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HEARING

“A REVIEW OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF DEMOCRACY IN BURMA”

Chaired by

SENATOR SAM BROWNBCK

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Testimony by

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INTRODUCTION

Mr. Chairman,

It is an honor to have been invited to offer an international educator’s perspective on the current situation in Burma. I believe that the United States and other nations which share a common concern about Burma’s future have a role to play in helping to re-build Burma’s democratic institutions, to ensure the provision of health and human services (especially education), and to assist in advancing economic development at the early stage of its transition. Very briefly, I propose to focus on the roles that exiles – and, more particularly, Burmese students in the United States and elsewhere abroad – might play in helping to rehabilitate their beloved homeland at the early stages of its political transition and beyond. Mr. Chairman, for this reason, I am delighted to testify before the Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs as part of its review of the development of democracy in Burma.

Let me preface my testimony with a brief observation regarding the history of Burmese student involvement in popular political reform movements:

College and university students have long been at the forefront of popular movements in Burma. During the final decades of the British Raj, Rangoon University students advocated first self-government, and then independence for Burma. The heroic leadership of a one time Rangoon University student leader, Aung San, has been an inspiration to generations of young Burmese ever since. Many Burmese historians and observers would agree that Aung San's astute efforts won the promise of independence from Britain and helped Burma gain unprecedented unity among the people of this country.

Among recent generations, his example – reflected in the selfless dedication of his brave daughter, Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi – has galvanized opposition and resistance to the brutal repression of the military regimes that have ruled the country for the last 41 years. College and university students are therefore proudly regarded by Burmese people not only as the champions of freedom and democracy, but as a precious resource for restoring democratic institutions and the nation's economic health.

Mr. Chairman, my personal and professional involvement with Burmese students dates from the early 1960s when I was a young Foreign Service Officer on assignment with the United States Information Service (USIS) for four years. During my time in Burma, I had considerable contact with university educators and taught English as a Second Language classes for high school and university students. This background proved very valuable when, in the early 1990s, I was again brought into contact with Burmese students. This time I was to serve as an advisor and mentor to hundreds of the pro-democracy activists who had fled to Thailand from Burma following the popular uprisings of 1988-90 and who had subsequently been relocated as refugees to various communities in the United States, including Fort Wayne, Indiana. At about the same time, Indiana University became responsible for managing the U.S. Government-funded Burmese Refugee Scholarship Program (BRSP), an historic initiative established at the behest of Congress in 1991. I am pleased that Indiana University has administered this Program which, to date, has made it possible for over 60 scholars and professionals from Burma to pursue higher education and technical training at Indiana University and other institutions of higher learning throughout the United States.

POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF BURMESE EDUCATED ABROAD SINCE 1988

Ten years of working with Burmese student exiles have led me to the conclusion that, individually and as a group, they are capable of contributing vitally-important knowledge and experience to the process of moving their homeland toward democracy, as well as to the economic and social advancement of their fellow countrymen and women. However, the extent to which they will be able to do so with maximum success is going to depend upon adequate preparation in advance of their return home. Adequate preparation would consist of strategies and special training that are compatible with cultural traditions and the availability of resources for bringing about needed changes or reforms of existing structures, policies, and practices in the Burmese educational system. With a modest financial and in-kind investment, the United States and other nations can help the prospective returnees to prepare for the conditions under which they will be called upon to work.

In determining the particulars of an advance preparation program, its planners should not only heed realities of the current situation in Burma, but also those that foreign-educated students from developing countries beyond Burma have encountered on returning home. Burmese returnees will need to be made aware of the kinds of re-entry pitfalls and problems that they might expect to encounter once they return to their homeland. Such pitfalls and problems could easily frustrate -- or even defeat -- their efforts to revitalize the educational system and other elements of the nation's infrastructure.

Let me elaborate briefly.

