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Passed on to Webb staff comments regarding our appreciation for his role. Kurt

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE
Office of the Spokesperson

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BACKGROUND BRIEFING

Senior State Department Official on Recent Developments on Burma

January 13, 2012
Washington, D.C.

MODERATOR: All right, everybody. We are delighted today to follow the President's statement and the Secretary's statement on events in Burma with a background briefing for you with a senior State Department official. For your records it is [Senior State Department Official] to give you a little bit more texture on where we are. Take it away, [Senior State Department Official].

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Thank you, [Moderator]. And again, let me just apologize. I'm sorry to keep you guys waiting. We've had a lot of calls and developments over the course of the last couple of hours. So I'll just give you guys – I'm sure you've followed much of this, but I'll give you my context and then be happy to take your questions going forward.

I think as you know, yesterday or I guess today, January 12th and into the 13th, the Burmese President Thein Sein granted amnesty to 651 prisoners, as best as we can tell. And I'll talk more about that in a moment. And we view this as a significant development and a very positive one. This morning, the President, as [Moderator] indicated, and the Secretary issued statements welcoming – U.S. support. The Secretary gave a presentation – public presentation at about 11 a.m. this morning. As you know, the Secretary when she was in Nay Pyi Taw indicated that we would be prepared to match --

OPERATOR: Excuse me. This is the operator. I would like to inform all parties that today's call is now being recorded. If you have any objections you may disconnect at this time. Parties on the phone will remain in listen only until it's time for questions. *1 to ask a question. I'll turn it over to [Moderator].

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Thank you.

MODERATOR: Operator, with regret, we have already started. Welcome to our colleagues on the phone. For your records, the background briefer today is [Senior State Department Official]. [Senior State Department Official] has already started, so we will catch you up later, phone folks, and we will come to you at question time as well.

Go back to where you were, [Senior State Department Official]. Thanks.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: So, again, action for action. And Secretary Clinton in her statement today indicated that we were beginning a process immediately towards exchanging ambassadors, and that will be part of a larger effort to see areas that we can support the reform effort that is underway inside the country. The Secretary also indicated that she will be speaking with Aung San Suu Kyi and President Thein Sein over the weekend as we schedule calls to exchange views on recent developments.

I just want to underscore that the releases have taken place across a whole series of prisons across the country. And so we are trying as best we can to monitor developments on the ground or be in touch with family members. So far, everything that has been publicly reported by the government appears to be in alignment with what we are seeing on the ground.

The reports so far indicate that many of the political prisoners have secured an unconditional release. Some have signed a specific waiver which would require them not to engage in certain quote/quote "illegal activities." We are, frankly, urging the government to follow through on unconditional release. But it must be said that many of these people have chosen to accept this step; and from many of our conversations over the course of the evening, I think they are both grateful for the chance to rejoin civil society but also have a full intention to participate actively in the public affairs of the country going forward.

We are in close contact with advocacy groups and family members about developments on the ground. I think you will have seen there are kind of visual displays of jubilation. We're being careful. We obviously welcome this, but we're going to want to see the full details and continue to work closely with various international partners and friends on this.

Let me just tell you, in terms of the releases of this group, this 651, we think they have either released or offered release to a substantial number of what we would call the top-level or high-profile political activists. And that include members of the so-called '88 Generation Student Group that led the 1988 uprising and participated -- some who also participated in the 2007 Saffron Revolution. Taken in its total, this is one of the largest political -- releases of political prisoners in Asia's history. And if you add up the total amount of time spent in prison, it's hundreds of years. And so it's very substantial in that respect. And as we've indicated, the Secretary and the President have supported this and look forward to continuing steps.

We have already had a number of calls. We've been in touch with all of our friends and allies in Asia. We will continue those consultations in Europe and elsewhere in order to best support the process. The Secretary has spoken with Senator McCain, this morning with Senator McConnell, who will be flying later today to Burma for meetings with the government and with Aung San Suu Kyi, with Senator Lieberman and Senator Webb. She also thanked each of them, and particularly Senator Webb, for the strong guidance, support, and advice they have provided to us over the course of the last few years.

