

MR SPEAKER'S SPEECH AT RANGOON UNIVERSITY, BURMA
1 August 2013

It is an enormous privilege and honour, and a personal joy, for me to be with you here today. I come not only as Speaker of the House of Commons in the British Parliament, but perhaps more significantly as a friend of the people of this country, to salute those who have struggled for so long at great cost for the cause of freedom, democracy, human rights and peace; to encourage those who are working for change; and to offer whatever practical assistance we can to all those who wish to build a better future for this beautiful country.

In the past two years, President Thein Sein and his Government have introduced measures which have changed the atmosphere significantly, and opened the way for a transition to democracy and freedom after decades of brutal military rule. It is absolutely right that the international community should recognise the changes that have been implemented, applaud the reforms, welcome the positive steps and encourage all parties engaged in the reform process to continue further along this path. When dictators unclench their fists, they should be met with outstretched hands.

And so today, both on behalf of the British Parliament and as a long-time friend of this country personally, I join others in welcoming the changes that have been introduced: the release of most political prisoners, greater freedom of expression for the media, increased space for civil society, greater participation in the political process by opposition parties, and the establishment of preliminary ceasefires with most of the ethnic nationalities.

DASSK is a heroine for humanity and, alongside Nelson Mandela, the greatest freedom fighter in the world today. The fact that Daw Suu, for so many years the international symbol of your struggle, now sits in Parliament rather than under house arrest, symbolises the fact that your country is changing. The fact that alongside her in Parliament are 42 of her colleagues from the National League for Democracy, many of whom spent years in prison, is remarkable. The fact that the leaders of the 88 Generation, whom I had the privilege of meeting in London last month, are not only released from decades-long jail terms but are engaging so openly, actively and admirably in the political and civil life of this country once again is another important sign that the political atmosphere of the country has changed in an extraordinary way. And the fact that I am able to be here today speaking in these terms is yet more evidence of the first steps towards the development of a freer and more open society.

But I am under no illusions whatsoever about the challenges ahead. These changes, these signs of openness, these glimmers of hope, represent a welcome change of atmosphere, but they need to go much further and deeper if there is to be a fundamental change of system. There is, as you will know far better than me, a very very long way still to go. You are just at the very beginning of the path towards democracy and peace – and the international community must remember that. We must welcome positive steps when they occur; we must encourage deeper reform; but we must be vigilant in guarding against premature euphoria which is as misplaced as it is desperately dangerous.

I know that there are still political prisoners in jail today. If democracy is to be truly established, and secured, there must be no political prisoners at all. As Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has said, one political prisoner is one too many. There can be no place in an open and democratic society for arbitrary arrests, repressive laws that attempt to curtail or silence dissent, or the imprisonment of people simply for daring to criticise the Government or

express an alternative opinion. Freedom of thought, freedom of conscience, freedom of religion, freedom belief and freedom of expression, including the freedom to protest, are the bedrock of a democratic and open society. So I hope that the President and the Government will release, and release unconditionally, all remaining political prisoners as a matter of urgency, and in so doing, signal their seriousness about real, lasting, irreversible reform.

In addition to releasing unconditionally remaining political prisoners, there is a need for a thorough review of legislation, and the repeal of all repressive laws. I hope the Government, and the Parliament, will work with the international community to ensure that legislation is in accordance with international human rights standards, and if Britain and our Parliament can offer any assistance to help your Parliament develop skills and capacity needed for drafting laws and other aspects of law-making, we would be delighted to do so.

However, even if political prisoners are freed and repressive legislation repealed, if the Constitution itself hinders democracy, a meaningful transition will be hindered. So there is an urgent need for amendments to the Constitution, including the clauses relating to the eligibility of candidates for the presidency, and the system of governance for the ethnic states, if the reform process is to be genuinely inclusive and legitimate.

None of these steps, however, will deliver true freedom and democracy if there is not a genuine peace in the country, and it is here that I wish to speak most frankly and personally.

