

POLITICAL MONITOR NO. 4

OFFICIAL MEDIA

GROUP OF US SENATORS LED BY McCAIN VISITS BURMA

A group of US Senators led by Senator John McCain and including Senators Joseph Lieberman, Kelly Ayotte and Sheldon Whitehouse recently made an official visit to Burma, where they met President U Thein Sein on 22 January in Nay Pyi Taw as well as Speaker of the Pyithu Hluttaw (Lower House) Thura U Shwe Mann. They held discussions on further strengthening ties and friendship between the two countries as well as cooperation between the US and Burmese parliaments.¹

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The US delegation called on the government to allow international observers to monitor the by-elections in April. Senator McCain said that the successful completion of free and fair by-elections in Burma in April will help secure the lifting of US sanctions. At a press conference following a meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi in Rangoon, McCain said that "We don't expect miracles, but we do expect progress in the right direction." He told reporters that there are some sanctions that President Obama can lift immediately, but that other sanctions needed Congressional approval before they can be legally lifted. "I'm not worried about how rapidly we could act. If the elections are free and fair, that would not be a problem," he said. McCain added that he had also urged the Burmese president to allow international observers to oversee the process, but that Thein Sein has not yet responded to his request. At a separate press conference at the American Center in Rangoon, McCain also called on the president to release all remaining political prisoners unconditionally, to allow the International Committee for the Red Cross access into prisons, and to improve prison conditions. He also urged the government to allow humanitarian aid organizations inside and outside Burma to war-torn ethnic areas. The trip is the second by Senator McCain to the Burma since his first in June 2011.²

PAKISTAN PRESIDENT VISITS BURMA

Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari arrived in Burma on 24 January 2012 on a two-day official visit to Mr. Zardari held talks with President Thein Sein for strengthening of bilateral ties between the two countries.³

President Zardari also called for the establishment of a Preferential Tariff Arrangement to lead to the culmination of a comprehensive Free Trade Agreement, as well as the establishment of a Joint

¹ President U Thein Sein receives US Senator Mr John Sidney McCain and party - <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs13/NLM2012-01-23.pdf> (NLM) 23 January 2012 (p. 1) / Speaker of Pyithu Hluttaw Thura U Shwe Mann receives US Senator Mr John Sidney McCain and party - <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs13/NLM2012-01-23.pdf> (NLM) 23 January 2012 (p. 16)

² US Calls for International Observers at Burma By-elections - http://irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=22902 (Irrawaddy) 23 January 2012 / Ending Myanmar Visit, McCain Urges Democratic Reform - <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/04/world/asia/04myanmar.html> (New York Times) 3 June 2011 / US Senator meets Aung San Suu Kyi - http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=22906 (Irrawaddy) 23 January 2012

³ Pakistani President arrives in Nay Pyi Taw - <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs13/NLM2012-01-25.pdf> (NLM) 25 January 2012 (p. 2) / President U Thein Sein receives Pakistani President Mr Asif Ali Zardari and party - <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs13/NLM2012-01-25.pdf> (NLM) 25 January 2012 (p. 1)

Ministerial Commission mandated to promote economic and trade cooperation between the two countries.⁴

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President Zardari also conferred the 'Shaheed Benazir Bhutto Award for Democracy' on Aung San Suu Kyi in a special ceremony. Zardari said on the occasion that the people of Pakistan hold Suu Kyi in high esteem for her sacrifices.⁵

NORWAY'S FOREIGN MINISTER RECEIVED BY BURMESE LEADERS

President U Thein Sein received a Norwegian delegation led by Minister of Foreign Affairs Jonas Gahr Støre in Nay Pyi Taw on 25 January and discussed the promotion of bilateral cooperation between the two countries⁶. Minister Støre also met the Speaker of the Pyithu Hluttaw (Lower House) Thura U Shwe Mann and the Minister for Industry U Soe Thein. The discussions focused on the democratization process and bilateral cooperation between the two countries in undertaking reforms of business and investments. Minister Støre expressed his satisfaction on the democratization process in Burma and said that economic sanctions against Burma where Norwegian companies were not allowed to operate businesses are being lifted in order to promote bilateral trade.⁷

IMF AND BURMESE GOVERNMENT HOLD CONSULTATIONS

A team from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) led by Deputy Division Chief of Asia and Pacific Meral Karasulu visited Burma from 9 to 25 January 2012 to hold discussions on the 2011 Article IV Consultation. The IMF team held meetings with government officials including the Minister for Finance & Revenue, the Minister for Energy and other key counterparts and discussed developing Burma's economy, the stability of monetary system and integrating the foreign exchange rate, as well as policy changes in energy resources and business prospects.⁸

Note: Under the IMF's Articles of Agreement, Article IV requires the IMF to hold annual bilateral discussions with member states, collects economic and financial information as well as holding talks with officials on the country's economic developments and policies.