I must say just a word about Senator Webb. He has pioneered many of these actions. He was one of the first senators on the ground pushing for the release of political prisoners, asking for the United States to engage actively. And I think the Secretary wanted me to underscore our gratitude for his service not only in the Senate but basically as a diplomat in the Senate, and that has been significant.

In addition, since the Secretary has left – she was there on December 1st – since she has left we've seen a number of things since her departure. When we were there, we asked for international organizations such as the International Red Cross, elements of the UN, to be given access to areas of – where there has been serious fighting, in some places for decades. That -- we now have the Red Cross and other UN groups on the ground in places where they have not been in the past.

Secondly, we asked – we called on the government to declare clearly the date for elections – by-elections. They were announced two weeks ago. They will take place on April 1st. And I think as you all have seen, Aung San Suu Kyi and her party have been – made very clear their determination to contend in those elections. And they have been – they've been able to take all the necessary steps to both register and to take actions on the ground that will allow them to be competitive going forward.

We have also seen substantial interactions between the government and various ethnic groups. Probably the most significant was yesterday, the leaders of the Karen National Union, that is the KNU, signed a ceasefire agreement with the Burmese Government Thursday, January 12th. This is one of the longest running insurgencies on the planet, basically started in 1947-1948. This is the beginning of a process. But Ambassador Mitchell – Derek Mitchell's on the ground – talked to many of the interlocutors. They feel that the time is right; they believe they're going to approach the next phase of negotiations in an atmosphere of greater trust, and we will be encouraging this effort going forward.

This is, frankly, very substantial. At the key to peace and stability and progress in Burma – what others call Myanmar – is these substantial challenges: ethnic violence, horrible abuse. And the fact that the government has taken these steps seriously on top of the political dynamic with Aung San Suu Kyi, the release of political prisoners, is significant.

Let me just say that there's still more work to be done. We still call on the government to unconditionally release all political prisoners, those that are remain. We want the process that has played out with the KNU to be replicated across the country: ceasefires in place, serious political negotiations to begin, steps that will allow for the broadening of political and civic activity, and implementation of legislation that would protect freedoms of assembly, speech, and association.

Let me just also say that next week, Assistant Secretary Tom Countryman will be in Burma for high-level consultations on several issues. We have made clear our determination that the military ties between the two countries going forward be severed between North Korea and Burma. And we will be talking with them about Nay Pyi Taw's intention to sign the Additional Protocol of the IAEA. That still has not been finalized, but there are substantial progress that have been made in recent weeks.

All told, this is a substantial effort. It is multidimensional. And it is deserving of American and international support. And the Secretary has charged us to work closely with the White House and other agencies in government to ensure that we are putting in place a series of potential actions, not only to push for further reform, but also to recognize the steps that have been taken to date.

I'm sorry to go on so long, but that's the background. Happy to take questions or suggestions. She'll get us.

MODERATOR: Okay, we're going to take about six or eight, and then we're going to have to let [Senior State Department Official] go. We're going to take about three or four from the room, some from the phone, and come back to the room.

Elise.

QUESTION: Can you talk a little bit more about the next steps in terms of the action for action, and what specific action you would like to see before you could consider lifting U.S. sanctions? And a – just a tangential: When do you anticipate , now that you're exchanging ambassadors and strengthening ties, when you would consider this country Myanmar and not Burma anymore? Would you wait for Aung San Suu Kyi to make such a declaration?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Yeah. Thank you, Elise. There are many – let's take the second part – there are many factors that go into the second question. And I think that that will require not only a dialogue with Aung San Suu Kyi and others inside the country, but a substantial dialogue with some of the key stakeholders in the country, here in the United States, and in other international organizations. I think we adhere to the use of the term – the reference to the country as Burma, but I think – the Secretary and Aung San Suu Kyi discussed this matter when they were together in Nay Pyi Taw, and I think this is an issue that will be addressed in due course.

