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Unofficial Notes by the Euro-Burma Office, Brussels

**FES – ASIENHAUS**  
**Panel Discussion – “What to do about Burma”?**

18:00 – 20:00 - Thursday 6 September 2007  
Berlin, Germany

Welcome and Introductory Speeches by:

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Moderator: Dr Christian Hauswedell, former Director for Asian, German Ministry of Foreign Affairs,

PANEL DISCUSSION:

**Dr. Thant Myint-U** - Senior Fellow at the International Peace Academy in New York, author of 'River of Lost Footsteps' and Research Associate at the Cambridge Centre for History and Economics

The recent protests against the fuel hikes in Burma instill in us a sense of solidarity and sympathy, but also a sense of despair when we consider how the government could likely respond to them with a heavy hand and with no commitment to real change. Where does that leave Burma?

There is a political stalemate between the Burmese democracy movement and the military government. The past 20 years have made us no nearer to realizing democracy in Burma than in 1988. What kind of engagement, pressure or sanctions should we put on the government to get them to change?

We have seen that it has been possible to get a marginal response from the government on certain issues such as humanitarian aid, but nothing has so far made them change their core practice and policies. The fear is not that the situation will stagnate and that the status quo will remain, but that the situation will slowly and quietly deteriorate. The military regime remains quite robust and comfortable. Forty years of rule have meant that this has become a much more 'purer', tighter and closed dictatorship probably than anywhere else. While military power becomes increasingly immovable, the country as a whole is undergoing dynamic social and economic change. Local and national structures outside the military have been 'frayed' apart. Public institutions and services, such as health and education are decaying. The government is successfully fracturing Burmese society – in the recent demonstrations it is mainly civilians against civilians, which could become very problematic in the future. All these things demonstrate the slow decay taking place in Burma.

The Army has been in power for generations. Army staff have grown up in the military institution. Today the army is focused on how to maintain its hold power rather than pushing for any development towards ideological goals. While the military aims to manage its conflicts and enemies both internationally and internally, it has become increasingly unable to govern. The decline in health and education standards means that the prospect of a transition to a meaningful democracy is becoming less and less hopeful. This multi-faceted, slow motion deterioration is happening.

*Urgent Action*

We need to act soon. We have a watershed of only a few years. After this period no government will be able to successfully govern.

### *East /West*

When the West looks at the situation in Burma, it tries to find out how the West can influence Burma. The Burmese military, however, looks towards the East. China has increasing economic and diplomatic engagement in Burma. Equally, the regime is looking more and more to China. China and the role of regional powers are crucial. The West is much less present and dominant in Asia than it was a few years ago. We need to be careful about how we estimate the West's role in Burma. China won't impose sanctions on Burma. Sanctions will remain a Western intervention. It is not good to give the Burmese unrealistic expectations of what the West can deliver.

### *UN Role*

Despite the UN Security Council failure, the UN is important in the sense that Gambari, Ban Ki-Moon's special representative for Burma, is the only one to have access to the generals at the highest levels and to Aung San Suu Kyi. It is important that he is not criticized too much internationally as he is the only interlocutor with the regime. We should not force him to deliver too soon as it might not be possible given the recent protests inside the country.

### *Sanctions/engagement?*

In terms of international response, it is not so much a question of engagement versus increased sanctions, rather a question of using all tools at our disposal to prepare for sustainable change in the country. How can we currently work to create and sustain a 'landscape' where sustainable change can happen? In the current landscape the realistic possibility for change is very minimal. Rather than taking a big step and encouraging a massive change now it may be best to focus on the landscape for change, while keeping in mind the longer term. The tragedy would be if a new generation of generals (after Than Shwe) see no other choice but to follow the older generation of generals, or that the generals would be overthrown and soon after there would be another coup as there would be no other viable institutions to govern the country.

### **Harn Yawnghwe- Director Euro-Burma Office in Brussels**

Burma has seen a severe deterioration over the past 20 years – the situation today cannot be likened to the situation in 1988.

It is time for the Burmese democracy movement and those who want change in Burma to discuss sensitive topics in order to tackle the question of 'what are we going to do to make the generals want to change?' If we don't start coming up with some answers the political stalemate will remain while the country deteriorates further.

