

Dr U Ne Oo
July 7, 1997.

Mr Alvaro de Soto
Assistant-Secretary-General
Department of Political Affairs
United Nations, New York N.Y.10017

Dear Sir,

re: Current political situation in Burma

I am writing to the Assistant-Secretary-General to inform current political situation in Burma. Following your visit of 7-10 May 1997, there has been unlawful arrest and detention of elected members and supporters of National League for Democracy party by the military government. By the end of May, the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) has approved the membership for Burma amidst protests by the international non-governmental organizations. The domestic political consequences for this development is still unknown. It however can be expected to be of a minimal impact on the population of Burma. On the positive side, the ASEAN has become an official avenue for the international community to approach military government in Burma. In late June, the American Heritage Foundation has visited Burma and reported to have met with both military authorities and members of National League for Democracy.

We continue to receive reports of displaced Rohingyas entering into Bangladesh. These displaced people reported the shortage of food(rice), forced labour and excessive taxation in their area. There has also been disturbing report of extrajudicial execution of civilians in Shan State by the Burmese military.

I believe that more efforts and coordinations between the United Nations agencies and international community at this stage are vital to advance the cause for democracy in Burma. I therefore appeal the United Nations and international community to take following measures in regard to the situation in Burma.

1. Contact group for Burma: The UN Secretary-General should make initiative to organize a group of eminent persons to support Aung San Suu Kyi and democracy movement in Burma. Previously, there have been initiatives in this regard by Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien and U.S. Ambassador Bill Richardson. Such a UN Contact group will certainly help the Burmese people in bringing democratic changes to Burma.

2. Ad hoc committee for refugees from Burma: Current political situation and refugee problem suggest that the immediate attention from the United Nations is necessary in order to the situation in Burma not developing into a hardening deadlock, which in the long-term will threaten regional stability. The Karens and other refugees from Burma, on the otherhand, have been in Thailand since 1984 with no solution in sight. Therefore, the High Commissioner for Refugees is urged to set up an Ad hoc regional committee, in accordance with the notes of 47th Executive Committee of the High Commissioners Program (A/AC.96/863 para.31, 1-July-1996), to tackle Burma's refugees and displaced people problem. The Asian Regional Forum, which include the ASEAN member countries, can be considered as a good basis for such a regional committee.

I believe that such initiative by the High Commissioner for Refugee will help encourage Burma's neighbouring states to assume their responsibilities in regard to protection, prevention and solution to Burma's refugee problem. This will also put pressure on the military government to enter peaceful negotiation with the opposition and ethnic minorities.

3. Promoting legal framework for organized repatriation: The number of displaced Burmese in Thailand is estimated to be 600,000, in addition to approximately 90,000 refugees at the border camps. There have been constant reports throughout the year of the Thai authorities forcibly repatriating the displaced people, especially of those from Shan and Mon ethnic groups, back to Burma.

In order to tackle this involuntary displacement problem, the UNHCR, Royal Thai Government and Burmese authorities should promote a memorandum of understanding for the safe and voluntary return of the refugees and displaced people. As a first step, the Royal Thai Government must be persuaded to grant the refugee status, on a group basis, to the Karen and other refugees living in the camps and RTG should allow the UNHCR to have unhindered access to these border areas. With the help of ASEAN and Asean Regional Forum, the United Nations should promote a legal framework and draw-up a Program of Action to solve the problem of displaced people.

The underlying reasons of involuntary displacement of Burmese in Thailand, at the core, are the same as those of refugees. The amelioration of the displacement situation can be expected only by solving refugee problem as a start. All Burma's neighbouring states must be made aware of this fact. In addition, the United Nations must assure the RTG that there will be no repeat of disastrous resettlement-traps for Burmese refugees in Thailand.

4. Improvement to the General Assembly resolution: To my observations, the UN General Assembly resolutions on Burma since 1994 have not been progressively moving along with the situation in Burma. The successive UNGA resolutions, certainly, have shown grave concerns about military government's human rights abuses in Burma. However, these resolutions are non-binding and, in my view, did not include recommendations that enable the international community to take appropriate actions.

In dealing with SLORC, it is inadequate for UNGA to simply express 'grave-concerns' about military's human rights abuses. The UNGA must construct its resolutions in certain ways so that the UN Agencies and international community can take follow-up actions. The resolution may recommend, for example, the UN Agencies to send human rights monitors to Burma, the military government to allow a free and unhindered access for UNHCR and NGOs in Burma. Specific measures to highlight the illegitimate nature of SLORC rulings should also be introduced in the resolution.

5. Funding of the repatriation program: There has been the possibility of SLORC receiving a large amount of revenue (\$400 million) from the oil companies after 1998. The UN is urged to make initiatives to channel the funds to possible refugee programs in Burma. There has been a precedent, for example in Iraq, to channel the sales of natural resources to the use of disadvantaged population. The Royal Thai Government as well as the business community should be informed of such possibility in Burma.

In closing, I should like to express my sincere thanks to you and the United Nations for your kind efforts made for the people of Burma.

Yours respectfully and sincerely,

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