On the first issue, look, I think our most immediate task is to begin the process of an exchange of ambassadors, and we will begin that effort immediately. We're also looking at a number of following through on the steps that the Secretary had indicated when she was in Nay Pyi Taw and Rangoon in early December. Those steps involve potential remains recovery, assessment teams supporting certain efforts associated with capacity building, legal reform, medical issues. We have worked with a number of nonprofit and other groups that are involved in these efforts, and we want to support that going forward.

I think it would be fair to say that since our return, the Secretary and others, we've been involved in a broad conversation about the appropriate next steps. Much of what we had considered, frankly, required the kind of step that we have seen today – a substantial release of political prisoners.

So I think we will beginning a dialogue with our key counterparts on Capitol Hill who played such an important role in how sanctions and other restrictive steps are both implemented and interpreted. And that's one of the reasons that the first call that the Secretary made this morning was to Senator McConnell. She's going to be looking forward to talking with him immediately on his return.

MODERATOR: Kim Ghattas, BBC.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Hey, Kim.

QUESTION: [Senior State Department Official], hi. Thank you. I understand that this is a lengthy process and that you have to test the willingness of the Burmese authorities to really continue on this path towards reform, but you could argue – I mean, they've done quite a bit since the Secretary visited in December, and all they're getting is an ambassador. That's not very much as a reward. I mean, how important is it for them?

And then a second question is: To what extent is this your success? I mean, not you personally but – as well, but the Administration's success, the success of its positive engagement towards Burma? And to what extent is it simply a Burmese decision to do this?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Yeah. Well, first of all, let me say that as you look at the course of the last several months, one of the most important signals that we have sent is the visit of the Secretary herself – first visit of a Secretary of State in over 50 years, a major respectful engagement. And that carries, I think, incalculable consequence, not only internationally but for the regime itself.

It is also the case that – as we indicated, that we would be taking steps, and I will just note that immediately upon taking the steps that were announced yesterday, we made our reciprocal step with respect to an intention to move forward on an exchange of ambassadors. We've been very clear with the authorities in Nay Pyi Taw and in consultation with Aung San Suu Kyi what our game plan is for going forward. The government understood that – what we were prepared to do and where we're prepared to go.

And all I can tell you is mostly what we have received is appreciation for our engagement, for the respect with which the United States has approached the relationship to date and what we were prepared to do going forward. And I think one of the most important things for the United States in this respect is not to over-promise and under-deliver. This is going to require a substantial set of interactions and consultations, not only with key stakeholders inside the country but also with some of the groups, organizations, senators and the like, who have been so deeply, passionately committed to the relationship going forward.

And so I have no reservations about how we have done this, and I think it's been appropriate. And you will note that it's only been a few hours since the formal release that you have very clear statements and indications of the way forward by the President and the Secretary of State.

The – what goes into the potion that leads to a decision for reform is impossible to firmly sort of determine and calculate. But I would simply say that since the beginning of the Administration, the President, the Secretary of State, and other key officials have underscored our determination to work and to meet and to match steps that were taken inside the country on the path to reform, and that's exactly what we're doing. And so I don't think it's important so much to sort of judge about where did this begin, where did this process begin. Ultimately, we believe that there are many voices and factors that go into this, not least of which are many of the people that were released today, some of whom have suffered for decades in very horrible conditions, all in pursuit of democracy and a better life for their people.

MODERATOR: Wouldn't you think it's fair to say that this is – this progress is Burmese success --

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Yeah.

MODERATOR: -- supported by the United States and the international community?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: That's much better. This is why [Moderator] is the [title] and I am not. So in one sentence, [Moderator] said it better than I did.

MODERATOR: But I would also more broadly remind that when the President came to office, when the Secretary began her job, more broadly they were committed to trying to reengage in many parts of the world where we had had frozen relationships. As you see in this instance, that has been positive in some cases. In other cases, the offers that we've made of progress have not been reciprocated with steps on the ground. So this just speaks to the effort to try and what it can produce.

MODERATOR: Andy.

QUESTION: I have just a quick one. First, on the number you cited of 651 names, has the U.S. been able to – are you trying to verify that specific number?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Oh, of course. Yeah.

QUESTION: And has that been verified?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: No.

