



Special sitting

Thursday, 14 June 2012, 11 a.m.

President: Mr Alburquerque de Castro

**ADDRESS BY MS AUNG SAN SUU KYI,
CHAIRPERSON OF THE NATIONAL LEAGUE FOR
DEMOCRACY (NLD) AND MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT,
REPUBLIC OF THE UNION OF MYANMAR**

Original Spanish: The PRESIDENT

The International Labour Conference today is honoured to receive the visit of Ms Aung San Suu Kyi, Chairperson of the National League for Democracy and Member of Parliament of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar.

I now give the floor to the Secretary-General of the Conference, Mr Somavia, to welcome and introduce our distinguished guest.

The SECRETARY-GENERAL OF THE CONFERENCE

Very, very dear Aung San Suu Kyi, welcome, welcome, welcome. Thank you for your presence. You have brought a ray of sunshine to your country and now you fill this room with the light of your spirit. It shines on all of us as it shone from the confines of your own home towards the world. You can see the reception, the interest, the commitment to your cause that is in this room.

This is an emotional day for us, a golden day for the International Labour Organization, a day that we will keep in our memories and say, years from now, “I was there, I was there when you came to the ILO.” Look at all the people that are going to be able to say that in the future.

Dear friends, today we celebrate a woman of remarkable courage and determination, physical and moral courage that drives her in the quest for truth and freedom, a true embodiment of “Freedom from Fear”. Your powerful speech in 1990 on this theme reflected the life that would be yours, and the qualities that would shine in the years to come.

In her 1990 speech, “Freedom from Fear”, she said, “It is not enough merely to call for freedom, democracy and human rights. There has to be a united determination to persevere in the struggle, to make sacrifices in the name of enduring truth, to resist the corrupting influence of desire, ill will, ignorance and fear.” You said that in 1990; you were almost describing your life up to now, from that moment onwards. You are truly a daughter of Aung San: real grit, tempered by humanity that inspires your people and the world.

So, dear Aung San Suu Kyi, we greet you as a friend, also as a fellow Nobel Laureate, and a great symbol of the values of our Organization. You once said, “We will surely get to our destination if we

join hands.” In the confines of your home, you reached out to the world and the world joined hands with you in your fight for democracy and human rights. Today, your incredible journey brings you to our podium. President Mandela and Lech Walesa also made this journey to the ILO when the brighter times dawned for them. You all stand tall in history. Your presence gives powerful reassurance that the impossible can become reality and that the greatest odds can be overcome. We heed your message that hope is empty without endeavour and that there are still many tasks ahead, which you will lead.

More than a decade ago, our paths came together in our common quest for freedom, dignity and justice, and the particular issue of forced labour in your country, Burma. We share the conviction that these values, the values we share, must translate into better conditions for women and men and their families at work.

You followed closely our mission to uphold the dignity of work in your country. You supported our approach, blending conviction and firmness with patience and balance, and our commitment to keeping the channels of dialogue open, even in the face, very often, of indifference and silence. In your methods, you walk in the footsteps of Mahatma Gandhi, who said, “I cannot teach you violence, as I do not myself believe in it. I can only teach you not to bow your heads before anyone, even at the cost of your life”, and that is what you have done.

We could always count on your constructive, pragmatic, clear advice. Your insights have been influential in enabling us to foster a certain degree of trust that allowed us to work there, and the results are slowly coming. In the case of the ILO’s engagement, we moved from denial of forced labour to opening a Liaison Office and receiving complaints. Today, the Workers’ delegation of Myanmar is led by a representative of an independent union movement. Last year, you could not leave your home, and you sent us a video. Today you are here with us. There is still much to do and that is why the Conference has taken a decision to facilitate the work of the ILO in the future, as things evolve in your country.

Let me highlight something that is also important: your strength comes from your inner self. You have said something that I find so important, and I quote you, “The quintessential revolution is that of the spirit, born of an intellectual conviction of the need for change in those mental attitudes and values which shape the course of a nation’s development.” You have certainly also embodied that spirit.

Let me simply say, finally, that we thank you for standing here today with us. We hope with all our hearts – and we will work with all our might – to ensure that this journey to the ILO does indeed mark the coming of a new dawn for you, your people and your country. In my own country, we knew that one day, with our unrelenting pressure, democracy and freedom would ultimately prevail. There is no doubt in my mind that democracy and freedom will ultimately prevail in your country. With dialogue, resilience and perseverance, right will prevail and your people will regain their rights.

Thank you for being here. Thank you for being this symbol that the world not only acknowledges, but follows with enormous interest because we know that your journey has not yet ended, but that you will end it successfully. Thank you so much for being here.

Original Spanish: The PRESIDENT

I would now like to call upon our guest of honour, Ms Aung San Suu Kyi, the Chairperson of the National League for Democracy and Member of Parliament of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, to come to the podium so that she can make her speech to the Conference.

