

RELEASE IN FULL

Transcript of Senator McConnell's remarks to the Press in Naypyitaw, Burma
Thingaha Hotel
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3:15pm

SENATOR MCCONNELL: Good afternoon everyone. As you may know, I've been in your country for the last two days. I've had an opportunity to talk to Aung San Suu Kyi for an hour and a half and get her analysis of the progress that's being made here. And then today an opportunity to meet with President Thein Sein, the Foreign Minister, the Defense Minister, and other ministers. The one clear impression one gets from everyone with whom I have spoken here is that reform is for real.

I think everybody believes that the country needs to go in a different direction. So it's not just a question of a new constitution, a new government, elections coming up April 1, the by-elections. But also the view of all of that. I heard the same message from literally everyone. That there's a level of serious about the reforms in this country that makes it highly likely that it will occur.

So as somebody who has watched events in this country for some 20 years, I must say this is the first time that I have been genuinely optimistic about the future. I'm convinced as I go back to Washington and review these matters with my colleagues that reform is clearly on the agenda here and likely to stay on the agenda.

So with that, let me throw it open for whatever you may wish to inquire.

QUESTION: Didier Lauras, AFP. Obviously, as you said, you've been a long-time watcher, so your opinion is influential, important. Are you going to ask for the sanctions to be lifted in some kind of ... what would be your ideal timing, and what would you ask?

SENATOR MCCONNELL: As some of you may know, I was the author of most of the sanctions legislation that's been passed in Washington over the last years. My view of that is similar to what Secretary Clinton has already said publicly, which is that what we're looking for is reciprocity. As the country moves forward down the path of reform, then we will review the sanctions. As you know, we've already responded to the events to date by the announcement by Secretary Clinton that the Administration is going to recommend an ambassador, which we will consider under our Constitution in the U.S. Senate. So that's an indication of our pleasure at what has happened so far. And I hope we will be to the position in the not-too-distant future that I and others can be recommending lifting the sanctions. So it's going to be step-by-step. As we see further steps down the road toward reform, we'll consider lifting sanctions.

QUESTION: The Myanmar government has been claiming that the U.S. government has been backing Aung San Suu Kyi through the imposition of sanctions. Is that true? And will the lifting of sanctions be the final answer to the question of whether or not the Burmese government is a democratic government?

SENATOR MCCONNELL: Well first, obviously Aung San Suu Kyi view about the appropriateness of the lifting of sanctions is something that will carry a lot of weight with members of the U.S. government including myself. So how she feels about the direction of reforms will have a lot of influence on us in the United States related to the decision to lift sanctions.

QUESTION: What is your view on Myanmar's parliamentary system that is governed by the military?

SENATOR MCCONNELL: Well, it's not up to the United States to determine what kind of government you have here. You all decide what kind of government you're going to have. But the things we're going to be looking at are things like the ceasefire with the Karen... can that be established with the Kachin? Can you make further progress to make good relationships with all of the ethnic groups? Those are the kinds of things that we're going to be looking to as examples of further progress that would lead to lifting of one or several or all of the sanctions.

QUESTION: I think one of the questions that many people have wondered is how is it possible to see such important reforms from the people that were in power before. Basically they are the same. Lots of them have just retired from the Army. How do you explain what has happened in the past year compared with what has happened in the past 20 years? How do you explain that?

SENATOR MCCONNELL: My view is that the most important thing is not the people, but the policy. You know, the same group of people can adopt different policies. And it seems to me, whether you have a lot of the same individuals involved in the new government that you did in the old government is not the main point. The main point is, are the policies changing? And it strikes me that by any objective standard, things like the ceasefire with the Karen, things like establishing a date for the by-elections, things like underscoring the importance of having free and fair elections... it's the policy, I think, that is the most important thing. And we anticipate.. I hope it will be the case.. that there will be opposition members in the congress after April 1st. That would be further evidence of an evolving democracy. So to me it's not so much the individuals as it is the policy. And it looks to me as if the policies are definitely changing.

QUESTION: So what do you think about whether sanctions have worked, or not?

SENATOR MCCONNELL: Oh gosh, you know, I don't know the various factors that have been at work here to bring about reform in this country. I'm not going to judge what brought that about. But it's happening. By any objective standard, it's happening. If sanctions were helpful, then that's a good thing. I think demands from the people in this country for new and more responsive government has certainly been a factor. I think, by all accounts, public opinion was a major factor in the decision to cancel the Myitsone Dam. I think responsiveness to public opinion is what happens in a genuine democracy. And you see evidence of that all around you here in this country.

QUESTION: Have you met also other members of the opposition in Yangon, and do you agree that in some respects the West has had this tendency to look exclusively at Aung San Suu Kyi as the leader of the opposition... but that the opposition is actually more complex than this?

SENATOR MCCONNELL: I've met with other members of the opposition, as well as with representatives of the various ethnic groups. I think I had at least two different meetings with a number of different groups. So I think I've gotten a pretty good cross-section.. beyond Aung San Suu Kyi.. a pretty good cross-section of the various groups in this country, ethnic and otherwise. I think I've certainly had that opportunity over the last couple of days.

Okay, thank you everyone. Good luck.