

## **Ottawa Declaration: Convene Multi-party Talks on Burma**

By Lali K Jha/Ottawa

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A call to convene multi-party talks on Burma along the lines of the six-party talks on North Korea to facilitate reforms and transition in Burma marked the end of the two-day conference of eminent Burmese political thinkers in exile.

Participants issued an “Ottawa Declaration” on Thursday and called on Burma's neighbors—Bangladesh, India, China, Laos and Thailand—to cooperate with the United Nations to bring about democratic change in Burma.

Perhaps the most significant outcome of the conference, hosted by the Canadian Friends of Burma, was the decision to approach China to use its influence with the military junta to make political reforms.

The declaration noted that a statement by Wang Gyangya, China's ambassador to the UN, in the Security Council on January 12, 2007, said: “China sincerely hopes and expects that the Myanmar government will listen to the call of its own people, learn from the good practices of others and speed up the process of dialogue and reform so as to achieve prosperity for its nation, bring benefits to its people and contribute to peace, stability and development of South East Asia.”

Considering this as a significant indication of change in Chinese policy towards Burma, conference participants formed a 16-member Working Group on China—expanded to 17 on Thursday—to draft a pro-democracy China policy.

“We want to open a channel of communication with China,” Tin Maung Htoo, the executive director of the Canadian Friends of Burma told *The Irrawaddy*. “Once the Working Group submits its report, we plan to send a delegation to Beijing to meet Chinese leadership.”

A significant portion of the conference revolved around China, but the declaration also noted the positive role Burma's neighbors could play in resolving the crisis.

“Burmese participants call on Burma's neighbors—Bangladesh, India, China, Laos and Thailand—to cooperate with the UN to bring about the much needed change in Burma,” the declaration said.

It also called on Canada, Asean, the European Union, the US, Russia and Burma's neighbors to convene multi-party talks similar to the six-party talks on North Korea, to facilitate reforms and a transition.

“The Ottawa consultation believes that if appropriate policies were to be adopted in Burma, it could alleviate the suffering of the people and Burma could become the gateway for both China's southwest and India's northeast to world markets,” it said.

Earlier, addressing the first-of-its-kind conference of Burmese leaders in exile, the Canadian deputy leader of Government House, Scott Reid, reiterated the government's demand for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and the inclusion of Burmese ethnic minorities in a meaningful dialogue leading to genuine national reconciliation and the establishment of democracy.

“These are easily achievable steps that most in the international community agree the junta should take,” Reid said in his key note address. “They will not lead to the establishment of democracy overnight, but we want to see a credible and transparent political process underway that allows all sectors of society to freely express their views.”

Reid said Canadian sanctions against the military regime would continue until significant progress on political transition to a genuine democracy and respect for human rights is demonstrated.

Paul Devar, the vice-chair of Parliamentary Friends of Burma, in his address acknowledged the influential role China can play in bringing reform to Burma. He said Canada would continue work to put the Burma issue before the UN Security Council.

Among other prominent speakers were Harn Yawngwe, the director of the Euro-Burma Office; Nyo Ohn Myint, the director of the Foreign Affairs Department of the National League for Democracy (Liberated Area); Than Khe, the chair of the All Burma Student’s Democratic Front; and Zaw Oo, an economist at American University.

Referring to the Chinese veto of the UN Security Council resolution on Burma early this year, Harn Yawngwe emphasized that there was a silver lining, noting that for the first time China publicly told the regime it should listen to the people of Burma.

He said China was now working behind the scenes and was holding a series of consultations with various Burmese pro-democracy groups. However, he said China would never condemn the present regime and is not attempting to promote democracy per se or work towards protection of human rights in Burma.

“For China, the present Burmese regime is a burden on them, but they do not have an alternative,” he said.

Nyo Ohn Myint, one of the few pro-democracy Burmese leaders who have publicly acknowledged consulting with the Chinese government, said China primarily wants stability in Burma for its “national interest,” and they consider the Burmese government a failed state.

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