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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. STROMSETH: Greetings. I'm Jonathan Stromseth, the Lee Kuan Yew Chair in Southeast Asian Studies at Brookings and I'm pleased to welcome everyone to this timely event, "The quagmire in Myanmar: How should the international community respond?"

Early this year, the Burmese military, also known as the Tatmadaw, detained State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi and other civilian leaders in a coup d'état ending a decade of quasi-democracy in the country. The junta has since killed hundreds of protestors and detained thousands of activists and politicians, but mass protests and mass civil disobedience activities continue unabated.

In addition, a devastating humanitarian crisis has engulfed the country as people go hungry, the healthcare system has collapsed, and COVID-19 has exploded adding a new sense of urgency as well as desperate calls for emergency assistance.

As this tragedy deepens the Association of Southeast Asian Nations or ASEAN has called for dialogue and a cessation of violence, while the U.S. and its partners combine diplomatic isolation and economic sanctions to try to force a return to democracy. The United Nations has also called for an arms embargo. So far, nothing has worked.

What should the international community do next? Today, the Brookings' foreign policy program is pleased to host a distinguished panel of experts to discuss these questions and developments focusing especially on the current state-of-play inside of Myanmar, the unfolding humanitarian crisis, and what international actors can do now.

Our panelists include Aye Min Thant, a Burmese American journalist who won a Pulitzer Prize for international reporting as part of a Reuters team that covered the expulsion and murder of Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar. She is currently a features editor at Frontiers Myanmar, a news and business magazine in Rohingya.

Mary Callahan is an Associate Professor at the Jackson School of International Studies at the University of Washington. Her research includes political reform in Myanmar and the role of the military in that process. The history of peace negotiations in the country and civil military relations in

Southeast Asia more broadly.

Derek Mitchell is the President of the National Democratic Institute from our International Affairs. He has a distinguished career in and out of the U.S. government including as U.S. Ambassador to Myanmar from 2012 to 2016. Just before that Derek also served as the State Department's First Special Representative and Policy Coordinator for Burma.

Kavi Chongkittavorn is a Senior Fellow at the Chulalongkorn's University Institution for Security and International Studies. He is an expert on ASEAN and has written extensively on ASEAN's approach to the crisis in Myanmar. Kavi is also a Columnist for the Bangkok Post and formerly Editor in Chief of the Myanmar Times.

Finally, a couple of housekeeping issues before we get started. A quick reminder that we are live and this is on the record. We have already received several great questions for our conversation and if anyone has additional questions please feel free to submit them to us by emailing events@brookings.edu or on Twitter at #Myanmar and we will do our best to run through there.

Now, let's turn to our discussion. Aye Min Thant, let's begin with you. The picture one gets six months after the coup is a country locked in stale mate between junta that can't seem to neutralize the protestors or fully control the country, but also a wide spread and inchoate opposition movement that really isn't capable of pushing the military out of power either.

Is this an accurate characterization? And where do you think things might go from here?

AYE: I would definitely say that's an accurate assessment and I think it also became more and more sort of likely and predictable as the coup kind of progressed.

You know, at the very beginning, I remember speaking to people who were joining the protest movement, joining the civil disobedience movement about, you know, how they saw the future. And a lot of the people on the ground really felt that they were going to go without pay for maybe a month.

Some people even thought that, you know, in a few days of protest and a few weeks of protest that things would really improve and change. And I think I was someone who always felt that this would be a few years if we're being optimistic. But having a sort of pessimistic view and sort of looking at

Myanmar history, you know, we could be looking at a decade or more of protracted struggle.

And I think it's really because of the situation where neither side can fully win. On the one hand, you have the junta who is basically occupied in this position as an almost colonial force, right? Like an almost foreign occupation where because they were so removed from the Myanmar public before the coup. This is not an institution that is well integrated into Myanmar society and not seen by the people as a part of them.

And people are responding in ways that you've seen in other sort of occupation type situations where it's the slow level of constant sabotage which will ensure that the coup is not able to succeed. And I'm sure we'll keep talking about this as the night goes on.

But given the lack of kind of centralized opposition or at least the sort of coordination and sort of implementation capabilities right now that we're seeing from the opposition. Either through the protest movements or through the National Unity government or many of the armed forces. It's unlikely, I think, that we will see a clear winner any time soon.

MR. STROMSETH: So you don't really see a kind of breakout moment where there could be sort of more power and energy accruing and maybe coordination to the protest or civil disobedience movement. You really see it as a multiyear or even decade long struggle?

AYE: I think for now unless we do see some very large shifts or changes. Obviously, we can't predict the future, but, you know, for example, something like Aung San Suu Kyi dying could completely change sort of the emotional landscape of the country and really change what -- especially some of the more kind of moderate people might be hoping for and could push the movement in a very different direction.