⁴ Zardari, Thein hold wide-ranging talks to boost bilateral cooperation - <http://www.president.gov.pk/index.php?lang=en&opc=3&sel=2&pId=801&pressReleaseYear=2012&pressReleaseMonth=01> (President's Office, Pakistan) 24 January 2012

⁵ Zardari confers Benazir democracy award on Suu Kyi - <http://www.dawn.com/2012/01/25/zardari-confers-benazir-democracy-award-on-suu-kyi.html> (AFP/Dawn) 25 January 2012

⁶ President U Thein Sein receives Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs and party - <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs13/NLM2012-01-26.pdf> (NLM) 26 January 2012 (p. 1)

⁷ Pyithu Hluttaw Speaker Thura U Shwe Mann receives Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs and party - <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs13/NLM2012-01-26.pdf> (NLM) 26 January 2012 (p. 2) / Norwegian Foreign Minister concludes visit - <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs13/NLM2012-01-27.pdf> (NLM) 27 January 2012 (p. 8)

⁸ Union F&R Minister receives IMF officials - <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs12/NLM2012-01-22.pdf> (NLM) 22 January 2012 (p. 9) / IMF Mission calls on Union Energy Minister - <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs12/NLM2012-01-21.pdf> (NLM) 21 January 2012 (p. 2)

HLUTTAW SESSIONS (1st Day) – Highlights

The 3rd regular session of the first Pyithu Hluttaw was convened at the Pyithu Hluttaw Building on 26 January 2012 and was presided over by Speaker of the House Thura U Shwe Mann (USDP) and attended by 379 Hluttaw representatives.⁹

Pyithu Hluttaw (Lower House) session:

During the 1st day session of the Pyithu Hluttaw the following key issues were discussed:

- **Approval of remaining bills of the Second Regular Session**
- **Approval of the Bill on Supplementary Budget for 2011-2012 Fiscal year and Bill on budget and national planning for Fiscal year 2012-2013**
- **Appointment of U Win Myint of Myingyan Constituency (USDP) as Secretary of Banks and Monetary Development Committee and U Maung Maung Soe of Thakayta Constituency (USDP) as a member**
- **Questions on rail transportation**
- **Questions on construction of roads and bridges**
- **Proposal on setting up of Government Peace Making Fund by U Thein Zaw of Myitkyina Constituency (USDP)**
- **Proposal on amending trade tax and relaxation of tax on raw material imports by U Aung Thein Linn of South Okklapa Constituency (USDP)**
- **Proposal on Control of Money Laundering Law, Bill on Penal Code and Bill on Bar Council Act by U Thein Nyunt of Thingangyun Constituency (New National Democracy Party (NNDP) formerly of NDF)**

Amyotha Hluttaw (Upper House) session:

The 1st day of the 3rd regular session of 1st Amyotha Hluttaw was convened on 26 January 2012 in Nay Pyi Taw and was attended by Speaker of Amyotha Hluttaw U Khin Aung Myint (USDP) and 211 Amyotha Hluttaw representatives.¹⁰

During the 1st day session of the Amyotha Hluttaw the following key issues were discussed:

- **Appointment of Chairs and members to parliamentary committees**
- **Change of name of the *National Races Affairs and Internal Peace Committee* to the *National Races Affairs Committee***
- **The National Planning, Economic, Monetary and Customs Committee was divided into three committees: 1) the National Planning Committee, 2) the Monetary and Customs Committee and 3) the Commerce Committee**
- **Questions of concerning border regions development projects**
- **Questions regarding energy consumption and the security of the state**
- **A bill on amending the Union Election Commission Law submitted by U Myint Naing, Member of the Union Election Commission (UEC)**

⁹ Third regular session of first Pyithu Hluttaw commences - <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs13/NLM2012-01-27.pdf> (NLM) 27 January 2012 (p. 9, 10 & 11)

¹⁰ First day third regular session of first Amyotha Hluttaw held - <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs13/NLM2012-01-27.pdf> (NLM) 27 January 2012 (p. 7 & 8)

- **Proposal on changing the use of Imperial System to Metric System**
- **Proposal regarding the extension of maternity leave for women**

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NMSP AGREES TO HOLD NEW ROUND OF PEACE TALKS WITH GOVERNMENT

The New Mon State Party (NMSP), a prominent ethnic armed group, will participate in another round of peace talks with the Burmese government beginning on 1 February in Moulmein, the capital of Mon State, according to sources from the NMSP. The NMSP has said that Nai Rao Sa, the party's vice chairman will lead the delegation. According to NMSP spokesman Nai Hong Sar Pon Khaing, "This round of talks might not be the time for us to sign a ceasefire agreement. However, this could eventually lead to an agreement if we get the points that we want from the talks."

