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Briefing to the Security Council – 5 October 2007

Mr. President,

Thank you for this opportunity to brief the Security Council on the outcome of my recent mission to Myanmar from 29 September to 2 October. Members of the Council are fully aware of the circumstances in which the Secretary-General decided to dispatch me to Myanmar, and I am grateful for the clear and strong support expressed by the Council for my mission.

On behalf of the Secretary-General, I would like to thank the Myanmar Government for having received me and for the cooperation extended to my delegation during our visit. Within the context of the good offices mandate entrusted to the Secretary-General by the General Assembly, my mission had three main objectives: (i) to assess the situation on the ground in the wake of recent demonstrations; (ii) to deliver clear messages from the Secretary-General to the Myanmar authorities at the highest level; and (iii) to promote dialogue between the Government and the opposition as the best path to ending the present crisis and achieving national reconciliation.

Before addressing each one of these objectives, I would like to express my gratitude to the Myanmar authorities for their flexibility in developing the programme of my visit as it evolved. As was the case during each of my previous visits to Myanmar, I was able to meet with both the Chairman of the State Peace and Development Council, Senior General Than Shwe, and with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. I also met with Acting Prime Minister Lt.-Gen. Thein Sein and other members of Government. Although I was not able to meet with other relevant interlocutors – despite repeated requests – including the NLD and representatives of the monks and 88 Generation Students, I did receive messages from many groups and individuals that have also informed my findings.

Assessment of the situation

Mr. President,

The conditions in which my mission was undertaken and its duration were such that any assessment of the situation on the ground is necessarily limited. In my last two briefings, I updated members of the Council on the backdrop to the growing demonstrations since 19 August. The authorities initially exercised restraint in dealing

with the protests, but in the week preceding the mission tensions escalated through violent repression by the authorities against peaceful demonstrators. By the Government's own account, up to a dozen people were killed (including a Japanese journalist), several dozens wounded and over two thousand arrested. Unconfirmed reports, however, put the number of casualties much higher.

By the time my mission started, the protests on the streets of Yangon had been largely put down. And by the time the mission ended, the streets were busier and activity seemed to be returning to normal, although the situation remains tense.

Of great concern to the United Nations and the international community are the continuing and disturbing reports of abuses being committed by security and non-uniformed elements, particularly at night during curfew, including raids on private homes, beatings, arbitrary arrests, and disappearances. There are also continuing reports of mass relocation outside Yangon of monks arrested in the course of the demonstrations and monasteries that remain blockaded. The High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Human Rights Council have already issued strong appeals for independent verification of these reports and accountability for any human rights violations.

During the mission, the United Nations Resident Coordinator in Yangon reported that at least two national UN staff were arrested and detained. I brought this immediately to the attention of the authorities at the highest level, and the two staff were subsequently released. A third national UN staff and a dependent were subsequently reported missing and both have also since been released. The UN office in Yangon has also received requests from people asking for a safe place to hide.

Mr. President,

In my discussions with senior Government officials, I was told that the demonstrations were instigated by a minority of elements opposed to the Government and supported from outside; that the demonstrations were limited to Yangon and Mandalay while the rest of the country had remained calm; that the authorities had shown the utmost restraint in handling the situation; and that most of those arrested could be expected to be released shortly after investigation and interrogation. My delegation was also taken to a mass rally in Lashio (Northeastern Shan State) organized in support of the Government's National Convention and Seven-step political Roadmap.

It is clear, however, that the demonstrations over the past few weeks are for the most part the expression of deep and widespread discontent about socio-economic conditions in the country. General vulnerability in Myanmar is defined by accelerating impoverishment and the growing inability of the social service structures to address the basic needs of the general population. As an illustration, a UNDP household living conditions assessment in 2004-2005 noted that one-third of Myanmar's people live below the poverty line and that 90 percent of the people were spending less than \$300 per year. At the time of the study, UNDP predicted that a 10 percent rise in prices could push another third of the country below the poverty line. Since then, the price of fuel has been

increased twice, and significant levels of inflation have driven prices up considerably for basic food items and commodities. The overall poverty level is also indicated by the household budget-share of food consumption, which on average is as high as 69 percent.

