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Supporting People – Assisting Transition
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**Ladies and Gentlemen,
Distinguished Panellists and Participants,**

Good morning and a warm welcome to all of you to the Burma/Myanmar Forum!
This Forum is organized and hosted by the European Institute for Asian Studies (EIAS) and I am grateful to the EIAS for having taken the initiative to hold this meeting and for giving me the opportunity to speak.

The Commissioner for External Relations, Mrs Benita Ferrero-Waldner, had hoped to be here to speak to you. But, she is unable to attend and has asked me to convey to you her best wishes.

The programme for today's discussions cover a wide range of topics: We will hear about constraints and challenges of delivering assistance in Myanmar, and we shall discuss the situation of citizens having left – forcibly or voluntarily – the country to seek shelter, work and a new livelihood outside.

**Why is the European Commission involved?
Why is today's event important?**

As a global player the EU has a responsibility vis-à-vis Burma-Myanmar. As in the case of the DPRK, we simply cannot look the other way while knowing that there are serious humanitarian and developmental problems in an important country in South East Asia like Burma/Myanmar.

Moreover, the Southeast Asian region is important to the EU. Trade and economic issues remain high on the agenda, but other policy issues and security concerns are of increasing importance, like non-proliferation, environmental degradation and avian flu. We cannot ignore Asia. Its prosperity and stability is very important for the EU. Nor can we ignore important constituent countries like Burma/Myanmar.

The EU has also certain assets. For example, it is regarded as a neutral and benign partner, which is committed to engagement in the long term. Second, it has the valuable experience of some of its own Member States who have recently undertaken the difficult transition to democracy and market economy.

Policy framework for EU relations with Burma/Myanmar:

In dealing with a country like Burma/Myanmar the Commission and the Member States coordinate their approach very carefully. Our overall policy approach is set out in what is called “the EU Common Position”

The EU’s policy can be summarized as follows:

- Maintain dialogue, but this dialogue must be critical of the severe political shortcomings in Burma/Myanmar;
- Engage the government over its responsibility to develop the country
- Ensure assistance for the most vulnerable groups in society; this includes our commitment to fund assistance to refugees who have fled from conflicts inside Burma/Myanmar into neighbouring Thailand.

The “Common Position” is reviewed regularly, in the light of developments, and may be adjusted as appropriate.

Some may consider the “Common Position” as being too weak; others may consider it as being too severe. But, the situation in Burma/Myanmar is not simply black and white; there are also shades of grey and the “Common Position” reflects an effort by the EU to recognize, and deal with, a complex situation.

In Burma/Myanmar itself, one does not encounter much change recently:

Burma/Myanmar will only be at peace with itself and make progress towards improving the welfare of its people:

- If the authorities respect human rights and ensure democracy and good governance;
- If the armed forces abandon the use of forced labour and do no longer force political opponents to flee their homeland;
- If opportunities for development of the country are realised.

Viewed in terms of these benchmarks, the transition process to which the government has committed itself in August 2003 – the so-called “Seven-Step Road” – seems to be making little or no progress.

The government has retreated further from the outside world, by recently moving the administrative seat from Yangon to a provincial location – Pyinmana – which is not yet accessible for the international community. Human rights violations continue as well as pressure on the donor community. The National Convention, which reconvened in May 2004 after an interruption of almost ten years, has not yet delivered visible results and seems to have left the National League for Democracy on the sidelines.

Promises of political transition can only be considered serious when there is a clear time frame for progress, and when it is an inclusive process, without political opponents being jailed or marginalised.

Constraints on Policy:

In framing our policy towards Burma/Myanmar, we need not react to short term developments, rather we have to think longer-term. We face important constraints that explain why a policy of only restrictive measures and isolation will not work.

→As in the case of the DPRK, the deprivation suffered by the common people of Burma/Myanmar does not put immediate political pressure on the governing regime to change its ways.

→China, India and Thailand, all countries with which the EU has an increasingly close relationship, provide a “comfort zone” for Burma/Myanmar. These countries have important political and economical interests there – in some respects competing interests - and do not wish to see Burma/Myanmar isolated or “demonized”.

→ASEAN, with which the EU is also trying to build closer relations, both as a regional organization and bilaterally with its constituent members, finds it difficult to accept that one of its members should be sanctioned or treated as a “pariah” state.

