

What more can Canada do in Burma?

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My naturalized country, Canada, played an important role in the restoration of democracy and human rights in Burma since the 1988 student-led democratic uprising.

Burma is the country of my birth, a country I recall with love. The Canadian Friends of Burma for which I've worked for more than seven years has been instrumental in generating support from within and beyond Canada.

In practical terms, CFOB also helped secure money from the Canadian government to support hundreds of thousands of refugees and dozens of civil society organizations on the Thai-Burma border and in other bordering countries with Burma.

Burma in its communications has proclaimed a transition to a democratic society. The question now is the role Canada can play during this ongoing democratic transition period.

What are the results of the historic visits of Foreign Minister John Baird and Trade Minister Ed Fast, as well as a 14-member delegation led by Deepak Obhrai, parliamentary secretary to the minister of foreign affairs earlier this month? Is there any tangible support for the peoples of Burma in their efforts to rebuild the country, and is there any ongoing attempt to continue to invite democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi to Canada?

The outstanding invitation

Canada has an outstanding invitation to Aung San Suu Kyi. All our political party leaders, including Prime Minister Stephen Harper and the late opposition leader Jack Layton, expressed their aspirations to invite this Nobel laureate to come to Canada.

When I made an inquiry out of frustration that she would not be travelling to Canada when she was visiting the United States, government officials assured me that both ministers who visited Burma last year had handed over the invitation.

Aung San Suu Kyi has visited the US twice, as well as Korea, India, the United Kingdom, France, Ireland, Norway, Switzerland, and Thailand. She is also reportedly planning to visit Japan this April. All these visits leaves me with more questions as to why she has not come to Canada, a country which made her an honorary citizen.

When the US administration invited Aung San Suu Kyi to visit, a team consisting of State Department officials including Ambassador to Burma Derek Mitchell accompanied her to the US.

I was indeed excited when Mr. Baird announced the opening of a Canadian Embassy in Burma. However, the excitement was short-lived and evaporated when I found out more.

The opening is under the shadow of the United Kingdom Embassy and in their building. For me as a Burmese-Canadian, this is hardly a new page in the history of my two countries. The Australian Embassy in Rangoon had directed Canadian consular

affairs on Canada's behalf for a long time.

No more than a space within another embassy leaves me with concern as to how the peoples of Burma will view the commitment of Canada as stated by our ministers.

What's next for Canada?

I am a proud Burmese-Canadian with hopes of Canada's continued support in the current Burmese reform process, especially in peace and development that is badly needed for all Burmese who have lived under repressive rule for more than five decades.

In that regard, I've heard a lot about other countries' new programs for education, health, peace, and capacity-building of civil society organizations. The US, UK, Australia, Norway, Japan and even New Zealand are leading these efforts in Burma now.

Last week, a parliamentary delegation comprised of MPs, political advisers, and officials from the Canadian Parliamentary Centre visited Burma for one week. I am also aware of more frequent visits of officials from the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, and the Canadian International Development Agency since early 2012.

However, there is no apparent Canadian partnership and programs yet inside Burma. And even Canada's support on the Thai-Burma border goes unnoticed.

To understand my point of view I need to go into a bit detail and will use my experience. Ten years after arriving in Canada, I made my first visit to Thailand. I was directly transferred from Thailand to Canada after being kept in the Special Detention Centre

for three years. The Canadian Embassy in Bangkok helped a lot during this process, even invoking a special provision in order to push my case, and a friend's, and get us out of prison. We have a strong bond with Canada since that act of kindness.

When I landed back on Thai soil, I started meeting with a number of representatives from most of the border-based organizations. I was surprised that they were not much aware that the assistance they received comes from Canada. However, I was impressed to see a small initiative under the Canadian Embassy's management. They were lucky enough to have small amount of money under the name of the Canada Fund, with which embassy staff were able to reach out to the exiled community on the border. One appreciation symbol I saw at the time was when I visited a small, activist-run art exhibition shop. I saw a Maple Leaf sign with an appreciation banner "supported by Canada Fund." Seeing this made me realize that we in Canada need to have outreach that connects those we give with the country that helps.

And since my name is officially off from the blacklist compiled by the Burmese government, I hope I can safely go back to Burma again after 24 years in exile.

CFOB allowed me to advocate for the peoples of Burma. Now when I go back for a visit, I will advocate for the Canadian image in Burma and share what Canada can mean in Burma.

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