(1) Current Conditions in Burma

Within Burma, the system of education, long impoverished and in disrepair, has become practically dysfunctional. United Nations statistics indicate that the Burmese military government spends only 1.1% of gross domestic product on education.ⁱ This forces parents to bear much of the cost of primary and secondary level schooling for their children through indirect taxes or "donations" paid to the Education Ministry, teachers, and school administrators. As a consequence, Burma's youth have been cruelly short-changed. At present, scarcely one-third of the entire population of primary school-aged children manages to complete the primary level of education.ⁱⁱ

Education at the tertiary level has been totally and systematically emasculated by the military regime, which regards university students with suspicion, if not hostility, as enemies of the government. To deter dissident students from organizing anti-government demonstrations, Burma's military rulers have ruthlessly shut down institutions of higher education -- for years at a time. The regime has even relocated some university campuses to remote areas away from population centers. With the same objective, the regime has shortened the length of the academic year in some fields of study. The nation's universities have been shut down, except for brief intervals, since 1988. As of 2001, they had been open for only three of the previous twelve years, a situation that has created enormous backlogs of waiting students, including an estimated 5 million high school graduates who have been kept in limbo for years pending admission to universities. Tens of thousands of university matriculants have also been stymied -- having been forced to wait for institutions to reopen so that they could get on with completing their degrees.ⁱⁱⁱ

Today U.S. and U.N. authorities see the educational system failing in Burma. This situation raises a critical concern because there is a very real possibility that political change will come suddenly and soon to the country, and that the citizenry will not be prepared to take advantage of the change because of low literacy and general education levels. As an unpublished report of one in-country observer of the Burmese education scene sums up his assessment of the situation, "There is real fear that democracy may see the light of day but fail because an educated population will not have the tools to sustain it."^{iv}

(2) Dearth of Recent Experience with Democratic Government

Except for a relatively small number of people who have previously lived abroad or who were politically

active in the years before the Ne Win takeover of 1962, there is hardly anyone alive today in Burma who has a firsthand familiarity with the functioning of a democratic national government. This state of affairs, which corresponds to a condition that existed in Russia and the former Soviet republics of Central Asia at the time of the collapse of the USSR, underscores the difficulty of the task that Burmese advocates of democracy and educational reform will face in introducing their fellow citizens to essential and functional aspects of a democratic government. On the other hand, skills and knowledge of how governmental and educational institutions function in a democracy garnered by the Burmese students in exile could be successfully utilized in new democratic Burma. Their skills and knowledge can be tapped to inform the general public at the “grass roots” level and to give additional credibility to mass media messages aimed at building public awareness and support for re-building democratic institutions in Burma. The United States and international community should prepare to facilitate the return of these students and to lend a significant level of support to their efforts to rebuild a democratic Burma.

(3) Challenges that Returnees Face

As Burmese students in exile contemplate returning to their homeland, they should be mindful of relevant home country re-entry problems that thousands of students from developing nations of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East have experienced historically. For quite a few of these returnees, re-entry has been far from a smooth ride, largely because of the difficulties and disillusionment that they have experienced as they have tried to re-adjust to various aspects of their home country environment.

It is therefore generally advisable for students from developing nations who intend to return home after having completed their studies abroad to anticipate that there will likely be resistance to, if not outright rejection of some of the foreign (read “Western”) ideas that they may have brought home with them which are or which might seem to be at variance with the traditional customs, values, methods, and practices of their fellow countrymen – and especially those who are in positions of authority and who have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo.

Among professional advisers to students from abroad at universities in the United States, there is a widely-shared view that student and alumni networks can help to minimize or mitigate the re-entry problems of returning students by alerting them to certain “sensitive” issues in the home country, suggesting “do’s and don’ts” for espousing certain kinds of “new” ideas that they may have brought home from abroad, and so forth.

Student/alumni networks might also suggest various “tried and true” strategies that returnees might follow in gaining acceptance or persuading others to accept ideas or beliefs acquired through study abroad – especially in the face of attitudes ranging from indifference to skepticism or rejection. In providing guidance that is readily adaptable, credible, and above all applicable to real life situations, such networks would also lend a measure of moral support to prospective returnees in a spirit of understanding and encouragement.