Just over nine years ago, I travelled to Burma for the first time. The differences between that visit and this one are stark. On that occasion, I did not enter the country on a visa, or visit the cities. I did not meet with Government officials. Instead, I visited internally displaced Karen peoples in the jungles across the border from Thailand, and Karen and Karenni refugees on the Thai side of the border. I met people who had fled attacks by the Tatmadaw, sometimes multiple times – people whose homes had been burned down, crops destroyed, loved ones killed. I met children who had seen their parents shot dead in front of them; and parents who had seen their children killed in front of them. I met women who had been raped, and men who had been taken for forced labour. I heard appalling stories of excruciating torture. Indeed the testimonies I heard were to some of the most egregious abuses of human rights that can have been practised anywhere by anyone at any time.

That visit was the beginning of my own personal commitment to your country. I returned to the Thai border with colleagues from the House of Commons three years later in May 2007. In September 2007 I travelled to the India border, to visit the Chin people, where I heard further stories of forced labour, rape, torture and religious persecution. I did what I could, as a Member of Parliament before I was elected Speaker, to raise the plight of the ethnic nationalities, as well as the wider struggle for freedom and democracy, regularly in Parliament, because such barbaric and gross violations of human rights cannot and must not be tolerated. Between November 2003 and June 2009, I tabled 343 written questions about Burma and mentioned your country in no fewer than 46 question times and debates in parliament. I did so for the good reason that the subject of the fight for democracy in Burma needed to be raised again and again and again. For as Martin Luther King once said, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere”.

I welcome the Government’s efforts to engage in talks with the ethnic armed groups, and I welcome the establishment of ceasefires with many of the armed groups. But just as the political changes I have witnessed and described mark merely the very beginning of the

process of democratisation, so too the fragile preliminary ceasefires must lead to something more substantial if they are to result in a genuine peace. As one Karen activist told me, “ceasefires are about just pressing the pause button – we need to press the stop button” to end more than 65 years of civil war. So I wish to encourage the Government to go further and engage in a genuine nationwide peace process, involving a political dialogue with the ethnic nationalities.

Without a political solution, the root causes of conflict will not be addressed and peace will not be achieved. The desire of the ethnic nationalities, as is well known, is for a federal system, in which they are granted some autonomy, and in which equal rights are respected for all. The cultures and languages of the different ethnic nationalities must be protected and respected. This is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation, and that diversity is what makes it so rich and beautiful. Diversity should be celebrated. Only with a true application of the principle ‘unity in diversity’ can peace be achieved.

I welcome the remarks by several very senior leaders in Government and Parliament, displaying an openness to consider the idea of federalism. I hope that such openness will translate into a real dialogue process. I know in the past that ‘federalism’ has been a word viewed with alarm by some in this country, but it would appear it has been misunderstood. I hope policy-makers will now have the opportunity to study different models of federalism from different parts of the world, and see that, far from leading to the fragmentation of a country, federalism can provide a way of strengthening and uniting the country. Some of the world’s most successful economies and democracies are federal systems – the United States, Germany, Switzerland, India and Australia, to name just five.

A free, peaceful and democratic future for your country can be built on these foundations – the release of political prisoners, legislative and constitutional reform, a nationwide peace process involving a political dialogue leading to a federal system in which equal rights are protected and diversity is celebrated. There is, however, one further element without which peace and democracy cannot be achieved: respect for human rights, including religious freedom, justice and the rule of law.

The stories I have heard from the conflict in Kachin State over the past two years are deeply disturbing. They are very similar to the testimonies I heard myself from the Karen, Karenni, Shan and Chin people in the past. In the past two years, it is reported that at least 100,000 Kachin civilians have been displaced; more than 200 villages destroyed, including at least 66 churches; rape, forced labour, torture and killing of civilians are all still happening.

These acts of violence, these abuses which could amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity, must stop. The culture of impunity must end. If the President’s reforms are to be believed, there must be a concerted, unremitting and transparent effort to change the behaviour of the Tatmadaw, to end these widespread and systematic abuses which result in so much injustice and loss of life.

Today, I say clearly and unambiguously to the President, the Government and the military, as a friend of this country and its people: stop the war; stop the killings; stop the torture; stop the rapes; stop forced labour. Only then can the people of this beautiful but benighted country – whether in Kachin State or in other parts of the country – begin to rebuild their lives, not only physically but spiritually as well, to reconcile, and to build a better future for all.

