

October 1, 2012

Myanmar President's Historic Visit to U.S. Opens New Chapter in Bilateral Ties

By Feng Yingqiu

Myanmar President U Thein Sein's week-long historic visit to the United States, which ended on Sunday, has opened a new chapter in the bilateral ties since the two countries establish diplomatic relations at ambassadorial level.

Thein Sein's visit to the U.S. from Sept. 24 to 30, which was the first by a Myanmar leader in 46 years, came 18 months after he assumed office in March 2011.

While in the U.S., Secretary of State Hillary Clinton paid a call on Thein Sein at the **Mark Hotel** in New York. U Thein Sein repeated his dedication to democratic transition, describing the U. S. recognition as a shot in the arm to Nay Pyi Taw to continue its chosen path.

Noting that it was the third meeting between the pair, Clinton said the U.S. has watched the steady reform process continued by the president and his cabinet and it is responding to every step of Nay Pyi Taw to acknowledge its reform efforts and to encourage further reform.

In recognition of the continued progress toward reform, the U.S. took a next step in normalizing commercial relationship between the two countries by easing U.S. restriction on import of Myanmar goods into the U.S..

Washington hoped that the action would provide opportunities to Myanmar people to sell their goods in U.S. market.

Clinton promised Thein Sein to continue consulting with U.S. Congress and other relevant stakeholders about additional steps.

Clinton also recognized the several efforts of the president, acknowledging his political reform and endeavors to bring an end to ethnic conflicts to ensure peace and stability in the country.

Besides, Thein Sein also held private talks with Chairman of Clinton's Global Initiative former U.S. President Bill Clinton and former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.

Moreover, he met with members of the Asia Society and leaders of the European Council, US-ASEAN Business Council and US Chamber of Commerce.

During his visit in the U.S., Thein Sein attended the 67th General Assembly of the United Nations in New York on Sept. 27, where he delivered his first ever speech as the president of Myanmar at the UN.

He said that his country will be participating more actively in UN activities in various fields and take challenges of the 21st century in a bold and resolute manner while standing as a responsible and respectable nation on the world stage.

"Myanmar is now ushering in a new era," he announced.

On domestic affairs, Thein Sein said Myanmar's parliament, the judiciary, the armed forces, the national races, political parties, civil societies and the people at large have been taking tangible irreversible steps in the democratic transition and reform process.

"Leaving behind a system of authoritarian government wherein the executive, legislative and judicial power were centralized, we have now been able to put in place a democratic government and a strong, viable parliament following a practice of check and balance," he said.

Citing encouraging and inclusive political process and significant development in the country, Thein Sein said "the government and other stakeholders have now been able to foster a new political culture of patience and dialogue."

Praising Aung San Suu Kyi as main opposition leader and Noble Peace Laureate for the first time, Thein Sein said, "As a Myanmar citizen, I would like to congratulate her for the honors she has received in this country (U.S.) in recognition of her efforts for democracy."

He maintained that "the political progress in our country is enhancing its political legitimacy. This in turn facilitates the creation of basic political stability thereby paving the way for economic and social transformation necessary for better living standard of the people."

In the economic sector, he stressed the need to pay careful attention to the investment in the extractive sector like energy to ensure transparency and impartiality.

Relating to ethnic conflicts in the country, he expressed belief that cessation of all armed conflicts are a prerequisite for the building of genuine democracy, saying that high priority is being placed on achieving a lasting peace in the country and disclosing that the government has so far produced ceasefire agreements with 10 ethnic armed groups.

"While further strengthening confidence building measures, we will continue the peace talks," he said, citing the holding of informal consultations for such move with the Kachin Independence Army (KIA).

Regarding the issue of communal violence in western Rakhine state, he held that the issue will be resolved by taking short- term and long-term measures through a multifaceted approach taking into account political, economic and social aspects.

He said being an independent and sovereign state, Myanmar has the right to secure its border and safeguard and protect its sovereignty and pledged to do its utmost to solve the issue in line with international norms.

Pointing out that Myanmar's democratic transformation process is a complex and delicate one that requires patience, the president called for understanding and support from the UN and its member states, the international community as a whole and the people of Myanmar and stressed the importance to view Myanmar from a different and new perspective.

Near the end of his visit in New York, Thein Sein met with UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon and had talks on continued cooperation between Myanmar and the UN and extension of UN development aid to the country.

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