

Statement on the Release of Political Prisoners in Burma

January 13, 2012

President Thein Sein's decision to release hundreds of prisoners of conscience is a substantial step forward for democratic reform. Two months ago, I spoke with Aung San Suu Kyi and President Thein Sein about how America's engagement can help empower democratic reform and improve relations between our countries. Shortly afterwards, Hillary Clinton became the first Secretary of State to travel to Burma in over half a century. In her meetings in Nay Pyi Taw and Rangoon, she discussed with President Thein Sein and other leaders the steps that would advance a new beginning between our countries. A key part of that discussion was the need to unconditionally release prisoners of conscience and allow them to participate fully in public and political life.

Since that visit, there have been a number of positive developments, including the announcement of elections to be held on April 1 and the decision to allow Aung San Suu Kyi and her party to participate. There has also been an important ceasefire agreement reached with the Karen National Union, which the United States welcomes. Today I applaud President Thein Sein's decision to release hundreds of prisoners of conscience, which is a crucial step in Burma's democratic transformation and national reconciliation process. I'm pleased that Aung San Suu Kyi has welcomed this step as she continues to pursue a dialogue with the Government. I urge the Government to ensure that these and all other former political prisoners are allowed to participate fully and freely in the political process, particularly the upcoming by-elections, and to free all remaining prisoners of conscience.

In Indonesia, I spoke about the flickers of progress that were emerging in Burma. Today that light burns a bit brighter as prisoners are reunited with their families and people can see a democratic path forward. Much more remains to be done to meet the aspirations of the Burmese people, but the United States is committed to continuing our engagement with the Government in Nay Pyi Taw. I have directed Secretary Clinton and my administration to take additional steps to build confidence with the Government and people of Burma so that we seize this historic and hopeful opportunity. We will continue to support universal rights and engage the Government as it takes the additional steps necessary to advance freedom for prisoners of conscience, democratic governance, and national reconciliation.

NOTE: The statement referred to Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the National League for Democracy in Burma.

Categories: Statements by the President : Burma, political prisoners, release.

Names: Aung San Suu Kyi; Clinton, Hillary Rodham; Thein Sein.

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