Or, you know, steps taken by ASEAN, by members of the international community to also really change things on the ground. But if things kind of stay the way they are which kind of seems likely right now. Yeah, I don't see that.

MR. STROMSETH: Can you give us just a sense of sort of the latest types of civil disobedience sort of manifestations? What are people actually doing on the streets maybe now

compared to four or five months ago?

AYE: Yeah. I mean I think we're not necessarily seeing that much new that's happening. But we are seeing the cumulation of months of efforts kind of coming to bear fruit.

So one really clear example of this is in the electricity energy sector where people have staged a multiple month boycott of paying their electricity bills. And electricity is something that was always subsidized by the state of Myanmar. Like electricity is quite cheap compared to most other countries. And it was always sort of a revenue loss, but what we're seeing now is that the junta is losing a tax base that the state budget really relied on.

Electricity accounts for almost 10 percent of revenue that the states takes in every year in Myanmar. And so, we're looking at tens of millions if not hundreds of millions in loss if this continues. So we're already seeing tens of millions in loss.

And you see now that this is a very important site of struggle where the junta and administrators, tax collectors, are really trying to pressure people into paying. And, you know, by cutting off people's electricity by using threats by just trying to like go to door to door and sort of pressure people to paying that way.

And you're seeing some on the resistant side really working to make sure that people don't pay. Whether that is by actually killing the tax collectors. Bombing these locations or just, you know, using other methods of hard and soft pressure to assure that people kind of tow the line of the boycott.

MR. STROMSETH: Thank you. Mary, let's look at the other side for a moment. You spent decades looking at the role of Burmese military among other features of Burmese politics and society. Help us better understand not only the psychology of the Generals but also their, you know, privileged political and social status in Myanmar including their economic sources of revenue for instance.

MS. CALLAHAN: Thanks, Jonathan. And many thanks to Aye Min Thant. That was a terrific introduction to the scene.

Maybe I could make a few historical points that I think really inform how the military

behaves these days. And then talk about that privileged position and what the implications for what's going to unfold in the country.

So a few historical points. The first which has to be remembered all the time is that never in history has the Myanmar defense services or Tatmadaw been under civilian control. Not in the 1947 constitution. Not in the 1974 constitution and not in the 2008 constitution.

So we have to remember as we look at this. There is no barracks to go back to. And in addition, on the flip side of that I would also say that some of the rhetoric about restoring democracy is almost entirely ahistorical revision of or maybe selective or nostalgic memory.

Sure, there were elections in the 1950s and the 2010s until last November. But with the exception of about three years from 2013 to 2016, there were always at least as many political prisoners as there were elected officials. So that's the first point. Civil military relations have never really functioned with civilian control of the military by democratic government.

The second is that I think one thing you always have to remember about Myanmar and its Tatmadaw, but also its people—is that it is the little country in between two giants, India and China. And so, it is all historically for hundreds of years, there's always been this sense of vulnerability to external threats. But since independence in 1948, that sense of vulnerability has focused a lot on internal threats.

And so, this sense of vulnerability is actually shared. You know, when things began opening up quite a bit in Derek's period in 2012 to 2015. You know, a lot of people were nervous about losing what is essentially Myanmar. And so, this is felt so deeply by the military to the point that having fought in civil wars every single day since January 4, 1948 independent, citizens have been viewed as potential enemies not as rights bearing subjects.

And I would actually argue that the army shares with Aung San Suu Kyi as understanding that the opposite of that vulnerability is (speaking Burmese) or in English a goal of totally conflict free tranquility.

And then the third very practical point which comes comparatively from the region is unlike the Indonesian military, the Thai military, and the Philippine in military, this military has not split in a

politically significant way since 1949.

Indeed, it's leaders in the old days, supreme commander now commander in chief have squared off against extremely powerful rivals inside the military, but they've taken them all down. Just as an example, military intelligence which collects intelligence on people in the military as well as everything else. The heads of military intelligence were tossed into jail in 1963, 1985 and 2004. And in 2004, 660 intelligence officers went to jail and they must have had dirt on the everyone.

So this is just not a military that tends to have fractures. It's a very highly integrated hierarchical structure in which almost all of the power is in the hands of the commander in chief.

MR. STROMSETH: So in light of these historical developments and presence that you're explaining to us, I would assume therefore that you don't see much prospect of meaningful compromise or even interest on the part of the military to some kind of dialogue, you know, with the opposing side however that's supplied?

MS. CALLAHAN: So I think that what we've seen in the absolute barbarity and cruelty unleashed by the military and the riot police on civilians in the March, April, May protests and this moment we're at wherein the population is being left to suffer immensely from COVID with no support from the government. I mean, I think we're seeing in that indication is that this is not a government – or rather, I mean, it's not a junta that sees any reason to compromise. And I think there might be two reasons or maybe three reason for that. One is that dismantling of intelligence back in 2004.