QUESTION: I've seen different reports.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: No. And – but so far, the names that have been given to us, we have been able to validate. I think this will take several more days to fully confirm all the details.

QUESTION: But you had a – you have a list of 651 names?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: No. They have not given us a formal list of – they've given us some of the people that will be released. And those – that seems to match up. But frankly, this is going to take a substantial period. We are also looking to align that – the most recent release with the list that Assistant Secretary Posner provided them on our visit in December in terms of the people that we would look to see released.

QUESTION: Okay. And --

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: But can I also make one other point? That what is also interesting is that in addition to political prisoners, some former military people have also been released, and so one of the most significant people released was the previous military leader who actually put most of these people in prison. So it's a fascinating sort of – just --

MODERATOR: And with regard to those of you who follow names, there were some names given to me to use today that we believe are on the list, and Darragh can help you with those after the briefing.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: And I've got them as well, but we --

MODERATOR: Yeah.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: But – happy to help as we go forward.

MODERATOR: For our colleagues on the phone, Operator, are you there with us?

OPERATOR: Yes. If you would like to ask a question over the phone, it's *1 and then record your name.

MODERATOR: Do you have any calls registered, Operator, now?

OPERATOR: Yes, ma'am. Your first question, Josh Rogin, *Foreign Policy* magazine.

QUESTION: Thank you very much. I apologize if you covered this before we were added to the call, but I'm wondering, what's the timeline for sending the ambassador? Also, have you seen any demonstrable reduction in violence towards ethnic groups? I mean, ceasefires have been violated multiple times before. And third, do you plan to focus on reducing sanctions and penalties that don't require congressional approval, such as banking sanctions and Executive Order sanctions? Is that a correct way to characterize the next steps of this process? Thank you.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Thank you, Josh. It's difficult to fully ascertain whether there has been a diminution of violence in ethnic areas. But I would say, as the Secretary indicated and we have continued to point out, that there still are unacceptably high levels of violence in ethnic areas, and that continues. Now the most recent ceasefire between the KNU and the government is significant, largely because of how little interaction there has been in the past between the government and the KNU.

But I think you were right to point out, Josh, we have to see what the steps are subsequently on the ground. And as we indicated before you were added, this is really the most serious and sensitive issue inside

the country, which is what is the status of ethnic violence, ethnic interactions between the government and the various groups across the countryside. So I think it would probably – the best answer would be: It is too soon to tell whether there has been a substantial improvement in violence on the ground, but we will continue to call for that and work closely with our allies and friends to push that forward.

Secondly, I don't need to tell you, Josh, that the process of an ambassadorial nomination, it's vetting, both in the Executive Branch and then, subsequently, on the Legislative calendar, is, in the best of circumstances, challenging. Obviously, we have a dynamic situation currently between the Executive and Legislative Branches. I would simply say that the Secretary is committed to begin that process. She will consult closely with the key players on Capitol Hill. Many of them will be able to test for themselves over the course of the next couple of days, including Senator McConnell, about what he thinks is going on inside the country and whether this is an appropriate step or not. We believe it is, and we'll work closely on that.

MODERATOR: And of course, the President has to nominate an individual before this process can begin.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Yeah, that's right. The President – that's right. Thank you. The President --

QUESTION: And back on my question regarding – the Executive-driven sanctions versus the Legislative-driven sanctions?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Yeah. Look, and thank you for that. I was going to get to that, Josh. You didn't give me a chance to – look, we have looked carefully. As you can imagine, there is a – Burma is among the most sanctioned countries in the world. Many of them are interlocking, and overlapping. Any steps that we would take along these lines would require substantial consultation and engagement not only in the Executive Branch but in Congress and with other key stakeholders. We're prepared to begin that process and we will, as the Secretary indicated, match their steps with ours.

The most important step today is the ambassadorial nomination. Obviously, we're going to be watching closely at the by-elections on April 1st as well.

MODERATOR: We're going to take one more --

QUESTION: And do you have someone in mind for ambassador? And is it Mike Green?

MODERATOR: Josh, you know we're not going to answer that question. It's a good effort, however.