Although the protests coincided with the Government's sudden decision on 19 August to sharply increase the price of fuel, the marches by monks across the country appear to have provided a catalyst for the demonstrations to become explicitly political in nature. This must be understood within the context of Myanmar's complex history since independence. What is clear is that since 1988, the democratic aspirations of the people of Myanmar have been systematically denied by the Government in the name of stability and security. Although the Government succeeded after fourteen years in completing the National Convention on 3 September, and assured me that the Seven-step Roadmap is broadly supported by the population, the exclusion of key stakeholders, such as the NLD, and the failure to meet the expectations of key participants, such as ethnic ceasefire groups, tends to undermine the credibility and legitimacy of the process. In this context, unless the Government decides to open up and broaden the process that is to define Myanmar's future, the demands for greater inclusiveness, participation and transparency, and for an acceleration of the transition to democracy and civilian rule, are likely to continue.

Key Messages

Mr. President,

With regard to the second objective of my mission, I am pleased that, amidst the ongoing crisis, I was able to deliver clear and strong messages on behalf of the Secretary-General directly to the authorities at the highest level. My first message was to emphasize the changing domestic, regional and international context within which my mission was taking place, with the clear and strong support of Myanmar's neighbours, ASEAN countries and the Security Council. As I have said before, the world is not what it was twenty years ago, and no country can afford to act in isolation from the standards by which all members of the international community are held. It is therefore essential for Myanmar's leadership to recognize that what happens inside Myanmar can have serious international repercussions.

My second message was to express the Secretary-General's and international community's deep concern about recent events and make specific recommendations for immediate steps to de-escalate tensions. These include: putting an end to night raids and arrests during curfew; lifting the curfew as soon as possible; releasing all those arrested during the demonstrations; allowing access to clinics for those wounded during demonstrations; withdrawing military forces from the street; ensuring respect for human rights and the rule of law in the exercise of law enforcement, in accordance with international standards; allowing the ICRC to access persons detained and assist in tracing missing people; and putting an immediate end to raids on monasteries.

Thirdly, I emphasized the need to address without delay the political and socio-economic factors underlying the demonstrations through specific mid- and long-term measures, predicated on dialogue among all stakeholders. Any decrease in tensions can only be sustained if accompanied by positive steps that go to address the root causes of unrest, and specific recommendations have been put to the Government on this regard. The Council is already aware of the key areas in which I have been encouraging the Government to make tangible progress: (a) the release of all political prisoners, including those arrested in the course of recent demonstrations; (b) the promotion of an all-inclusive national reconciliation process; (c) full cooperation with and better access for humanitarian organizations; (d) the cessation of hostilities in conflict areas, including Kayin State; and (e) continued cooperation with the ILO.

While it remains unclear how responsive the authorities will be to these messages, I believe that the mission helped develop their understanding of regional and international perceptions of the situation in Myanmar and of the urgent need for them to implement some of the specific ideas put to them in order to meet domestic and international expectations. In terms of immediate steps, I would like to note that the authorities have already announced a relaxation of the curfew in Yangon and Mandalay and reports indicate that visible military presence in the streets has been reduced. I have been informed by the Government that, as of today, a total of 2,095 persons arrested in the course of demonstrations have been released, including 728 monks, and that more releases will follow, as a direct result of my request to the authorities. While these steps are welcome, further steps will need to be taken over the next few days and weeks, not only to overcome the current crisis but also to address the underlying factors to the recent unrest.

