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Note to the Secretary-General

**MYANMAR STUDENT PROTESTS**

Confidential

FEB - 3 2015

15-00930

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OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

02/02/15

1. President U Thein Sein's last budget before the election significantly raises spending in education, health, the agricultural sector and especially on enhancing water quality and electricity supply. The budget also provides allocations to raise civil service and military salaries. Though defence spending has increased marginally, it has continued to fall as a percentage of the overall budget. Foreign debt and the budget deficit will rise but the Government is confident that it will remain at acceptable levels, five percent of the Gross Domestic Product.
2. Meanwhile, the National Education Bill, which was passed by Parliament in July 2014, was sent back by President Thein Sein with 25 suggested amendments. Despite strong criticism from education activists, Parliament passed the bill again in September, approving 19 of the President's amendments and rejecting six. The President's memorandum had included calls for the formation of student and teacher organizations, the reduction of centralised control, setting up a "comprehensive and inclusive" education system and allowing ethnic languages to be taught. The bill as it currently stands restricts the formation of student unions and creates a commission to oversee the country's education system.
3. Student protest in the country has raised its ominous head. It will be recalled that student protests in 1988 had caused major turbulences in many cities in Myanmar and the resulting efforts by the military government to muzzle these protests had led to widespread violence and instability throughout the country. In November 2014, protesting student organizations around the country called for a 60-day moratorium and requested the establishment of a 15-member committee comprising students, government leaders, parliamentarians and the National Network for Education Reform (NNER) to discuss changes to the most recent bill before Parliament.
4. Amendments to the draft law proposed by students include a guarantee for the establishment of student and teacher unions independent of the Government, changes to exam and entrance requirements at universities, the introduction of ethnic languages, more government spending on education, greater freedom in universities, more say in education policies and laws and a modernisation of the national syllabus. The students are also asking the Government that those protesting should not be prosecuted.
5. In a move to sidestep the growing protests across the country, the Government last week agreed rather promptly to student demands for negotiations. At the meeting held yesterday, 1 February, around 70 participants representing the students, the Government, the Parliament and the NNER took part in discussions and 200 members of media and other organizations were allowed to observe the meeting to ensure transparency. U Tin Aung and U Tin Hlaing of the NNER discussed the legacy and roles of student unions in Myanmar, and the discussions were occasionally heated between Minister of the President's Office U Tin Naing Thein and the students. Minister U Aung Min, also of the President's Office, told the meeting that he would forward to the Parliament the issue of officially forming student unions and the other demands. Though the Sunday meeting were to discuss the original 11-point demands of the students, they, however, brought up a new 9-point demand for discussions to the surprise and consternation of the Government team. Nevertheless, negotiations held on Sunday resulted in agreement on 7 of the 9 points of the new demands. The remaining two points, the official formation of student unions and that there should be no legal action against protesting students, are to be discussed at the upcoming meeting scheduled on 3 February in Nay Pyi Taw.

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6. The protesting students said they would continue their marches to Yangon if no agreement could be reached on their demands. Meanwhile, at his monthly radio speech on Sunday, President Thein Sein urged the students to suspend their protest marches during the negotiation period. Minister U Aung Min also warned the students at the meeting that he would not be able to take responsibility for the security of the protesting students if they proceed further.

7. The first students' protest march began after the expiration of a 60-day ultimatum for the Government to respond to the demands for education reforms. Starting from Mandalay on 20 January towards Yangon whilst passing through cities and towns, the marching students were greeted by thousands of local residents showing their supports for the students' movement. Similar protest marches by students were held locally in Dawei, Pakkoku, Myingyan, Pathein, Magwe and Sittwe. Students also threatened converge and hold a nationwide march in Yangon if their demands were not met.

8. Widespread public support for these marches including the main one that took place on 25 January reflected public dissatisfaction over the overall economic and political situation affecting the population and this has caused some alarm among officials. On 27 January, students marched towards Taungtha Town, the hometown of hard-line leader Aung Thaung and a strong support base of the ruling USDP. The march was confronted near the town by around 200 security personnel, township authorities and local thugs believed to have been organized by the USDP. A government negotiation team led by Director-General Soe Win of the Upper Myanmar Higher Education Department and Mandalay University Rector U Maung Thin met the students and agreement was reached to hold a dialogue with the Government. The protest march was allowed to proceed. Marching students were welcomed and greeted by huge crowds in Taungtha Town. The diffusion of tension in Taungtha has, however, tempered the town's earlier dubious reputation with the students.

9. Meanwhile, it appears the original protest marchers of students have split into two groups, one led by Takatha (University Students Union) and another Bakatha, (All Burma Federation of Student Unions), the latter known as having leaders leaning to leftist ideologies. The Takatha protest columns have reportedly decided to suspend their march until the negotiations with the Government ended, while the Bakatha groups are continuing their march on 2 February, saying they were "not amenable to tolerating prolonged meetings."

#### Some Observations

- There is mounting concern among government officials, politicians and other observers that the current student movement could spin out of control in the volatile pre-election politics of the country and result in a quagmire that could seriously destabilize the country. Myanmar has a history of student-led movements that have given rise to widespread uprisings such as in 1962, 1974 and 1988.
- Although the current movement is targeted at educational reforms, there are elements in the movement that could cause wider political conflagration. Sensing the danger, well-known activists and DASSK last week urged the students and the Government to negotiate until agreements are reached.

- In the face of the continuing protest marches, the authorities could face a situation of confrontation or even head-on collision with the students. In the past, USDP hard-line elements and local thugs have been known to incite trouble and stoke disorder.
- The Government and Parliament appear willing to make concessions to modify the education bill which is widely seen as unpopular in its present form. However, it remains to be seen how flexible and willing the students are in negotiating their demands. The unity among the students and the capacity of their leaders are still under question. Many students interviewed by independent observers say they do not like or trust the student activists, many of whom are seen to be neither "hard-working" nor "well mannered."

10. We shall follow the situation closely and keep EOSG apprised as necessary.



Vijay Nambiar

Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on Myanmar  
2 February 2015

cc: The Deputy Secretary-General  
Ms. Malcorra  
Mr. Feltman  
Mr. Gilmour