
POLITICAL MONITOR NO. 17

GOVERNMENT REDUCES SENTENCES OF PRISONERS BY ONE YEAR

President Thein Sein on 16 May 2011 signed Order No.28/2011 granting amnesty to those currently serving prison sentences. Under the Presidential order, those serving death sentences will have their prison terms commuted to life while others will have their sentences commuted by one year exclusive of remission days.¹

FOREIGN AFFAIRS MINISTER RECEIVES GERMAN DELEGATION

Minister for Foreign Affairs U Wunna Maung Lwin received a Delegation from Germany led by Michael Glos, Member of Parliament of the Federal Democratic Party (FDP) and Dr H. C. Mult Hans Zehetmair, Chairman of Hans Seidel Foundation, at his office on 16 May. The meeting focused on strengthening bilateral ties and cooperation between the two countries.² Prior to 1988, Germany provided technical cooperation programmes under the state-run German Technical Corporation Agency (GTZ). In 1985, a joint venture agreement to form the Myanmar Fritz Werner Industries Co. Ltd was signed. Under this agreement, German experts were dispatched to Burma to assist the Burmese in the production of small arms at the Defence Services Products Factory (Kapasa) in Yangon.

PYITHU HLUTTAW SPEAKER RECEIVES VICE-CHAIRMAN OF CHINESE CENTRAL MILITARY COMMISSION

The Speaker of the Pyithu Hluttaw (People's Parliament) Thura U Shwe Mann received a visiting Chinese delegation led by Vice-Chairman General Xu Caihou of the Central Military Commission at the Zabuthiri Meeting Hall on 14 May. Also present were Deputy Pyithu Hluttaw Speaker U Nanda Kyaw Swar, Pyithu Hluttaw Representatives U Thein Zaw, U Soe Tha, U Maung Maung Thein, Thura U Aye Myint, U Thein Swe, U Soe Naing, U Thurein Zaw, U Win Sein, Col Htay Naing and Colonel Tint Hsan, Maj-Gen Maung Maung Ohn of the Ministry of Defence, Burma's Military Attaché to China and the Deputy Director-General of the Hluttaw Office. General Xu Caihou was accompanied by the Chinese Ambassador to Burma Mr Li Junhua and Military Attaché Senior Colonel Xiong Shaowei.³

OFFICIALS OF ELECTION SUB-COMMISSIONS PREPARE FOR BY-ELECTIONS

The Chairman of the Union Election Commission (UEC) U Tin Aye and members of Sagaing Region/District/Monywa Township sub-Commissions held a coordination meeting at Hluttaw Hall in Sagaing Region on 17 May. The UEC chairman commended the work of election sub-commission officials during the 2010 general elections and urged for their continued dedication in performing their duties. He also said that it was equally important for the public to select reliable candidates to serve as officials on the elections sub-commissions at different levels. Also, the Chairman of the Sagaing Region Election Sub-Commission U Tin Oo gave an account of the functions of the commission to those present. Reports regarding findings of the 2010 General Elections were given by representatives from Sagaing, Monywa, Shwebo, Katha, Kalay, Tamu, Mawlaik, Hkamti and Naga-

¹ Government grants amnesty for prisoners - <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs11/NLM2011-05-17.pdf> (NLM) 17 May 2011 (p. 1)

² Union Foreign Affairs Minister receives German delegation - <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs11/NLM2011-05-17.pdf> (NLM) 17 May 2011 (p. 2)

³ Pyithu Hluttaw Speaker receives Vice-Chairman of Chinese Central Military Commission - <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs11/NLM2011-05-15.pdf> (NLM) 15 May 2011 (p. 1)

Self Administered Zone and future work, including the forthcoming by-elections, was also discussed.⁴

Other political news not reported in the official media

“CONCRETE STEPS” NEEDED SAYS UN ENVOY AFTER TALKS

At the conclusion of a 3-day visit to Myanmar, UN envoy Mr Vijay Nambiar reiterated the importance of taking “concrete steps” to implement the “important” reforms as outlined in President Thein Sein’s inaugural address. During the visit, the UN envoy met government officials, members of political parties, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi as well as civil society organisations. Mr Nambiar in speaking to the media said that expectations were high both domestically and internationally for the newly formed government and how it would achieve progress in tackling issues including reconciliation, human rights, economic development and the rule of law. He also added that it is important to recognise the significance of the governments’ commitments and noted at the same time that the implementation of these commitments is crucial. Following his meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi, the UN envoy stated that progress would “depend on the actions of the government”, but noted that “the government has made encouraging and interesting statements”. He also held separate discussions with the Deputy Speaker of the Pyithu Hluttaw and the General-Secretary of the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) and reiterated the UN’s commitment to engage more with the Burmese people and government on a wide range of issues. “The UN wants Myanmar to succeed,” he said. “[But] the UN agencies would be better placed to respond to Myanmar’s development needs if the existing restrictions on its operations are removed.”⁵