Ms AUNG SAN SUU KYI (Chairperson of the National League for Democracy and Member of Parliament, Republic of the Union of Myanmar)

The welcome that I have received this morning has forced me to move a little away from my prepared text, with apologies to the interpreters! Before I start on my prepared address, I would like to thank you all for this totally unexpected, very warm welcome. It has moved me profoundly, and I hope that in the future we shall be able to work together to build a world where all of us can move closer to one another.

I was saying to Mr Somavia that, whenever I meet people from South America, I feel as though I were meeting members of my own family, because we have been through the same experiences in our countries. But I think this applies to many other countries besides the ones in South America. So, coming here, it feels as though I have come back to meet long lost members of my family, and I hope that this will by no means be the last meeting.

The International Labour Conference is a pioneer and an example of inclusiveness. Delegates of workers and employers, as well as governments, coming together to find effective solutions to complex problems demonstrate the value of meaningful exchange between relevant stakeholders. However, I do not stand here as a representative of workers, or of employers, or of government – not yet, anyway! Perhaps you could accept me as the fourth element. I am one of those countless people whose lives are impacted by labour issues. I am also a politician, so perhaps I could make a claim to be the fifth element as well – the element that represents the interests of the general public. I still feel a little self-conscious about referring to myself as a recently elected Member of Parliament, which I presume is the correct formal definition of my status.

My association with the ILO, which goes back several years, has been based on my responsibilities as a politician. More precisely, it is based on the activities of my party, the National League for Democracy, related to democracy and human rights. We cooperated, to the best of our ability, with the

ILO and other interested organizations and individuals over the issues of forced labour and child soldiers. The report of the Committee on the Application of Standards sets down the progress that has been achieved in these areas since the situation was last reviewed, as well as remaining concerns. There is little I have to add to the contents of this comprehensive report. Today, I would like to address issues that have arisen as a corollary to changes that have been taking place in Burma over the last year.

The initiatives towards democratization taken by President U Thein Sein's Government have been welcomed by the people of our country, as well as by the international community. In addition to measures aimed at political reform, there has been considerable effort to affect positive changes in the economic sector. One of the few remaining countries in the world with vast potential waiting to be realized, Burma has attracted the acute attention of business interests, as well as of governments and agencies desirous of encouraging and supporting the reform process.

The ILO is unique in that social, political and economic issues coalesce in its work. It is therefore appropriate for me to speak from this forum of concerns related to the opportunities offered by the changing situation in my country. As rights should be balanced by responsibilities, opportunities should be linked to probity if we are to avoid the dangers of exploitation. What I would like to see for our country is democracy-friendly development growth. I would like to call for aid and investment that will strengthen the democratization process by promoting social and economic progress that is beneficial to political reform.

The National League for Democracy has repeatedly emphasized the need for the rule of law and an end to ethnic conflict in our country. Unless these basic requirements are met, the foundation for healthy social, political and economic growth cannot be laid down. Strong democratic institutions that will guarantee basic human rights are necessary to ensure good governance based on transparency, accountability and enhancement of integrity. Am I overly ambitious? Perhaps. Yes, I think I am ambitious. But unless we aim at achieving the best that might be possible, we will be in danger of having to make do with the least that is tolerable – in the short run. In the long run, as powers of tolerance run out, unrest and instability will erode the progress that has already been gained.

The resolution adopted by this 101st Session concerning the measures on the subject of Myanmar adopted under article 33 of the ILO Constitution reflects positive steps that have been taken over the last year. The Ambassador of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar expressed the opinion that this resolution fell short of his Government's expectations. The Worker Vice-Chairperson, on the other hand, stated that "it was not easy for the Workers to accept the resolution. A good number of the provisions of the resolution had been met in law, but much remained to be done, if they were to become reality in practice." A Worker member of the delegation from Burma, however, focused mainly on the creation of job opportunities, urged the lifting or suspension of all international sanctions, and also invited investment.

Although I do not officially represent either workers or employers or government, in my capacity as the fifth element I met, in preparation for my

trip to Geneva, individuals and organizations that have been engaged in the promotion of workers' rights over many years. Those I met in Burma expressed concerns that reflected the presentation made by the Worker members to the Committee on the Application of Standards with regard to forced labour.

In addition, they highlighted the importance of ensuring legislation that would protect workers' rights. They pointed out that, although a number of laws relating to labour were theoretically in force at present, some were obsolete or anachronistic, some have not been translated into Burmese, and some, such as the Minimum Wage Act, have neither been abolished, nor replaced, nor are yet in force either. Further, they expressed concern that the newly enacted Workers' Association Act did not provide sufficient protection from government interference in the matter of trade union funding, and that strike regulations should be less restrictive to avoid bias in favour of employers. They also put forward the opinion that the Workers' Association Act should be entitled the Trade Union or Labour Union Act, and that it should cover other workers besides those in industry.