Military intelligence never really got rebuilt to the behemoth that it was in the old days. And so, it's very possible that the commander and chief on February 1st thought he was just going to step into a leading role and there wouldn't be much problem.

And part of that is that historical cultural phenomenon in Burma that you never report bad news up to the king. So it's unlikely any regional commanders would have flagged for him how popular the NLD was. But it's also maybe the function of having moved the government to a remote area in the middle of the country called Naypyidaw.

And the army head high command is there. And that was done under the last junta in

2005. And so, the army and all of the government officials, they have very little contact with ordinary people who live at least 150 or 200 miles away in Mandalay and Yangon.

And so, their sense of what was going to happen was probably distorted by all three of these factors.

MR. STROMSETH: Thank you. Derek, I wonder if you can also give us a little bit of a window into, you know, not the broad protest civil disobedience activities per se, but, you know, the formation and status of the National Unity Government, the NUG, as a parallel authority.

Who are they? Where are they? What are they thinking?

MR. MITCHELL: Thank you, Jonathan. And it's great to see all my colleagues here who I have such tremendous respect for and learn every time they open their mouths on this issue.

Well, the NUG is a conglomeration of elected figures. You know, there was an election last year as people remember where it was a landslide for the NLD once again. And it's a collection now of sort of a parallel government that is a collection of both NLD politicians and ethnic leaders trying to demonstrate that they represent the true democratic elected, legitimate representatives of the people.

So they're based inside the country. They don't want to be an exile government. They want to be inside the country so that they are not -- they remain relevant. They have a government structure. So they have foreign minister and they have, you know, they've established Aung San Suu Kyi as their capitular head and all the rest.

And they have external arms. So they try to represent in Washington and in capitals around the world to try to get recognition. So they're trying to demonstrate still that the beating heart of democracy remains and that the people are represented alternatively. And they're seeking then recognition of that fact from the world so that the junta are not the only ones out there talking and trying to gain support.

And it's difficult for them because look, the challenge of Myanmar, fundamentally, is this question of how the Burmans and the ethnic nationalities get along. And how they reconcile their many differences and there are a lot of differences. And there's never been -- the NUG in some ways

represents the most unified face of the country or diverse face. But they're having a very hard time actually functioning and governing or having impact either inside or outside the borders of Myanmar.

So this is going to be a very much a big challenge for them to remain relevant and representative over time. But it's all we have frankly to go by if who represents the alternative to what the military represents.

MR. STROMSETH: Right. Well, you know, I think one reason why there are so many challenges for the NUG and others, of course, in Myanmar today is because of this extraordinary humanitarian disaster that we're seeing unfolding.

And, Mary, I wanted to -- you've been talking a lot about this and I just wanted to ask you what in your view has been the impact of the coup on human welfare, everyday lives especially in terms of poverty, hunger, malnutrition, and health care. And most urgently, you know, how has COVID exacerbated the situation?

In a recent article, you wrote, titled *Everyone is Dying*. You described just an astronomical surge in COVID-19 cases and deaths just as the healthcare system creators and with vaccines and oxygen in extremely short supply. So tell us more about that. You're muted, Mary.

MS. CALLAHAN: I think it's important to remember that Myanmar's economy has been in crisis for at least a year prior to the coup. Factories. A lot of the Chinese factories, for example, have shut down when COVID hit sending hundreds of thousands of mostly women workers into poverty.

So there was already the makings of an economic crisis the likes of which Burma had not seen in 100 years or since the Great Depression. However, since the coup things have gotten considerably worse.

The entire system depends on local administration. The governance system does. And local administrators, my local administrator, for example, was one of the first protestors on the very first day of protest. And he had all the boys in the neighborhood haul all the office equipment down to a major thoroughfare and he used the megaphone for a couple of weeks to shout to people. And then he got locked out of his compound and then everybody in the neighborhood also put their locks on the gate so

that when the military replacement came, he had to spend two days cutting through padlocks.

The military replacements have come in a lot of places in local administrations. And, you know, in a sense their job is mostly surveillance. But in theory, if there was ever going to be a COVID relief program, it would be ward and village tract officials who would have to run it.

Ward and village tract officials have been assassinated left and right in Myanmar. Heads of hundred households and ten households, which is another administrative category, resigning, running into hiding. The replacements are now building what looks like, you know, the green zone in Baghdad around where they live.

And so, to the degree there was any delivery of services to people in Myanmar, it's all gone. The other thing the resistance forces did was they looted all of the local administration offices. So that means Aye Min Thant is onto something when she says this going to take a long time because even should the military manage to win in what she rightly calls a pacification campaign, it isn't going to have any information on anybody anywhere in the country. And along the way, we have seen week by week the disappearance of the supply chain of medicines and food. We have seen the neighbors and sometimes Myanmar itself shutting down borders.

