

The Way Forward in Burma

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Foreign Press Center Briefing
Washington, DC
November 8, 2007

3:00 P.M. EST

MODERATOR: Thank you again for coming to our briefing this afternoon on the current situation in Burma. I just want to remind you all to make sure your cell phones are on silent or turned off. Today's briefing will be on the record and I should note we also are being joined by DVC by the Foreign Press Center in New York City, so we may have some questions from them as well. When we're done with the initial remarks and we move to the question and answer session if you have a question, please raise your hand. I will call on you and you'll be given a microphone. Please state your name and your news organization before you ask your question. I'd really appreciate that.

Now it's my great pleasure to introduce our briefer today. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Scot Marciel is with the Bureau of East Asian & Pacific Affairs, where he's responsible for relations between the United States and Southeast Asia and ASEAN so please join me in welcoming him. Thank you.

MR. MARCIEL: Good afternoon. I thought I would start by trying to lay out for you what the U.S. government, in conjunction with the rest of the world, what we're trying to achieve via our policies in Burma.

First, as you know, the situation in Burma has been bad for some years and has been getting worse. Certainly politically the human rights situation is terrible and there's no democracy. People have very few freedoms. In addition, the economy has been declining. The regime's policies have negatively affected the health sector, the education system, and pretty much the entire rest of society in Burma. So it's fundamentally a political problem that's having repercussions or implications for the entire country, and taking Burma on a very much downward path at a time when most of its neighbors are moving in a very positive direction.



So what the United States has been trying to do for years and, what we continue to try to do now, is to promote sort of political change in Burma that would bring about greater freedom for the people, democracy, and better governance, better policies so that the people of Burma can begin to move in the right direction, or begin to move their country in the right direction.

Now currently what are we focused on? The United States is very much in line with the rest of the international community, including ASEAN, the United Nations, the European Union, other countries, as well as the people of Burma. We're all basically saying the same thing, that it's important, it's essential that there be first, an end to the crackdowns taking place over the last month or so. Second, that there be the release of political prisoners, as well as those recently detained in the crackdown, and third, that the regime begin a genuine dialogue with the opposition, including Aung San Suu Kyi, other political parties, and the ethnic minorities, that leads to a transition to a democracy, a new government that can begin to put into place better policies. So the entire international community is very much united on this and in support of the people of Burma. This is our policy.

What's key here is that the regime in Burma needs to feel, to hear constantly from the international community, not just from the United States, not just from the United Nations, but from the entire international community, the regime needs to hear constantly that they have to move ahead. By itself, given its track record, there's no reason to have any confidence that this regime, on its own, is going to move in this direction toward dialogue and the transition to a more democratic system. It takes strong pressure from the international community, and what we have been doing in the United Nations as well as working with other countries, is to reach out to other governments that basically agree with us on the need for this change and talk about how we can work together to encourage the regime in Burma to move in the right direction.

And we, like so many others in the international community, have strongly supported the efforts by Special Advisor Ibrahim Gambari of the United Nations to go out to Burma now on a couple of occasions and try to facilitate this change, this dialogue. So we're strong supporters of the international process.

Finally, before I take your questions, I just want to make a couple of comments on some recent developments that I know you've seen today with Mr. Gambari having left Burma at the end of his current visit, and the U.N. having issued a statement and then Mr. Gambari having issued a statement on behalf of Aung San Suu Kyi.

The United States endorses and welcomes Aung San Suu Kyi's call for a meaningful and time-bound dialogue with all parties. We urge that this kind of dialogue begin immediately; however, we remain concerned about the regime's behavior and its intentions, particularly in light of its rejection of Mr. Gambari's proposal for trilateral talks between himself, Aung San Suu Kyi, and the regime. And last, we of course look forward to Mr. Gambari's briefing to the United Nations Security Council when he returns. Let me stop there and open it up for questions.

MODERATOR: Anyone who would like to have the first question, feel free.

QUESTION: Parameswara Ponnudurai from AFP (Agence-France Presse). What do you see is lacking from the -- I mean, Aung San Suu Kyi has basically said that she's prepared to have a dialogue with the military regime and what do you see is lacking? You talk about the junta's refusal to have this trilateral process. Do you think that the United Nations should be there on the table with Aung San Suu Kyi and the military regime?

MR. MARCIEL: Well, what we said all along is that there needs to be a genuine dialogue between the regime and the opposition, including Aung San Suu Kyi and the ethnic minorities. That's still our position very much. What we haven't seen is a commitment by the regime to begin such a dialogue. Now again, we have to wait and hear what Mr. Gambari has to report. He just left today and so we very much look forward to it. It's hard for me to say if he comes back with news on that of course we'll have

to digest that, but our position is there needs to be a dialogue between the regime and the opposition.

QUESTION: Foster Klug with the Associated Press. I was curious to see what it would take for someone such as yourself or another high-ranking official to go to Burma and talk with either the regime or with Suu Kyi or with any of the opposition forces there.