For re-entry preparation purposes, it is fortunate that a considerable number of informal networks

already exist among Burmese students abroad. Such networks could serve as sources of support and encouragement, helping them as they prepare to cope with the challenges that they can expect to encounter upon returning to Burma. The actual capabilities of these networks for serving as accepted channels or vehicles for providing groups and individuals with suitable preparation for re-entry remain to be tested, of course, at this point. Yet in light of the re-entry experiences of foreign-educated students from other developing countries, it seems reasonable to assume that such networks, if broad-based and widely-respected among exiled Burmese, could be valuable tools for sharing re-entry-related information and experience. That being the case, perhaps a “re-entry forum” should be initiated or an internet chat room be created within some of the existing networks. Ideally, the networks involved would be ones that are dedicated to mutual aid and cooperation and therefore compatible with the goal of helping to ensure that returnees are as well-prepared as possible to play the role of agents of change in different and often difficult or less-than-favorable conditions. It follows too that they should not be operating in an isolated or exclusive manner within the community of prospective returnees, but rather that they solicit and be guided by inputs from fellow country men and women who have remained inside Burma.

(4) Learning from Experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq

Burmese students abroad who plan to return home as soon as it becomes possible (safe) to do so should also be mindful of the experiences that some of their Afghan and Iraqi peers have had this year upon returning to post-Taliban Afghanistan and post-Saddam Iraq, respectively. It has been reported that some – perhaps quite a few – have encountered considerable suspicion and even hostility among their fellow countrymen, many of whom not only resent their having escaped long years of political repression at home to live in the relative safety and prosperity of another country in Europe or North America, but are sometimes bitterly envious of their educational and professional attainments as well. Burmese students abroad who intend to return home when conditions change for the better should therefore take note of the experiences of recent student returnees to Afghanistan and Iraq.

(5) Financial Aid for Burmese Students in Exile

The availability of scholarship aid to help Burmese students in the United States and elsewhere abroad to obtain the requisite education and training for roles in the rehabilitation of their homeland has been and remains extremely limited in relation to the number of applicants for such assistance who are well-qualified by virtue of their academic and personal achievements. Through the U.S. State Department-funded Burmese Refugee Scholarship Program (BRSP) which Indiana University has administered on behalf of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) since 1993, it has been possible for more than 60 young scholars and professionals from Burma to pursue higher education and technical training in this country. The Supplementary Grants Program for Burmese students initiated in 1994 by the Burma Project of the Open Society Institute (OSI) has annually assisted several hundred Burmese students attending universities in the United States and some eight to ten other countries.

Although the creators and managers of these scholarship programs can be justly proud of the dividends

(in terms of successes achieved by the recipients of grants) that their investments have yielded to date, both programs have consistently lacked the financial resources to help more than a very small number of the many thousands of deserving Burmese students, who fled their homeland because of their participation in the pro-democracy movement.

READYING BURMESE EXILES FOR THE CHALLENGES OF RETURNING HOME: SOME PRELIMINARY RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite the daunting realities to be faced by prospective student returnees to Burma, there are compelling reasons for making the effort to mobilize, train, and deploy these students for various kinds of practical fieldwork experiences. It is prudent to anticipate that the conditions immediately following a regime change in Burma could equal or surpass in severity those of any country that has similarly suffered decades of tyranny and deprivation. Arguably, a change of government in Burma could occur at an early date. The international community simply cannot afford to wait on such an eventuality to begin the process of helping exiled students to prepare for their return and the roles they will be expected to play thereafter.

(1) Increase Funding for Existing Scholarship Programs

Since 1993, the level of funding for the Burmese Refugee Scholarship Program has not been increased. This has meant that, instead of bringing 12 Scholarship grantees per year to the United States under the Program as the Congress had originally intended, it has been possible to fund only 4 or 5 students per year since 1997. To redress this longstanding shortfall and express this nation's support for and solidarity with democratic forces both within and outside of Burma, the United States government should increase its funding of the BRSP at least up to a level that will fulfill its original aim of bringing 12 Scholarship recipients to U.S. colleges and universities each year. According to our field contacts in both Thailand and in India, there are thousands of Burmese students in refugee camps along the borders who are still determined to join in struggle for democracy, a significant number of whom are potential candidates for BRSP awards.

