign policy interests, although our relations prior to 1988 were friendly enough. Burma adhered to a moderate, non-aligned foreign policy and shared positions with Australia on issues such as Cambodia. Burma was also a major recipient of Australian overseas aid, and high level visits were exchanged at fairly regular intervals.

More recent developments have, to the SLORC's undoubted chagrin, required us to pay greater attention to Burma than previously, for a number of reasons. First, instability in Burma is a negative influence on regional development and security, in which Australia has a major stake. Thailand and Bangladesh have, of course, been most directly affected by this situation, receiving massive outflows of people displaced by conflict and oppression. They have responded in a humanitarian spirit and we trust that they will continue to be able to do so.

There are also potential implications for regional security in the SLORC's growing relationship with China, which is a result of Burma's isolation from many of its former friends in the international community. Increasing Chinese influence in Burma, including, as reported in the press recently, possible involvement in the development of port facilities on Burma's Indian Ocean coast, will raise questions for other countries in the region, if not directly for Australia, about the possible effects of such moves on the regional strategic balance.

In addition, there is a well documented connection between the SLORC's policies towards the ethnic minorities and the involvement of some of those minorities in the increasing production of narcotics for export. Burma is now considered the origin of up to 60 per cent of the world's total supply of illegal heroin.

Last but certainly not least, the Australian Government's human rights policy itself demands in conscience a response to the situation in Burma. Our conviction is that the universal observance of universal human rights standards would result in a more just international order, and one, moreover, from which the security and prosperity of all

nations and individuals would benefit.

Current Australian policy towards Burma is thus to maintain international pressure on the SLORC to accelerate the process of reform and to adhere to internationally accepted standards of human rights, including by releasing Aung San Suu Kyi and all other political prisoners. Elements of our policy include playing our part in embargoes on aid and the supply of defence-related goods.

We have repeatedly and very directly urged other countries known to sell arms to Burma to implement similar bans. As well as energetically supporting strong resolutions in the UN General Assembly and Commission on Human Rights, we have also repeatedly encouraged the ASEAN countries and China to use their undoubted influence with Burma to press for meaningful change. We have to acknowledge that there is not, at present, sufficiently wide international support for further measures such as comprehensive trade and arms sanctions. Nonetheless, these remain options to be pursued if the SLORC's undertakings to implement reforms prove manifestly devoid of substance, and if the necessary international will can be summoned to make such measures effective.

International pressure has clearly had at least some impact on the SLORC. Australia is, however, continuing to seek new approaches to assist positive change in Burma. We are disappointed that our offer at the UN in October to facilitate talks about talks between the SLORC and representatives of opposition groups was not accepted. Nevertheless, I believe the possibility of a negotiated resolution of the conflict must be further pursued. Both sides are on record as being prepared to negotiate, the principal obstacles being, at least ostensibly, the location of talks and the involvement of third parties. Agreements are possible: the SLORC has struck deals with some formerly antagonistic ethnic minorities. The possibility of negotiations between the Kachin Independence Organisation and the SLORC was reportedly discussed recently, and an offer in 1989 by Thailand's General Chavalit to mediate in the conflict appeared initially to have support from both sides, before being publicly rejected by the SLORC's former leader, General Saw Maung.

The picture is extraordinarily complex given the number of groups and interests involved. But it is perhaps time to see whether at least the change in the SLORC's leadership in April this year, and the growing cooperation between the opposition groups, offer any increased possibility of success. The need for a peaceful settlement is increasingly urgent as the current dry season brings closer the prospect of another tragic cycle of death and dislocation.

This seminar offers a good opportunity to examine all these issues and to identify some possible constructive ways forward. I am impressed by the array of unique expertise on Burma's problems and conflict resolution represented here, including the number of participants with intimate current knowledge of the views of the opposition groups on the

Thai border, not least Dr Sein Win. I had hoped also for the participation of a Burmese Government representative to enable at least some kind of dialogue to get started, or at the very least a better understanding of the SLORC's perspectives on all the issues I have mentioned. Regrettably, that has not been possible.

Let me conclude simply with an appeal that this seminar not be treated as a platform for merely rehearsing well worn antagonisms, or indulging in rhetoric which may impart a warm inner glow to some, but do little to contribute to a resolution of the problems. The time for that is past. I hope this seminar will contribute positively and constructively to the search for new approaches to the situation in Burma, to ensure that this lovely country's future will be much happier than its recent past.

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