The situation is in 30 days -- I mean, I lived there under martial law when the curfew was 8:00, but you had to be inside by 6:00 in 1990 to '93. And this is the grimmest I have ever seen it. You know, the schools are shut now. The junta declared a week of public holiday and ordered everybody to stay home. But people can't stay home. You know, and also home is where a lot of new infections are coming from.

So, you know, just talking today with a doctor in Yangon. He said, you know, 50, 60 percent of new infections are coming from people in multigenerational households or dormitories and peri urban areas. They're just passing this thing around. So you can't stay home. You have to go out. You have to find oxygen. You have to find -- the country is out of Paracetamol, you know, to alleviate fevers. So it is a very grim situation.

MR. STROMSETH: Aye Min Thant, do you have anything to add to that?

AYE: Sorry I was struggling to unmute. Yeah no, Mary is right. Like it is -- staying home is not an option for people. My family had six infections just this last week and, you know, people are finding themselves in the situation where in order to get treatment for your loved ones, you need to first stand in line for, you know, up to six hours maybe longer to try and get cash out of an ATM.

Then you need to call around. You need to just call and call and call until you find someone who has some sort of supply and then you have to go stand in line to go get those supplies. And you just have to hope that you can get those fast enough. And, you know, I think we're seeing a situation in which the junta is both incapable and really disinterested in filling the role of government.

And then you're seeing the opposition leaders, the NUG, largely not having the institutional and logistic resources to deliver that aid. We're starting to see some hope on that end where the NUG has recently started partnering with like health organizations and providers and tapping into the alternative health infrastructure that had developed in the country over decades of both military rule and quasi-civilian rule.

And I think that is sort of a ray of hope not in just the sort of pure like people need help right now. But also, in the NUG starting to function in a way that is different from its NLD predecessors. Although, we will see kind of how that actually plays out.

MR. STROMSETH: Derek, so what does this political stalemate, this political military stalemate and humanitarian disaster, you know, really add up to at the end of the day? Are we looking at a failed state in the heart of Asia, for instance?

A new Syria characterized by economic collapse, political anarchy? Even waves of refugees flowing into China, India, and Thailand?

MR. MITCHELL: We're already seeing a lot of this collapse. I mean, as Aye Min Thant says and as Mary suggested, the military has always taken care of itself. It's never really been interested in governing and looking after others.

So there are some of these muscle memory of the old networks in ways of people trying to take care of their needs. But the ceasefires are breaking down. You're seeing, you know, revolt of --

and people running to the jungle and getting training to fight back.

MR. STROMSETH: This is ceasefire with the armed organizations?

MR. MITCHELL: Yeah. And these are ceasefires that had been, as Mary said, they had been fighting the civil war with -- and off and on with various groups for 70 years. So some of them had gone dormant. All of them were on tenterhooks and many of them are just being revived now.

So you're seeing fighting all over the country and you're seeing desperation. And people -- the best and brightest, of course, are leaving in various ways. They are rushing the exits and you are having the COVID challenge on top of all that.

None of this is a surprise. I mean, all of this was sort of predicted as this is the result of a breakdown in the society where people are simply not going to stand for a return to military rule. They're just done with it. They know what that's like. A new generation has tasted freedom and they're just not going to go back.

So you have an immovable object and the irresistible force and it's not going to stay within the borders. You're already seeing a large wall being created, you know, on the China border. But still, China is getting infected with the Delta variant of COVID. And starting to seep into through their West. Thailand, Kavi will have a moment, I'm sure, to say, what's happening in Southeast Asia and in Thailand.

What we're seeing little by little, step by step in slow motion, the collapse of the country. And it's going to have an impact on the entire region. People are likening to what happened with Cyclone Nargis. Cyclone Nargis is true. That happened though overnight. You know, several hours happened and it was done. And people were just wow. Woke up and saw devastation.

People are seeing this in real time. We're seeing it in videos. We're seeing what's happening and I do think there is seriousness in the U.S. government. I think there's, you know, people are concerned. But there's not -- you know, if the assumption is that, well, we're not going to be able to do anything about and it's just the way it is. We'll have to see it burn itself out, as some in Southeast Asia have suggested, then you're not going to have a real sense of urgency.

You're just going to say, well, you know, we'll have the regular talking points and we'll deal with what's already happening now, which is every country is doing what's always been comfortable doing. It's going to its comfortable spot.

We move to sanctions. Southeast Asia moves towards, you know, impotence and noninterference and, you know, internal division. Japan wants to get along with all sides and do business. China takes care of its interests. India does its -- everyone is going to its comfortable spot. You're going to get a disaster happening. And yet, if I may say -- I don't want to go on too long -- and yet, some people say, well, these countries all have different interests. In fact, they have common interests. Their common interest is that they don't like this coup. And they don't like the results of the coup. They can see what's happening slowly. As you say, it could be masses of people or at least mass of infections and health problems even beyond COVID over time.