The NMSP held its first peace talk with government representative U Aung Min, on 22 December 2011 in Sangkhlaburi, Kanchanaburi Province, Thailand. Even though the party has said that they expect no advantage from accepting a new ceasefire with the government, the NMSP has no option but to agree to a truce in the meantime, as other major ethnic armed groups, such as the United Wa State Army, Karen National Union and Shan State Army-South, have signed ceasefires with Nay Pyi Taw. In particular, the ceasefire agreement between the KNU and the Burmese government is seen to have pressured the NMSP to have a ceasefire soon, as both the KNU and NMSP are based in areas near each other along the Thai border.

NMSP leaders say that they would still like to abide by the policy of the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC), which is to only agree to a nationwide ceasefire first, and then hold political talks between the Burmese government and the ethnic groups together as a group. However, NMSP Secretary Nai Hong Sar said that the policy of UNFC was weakened after the KNU and the Chin National Front agreed to individual ceasefires with the government. "If we ethnic groups are united, we can tell them how we want to solve our conflicts. But it is impossible now as some groups have already taken ceasefires," he said. Mon community leaders have said that the NMSP should hold firm to the principle of having a nationwide ceasefire, while also demanding the release of Min Nay Win (aka) Nai Yekha) and Min Myo Thwe, two prominent Mon political prisoners who are serving life sentences.¹¹

NEW SHAN PARTY TNDP PLANS TO CONTEST APRIL BY-ELECTIONS

Four former members of Shan Nationalities Democratic Party (SNDP) and 14 Taileng (Red Shan) stakeholders have formed a new political party known as the Taileng Nationalities Development Party (TNDP). The founders of TNDP include former members of the SNDP Sai Htay Aung, Sai Kyaw Sway, Saw Win Tun and Saw Min Htin. The party applied for party registration to Nay Pyi Taw on 20 January 2012. The 18 members of the TNDP represent the Taileng communities in upper Burma and plan to contest the upcoming 1 April by-elections in Mogaung, Moe Hnyin, Hpakant, Myitkyina and Bhamo in Kachin State and Homalin, Eintaw, Khamty, Monywa in Sagaing Region as well as Mandalay and Rangoon. According to one of the founders, the TNDP aims to represent not only Taileng people (Red Shan) but also other Shan communities who are living in the areas, such as Tai

¹¹ NMSP agrees to new round of peace talks, holds out on ceasefire - <http://www.kaowao.org/2012news-Jan-27.php> (Kaowao) 27 January 2012 / NMSP forms peace delegation -

<http://mizzima.com/news/inside-burma/6486-nmsp-forms-peace-delegation.html> (Mizzima) 26 January 2012
The NMSP delegation will include Executive Committee (EC) member Nai Tala Nyi, EC Nai Lari Ga Kaung, EC member Nai Aye Mon (Mawlamyaing District chairman), EC member Nai Banyar Lel (Dawei District chairman), EC member Nai Aye Ka (Thaton District secretary) and NMSP Central Military Committee member Lieutenant Colonel Nai Banyar Channun.

Ner, Thai Khamti and others. If the TNDP is approved, it plans to focus on economic and regional development as well as stand up for the rights of Shan communities in the above areas and organize all of the Shan as one community.¹²

ANALYSIS

Several US Senators have visited Nay Pyi Taw in recent weeks with the aim of seizing the opportunity to restore bilateral relations between the US and Burma. The most recent visit of (former presidential candidate) Senator McCain is another sign that decision-makers in Washington are considering easing sanctions on Burma under the leadership of President Thein Sein. That being said, the visiting US Senators have expressed different views and opinions with some taking a cautious approach and maintaining reservations on the Burmese government's reform measures, while others have even praised President Thein Sein as being a "true reformer". In any case, the current Burmese leadership appears to have taken steps in the right direction as it strives to introduce democratic reforms, by President Thein Sein opting to follow a path of engagement as opposed to a path of isolation as practised by his predecessors.

The parliamentary sessions of both the Lower and Upper Houses opened in Nay Pyi Taw with the budget for the fiscal year 2012-2013 as the main focus. How the parliaments tackle the sensitive issue of the budget remains to be seen, since the previous budget for the 2011-2012 fiscal year was approved by the previous military regime. However, it remains unclear just how much authority the Parliament will have over the national budget. 2012 will no doubt prove to become a crucial period not only for Burma but also the Burmese people. Without a doubt, the discussions on tackling the budget will be the first in a series of tests for President Thein Sein as he apparently strives to become the first leader in Burma's history to bring democratic changes as well as stability to the country.

¹² Taileng plans to contest April elections - http://www.shanland.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4375:taileng-plans-to-contest-april-election&catid=85:politics&Itemid=266 (Shan Herald) 25 January 2012