Promotion of dialogue

Mr. President,

With regard to the third objective of my mission, the promotion of dialogue, the visit allowed me to resume the role I started playing during my last visit by conveying messages between the senior leadership and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. The fact that I was allowed to meet with her a second time after meeting with the Senior General in itself suggests the usefulness of the United Nations good offices as a way for the parties to explore the possibility of engaging in dialogue. I am therefore cautiously encouraged by the Government's announcement yesterday that Senior General Than Shwe is prepared to meet with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, although with certain conditions. This is a potentially welcome development which calls for maximum flexibility on all sides. The sooner such a meeting can take place, the better, as it is a first and necessary step to overcome the high level of mistrust between them. I sincerely hope that the potential for dialogue will be recognized to the same extent by both sides and that it can translate into concrete steps in the immediate wake of the crisis.

Another necessary step for genuine national dialogue to take place is the release of all political detainees, particularly the sick and the elderly. After all, only free men

and women can engage in dialogue. The future of Myanmar belongs to all the people of Myanmar, and it is therefore in the interest of the nation that all those who have a contribution to make should have the opportunity to do so. The issues for dialogue are known – from serious political and human rights concerns to pressing humanitarian and socio-economic issues – but only by working together as one people will Myanmar be able to address them and move forward as one nation.

In this connection, the specific recommendations that were put to the Government, including the possibility of establishing a broad-based constitutional review commission, are aimed at encouraging the Government to engage in a post-National Convention process of consultations that is all-inclusive, participatory and transparent. This would enhance the credibility and legitimacy of the draft constitution to be submitted to referendum. The UN has experience in facilitating such a constitutional review process.

In addition to the imperatives of the political dispensation, the Government needs to become more sensitive to the extremely fragile humanitarian and socio-economic context within which the recent demonstrations and crisis broke out. In this regard, the recommendation put to the Government to consider establishing a broad-based poverty alleviation commission to identify and address socio-economic needs would be a useful vehicle for promoting national dialogue on ways to improve the overall “health” of the country. The work of UN agencies in-country has been recognized as useful by the authorities and every effort needs to be made to continue to find areas of mutual interest where progress can be made, including in the areas of health, education and drug reduction. While the humanitarian and political action need to remain coordinated, it is essential not to let humanitarian actions become hostages to political conditions, and vice-versa. Any serious steps on the political front should also be acknowledged by the international community through the provision of incentives in the humanitarian and socio-economic areas.

Conclusion

Mr. President,

Amidst the tragic events of the past few weeks, this is an hour of historic opportunity for Myanmar. As I have said before, responsibility for the future of the country ultimately rests with the Government and people of Myanmar. The world is watching closely how that responsibility will be exercised in the interest of all the people of Myanmar. To deny the prospect of a peaceful, prosperous and democratic Myanmar is to deny it to those who deserve it most, the people of Myanmar. They have suffered too much for too long. At this point, what they need above all is hope, and I would be encouraged if this mission helped Myanmar’s leaders to listen to their people.

The Government also needs to know that the world needs a peaceful, prosperous and democratic Myanmar that can contribute to the development of the region and play a useful role in the international community. I want to reiterate here that, over the past two

years, Myanmar has demonstrated greater openness and cooperation with the United Nations and the international community. Now is the time for Myanmar's leadership to make the bold choices that will demonstrate that these efforts were not in vain and that Myanmar is ready to partner with the international community by making serious tangible progress in the areas of concern to the international community. If it does so, it will find that there is much goodwill out there to help it along the way. Myanmar is part of a dynamic and prosperous region. As the ASEAN countries have already demonstrated, they recognize that they also have a responsibility to support Myanmar's efforts towards a peaceful and stable future.

Mr. President,

As I emphasized from the beginning, the Secretary-General's good offices is a process not an event. It is important to recognize that one mission by itself cannot resolve the fundamental challenges facing Myanmar today. Advancing the causes of all-inclusive national reconciliation, democratization and full respect for human rights will require sustained engagement by the United Nations, including through the Secretary-General's good offices, with the active support of Myanmar's neighbours, ASEAN countries and the international community, including a united Security Council.

Thank you Mr. President.

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