And so, they have a common interest, but nobody is taking leadership. No one is saying this is not in our interest. And grabbing the bull by the horns and getting the various capitals in line for some kind of intervention. And I think COVID does provide that ability and leverage to do so because it is so imminent and obvious, and it can cross borders in ways that maybe it's not so obvious that the coup will.

But I think we should be finding extra urgency now for an intervention. And if not now when? And if not Burma then where? And I think it just needs more attention and it needs -- if we can get all these countries to work on it together with urgency maybe we can make a dent, and in the process find a way perhaps to also create a different context for the domestic political dynamics as well. And so, it's a broad way of looking at this.

MR. STROMSETH: Thanks, Derek. Well, this is a perfect segue I think into the third and I think most important focus of our discussion which is how international actors should respond.

And, Kavi, you bring enormous ASEAN expertise to this discussion. The Myanmar crisis has been described as sort of the ultimate test of ASEAN's credibility as a regional organization. ASEAN convened a special summit on Myanmar back in April and announced plans to appoint a special envoy to

mediate, you know, dialogue between the opposing sides. So far, no envoy has been appointed.

And I wanted to ask you what has ASEAN been doing to address the crisis? And what do you think it should do now? You're muted, Kavi.

MR. CHONGKITTAVORN: Okay. First of all, I have to say that a lot of disappointment over ASEAN slow action. One thing ASEAN would like to do is that ASEAN go for the outcome not for the speed. So I think outsider always talk about the speed. ASEAN is not going for that. They're aiming for the long-term outcome.

And ASEAN now is doing. They have pick already a special envoy and I think Brunei will announce it. And when they announce the special envoy, ASEAN will come out with plans especially as you can see.

The five points consensus has two very important components, the political components and the humanitarian component. But I think even what they'll accept and our friends will focus is that humanitarian now is in deep crisis.

And I think immediately special envoy and ASEAN power is to make sure that there is a plan of action to move in to help elevate the humanitarian assistance, like the COVID and you have millions of displaced person both in conflict area and inside the country. Some of them have cross over to Thailand and Thailand was the frontline state. This is why Thailand has been keeping a low profile. Try to make sure that, you know, Myanmar problem inside Thailand is well kept.

We have six million Thai Myanmar worker. Half of them registered, and other living in the border and you have also ethnic group that is very active.

So these are the very, very serious issue that each ASEAN member -- other country as you can see. Indonesia has been very vocal. Singapore as well.

I view this as a division of labor. You know, bad cop and good cop kind of things, you see. So you have but in the end as you can see. ASEAN always come together even sometimes people argue that it's the lowest denominator. Look at the five points of consensus.

So ASEAN is moving but one thing, if you want to criticize Brunei, I think it's the way they

fails to inform the public. Fails to publicize what they have done. They have been very active being the chair and, you know, trying to keep dialogue going with all side particularly the Naypyidaw.

How you talk to Naypyidaw regime, you don't want to openly recognize them but you know that you need the cooperation to stop all the fighting, ceasefire and many other issues that have not yet been realized by you.

So I think as they accept. The crisis actually will provide a unique opportunity for all stakeholders in Myanmar to hold talks because now at this particular moment, the NUG, the Tatmadaw, they thought that they were going to win this war. They cannot because the looming humanitarian crisis.

So I think this the opportunity. If ASEAN have set up everything they need. I think it would take another 10 days because ASEAN is having ASEAN foreign minister meeting from August 2nd to 7th. So a lot of things will be clearer.

And then I think ASEAN will move in. And at that time in international community must help. For example, United States, China, Australia, all this dialogue partner, because ASEAN alone cannot help Myanmar. And this is a Myanmar led inclusive to what political settlement. ASEAN is helping facilitate it.

So international community must help. For example, humanitarians assistance. ASEAN alone cannot -- AHA Center which was set up because of the Cyclone Nargis. Does not have the resource to do that.

MR. STROMSETH: AHA Center can you explain that a little bit?

MR. CHONGKITTAVORN: AHA center was set up during the Cyclone Nargis to coordinate the foreign assistance to salvage disaster and rehabilitation. And since then it has been the main organization.

Now, people realize that you have to give more funding to AHA Center and add some capacity building so that they can handle complex issue that related to humanitarians assistance on conflict areas and locally displacement persons.

MR. STROMSETH: Right. Well, let's keep going with this thread. You know, in terms of

what international community can do?

Derek, you've already spoken to this a little bit, but, you know, you in a foreign affairs article, I think in April. You know, you warned that fatalism is not a strategy. And the international community has to find the will to provide the resources and take the necessary actions to curbe the bloodshed and help bring this crisis to an end.