### *National Convention*

Most people believe that the SPDC's National Convention should be boycotted as it will not lead to democracy and it is unacceptable (I have myself worked to block the National Convention). But looking back to the recent 'yes' vote in the Thai constitutional referendum we find that most Thais voted in favour, not because they liked the constitution, but because they wanted to get rid of the military. A 'no' result would have led to another year of military rule while the generals worked on another draft of the constitution. Thailand is obviously not in the same situation as Burma, but we can nonetheless pose the question; what would have happened in 1993 if the Burmese people had accepted the National Convention process? What could have happened in 14 years of 'disciplined' democracy? Could we have made the generals relax the 'discipline'? In 1974, nobody liked General Ne Win's Burmese Way to Socialism Constitution. There was no choice and people lived with it. Ne Win and his constitution were gone in 1988 – in 14 years. As it is now, Burma and the Burmese people are much worse off. There are no clear answers to the questions, but it is very important for us to ask these sorts of difficult questions in order to determine what to do next. We should also ask ourselves – what do we really want? Do we want to punish the generals or do we want to get them out of power? What is more important?

### *UN Role*

The failure of the UN Security Council resolution was a blow in the sense that many Burmese people had unrealistic expectations and were very disappointed. However, it was useful in the sense that it highlighted the situation in Burma internationally. It also has more or less led to an international consensus that Burma needs to change. Although China vetoed the resolution, they acknowledged that the situation in Burma needs to be addressed. They also advised the Burmese generals to learn from the experience of others and listen to their people. The Chinese do not want to be embarrassed internationally so they are now under pressure to help bring about change in Burma. Gambari has visited China and other capitals to get a consensus and their support for his role. This is a hopeful development.

### *China*

Most Burmese are very afraid of China and would prefer to be a Western ally. But Burma has no choice. It has to live with China and India because of their geographical closeness. The Burmese will need to learn to establish what are the real dangers of this close relationship with China and what are the imagined fears. China may not respond to calls for democracy in Burma but it will respond to calls for the economic development in Burma as it is in their interest. We need to find ways to get both China and India to cooperate and help bring about change in Burma.

### **Summary of the Q&A**

The role of Aung San Suu Kyi was discussed. Both speakers felt she could play an important role, particularly in terms of raising attention internationally and also in uniting the country as she has huge public support.

When questioned on the role of the NLD and 88 Generation Student Leaders, the panel stated that the NLD have been practically paralysed by years of repression. But they did not believe the 88 Generation of Student Leaders were replacing the NLD. They are taking a more active role in areas where the NLD is unable to function.

The panel was asked about the likelihood that civil servants from the regime will be recycled in a new democratic government. They concluded that it was possible and that it could be worth engaging with some of them now.

Responding to a question about human resources and leadership in a democratic Burma, the panel was of the opinion that there are 'hidden' leaders remaining in Burma and that it is probably unrealistic to rely on exiles to return. Instead, it was suggested that there must be an increased effort to use initiatives like EU humanitarian aid to build up people at the grassroots level so that the general population gets a better chance of becoming more involved in the democratic process.

Regarding the ethnic response to the National Convention, the panel was of the opinion that given the different status and circumstances of each group, the responses will differ. The more 'commercial' ethnic armies will go along with the SPDC, but other more nationalistic ceasefire groups will not accept it if they are not given any political concessions. Although the SPDC will crack down on the ceasefire groups, they will not disappear. Many will regroup and resume fighting. The non-ceasefire groups will not accept the National Convention.

One participant asked a theoretical question about what would happen if the generals in Nay-pyi-daw were to just disappear. The panel felt a sudden departure would lead to a slow descent into anarchy. Local commanders today 'rule' in the areas under their control. If the national military leadership disappeared, renegade military leaders (warlords) will emerge across the country. This means that there must be a national leadership to replace the generals in order to keep the country together. This means that it is crucial to start urgently creating the building blocks for a sustainable and meaningful democracy. This will require building up the self awareness of the Burmese people and 'people focused' development and humanitarian assistance, rather than development focused only on political groups.

The panel concluded by saying that humanitarian crisis is very real and it is extremely destructive. The humanitarian response must be disassociated from the political debate. End.