In this multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation – home to Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Animists – respect for religious diversity and freedom is essential. I understand that in Buddhism you have two principles, ‘Metta’ (loving kindness) and ‘Karuna’ (compassion). I hope that the appalling violence we have seen over the past year – in Rakhine State, and in Meikhtila, Oakkan, Lashio and other towns and cities – will cease, and that the country and all its people, of whatever religion, will be filled with a new spirit of Metta and Karuna. For the spirit of Metta and Karuna is not limited to Buddhism. All the great religions have similar teachings to these. These are the teachings that unite us, people of different races and religions, for they are the teachings of humanity – and they are fundamental to democracy.

If such violence and hatred continue, they threaten to undermine all that has been achieved in the past two years, and to snatch from you the freedom and democracy for which you have struggled so long just when they appear at last to be in sight.

A country in which one particular religious or racial minority is made to feel they do not belong; a country in which a particular religious or racial minority is subjected to campaigns of hatred and violence; a country in which, despite being born in the country, people from one particular racial group are denied citizenship and rendered stateless – can never be a country free and at peace. So it is vital that everyone who desires true freedom, democracy and peace for this country should unite to oppose intolerance and hatred. Voices of peace and justice from all religious and political groups must work together to oppose the intolerant minority. I urge the Government to ensure that the police and security forces act swiftly and effectively to prevent further violence, protect vulnerable communities and bring the perpetrators of such hatred and violence to justice. I call upon the Government, and Parliament, urgently to review and revise the 1982 Citizenship Law, to bring it in line with international human rights norms. I call for a genuinely independent analysis of the Rohingya people’s history in Burma, so that misunderstandings can be corrected, misinformation countered and prejudices addressed. I call on the Government and civil society to invest in initiatives for inter-religious and inter-racial dialogue and reconciliation. And I applaud religious, political and civil society leaders who are already beginning this vital work.

But I am not here just to tell the Government what we expect of them. I am also here, along with my colleagues, to offer our assistance. Just over a year ago, I had the privilege – one of the greatest privileges of my professional life --of introducing Daw Aung San Suu Kyi as she addressed our Parliament in Westminster Hall. During her address she specifically requested support from us to help strengthen your own Parliament. She asked Britain as “one of the oldest parliamentary democracies” in the world “to consider what it can do to help build the sound institutions needed to support a nascent parliamentary democracy”. Since then, in addition to groups of UK MPs visiting Burma, I have been pleased to welcome two delegations of Burmese parliamentarians in December 2012 and April 2013. The Bills committee and the Public Accounts Committee came to engage with us on the issues of law-making and legislative scrutiny.

As this country develops the institutions of democracy, strengthening the role of Parliament is vital. Parliament exists in a democratic society to represent the people, to scrutinise the executive, to ensure not only the rule of law but good law, and to hold those who govern to account.

In our Parliament in Britain – known as the ‘Mother of Parliaments’ – we do not claim to get it all right. On the contrary, we make plenty of mistakes. But we have the advantage of experience and history, of lessons learned from our mistakes. We would never presume to suggest that our system is the only model for parliamentary democracy, nor the best, nor the model that you should emulate. But if there is knowledge, experience, expertise and ideas that we may be able to share, that – adapted to your own context, culture and customs – could help Parliamentarians in Naypyidaw strengthen their role, and ensure greater scrutiny, better laws, more transparency and accountability, and better government of, by and for the people, if there is a contribution we can make, then as friends of this country and its people, we would be delighted to be of service.

There is an Asian saying to the effect that a journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step. You have embarked on a new path in your journey towards freedom, democracy, justice and peace. It is a journey that you have been pursuing for decades, with a struggle for independence from colonial rule, a struggle against Japanese occupation, a struggle for ethnic rights, a struggle for democracy. Many of your people have engaged in that struggle with heroism and courage, and sacrifice, which deserve our deep respect. Some of us in Britain have tried, in our own small ways, to walk with you for at least some of that journey. And today I want to assure you that we will continue to do so. To do so until you reach the destination to which you have been journeying for so long. To do so until you achieve the freedom, democracy, justice, respect for human rights and peace which we in Britain have so long enjoyed and which you have too long been denied.

Thank you.