MR. MARCIEL: Well, we have asked many times to see Aung San Suu Kyi in the last few years and we've never been able to, so that's really a question at this point for the regime. In terms of our willingness to go there, we do of course have an embassy in Burma and our chargé does talk to members of the regime. It's not easy for her to get appointments, but she does have some discussion with them. But really the fundamental point is that we have a U.N. envoy who, with the support of the U.N. Security Council, is charged or tasked with trying to facilitate this dialogue and we think the focus should be on supporting him and more importantly on getting the regime to move.

QUESTION: Sridhar Krishnaswami from the PTI (Press Trust of India). Can you tell us a little bit about what your expectations are and have been with a country like India over the crisis in Burma? And secondly, sir, as kind of a follow-up, when you're asking the countries to do more quote on quote in Burma, how do you factor in that country's own national interest in helping you or impeding the process?

MR. MARCIEL: Those are good questions. First, I should answer the second one first because I think it frames the first one. We're not asking countries to help us. This is not a U.S. and Burma issue.

This is an issue where you have a regime in Burma that's treating its people terribly and whose policies have a significant impact not only inside of Burma but in the region. So we think the international community has a strong interest in trying to promote positive change there. So it's not a matter of us going to countries and saying, help us. It's a matter of working with other governments, all of whom I think have an interest in seeing progress in Burma. And each country has to figure out how its national interests work on this. Our message has been consistently that the regime in Burma has shown no signs of movement except when it's faced significant international pressure. So it's important for the entire international community to make sure that it is pushing the regime to begin this genuine dialogue, move towards national reconciliation, release political prisoners, and so on. Different countries have different approaches on how they do that, and we're not trying to prescribe that each government must do exactly this. But each government should use what influence it has, in our view, to try to press the regime, whether it's sanctions, bilateral discussions, or other steps.

In terms of India, India's very important in this as a neighbor but I think most importantly as the world's largest democracy. I think the world looks to India as the world's largest democracy. It could be a model for Burma. I'm sure the Burmese people look to India as a neighbor, again as the world's largest democracy, to contribute to this overall effort because I think and we think that a Burma that's moving in the right direction politically, economically, socially, and in terms of dealing with health problems, refugee flows is in India's interest and this regime is not doing the right thing on any of those fronts.

QUESTION: John Odle, Kyodo News. Do you think that China's doing everything it can or would you urge China to do more as well?

MR. MARCIEL: We think -- yeah, China has done some things to be helpful. It certainly helped when Mr. Gambari was trying to go on his previous trip, our understanding is that the Chinese were quite helpful in facilitating his visit. The Chinese of course supported the U.N. Security Council's very important presidential statement after Mr. Gambari's last visit, which also again called on the regime to take these same steps that I outlined earlier. So yes, I think China's been helpful. Could it do more? Yes, we think it could do more as most governments could because it's a matter of maintaining constantly pressure or encouragement on the regime to move in the right direction.

QUESTION: Richard Finney, Radio Free Asia. Singapore over the years has developed very close ties with Burma and I guess about a month ago it issued a very strong statement expressing its revulsion at the crackdown. Do you see any signs of a shift in its policies or its ties in such that it would indicate a move toward pressure on the regime there?

MR. MARCIEL: Right, well of course Singapore issued a statement on behalf of the -- as ASEAN chair issued a statement on behalf of all the ASEAN foreign ministers so in that sense it was even more important than a bilateral Singaporean issue statement, although the Singaporeans separately and bilaterally have issued their own statements. What I think it shows is clear -- that the ASEANs were, as they put it, they felt revulsion at the crackdown, not just Singapore but all roughly 500 million people in ASEAN and so I do think it signals that they are very frustrated and they've made very clear themselves that a return to the status quo ante is not an option, that Burma really needs to move forward and it does affect the rest of ASEAN's relationship with Burma. So absolutely yes, it's a significant change.

QUESTION: (Parameswara Ponnudurai from AFP.) I just wanted to follow-up on the earlier question. I mean if the U.S. is interested in the junta having a dialogue with the opposition and the ethnic groups, the fact that Aung San Suu Kyi has not seen her party members and the fact that the junta today agreed to allow her to meet the party members I thought was a positive development in that sense, and then you have Aung San Suu Kyi herself saying that she's open to a dialogue with the junta. So I mean, except for Gambari's failure to meet the general I think it seems like, there seems to be positive that's coming out of Myanmar. What do you think?

MR. MARCIEL: I think we have to wait and see --

QUESTION: Why do you say, wait and see, in the sense that you don't believe that -- to allow such kind of a dialogue?

MR. MARCIEL: Well, the regime has not yet said that it will engage in this dialogue. Aung San Suu Kyi has said very clearly that she was willing to participate. Obviously the United Nations is trying to facilitate it. The rest of the international community has expressed strong support for this so everybody is on board except so far the regime.

QUESTION: Which has basically agreed to allow Aung San Suu Kyi to meet with some of the members --

MR. MARCIEL: That's right.

