

HOW THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY CAN SUPPORT UN EFFORTS IN BURMA/MYANMAR

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Panel Two – Engaging in National Dialogue

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NOTES:

First, I agree with the other panelists that a national dialogue in Burma is not likely to take place with the current leadership. However, I would like to talk about national dialogue because I believe that politics is the art of the impossible.

In talking about national dialogue, we should be reminded that there are official United Nations General Assembly resolutions since 1994 that call for a ‘Tripartite Dialogue’ – the military, democracy advocates, and the ethnic nationalities – if we want to solve Burma’s problems and build a sustainable democracy.

Everybody except the Burmese military agrees that we need a dialogue in Burma. The question then is why the Burmese generals do not agree and how can we make them change their minds?

Why should the generals change? If you have all the power and all the money that you need, why change? Why give up power? Someone mentioned that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is willing to share power with the generals. But from the generals’ point of view, she has no power to share with them. She wants them to share their power with her, and they are not willing to do so.

Some believe that we can force the generals to come to the negotiating table by having more sanctions. In this sense, the Burmese democracy movement is too dependent on the international community. Sanctions can help if a dialogue is taking place and it is used as a tool to gain concessions. Sanctions in a vacuum will not automatically produce a dialogue.

The Burmese generals are not totally opposed to dialogue. They will enter into a dialogue when they see the opposition is strong or when they think they can exploit a situation. For example, the SPDC entered into a dialogue with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in 1994-95, 2000-3, and in 2007. They also entered into a dialogue with the ethnic nationalities in 1989 and made ceasefires because those groups were strong and could not be ignored. Even today, the SPDC is talking to various ethnic armies to get them to support the Army’s Road Map. So, if we want a national dialogue, we need to build up the strength of the opposition in Burma, not just call for sanctions.

So there is a possibility for national dialogue. But in approaching the military, we need to think about what they want. If we say we want a dialogue to discuss how they can give up power, they will not agree to talk. But if we say we want to discuss how to help smoothly implement their Road Map, they might be more interested.

In the past, the generals have talked with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi but in their opinion, their attempts have all ended in failure or have backfired against them. So, the question is, what incentives can we offer them that will overcome their suspicion, and be attractive to them?

We need to come to grips with these questions if we truly want a national dialogue. Even if we take the case of the UN Special Envoy Mr Gambari - in our minds, he is the international mediator between DASSK and the generals. As far as the generals are concerned, he is not a mediator. He is a messenger from the UN Secretary-General. He has no mediation role. We need to start off from the same point or we will never be able to agree on anything with the generals.

Mr Gambari's efforts are also seen by the generals as being an imposition from the outside world. It is not what they want. If the efforts of the UN are to yield fruit, Mr Gambari will have to somehow transform the process from one of external imposition into one where it becomes an internal process. Rather than the UN imposing its will, the UN has to be seen as supporting a process that the Burmese generals want and is acceptable to the rest of the international community. This is easier said than done. But dialogue is possible if we can achieve these steps.

End.