I wonder with so much hesitancy that I see out there. I mean how realistically do you think this can be accomplished? And, you know, what do you think the Biden administration should do in particular?

MR. MITCHELL: Yeah. And look, there's no silver bullet to this. And I don't think any policy or approach is going to bring this to an end any time soon. I agree with that. I think there's more that can be done though as I said.

I think there's more urgency. There could be, for instance, in that same article, I had suggested that the United States appoint a kind of special envoy or representative of some kind. Those could be a dime a dozen. I can understand we have special envoys to everything. I was one at one point.

But, you know, we have special envoys to Libya, to Syria, to the Middle East, to North Korea, to you name it. There's a special envoy. And what it does it sends a signal of a specific focused interest. So this rises to the level of real, you know, of major importance that goes beyond the typical bureaucracy of the U.S. government.

And I think this issue -- and it really goes to how this government sees Myanmar in the pantheon, in the range of issues that it faces internationally. How serious is this to their mind for international security and for Asia?

And I think if they truly felt this rose to the level of seriousness that I'm thinking that having someone like that who can go from capitol to capitol is very important and getting the various countries to go along with a united, coordinated approach, to going to the junta and even having a combination of engagement and kind of sanctions and pressure.

I mean the focus here -- the only way this really changes is as suggested by Mary and her talk of the military and Aye Min Thant. Is if something happens within the military. It's very unlikely they're going to split, I suppose, but they have to make some kind of recalculation.

And the current approach is not going to get any kind of recalculation. They feel like they're in the catbird seat. Maybe Min Aung Hlaing is not getting information he needs or for whatever reason, they feel they have to keep pushing. And yet, a majority of the military voted for the NLD. The NLD won a landslide in military districts. There are a lot of people within the military who don't like -- and I'm sure they don't like this coup. And see a different future.

Now, they may not be in the most important positions at the senior levels, but we have to find a way together to get them to think differently about their future and to impose certain coordinated cost. Maybe it's access that they have to hospitals and the schools or families, you know, who have access to hospitals and schools and banks and money, certainly weapons.

These are some ways to do it, but it's going to take a real -- much more urgent, concerted focus effort, a special effort than I'm seeing right now and that's no knock on Wendy Sherman who is taking this on as Deputy Secretary of State.

She's having great meetings. She's doing that as we speak, but she should lay the ground work and someone has got to come in behind and do the kind of working level day-to-day follow up and then hopefully ASEAN has its people and Japan and China find a way if they can get together and then, you know, make a difference here. See it tested.

MR. STROMSETH: Khun Kavi, did you want to say something?

MR. CHONGKITTAVORN: Yeah. I think international community must help ASEAN, but don't go ahead of ASEAN. Let's follow ASEAN and strengthen ASEAN position. I can understand that ASEAN acts slow especially under Brunei leadership because you have Sultan who have to act properly because he's the king.

And a lot of people do not understand that. And I think it's very important that United States help ASEAN. China already have a strong support. And United States should, for example,

provide funding for humanitarian right away. And of course, the other foreign actor is United Nation.

At the moment United Nation has to the global mission. They come to the region and they try to act on its own. They cannot. They have to collaborate with ASEAN. So together you have ASEAN. You have dialogue partner United States, China, whatever, EU. And then you have U.N. together. I think that will be the best.

MR. STROMSETH: Kavi, you had mentioned that you think the appointment of an ASEAN envoy is imminent. Did you say within 10 days or something?

MR. CHONGKITTAVORN: Well, I think they have the names already. They just have to wait for the announcement. This is the Brunei style, very secretive. You know, but they've been working hard. They have been subtle because in the past Myanmar has said that Myanmar prefer representative from Thailand, but Indonesia persists that they have a better person who would like to lead Myanmar in this political process.

So there were some squabbling along the way and Brunei now has said they will make announcement soon.

MR. STROMSETH: Okay. So I guess --

AYE: Can I jump in? Sorry.

MR. STROMSETH: Yes, please jump in.

AYE: Yeah. So I think the issue or part of the issue with this argument of having patience with ASEAN is it is two-fold. One is that at least people in Myanmar are very critical about the fact that ASEAN has not seem to be interacting with the NUG, with disobedience leaders, with labor leaders.

MR. STROMSETH: Whereas they are interacting with or meeting with Min Aung Hlaing?

AYE: Yes, they're not meeting with them. They're not sort of being engaged as an equal partner in any discussions about a political resolution. And then the other argument that people in Myanmar have been making against sort of ASEAN leadership is that there's a lack of urgency, right?

Like people understand that these organizations can take time, but, you know, every day

that this issue is not resolved, it's people who are not getting vaccinated not just for COVID but in general. Like children are not being vaccinated for some of the most common diseases that we've had vaccines for decades. And if people are not going to school, there's over 200,000 people who have been displaced.