US ENVOY CAN IMPROVE DIALOGUE: U HTAY OO

The General-Secretary of the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) has welcomed the Obama administration’s nomination of a special envoy to Burma, saying it is likely to improve dialogue between the two countries. Speaking at an official opening ceremony in Hinthada Township, Ayeyarwaddy Region, USDP General-Secretary U Htay Oo said the proposed appointment of Derek Mitchell as US envoy could act as a “direct channel” between the two governments. He added that while it could lead to more direct relationship between the two countries, it could also provide the Burmese government with a better understanding of the US government’s view towards Burma. He said regular visits would be crucial to improving relations, as there can be misunderstandings when messages are relayed “indirectly”.⁶

ETHNIC PARTIES PUSH FOR INSTRUCTION IN ETHNIC LANGUAGE

Five parties representing Burma’s ethnic nationalities have announced that they will call on the government to lift a nominal ban on teaching young children their respective native languages in schools. At present, Burmese is the dominant language of curriculums for schools across the country and all teaching materials are in Burmese. This is despite that Burma is home to some 135 different ethnic groups, who historically each have their own distinct vernacular. Nai Ngwe Thein, the Chairman of the All Mon Region Democratic Party (AMRDP), said that this affects the learning abilities of children not used to speaking Burmese. “We want the schools to teach children in their mother language; [young] primary school children in areas that don’t speak the Burmese language

⁴ Election sub-commissions officials prepare for by-elections - <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs11/NLM2011-05-18.pdf> (NLM) 18 May 2011 (p. 1)

⁵ Concrete Steps Needed, says UN envoy after Talks - <http://www.mmmtimes.com/2011/news/575/news57502.html> (Myanmar Times) 16 May 2011

⁶ US Envoy can improve dialogue: U Htay Oo - <http://www.mmmtimes.com/2011/news/575/news57513.html> (Myanmar Times) 16 May 2011

shouldn't be taught in Burmese." He added that as they grow older, schools should begin to introduce the Burmese language, which is the native tongue of more than 60 percent of the country. At the moment, however, "there is a high rate of students quitting school because they are being taught in a language they don't speak". Those also giving their support include the Chin National Party, the Shan Nationalities Democratic Party (SNDP), the Phalon-Sawaw Democratic Party and the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP). Hla Swe, General Secretary of the RNDP, said that the parties are now preparing to raise the issue in parliament and submit a statement to the education minister. A similar attempt to bring about a change in education policy was tabled during the last session of parliament but was subsequently rejected.⁷

ANALYSIS

The recent presidential order granting amnesty to prisoners in Burma has received both positive and negative responses. While the announcement did not say how many prisoners are affected by the order, local and international media sources have estimated that 17,000 prisoners had been released. The presidential pardon has been seen by many as a test to make out the sincerity of the newly elected government. However, the authorities have once again defied their critics and opponents alike and show that they will not bow to pressure. While the release of political prisoners may have dominated the headlines, the government has not remained idle on the international front. The visit of a high-level Chinese military delegation once again reflects the cordial relationship between Burma and its northern neighbour - one based on the special "Sino-Myanmar Paukphaw friendship". The red-carpet treatment does not end there. The meeting between the Burmese Foreign Minister and a German delegation led by former Minister of Economics and elected MP Mr. Michael Glos is also significant. While governments, opposition parties and critics of the regime have remained sceptical of the sincerity of the Burmese government, others have opted to take a more pragmatic and constructive approach. The Germans, together with several EU members, have supported the idea of relaxing the restrictive measures imposed on the Burmese regime by the bloc. Therefore, the visit could be an indication that Berlin plans to take more pro-engagement policy towards Burma. The debates on engagement or isolation, maintaining sanctions or its removal have long been the centre of discussion. Practical solutions and better understanding of the situation within the country are essential if peace and stability is to be achieved.

⁷ Ethnic parties in push for mother tongue - <http://www.dvb.no/news/ethnic-parties-in-push-for-mother-tongue/15692>
(DVB) 17 May 2011