QUESTION: -- it should be the first --

MR. MARCIEL: Right. What we don't want to do here is get into a situation where we're confusing meetings for progress, okay. There can be lots of meetings but if they don't lead anywhere it's not progress. So what's important is that we see actually the beginning of the meaningful and time-bound dialogue that Aung San Suu Kyi has called for. That would be progress. And I'm not saying that these other steps -- they could turn out to be significant if they lead to that. By themselves we have to, you know, I think withhold judgment.

QUESTION: (Sridhar Krishnaswami from the Press Trust of India.) I just out of curiosity, suppose the regime and Aung San Suu Kyi say that they could talk things over. But would the U.S. object to the U.N. not being there?

MR. MARCIEL: No, we would not. But what's important is that there be a genuine dialogue, okay, and so -- I don't want to get too much into hypotheticals here but for example if the regime once a week picked up Aung San Suu Kyi from her house, took her to the government guest house and announced that they were having a dialogue, that wouldn't be satisfactory I think to us or the rest of the international community. I mean, as she said in her own statement she feels the need to be able to go out and consult widely with people to be able to engage in this dialogue. I mean that's only, if you think about, it's only reasonable, how can someone otherwise engage in a genuine dialogue if they're not allowed freedom to be able to consult widely.

It's not just Aung San Suu Kyi, important as she is. There are other players in this as well, the ethnic minority groups, other parties and so on. But no, we are not insisting that the U.N. be in the talks. That is not -- what we've called for consistently is a genuine dialogue between the regime and the opposition.

QUESTION: My name is Masaru Takagi, NHK Broadcasting Corporation. I'd like to know your opinion about the Japanese role, how do you see the role of Japan in the circumstance today to the issue of Myanmar?

MR. MARCIEL: Well, I would repeat what I've said in the context of other countries. I think it's important the entire international community work together as we have been to try to (A) support the U.N. efforts and (B) encourage and press the regime in Burma to move ahead toward this genuine dialogue. Japan's a very influential country in the region, has good relations with Burma, and so we look forward to continuing to work with Japan on this. It has an important role to play.

QUESTION: (Foster Klug with the Associated Press.) Many of the countries around Burma have strong business ties. Have you seen any easing of those ties or any sort of stronger pressure economically from China and India and Thailand and some of the other neighbors?

MR. MARCIEL: I wouldn't say a whole lot of pressure per se. What I have seen, what we have seen I think over the years, unrelated I think to this crackdown, is that a number of foreign companies that had invested in Burma have either left or reduced their operations because the business environment is so bad, so the regime's bad economic policies have done more than anything else to discourage those economic ties. There have been press reports that some banks in the region after the crackdown, after the announcement of sanctions by the U.S., the EU and Australia have chosen not to continue business relationships with clients in Burma. It's hard to know how widespread that is, to be honest.

MODERATOR: I think we have time for one more question. Is there anyone who hasn't gotten a chance yet who would like to ask a question?

QUESTION: (Parameswara Ponnudurai from AFP.) The fact that the ASEAN foreign ministers met at the (inaudible) United Nations and came out with a very strong statement, the foreign ministers -- the next meeting will be the summit meeting that's going to take place in Singapore and also the East Asian Summit. What does the U.S. expect from these two critical meetings, especially when they are held in Southeast Asia and in relation to Myanmar?

MR. MARCIEL: Well, they are very important meetings and they'll cover a lot of different issues. We would certainly hope and expect, I think, that out of those meetings will come a clear message among other things, reiterating the view of those in the region that Burma needs to move forward and needs to begin this dialogue, and I know I sound like a broken record by continually saying "begin a genuine dialogue," but that's what this is all about, begin a genuine dialogue leading to a real transition. And a number of ASEAN leaders in recent days have reiterated that message, so we certainly look forward to that being reaffirmed at the ASEAN summit and perhaps at the EAS as well.

MODERATOR: Thank you very much for your participation.

MR. MARCIEL: I can take one more.

MODERATOR: You want one more? Okay, we'll have a follow-up then. Thank you.

QUESTION: (Foster Klug with the Associated Press.) Are you attending that meeting or do you know who from the U.S. --

MR. MARCIEL: The ASEAN?

QUESTION: Yes.

MR. MARCIEL: No, that summit is just the ASEAN.

QUESTION: There won't be any U.S. presence as an observer?

MR. MARCIEL: Not as a participant. I don't think we actually observe. I'm sure we'll be talking to people on the margins of it to ask about it. If I could I'd like to just reiterate one fundamental point here. We've been working extremely hard as have many other governments to try to generate some positive momentum here. Really, we want to see success and we hope that this talked-about dialogue -- the genuine dialogue and the meaningful and time-bound dialogue that Aung San Suu Kyi has called for -- we really hope that this moves forward. But that's really what we all need to keep our eye on, does this move forward not just talking about it but actually making it happening and it's really, the ball is in the court of the regime. Thank you.

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