MODERATOR: May we, Operator, please have the next question on the phone? Then we're going to take one more from the room and then I'm going to have to let [Senior State Department Official] go.

OPERATOR: Next question, Lachlan Carmichael, AFP News Agency.

QUESTION: Hi, [Senior State Department Official]. Yeah, it's about Senator McConnell's visit. Do you expect him to increase the momentum for – increase – to remove sanctions?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I wouldn't want to prejudge Senator McConnell. I would just simply say he has been deeply committed to the relationship for years, counts Aung San Suu Kyi as one of his personal inspirations. We have briefed his team closely. As I said, the Secretary talked with him directly today. He is knowledgeable, committed. We, frankly, very much look forward to meeting with him after he returns, and we want to work for – work closely with him on the way forward.

One of the things that he has noted that we underscore is that the foreign policy engagement of Burma has been bipartisan. We appreciate his strong commitment and his determination to travel there now, and we have sought to provide him with as much information. And again, we'll very much look forward to meeting with him on his immediate return.

MODERATOR: Okay. Last one here, please.

QUESTION: Hello. Matthew Pennington from AP.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Hi.

QUESTION: You mentioned that there had been some progress in the recent weeks towards Burma signing the additional protocol. Can you elaborate a little bit more on that and how important you think it is for the IAEA to be allowed into the country if sanctions are going to be lifted?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Yeah. Look, we have had some high-level interactions with the foreign ministry and other senior officials around the president. The government has indicated to us and to other interlocutors in ASEAN of their intention to very seriously consider the necessary steps. They're studying those now. When Secretary Clinton visited, the president and others told her that they were leaning towards moving in this direction. We want to reinforce that effort, and we'll seek to do so in terms of next steps.

The – what was the second part of your question? I'm sorry.

QUESTION: How important do you think it is for them to do that if sanctions are eventually going to be lifted?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Look, our – we think it's important. Our primary focus right now is on what we would consider to be the full implementation of UN Security Council resolutions with respect to certain military interactions between Burma and North Korea. Those have spanned certain areas, but the issue and the area that we have been most focused on is in the realm of missiles.

MODERATOR: Which is further to why the Secretary is also sending Assistant Secretary Tom Countryman next week to work with the Burmese on these issues.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I can take one more.

MODERATOR: Okay. Generous [Senior State Department Official] wants to take one more. Right here, and then we're going to close it down.

QUESTION: Thank you very much. My name is (inaudible). Can you talk a little bit more about the relations between Burma and North Korea, (inaudible)? What is the main concern that U.S. has about that issue? (Inaudible) right now, so what will U.S. require to the Burmese Government to sort out these issues?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Well, first of all, let me just thank very much the strong support that Senator Lugar and his staff, Keith Luse and others, have provided on this issue. And we've worked closely with them on it. The previous government led by Than Shwe, one of the senior generals has told us that he was involved in the negotiations between Burma and North Korea. His name is Shwe Mann. He is now in the congress of Burma.

Frankly, he indicated that probably he had some regret about that. Most of those interactions, we believe, are in the arena of small arms – some combat equipment, but also missiles. We have indicated that it is missile sales. In particular, all of these things are in violation of UN Security Council resolutions. But it is particularly

missiles that we are concerned with. And we have consistently made clear, both to the government in Pyongyang but also in Nay Pyi Taw and also to associated countries in the surrounding region, of our determination to see those contacts end.

We have asked the current government for a commitment not to enter into new contracts of this sort with Pyongyang. Our primary interests obviously are – this proliferation of missiles to Southeast Asia is not in the interests of any of the countries in the region. It could spike regional tensions. We are also obviously concerned by a provision of hard currency to the regime in North Korea. And these kinds of surreptitious connections with respect to proliferation, we believe, undermine a larger peace and stability.

MODERATOR: I know all of us could keep [Senior State Department Official] here all afternoon because he's so informative. Just to remind everybody, including our followers on the phone, that this was a background briefing, Senior State Department Official.

Thank you very much, [Senior State Department Official].

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Thank you all very much. Hope you have a good weekend and a good three-day holiday.

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