

## “There’s been no trace of threats. The villagers I’ve met did not seem to have any fear so that’s what we saw.” : H.E. Prof. Dr. Surakiart Sathirathai

*ADVISORY Board for Committee for Implementation of the Recommendations on Rakhine State led by H.E. Prof. Dr. Surakiart Sathirathai was formed on 14 December, 2017. The committee met with State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, Vice President U Myint Swe, members of the Committee for Implementation of the Recommendations on Rakhine State and visited Maungtaw and Kyaukpyu in Rakhine State.*

*H.E. Prof. Dr. Surakiart Sathirathai gave an inclusive interview to journalists on 25<sup>th</sup> January.*

*Following is the interview with H.E. Prof. Dr. Surakiart Sathirathai.*

First of all, the advisory board, ten of us, the international advisors and Myanmar advisors got together and had a full board meeting for the first time on the 22<sup>nd</sup>.

We’ve had 3 board meetings in the past two weeks and looked at our terms of reference. We talked about our modus operandi and exchanged views of the general situation in Rakhine State.

Yesterday we visited several villages in Rakhine State and we saw villages that were burnt down and villages that were left empty. We also saw preparations for the returnees. I’ve been given the opportunity to talk to the local people; the Buddhists and Muslim, and the Hindus. I’ve inspected the houses being built to accommodate the people who were supposedly returning on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of January but that did not happen. But preparation has been underway and we saw the transit camps. Security has been provided. There’s been no trace of threats. The villagers I’ve met did not seem to have any fear so that’s what we saw.

I think the advisory board hasn’t given any advice yet. We will monitor the situation and have deliberations among ourselves in the days and months to come. I think in two, three months the advisory board will be able to come up with preliminary recommendations as to what else the implementation committee should do and what should be the priorities. We also need to install trust building mechanisms in the villages otherwise the implementations done there will not be sustainable.

We commend the Myanmar government in committing to



H.E. Prof. Dr. Surakiart Sathirathai meets people from Muslim Community during his visit to Maungtaw. PHOTO: MYANMAR NEWS AGENCY

implement the 88 points recommended by the Kofi Anan’s recommendations. The State Counsellor has emphasized on the rule of law and providing justice to the people in the local communities. I think that is the right way to go.

What I’ve seen from the helicopter is that Rakhine State has a very rich, fertile, agricultural ground and they have plenty of water so there is much potential there. There is much potential for income creation and job creation to train farmers on how they can have better productivity and how they can put more value added into their productions. I can see opportunities for microenterprises and job creations for women, especially in the garment industry.

On the way to Kyaukpyu there is a great opportunity for this special economic zone and there’s great opportunity for tourism in Thandwe. So I think that the idea of the State Counsellor that peace and development have to work hand in hand and the establishment of a Union Enterprise to create a public-private partnership is a good one. I can see a lot of opportunities there after I inspected on the ground myself and after talking to the people.

I think in some way the first trip to Myanmar has been very fruitful and constructive. We have seen what has been developed and we have seen the traces of violence and we have heard how the Myanmar government has endeavored to provide a lot of security.

We have seen the step by step preparation of accepting the returnees. The papers have been sent to the Bangladeshi side; they have even prepared a biometric registration for the returnees. I



H.E. Dr. Surakiart Sathirathai.

hope the repatriation will take place sometime soon. I hope the international community can be helpful and can understand the local constraints. The international community cannot be helpful if it’s not inclusive.

That’s my reflection of the impression I’ve had on this first trip. The advisory board will have a collective deliberation. We will speak with one voice and our mandate is to give advice to the implementation committee headed by the Minister for Social Welfare. So we expect to come up with recommendations and advice in the next 2-3 months.

Well I have seen the Chinese assistance for the building materials for the offices of the immigration, foreign ministry and security including part of the housing so I think that is to be commended. I think China can play a key role in helping with the repatriation in providing the housing materials to be built and I understand China has been working closely with the Union Enterprise on this.

I think what the returnees need most of all is security. We have seen security provided in 4, 5 villages that we have visited.

Secondly, the returnees will need a proper place to live and there should be full medical facilities adequately for them to stay

temporarily then to be resettled in the villages they are from.

They have given us the evidence of the preparations for food to be provided, electricity in the transit camps, health services and things like that. I also inspected the storage for food and how it could be transported. The place was already provided with electricity by the Myanmar government. I encourage the Myanmar government to continue to provide this kind of media access. I think we’ve had about 20 of us altogether seeing this with our own eyes.

I just like to say one thing if I may. You’ve probably heard the news that former Governor Bill Richardson is no longer with the advisory board. We came with open minds and we speak with one voice to the implementation committee so we should have given ourselves the chance and opportunity to listen to the policymakers, to the officials, to the villagers, to everyone involved in the problem of Rakhine State and the concerted effort to bring peace and development to the area.

Unfortunately, Governor Richardson might have come with the preconceived notion of wanting to do something; that is the release of the Reuters reporters. He did not raise that in the advisory board at all but he raised it with the State Counsellor. It is not in the mandate of the advisory board. The board was not consulted formerly in the meeting that we had three times.

My personal view is that if it was in the early stage of the persons being arrested then maybe we can do something about it. But the process has gone to the point where the public prosecutor has persecuted and filed a case

to court. So I think everyone has to respect the rule of law and I think the State Counsellor has emphasized that whoever they are, everyone is under the same law.

So the advisory board is not in the position and will not like to do pressuring any government or interfering with their criminal justice procedure. The only thing we could do and we did it already; I did it on a personal basis; I raised the issue with Union Minister U Thaug Tun before and he has ensured us that the treatment of the Reuters reporters would be in accordance with the due process of law and proper criminal justice procedure. We have no intention to pressure the government to release anyone or any intention to interfere in the court procedures.

Secondly, I would like to inform the press that I think it’s not fair that Governor Richardson said to the international media that the advisory board would be whitewashing or would be representing or protecting the Myanmar government. We don’t intend to be the cheerleader of the government or the lead cheerleader of the international community. We are not the mouthpiece of the Myanmar government or the international community. We are independent, impartial and you have seen that the international advisors and Myanmar advisors are people of great dignity. We have our credibility and a lot of social capital and we have been working in the area of peace and development for a long, long time.

My personal view is that the local government has to be more involved. I think the process has to be more inclusive and I would urge the local parliamentarians in Rakhine State to be consultants. I think the entire consultation process has to begin from the community level before going all the way up to the National Government level.

The implementation of Kofi Anan’s 88 points cannot be done top-down only or bottom-up only; it has to be under the process of constant consultation from the communities to the executive branch and the legislative branch of the State and National government. Of course, the international community can be included in the consultation process and I think that’s how the peace, development and harmony can be sustainable.—Myanmar News Agency ■