People are, you know, giving birth in the jungles and, you know, everyday people are dying not just as a direct result of being shot at with weapons, which is also happening. But just the rule sort of policy, decisions, and general ineptitude. And so, it's been -- feels a bit insensitive to tell a nation of people who have been struggling for six months now that they just need to be a little bit more patient with a bunch of people who, you know, live in far flung capitals to decide what is best for the Myanmar people.

MR. CHONGKITTAVORN: Yes, I understand. I sympathize with this difficult situation, but you are working with 10 countries which try to get the consensus, they understand. And I think there must be some more information to the Myanmar public because I think there is growing frustration viewing ASEAN as inactive has no urgency.

I don't think that is true. So I think it's Brunei and all ASEAN must have a better -- what do you call? Communications strategy explaining. There should be more information is what ASEAN is doing. Otherwise, you know, I think people will get misunderstanding.

MR. STROMSETH: So I'm just wondering if there's sort of, you know, we can bring some threads together here. There is this extraordinary humanitarian disaster unfolding every day. Looks like maybe ASEAN may finally have an envoy in a matter of days rather than weeks perhaps or months.

And I'm just wondering if there's an opportunity here as I think has already been hinted in our discussion. To look at the tragedy of the humanitarian crisis as perhaps some kind of platform. I hesitate to say opportunity, but something like that where, you know, as Kavi mentioned, you know, you also have the United Nations involved of course. You know, might there be an opportunity for ASEAN and the U.N. to somehow coordinate in the response to this humanitarian disaster in particular for the

provision of humanitarian -- urgent humanitarian assistance to the country?

And is that at all practical in the sense that, you know, they would have to be received within Myanmar by the junta. And is there much chance of that? Might there be a greater chance if the focus at least initially was really on the COVID urgency in particular? Anybody want to take a shot at that perhaps?

MS. CALLAHAN: I want to take a shot at that.

MR. STROMSETH: Mary.

MS. CALLAHAN: I think absolutely not. I mean, you know, let's be clear. You know, there are four to 10,000 people dying a week. And so, if we wait around for ASEAN and the U.N. to figure out how to operate in Myanmar. It has a setup of some kind of parallel system and there's a huge problem with the U.S. because the U.S. put the minister of health and sports on the OFAC, Specially Designated Nationals list. So absolutely nothing can be done through what remains of an already collapsed type of health system.

There is a second system in place which are the underground doctors who are practicing civil disobedience. Any attempt to try to organize those, send money to those, is only going to create a useless scathe of U.N. log frames and paperwork that people will have to sign off on and therefore put themselves at risk.

I mean there is no time to wait for the U.N. to follow ASEAN. Moreover, the 20 plus agencies that operate in Myanmar don't have the capacity. So many of their national staff have already died of COVID. So if they need people to actually run assistance out, it's too late.

MR. STROMSETH: Derek, do you see any kind of opening here?

MR. MITCHELL: I think we have to have a serious -- I mean there is no silver bullet on this either. I wonder -- I mean, look we've got U.N. folks to do humanitarian work in North Korea at some point. I mean there are examples of getting in where you can get organized hopefully fairly quickly, assistance that takes care and without having to go through the government or setting up other systems somehow but we have to test whether it can.

This is an urgent situation. I think however it's done. I mean the U.N. is a good place to organize that conversation. I think you can hopefully get in the security council. Even China would be interested in this as I mentioned, it's affecting them. Even Russia, who are vultures and, you know, go in anywhere and pick a carcass, and sell weapons. They might not want to get in the way of this. Maybe there's a way of organizing some special operation where you can go to the various folks including the NUG quietly and to the junta and say, this is a humanitarian tragedy. This is not political. We need to get in there and help people now.

And then potentially use that as you say as a platform or otherwise to see if the political side can be dealt with. But the urgent humanitarian -- people are dying. I mean politics doesn't matter if you're going to take over a country that's decimated. And the country is on a road to decimation.

So at least my view is there's some urgency of the U.N. potentially or some process that is able to get in and just start helping. Setting up whatever system because they don't exist to help people on an equitable basis that is not simply run through the military or it helps the military then I'm all for it.

But what I think is we need to have folks talking about this and working on it simply because if you're looking at India or Indonesia or other places, they have systems. Burma does not. And it's going to have impact on everybody if we're not able to get in.

MR. STROMSETH: Thank you. We only have nine or ten minutes left and I want to get to a couple of questions from our audience. Before that, though I have to ask and I know you worked on this Aye Min Thant extensively as a reporter.

What is the current state-of-play with the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh for instance and in this crisis more broadly? They seem all but forgotten or what's going on?

AYE: So I won't say they're forgotten. So the junta definitely tried to make the Rohingya issue a way in which they sort of legitimized their rule in parts of the international community.

