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Transcript

Myanmar's Complex Transformation: Prospects and Challenges

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Remarks as prepared for delivery

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Thein Sein (translated):

Excellencies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen:

I am extremely pleased to have this opportunity to address you at Chatham House today as part of my first ever visit to London and the United Kingdom.

As you all know, the histories of our two nations have been intertwined for over two centuries.

In the years that have followed independence we have had periods of good relations as well as more recently periods of difficult relations as well.

I am confident however that we are now turning a page, that we are entering a new era of close Anglo-Myanmar relations, and that Myanmar and the United Kingdom will not only be able to work together to the benefit of both our countries, but will be able to partner across a range of international challenges.

And in moving towards a new and lasting partnership, we will be able to build on the very deep connections that actually already bind us together. Even during the colonial era, and despite the evils of colonialism, many friendships were formed between the Myanmar and British peoples and many individuals bridged our two cultures. And in our history we have dozens of great men and women who studied in England and then came back to serve their country, including as leaders of the nationalist movement and as prime ministers and presidents.

We must be sensitive to our past, but acknowledge that our ties run deep.

We have a shared heritage, a shared past and a familiarity with one another that we must use as an asset.

Distinguished guests:

I speak to you at a pivotal moment in the history of Myanmar. My government came to office in April 2011 and over the past two and a half years we have embarked on a transformation that I believe is unparalleled in modern times. It is a multi-faceted transformation that to be successful must be successful in all its parts. Anyone who visits Myanmar today will see the great energy that has been thrown up by the transformation, of competing ideas and robust debate. This is because all Myanmar people know that we cannot allow this transformation to fail.

The first component of our transformation is political. We have a new constitution. We have had elections and by-elections. Media censorship and

restrictions on the internet have ended. New laws protect the freedom of association and expression. Thousands of prisoners have been freed. A special committee, comprised in part of former prisoners, is working diligently to ensure that no one remains in prison due to his or her political beliefs or actions. We are reviewing all cases. I guarantee to you that by the end of this year there will be no prisoners of conscience in Myanmar.

We are aiming for nothing less than a transition from half a century of military rule and authoritarianism to democracy. I believe you understand well that this is no easy thing. We see elsewhere the dangers of any sudden political shift, where institutions are unable to cope, and where the habits of democracy are not yet engrained, the dangers of violence and anarchy. We must manage this transition in a way that moves fast but prudently, grounded in our own realities.

Democracy cannot just be about elections, basic freedoms and constitutions. It must also include a culture of democracy and a new understanding of citizenship. We cannot be under any illusion that this is not a difficult thing, but I am confident that we will succeed.

We must succeed as well in the second component of our transformation: moving from a state-centred and isolated economy to one that is based on free-market principles and is integrated into world markets.

Myanmar is a country of tremendous natural resources. We occupy an envious location at the crossroads of Asia, between China, India and the other countries of Southeast Asia. We all know the potential is there. The task of lifting tens of millions of ordinary people out of poverty cannot take a back seat to any other task. We must free our markets and open the doors to foreign trade and investment, but in a way that ensures that poverty is reduced and that the ordinary farmer and worker clearly benefit. We will fight against corruption and we will fight to protect the environment.

We have taken key steps in this direction. We have abolished our old currency exchange regime, restructured our international debt, worked hard to end economic sanctions, changed our investment laws and policies, and focused on rapidly improving key public goods, including the provision of electricity and telecoms.

We are eager to become a signatory to the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, or EITI, to ensure maximum transparency as well as work to attract new investment and develop our natural resources. We wish to avoid the so-called 'resource curse' and make sure that revenue from our natural wealth is used to reduce poverty, not fuel corruption.

The challenges are tremendous. Land ownership issues, for example, are extremely complex. As part of our drive to foster growth for all the people of Myanmar, we will develop clear, fair and open land policies. The provision of basic healthcare, education and financial services remain far from satisfactory. Sectors such as tourism that will likely grow quickly must be well managed, so that we avoid the negative consequences of mass tourism seen elsewhere.

And we have as well the new and pressing challenges of urbanization and urban planning, with our cities projected to grow by another 10 million people by 2030. Yangon, our biggest city, must become a driver of economic growth, not a drag on development. I would like Yangon to be a city that can compete with any other in the region, that is modern and green, that works for its ordinary citizen and that protects its unique built heritage.

We are very grateful for the aid that the UK government and UK charities have provided over the years and continue to provide. But let me say this: we have no desire to become an aid-dependent country. We need assistance now, especially in training and education during this period of transition, in order that we might stand on our own two feet.

But what we need most is responsible trade and investment, to grow our economy, create jobs and lift our people from poverty, investment that will transfer technology and will help us join in the economic success of the region and give our children the same opportunities as the rest of Asia.