The above points related to new labour legislation indicate the need for greater transparency in the legislative process, that the views of stakeholders could be taken into consideration before new laws are promulgated. More democratic practices will offer greater protection for the rights of workers and of all citizens in general.

The creation of job opportunities was also a high priority for the advocates of workers' rights. They submitted detailed recommendations, ranging from the kind of foreign direct investment they considered desirable, to the role that government should play to ensure the right kind of business practices. I list some of these below, that this Conference might see that, despite many years of isolation and repression, our people can still boast a social, political and economic awareness that, given sufficient latitude, would bring our country in line with positive developments in the rest of the world.

I would here like to stress the problem of youth unemployment. As I have said repeatedly, it is not so much joblessness as hopelessness that threatens our future. Unemployed young people lose confidence in the society that has failed to give them the chance to realize their potential. Problems related to drink and drug abuse and vagrancy abound as restless, directionless youths agonize over the fruitlessness of their existence. Vocational training linked to job creation is imperative if we are to safeguard the future by giving our youth the capacity to handle effectively the responsibilities that will inevitably fall to them one day, which may not be that far away.

Foreign direct investments that result in job creation should be invited. Investors should adhere to codes of practices (track records in regard to internationally accepted labour standards and environmental responsibility should be examined). Sustainable benefits, including the acquirement of modern technology, should be the aim. Responsible foreign investment in agro-business could be beneficial, with the right precautions taken to protect smallholders. State enterprises marked for privatization should be made more competitive, and small and medium-scale enterprises, such as electrical products and spare parts for machinery, encouraged.

Preferred foreign direct investments were those related to tourism and to the development of efficient financial services and basic infrastructure. Investment in the extractive industries should be approached with particular care.

These above recommendations by representatives of workers are strikingly similar in many respects to those of an eminent economist who has studied the situation in Burma for many years: development of the tourist industry; creation of a viable financial system; and investment as a source of immediate job creation, as well as a source of new ideas, new techniques and new technologies. He also advises transparency and accountability in the energy sector and the extractive industries in general. The Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE), the State-owned company under the Ministry of Energy with which all foreign participation in the energy sector takes place through joint-venture arrangements, lacks both transparency and accountability at present. The Government needs to apply internationally recognized standards, such as the International Monetary Fund's Code of Good Practices on Fiscal Transparency. Other countries could help by not allowing their own companies to partner MOGE unless it was signed up to such codes. This would also ensure that their own companies would be subject to the above codes themselves and to the various requirements of "publish what you pay".

I support wholeheartedly the view that the domestic environment should be structured to make the best use of investment: property rights; rule of law; broad economic stability; functioning infrastructure, which would include soft infrastructure such as education; and an honest, efficient civil service. Greater accessibility to energy, transport and communications, including telephonic and electronic communications, will need particular attention.

There is a wide range of reforms that could be undertaken in Burma, not just to make investment attractive, but to make it sustainable and truly beneficial for our people. A democracy-friendly development policy of coordinated social, political and economic reform will put our country once again on the map of the positive and the successful.

No country can claim genuine development until all its peoples can enjoy the basic freedoms: freedom from want and freedom from fear. In such a discussion of potential economic progress, we cannot leave out those of our people who are suffering from insufficient protection of their rights as workers in lands other than our own. During my recent visit to Thailand, I had the opportunity of meeting migrant workers and their representatives, and individuals and organizations dedicated to the protection of workers' rights.

More than 80 per cent of migrant workers in Thailand are from Burma. It was presented to me that, in spite of the 2003 Memorandum of Understanding and the 2009 nationality verification process to change irregular workers' status to legal status through the issuing of Burmese passports, migrant workers are still facing frequent and significant rights violations because neither Burma nor Thailand has adopted a rights-based approach to managing migration, as exemplified in numerous ILO Conventions and, most importantly, in the comprehensive 1990 International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families. Both countries continue to have no clear migration policy or migration

management body, and neither country has taken a lead in ensuring the finalization of the stalled ASEAN framework instrument on the protection and promotion of migrant workers.

I understand that representatives of the State Enterprise Workers' Relations Confederation will be making a detailed submission on the plight of migrant workers in Thailand to this Conference. I would merely like to point out here that concerns related to migrant workers should receive similar consideration to those related to labour issues in our own country. So many of the migrant workers I met in Thailand told me: "We want to go home!" All of us have a responsibility to make that home one to which they can come back in peace and in security. I appeal to the ILO to join in efforts to build a home that is a true sanctuary for all our peoples. Here I would like to acknowledge with appreciation the members of the Thai administration who are participating in the resolution of migrant workers' issues with understanding and resolution. Host countries also deserve consideration and assistance, that labour and international relations might be improved the world over.