Earlier on when the coup especially they began to talk about how their repatriation process would actually create some sort of maybe not justice but an actual process to help people get

back into the country. They tried to frame the NLD as the actual sort of main perpetrators. Shockingly in the situation that sent over 700,000 people into Bangladesh.

And they have been a deep part of the conversation in how the NUG has been conducting itself and whether or not international actors are willing to recognize them. You had U.S. senators when they were speaking to NUG representatives ask about the Rohingya specifically, if you have a sort of ongoing conversation within the country in part because of the NUG stating that they are looking at how citizenship is constructed in the country to allow for Rohingya to have rights in the country along with other ethnic minorities as well who have been maybe not subject to as much direct violence but have been sort of institutionally disfranchised for decades as well.

But you know, with the junta in charge, given that they are the main perpetrators of the violence. Although they were sort of, you know, passively supported by the civilian population at the time. It is unlikely that, one, people will want to return especially if Myanmar turns into a failed state. And that too that they would actually be safe in any way especially if the junta decides that because there needs to be a pressure release in the country or something to try to stir up hatred or intracommunal violence or something like that in the future.

MR. STROMSETH: Thank you. Well, we have a little time for questions from our audience. I have one from Amitav Acharya of American University. A well-known expert on ASEAN. He asks what, if any, interest does China have in promoting a political settlement between the military and the NLD led Unity Coalition? Derek, you want to try that and we'll ask others as well?

MR. MITCHELL: I don't think they particularly like this coup. I don't think they see it as necessarily in their interests. Certainly, the failed state on their border that puts at risk all that they really care about which is to pick at Burma, use it as a resource and an access to the Indian Ocean for its road and rail to connect as its west coast as it were. I think maybe called the west coast. And as part of its rail and road.

That's what they care the most about. They care most about having a privileged position in the country and take care of their business interests and to ensure that there's not any kind of western -

- overwhelming western influence so that they're vulnerable on their western vulnerable border in their sense.

So yeah, I think they would have an interest in finding some kind of resolution, but I don't think they're going to get in the middle of this when it's so sensitive. They're not trusted by the Myanmar people at all. They're targets of a protest. They're viewed as in cahoots with the junta. And the junta doesn't trust them either. And the junta doesn't like them very much for how the Chinese have helped some of these ethnic armed organizations throughout history for decades.

I think they're -- either they or the generals or just one generation above them literally fought the Chinese and Chinese mercenaries on the border and died at the hands of Chinese communists and their allies up to the 1980s.

So and up to date when I was there, there were folks supported by China who were fighting the military. So they know China is playing a double game and they're not going to trust China to have a mediating role, I think, in this process. And China, itself, all it wants frankly is to hold onto to those interests I outlined.

And I think the current situation just makes them vulnerable to, you know, sabotage by the forces, some of the opposition forces and others who may want to create problems and cause trouble. So they're in a really difficult position which is why they may want to find a way out or a way if they could work with others to find a solution that is not necessarily against our interests or other's interests. It's an interesting opportunity in a way, but I'm not sure we're taking advantage of it.

MR. STROMSETH: I see.

MS. CALLAHAN: If I could just add. China's biggest problem is -- or biggest concern right now is the spread of COVID into Yunnan Province. And China is going to send Chinese vaccines to Myanmar allegedly at the end of July or early August but not in numbers that are going to make any difference at all.

China is not going to save Myanmar. China is going to save China.

MR. STROMSETH: Right. One last question and we only have about a minute left but,

Mary, maybe I could direct this to you. Wade Griffith the executive director of the Shanta Foundation asks do you have any visibility into when, how international cash transfers might resume?

Without this it is almost impossible for INGOs or international NGOs to respond to the growing humanitarian crisis.

MS. CALLAHAN: Yeah, I don't think it's going to be any time soon. I mean, the Central Bank of Myanmar is bleeding dollars to try to stabilize the kyat rates. And it is really not a central bank that cares very much about this money coming in. And in general, my personal feeling is that the commander and chief in the junta are -- their number one target are these CDM protestors and especially they hate the doctors, as they have set up all this awful sting operations on the underground doctors.

And I think they see them as to some degree even more problematic than the NUG or the local defense forces. And so, they don't want foreign money getting into the hands of the CDM people over and above everything else.

MR. STROMSETH: Okay. Well, look, I want to conclude by thanking our panelists for contributing to such a compelling sometimes riveting and dispiriting discussion highlighting the desperate state of Myanmar today, both the country and its people.

To me, the main outstanding question, which I think deserves a lot more attention is how the world, you know, can provide emergency assistance to the country in the very, very near term despite all the obstacles and complications that we've discussed. And, you know, whether such efforts, you know, be it a mission and intervention or whatever it's called, you know, can somehow if possible widen the aperture for broader peace efforts?

It's a very tall order, I know, but let's hope. And thank you all both the panelists and the audience. And this concludes our program today.

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