Distinguished guests:

We have as well our third and perhaps most important transformation: from armed conflict to a just and sustainable peace.

There has been armed fighting in Myanmar since just months after independence from the United Kingdom in 1948. It is the longest running set of armed conflicts anywhere in the world. Since the days Arnold Toynbee was director of Chatham House, we have been fighting in Myanmar.

This must end. And it will end. My government has been working tirelessly for peace. This too is not an easy thing. The remaining conflicts all have an ethnic character and are rooted in long-standing ethnic grievances and aspirations. And in Myanmar there is not just one non-state armed group but more than a dozen. Please imagine the complexities of any peace process then multiply it by twelve. There are issues of autonomy and self-determination, of power sharing and resource sharing, of cultural rights and

language policy, of protection against discrimination and security sector reform.

The Myanmar government is willing to engage with the international community to enhance security cooperation. It is our keen desire to foster greater ties between Myanmar and UK armed forces. Under the current transition, Myanmar will enshrine its cooperation with the international community not only to strengthen its internal security institutions but also to actively involve in international security. Enhancing technical capability in ceasefire implementation will be helpful to enhance the current peace process.

The current transition to democracy from military rule requires adjustment from security sectors, including from Tatamada. The government welcome international assistance to strengthen civil–military relations in Myanmar. This is crucial for the success of the political transition underway.

I am very proud to say that we have not only over the past two years signed ceasefires with all but one of the major armed groups but also that last month we have signed an initial agreement with the last remaining armed groups, the Kachin Independence Organization.

I believe we will turn a corner very soon. Very possibly, over the coming weeks, we will have a nation-wide ceasefire and the guns will go silent everywhere in Myanmar for the very first time in over 60 years. This will be a watershed worth celebrating. But it will also be only the first step towards the just and lasting peace we will need to achieve. Difficult talks will follow and hard compromises will need to be made. But it must be done.

For our peace process to be successful, it must be connected to the emergence of a more inclusive national identity. Myanmar people of all ethnic backgrounds and all faiths – Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, Hindu and others – must feel part of this new national identity. We are a multicultural, multi-faith nation. The Myanmar people speak dozens of languages and include people of all the great world religions. The recent communal violence has rightly concerned the world. I promise you that we will take a zero-tolerance approach to any renewed violence and against those who fuel ethnic hatreds.

You know that in any transition towards political openness there are those who will take advantage and stir up troubles. We must deal with this but in the framework of our emerging democracy. We cannot let ethnic or religious differences become an excuse to revert to authoritarianism. We are working to cultivate inter-faith dialogue and increase understanding between

communities and I urge you to appreciate the complexities in this task and the patience needed to make it succeed.

I suggest to you as well that you look beyond the headlines and appreciate that despite the recent violence, tens of millions of Myanmar people of all faiths and ethnic backgrounds live together peacefully, as friends, schoolmates, neighbours and co-workers. Go to Yangon and downtown you will see Buddhist pagodas, but also Anglican and Roman Catholic cathedrals, other Christian churches, Sunni and Shia mosques, a Jewish synagogue, Chinese and Hindu temples and even an Armenian church. We have a long history of tolerance. We must build on this to celebrate our nation's special diversity as the strength, not the weakness.

Distinguished guests:

I said that the components of our transformation are mutually reinforcing. The United Nations tells us that without peace there can be no development, and without development there cannot be peace, and that without human rights there can be neither. I would add that real progress towards democracy is also essential.

I said as well that our transformation is unparalleled. I can think of no country that has attempted to move from authoritarianism to democracy and from a state-dominated and isolated economy to a free economy tied to global markets, whilst at the same time trying to end a dozen different armed conflicts.

We do this at a time of weak institutions or institutions that evolved in a very different environment and to serve very different purposes. We do this at a time when after decades of self-imposed isolation and then sanctions, our people are unused to interactions with the outside world.

In all areas we are not working from a blank slate: there are the mentalities that have grown up over long decades of isolation and sanctions which need to be changed. And for every new dynamic that must be nurtured, a dozen old dynamics have their inertia, inertia that must and will be overcome.

Under such kinds of difficult challenges, one of the most important reasons and aims our government has with this reform process is to create a better future for our children. We will move ahead with our people-centred development agendas and lay necessary foundations for the government that will be democratically elected in the coming 2015 elections.

Distinguished guests:

In 2014 Myanmar will undertake the chairmanship of ASEAN. It is a great responsibility. And it signals Myanmar's eagerness to re-join fully the family of nations. We look forward not only to managing our own transformation but becoming responsible members of the international community, helping to do our share for regional and global peace and security and economic prosperity.

And in this new phase of our history, as we look outward and seek to make new friends, we look to our old friends in the United Kingdom for encouragement, understanding, constructive criticism, and I hope a lasting friendship.

Thank you.