I welcome the resolution of the 101st Session, in particular paragraphs 7 to 12, which will enable the ILO to work more effectively to resolve all labour issues outstanding in our country and in countries where there are migrant workers from Burma.

Here I have left myself an opportunity to make more work for our interpreters!

Coming to this Conference, I have learned that we can all work together. As I said earlier, I felt at home – I felt I had come back to meet members of my family. We are not just a family of nations; we are a family of peoples. People-to-people relationships are the most important kind of relationships. I would like you to think of Burma not just as a nation, but as peoples – human beings, like all of you. I would like you to think of our young people, especially, as your own young people, your own children.

I threatened the Governing Body this morning with boring the audience about my views on our young people, and I think I am going to carry this threat out!

During the campaign for the by-elections in April, I had the opportunity to meet young people from all parts of the country. We were trying to raise political awareness in our country, and it was amazing with what intelligence our young people responded to this campaign. And when I say young people, I start with toddlers. In many places we would see little children, barely able to walk, coming out running unsteadily to wave little flags to let us know that they supported us. This is amazing! Even those that could hardly talk could repeat slogans related to our work for democracy and human rights. I am not sure they understood every word they were saying, but I think the spirit of political participation had been instilled in them. They were learning early in life that they must take part in the political process of our country if we are to make a meaningful future for them. This encouraged me more than the results of the elections – which were of course very gratifying – but it was the conviction that our people are on the way to creating a society that is worthy of the potential that put such heart into me and to other members of my party.

I would like all of you to come to Burma – not just to look at investment opportunities or to inves-

tigate workers' problems, but to judge how much potential there is for good for the whole world. Our young people have such spirit in them, but they have not been educated – they have not received the kind of basic education that will enable them to take their rightful place in their country and in the world. We need to improve our education system. And, as I said earlier, we need vocational training to be linked to job creation. We would like potential investors to think of us, as well as of themselves. We understand that investors do not come purely for altruistic reasons. We accept that investments must pay off – investments must lead to profits. But we would like these profits to be shared between the investors and our people. And, most of all, we would like to invite the kind of investment that would share the skills of the rest of the world with our young people in Burma.

So, when you go back to your own countries, please encourage your governments, your businesses, your workers to help us build the kind of society that will ensure the future of our country. This is my request to all of you and, having seen the warmth with which you regarded me as a representative of the people who want democracy and human rights in Burma, I am certain that I can count on you to do your best.

It is 30 years since I was last in Geneva. I am not sure I recognize it, but my heart recognizes it as my heart recognizes that we will be meeting again and again to resolve the problems that pose a threat to the future, not just of my country, but of the whole world.

Now I will go back to my prepared text, like a good speaker, before I conclude!

With the lifting or suspension of sanctions and with the restoration of the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP), we will have an unprecedented opportunity for economic development that should be part and parcel of democracy-friendly, human-rights-friendly development growth that would bring peace and prosperity to our country.

I thank the ILO and the organizers of this Conference for making it possible for me to stand here and call on workers, employers, governments, international businesses, international agencies and organizations to join us in our efforts.

(Applause.)

I do not understand why people say that I am full of courage – I feel terribly nervous!

Original Spanish: The PRESIDENT

Thank you very much, Ms Aung San Suu Kyi, for your message of hope. We value it deeply, because we know that the path which has brought you here has been long and difficult. Your life experience has been one of the most inspiring examples of civic courage of all time. You have often had to forgo speech and direct contact, armed only with a forced silence which spoke louder than any outcry, for it gave a voice to those that had none.

Your life is an example to us all. The battle you have fought stands for all of the objectives that we pursue in the International Labour Organization, from the elimination of child labour and forced labour, through the strengthening of tripartism and social dialogue, to the fight for gender equality, decent work, and poverty reduction and social inclusion.

Your faith and your commitment have remained unshaken, even in the most difficult times you have had to endure. Your example gives strength to us all.

We are thus very honoured by the fact that on your first trip abroad for so many years, you have accepted our invitation to this International Labour Conference, to this international parliament of labour, so that your voice may be heard by thousands of workers and leaders throughout the world.

We hope that on the next stages of your international journey you will address many other audiences, which, like our International Labour Confer-

ence, will be privileged to witness the strength of your convictions.

Ms Aung San Suu Kyi, on behalf of my fellow Officers of the Conference and of all the delegates, and on my own behalf, as a Latin American from a country that also had to fight for its freedom and democracy, I would like to convey once again our profound gratitude to you for having honoured us with your presence here today. I would ask this assembly to rise once again and pay tribute to your fight for human rights and dignity.

(Applause.)

(The Conference adjourned at 11.45 a.m.)

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