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***The Irrawaddy* editor Aung Zaw recently interviewed US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell who in November led the US's first high-level delegation to Burma in 14 years when he met Aung San Suu Kyi and military junta premier Thein Sein.**

Campbell spoke about the regime's recent election law, US sanctions, Asean and the political unrest in Thailand.



QUESTION: *The regime has recently announced its much awaited election law and clearly there was no surprise—many reputable opposition figures including Aung San Suu Kyi and 2,000 other political prisoners will not be allowed to participate. How will the US respond?*

ANSWER: We are deeply disappointed with the political party law, which excludes all of Burma's more than 2,000 political prisoners from political participation. We are also troubled that the law appears to bar National League for Democracy (NLD) leader Aung San Suu Kyi from running. It may also prohibit her membership in her own party. This is a step in the wrong direction. These laws compound the already oppressive political atmosphere in Burma.

Q: *If the election is held without the participation of the main opposition party, Suu Kyi's NLD, could it be considered credible in any way?*

A: Whether or not Aung San Suu Kyi chooses to run is a decision for her and her party to make, and we respect the decisions opposition and candidates will make with regard to participation in the election. Our position is that all candidates, including Aung San Suu Kyi and other opposition leaders should be afforded the opportunity to make that decision for themselves. The regime should not impose rules that restrict the candidate pool to exclude those with whom it disagrees. The Political Party Registration Law, as promulgated, makes a mockery of the democratic process and ensures that the upcoming elections will be devoid of credibility.

Q: *At a press briefing in Bangkok, you said that engagement with the regime has failed. If that is the case, will the US increase sanctions against the regime?*

A: Sanctions are an important tool in the Burma policy toolkit. We have said publicly—and we have made clear to the government of Burma—that we reserve the option to further tighten sanctions should the situation warrant that.

We will also continue to engage with the regime. Dialogue is not a reward; we knew from the outset that this would be a long and difficult process, in particular given the electoral environment this year. While nothing is scheduled at this time, we remain open to further meetings and remain in discussion with the Burmese about another possible visit.

Q: *You didn't visit Burma during your recent trip to Asia. Why?*

A: We are still in discussion with the Burmese authorities regarding a possible trip.

Q: *As a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), has Burma in any way been an obstacle to full US engagement with Asean member states and the organization itself?*

A: The problem of Burma is a challenge for the US and for Asean as an organization. However, we are committed to a deeper relationship with Asean and we are not going to let the Burma problem impede that relationship. We believe Asean as an organization has an important role to play in pressing Burma, as a member state, to implement genuine reform.

Q: *Due to protests led by Redshirt demonstrators in Bangkok, you canceled your speech at Chulalongkorn University. How does the US view Thailand's ongoing political instability?*

A: We are closely watching the current situation. The United States believes that differences should be addressed through Thailand's democratic institutions and not through violence. We also encourage the Royal Thai Government to exercise appropriate restraint.

Q: *What is your message to Burmese army officers and officials who genuinely want to forge a more friendly and closer relationship with the US?*

A: Our message for those in the government and military is the same as for those in the democratic opposition and ethnic minority groups: we want to see Burma peaceful, prosperous and democratic, and will stand with those who are working toward that goal.