Nay Pyi Taw, 15 November 2013
131115/01

S P E E C H

Opening speech of High Representative Catherine Ashton at the Plenary Session of the EU-Myanmar Task Force meeting

"Mr President, excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, colleagues and friends,

It is an enormous privilege to be back in Myanmar and to fulfil the ambition that you, Mr President, and I discussed when we met in Brussels - to bring what we call a Task Force to this great country. It is an enormous pleasure to be here at the formal opening of this event.

Last night, Mr President, you and I talked about a whole range of issues where you felt the European Union could be of service to your country and you have again in your address expressed those views. I am delighted that we bring with us a range of people who I believe are as committed as I am to helping to support your people, your country into the future.

I want to thank especially Vice-President of the European Commission Antonio Tajani for his efforts to bring a hundred business leaders to Myanmar in support of your ambition, Mr President, to ensure that we have investment and job creation well developed. I also want to express my thanks to Commissioner Piebalgs, who has tirelessly worked to support this country through the development programmes - not just the present ones, but also for the future. And we are joined by my colleague, Agriculture Commissioner Ciolos. These Commissioners represent some of the key areas of support that we offer to Myanmar and I thank them for being here.
We also talked, Mr President, about the need for political and constitutional developments and changes, the on-going journey that the country has embarked upon. The purpose of the Task Force is to bring together what I describe 'politics meets economics' - the recognition that strong political reform, the rule of law and a transformation into a strong democracy are all important parts of ensuring the economic growth and development, sustainability and stability of a nation. Equally, the people of this country want to see their lives improved - they want to see better infrastructure, they want to see jobs, they want to see strong and good education for their children and grandchildren, they want to see a real future. So 'economics meets politics' means for me the opportunity to pull together these two strands into a cohesive sense of direction.

I have talked about the journey that this nation is on and I have talked when I first arrived here, to Yangon, about celebration and expectation. The reason why so many people came to the Task Force and the reason why we were so thrilled to have so many members of the government, of business, of civil society from Myanmar here - the reason for that is a sense of celebration. This country has moved dramatically in the course of recent time. But there is also a real sense of expectation. I know, Mr President, that you and your Ministers know that this is just the beginning, there is much more that needs to be done and I believe that you are committed to achieve that.

It is important, because when I think about European Union - and you, Mr President, referred to this in your speech - I think about countries who have made journeys that have been as complicated and as difficult. All the people who have come from the different nations from the European Union have a real understanding of how challenging that journey is, what a bumpy road it can be, but they have emerged at the end of it knowing that they have a country that is truly democratic, a country where rights are respected, strong people able to take the benefits of a good economic future.

That journey, Mr President, is, as I said, well worth the efforts, but it requires constant energy and continuous movement. With great humility we believe we have something to offer in helping to support this country on that journey.

More than anything the word that I would use for what we are engaged in is partnership - we are your partners, we do not come to impose. This great country belongs to the people of Myanmar and the European Union stands ready to be your partner and your supporter in the journey ahead. This Task Force is not one occasion, it is the beginning of the work that we will do in the days, weeks, months and years to come to show to you and to the people that we stand with you and that we will not fail you.

Thank you.”