I, therefore, urge that the United States government increase its funding of the Burmese Refugee Scholarship Program (BRSP).

(2) Increasing Opportunities for Short-term Study and Internship Experiences

In addition to placing Burmese students in U.S. institutions under the BRSP, the United States should provide short-term training opportunities for mid-career professionals in various priority fields. There are one-year practicum master degrees offered by highly-respected U.S. universities for public administrators and other professionals. Such programs would offer internship-type practical experiences for Burmese leaders who will be in charge of various public services during the transition to democratic government. An example of a highly successful program offering such experiences is the

Ukrainian Parliamentary Project headed by the School of Public and Environmental Affairs at Indiana University which familiarizes Ukrainian members of parliament with the democratic law making process in this country. The United States government, with the help of universities and qualified non-governmental organizations, should soon establish a comparable program to address the need of professionals in democratic opposition in Burma. Such a program should address issues such as political capacity building and political education for various political parties pertinent to democratic principles and governance as well.

(3) Training Young Entrepreneurs and Helping to Build Modern Market Institutions in New Burma

As the success and health of democracy is to some extent dependent on the health of a country's economy, it is important that Burma embrace the global economy with well-established market institutions that are shaped by Burmese entrepreneurs within Burma. The international community should not only take advantage of the potential of Burma's natural and human resources but also nurture entrepreneurs who can help to build market institutions that are in line with global market principles. The United States can certainly help by initiating exchange and training programs for young entrepreneurs in Burma that would enable them to participate in "on-the-job training" or "entrepreneurship training" in relevant sectors of the economy. Therefore, I recommend that the United States take the initiative to establish a task force composed of business leaders and their Burmese counterparts to facilitate the trainings of entrepreneurs and the establishment of market institutions for Burma's long term future.

In addition to the foregoing recommendations, I would urge that the following tasks be undertaken at an early date:

- Develop a comprehensive strategic plan for preparing students abroad to serve as cadres for effecting change in education and other key sectors. The planning process should include students as well as government, international organization/NGO, and corporate/private business representatives.
- Expand current efforts to enlist students' involvement and provide, through student conferences, alumni reunions, and special training workshops, and internet dialogues.
- Expand current efforts to enlist, train, and deploy students in exile to Burmese refugee camps in India and Thailand who can teach courses, conduct training programs.
- Initiate and pilot test distance learning programs designed to deliver high school and college-level courses to refugees in camps near the Burma-India and Burma-Thailand borders in anticipation of their ultimate employment in future Burma.

Once the transition to democracy in Burma has begun, it will be important to –

- Coordinate and support returned students' efforts through various channels, including UN, US, and foreign government agencies and NGOs in country, private foundations and multinational corporations, and academic institutions.
- Help organize a domestic peace corps-type agency to carry forward the rehabilitation work initiated by returned-student volunteers dedicated to bringing their knowledge of how a democratic society functions, along with their technical and professional skills.

CONCLUSION

A change of regime in Burma could come sooner rather than later. Considering the heavy pressure that the United States and the international community are in the process of placing upon the military rulers of Burma to release Daw Aung San Suu Kyi from detention and to negotiate an agreement early on for a peaceful transition to democracy, the regime change could come sooner than expected.

It follows that, if indeed a major political change is imminent, it is vital that there be a plan and preparations for dealing with transitional challenges, some of which could be chaotic, and even violent. I would therefore urge that the Government of the United States reach out to Burmese students in our midst and elsewhere outside Burma both to engage them in the development of plans and strategies for rehabilitating their suffering homeland and to prepare them for their roles in helping to achieve common goals for re-vitalizing the nation's educational system as well for economic development and the re-establishment of an elected, representative government.

Thank you.

ⁱ United Nations Education, Science, and Cultural Organization; Paper, 2001, see also "Education Report 2002," Foreign Affairs Committee, All Burma Federation of Student Union, May 2003.

ⁱⁱ See *ibid*

ⁱⁱⁱ Irrawaddy Magazine (English Version); June 2001, Vol. 9, No. 5, March 2003, Vol.11, No. 2

^{iv} Personal communication.