As well as engaging the authorities of Burma/Myanmar therefore, the EU has to talk to its other partners in Asia and persuade them that something is wrong in Burma/Myanmar and that we all have the duty as partners to encourage more positive developments there. This also means listening to our Asian partners in finding the balance between restrictive measures and engagement.

Using our policy instruments to best effects:

Against this background, the EU is using a number of instruments in a balanced manner.

→Restrictive measures – there is some role for such measures. In October 2004 the EU strengthened the “Common Position” in targeting members of the regime: it introduced a more comprehensive visa ban, in addition to the freeze on financial assets held in the EU, as well as blocking assistance from International Financial Institutions like the World Bank or the Asian Development Bank.

→At the same time however, we have a long-standing commitment to continue humanitarian aid for vulnerable groups.

→Specific instruments of the Commission, such as ECHO, have been used for many years in close cooperation with the UN agencies and our NGO Community. But this is not enough. More strategically planned assistance is needed to ensure basic services in important areas, such as health and education. Not offering it will only endanger the future of younger generations.

→For this reason, the Commission has drafted a Country Strategy Paper in order to open a limited line of development assistance in the 2007-2013 period. In preparing this document, we have extensively consulted interlocutors and stakeholders. We spoke to our Member States and to civil society in Myanmar. We shared our ideas about future assistance with international and national NGOs, and with the government.

Our strategy focuses on two crucial sectors: health and education:

→We are aware of the scarcity of health services and their availability, especially in rural and remote areas. The European Commission has regretted that the Global Fund for Aids, Tuberculosis and Malaria has ended its operations in Myanmar in 2005. Just think that malaria is the most important killer disease in the country. And consider, too, the increase in HIV infections over the past few years, along with the accompanying spread of TB infections.

→The European Commission is working with a group of donors to establish a trust fund, to fight those three deadly diseases. One of my Commission colleagues will present you our ideas later in more details.

→In education, we shall focus on primary education in line with the UN's Millennium Development Goals. It seems to me critical, to introduce modern concepts into the education system, to contribute to societal development and promote educated people as agents for change.

→On top of that, a third element of our Country Strategy Paper shall help to better sustain livelihoods. I could well imagine, for example, a specific focus on former poppy-growing farmers.

These programmes shall be implemented through NGOs and international agencies.

Our assistance activities already under way have demonstrated that a lot is possible, but also that obstacles to implementation still exist. We shall have to tackle these as they arise and see if it is possible to bring the assistance agenda forward.

I mention our strategy for the next six years in such details, for three reasons:

→First, we want to avoid a lost generation in Burma/Myanmar. If the young generation who should be the agents for change, are enfeebled by bad health, lack of education and no livelihood prospects, this is highly likely.

→We have to recognise that in Burma/Myanmar, there is still a functioning education system, market economy and civil society. We cannot abandon these. Instead, we should seek to find ways to reinforce these positive elements in the country.

→We want to expand our ongoing political dialogue to include a wider spectrum of individuals and agencies that have a stake in building the future of Burma/Myanmar – the education, health and economic authorities, for example.

Let me conclude by emphasising that the EU will continue to make every effort to persuade the authorities of Burma/Myanmar to move in a positive direction and to help its people to develop their economic and society and to live in peace and prosperity. But we have no easy formula to do this. This is why we need regularly to get together, with our like-minded partner countries like the US, Australia and Japan, and also with the donor community in Burma/Myanmar, and our assistance operators. We continuously need to take stock, share ideas and adjust our approach, if necessary.

In this spirit, I thank you all for your attention and wish you a lively and fruitful debate at this Burma/Myanmar 2006 Forum.

[Post-script: Following his presentation, the Director-General engaged in a Q&A with the 200 + audience, notwithstanding the numerous constraints on his time. He mentioned that as a Spanish citizen, he had been part of the movement for democracy in the Franco era. He emphasized that, in those days, the Spanish pro-democracy movement had placed great emphasis on developing links with the outside world, in as many ways as possible. He said that people-to-people exchange was perceived as beneficial for change. For example, the pro-democracy movement had embraced foreign tourism, judging this would be beneficial to international understanding and thus an agency of change. Dick Gupwell, Secretary-General ELIAS, thanked the Director-General, noting that it was of great significance that the EU's top civil servant for external relations held such a strong personal commitment to the fight for democracy].