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**Myanmar (Burma) Coup:
Restoring Democratic Transition and Achieving Federal Democratic Union
in the Southeast Asian Nation**

Let me begin by thanking the organizers of the Mid-East Honors Association Conference 2021 for giving me this opportunity to share what is happening in Myanmar (also known as Burma). Special thanks to the University of Indianapolis, our great partner who has made it possible for us to join you here at this conference today. I would also like to underscore how the Burmese in the United States and the international community are responding to the events in Myanmar, and how we all can help end the military regime and restore democratic transition, and ultimately establish a Federal Democratic Union in the Southeast Asian Nation. I am particularly delighted to have this privilege to speak directly to you, knowing you are some of the most talented and brightest students attending Honors Colleges in the Mid-East. But, I also hope that I am talking to thousands of University students, graduate students and Professors across the nation.

So, as many of you already know, the Burmese military Generals led by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing staged a coup d'etat on February 1st following the general elections on November 8 last year. Those elections resulted in the National League for Democracy party, led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, securing a landslide victory. The country's military generals discredited the election as fraudulent, a claim the electoral commission rejected. Not only that, but the local and international observers of the election, including The Carter Center, have concluded the election was free, fair and credible. Instead of respecting the will of the people expressed in this election and allowing the democratic process to proceed, the coup leaders detained State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, President U Win Myint, Vice President U Henry Van Thio, other key leaders of civilian government and peaceful protesters.

In response, hundreds of thousands of people have taken to the streets to protest against this illegal military regime. However, the coup leaders have responded to peaceful protesters with increasingly inhumane and brutal displays of force--killing at least 275 innocent people and detaining several thousands, and forcing many thousands of others to flee in search of protection.

These cruel actions are just a reflection of the impunity culture deeply embedded within the Burmese military and its generals, who have for more than half a century, used arbitrary arrests, rape, terror and torture as weapons of fear, and literally slaughtered thousands of ethnic minorities –children, women and men, as part of an ethnic cleansing policy—a policy that has ravaged 54 million people with poverty, systemic rights deprivations, and produced millions of IDPs and refugees.

We are witnessing once again the horrible violent culture of the Burmese military, this time under the gaze of the whole world. But at the same time, the people of Myanmar are increasingly

realizing the ongoing crisis actually offers a perfect opportunity to achieve the type of democracy they have long fought for. But to achieve this goal, a unified and strong response is needed.

At a community level, the Burmese Americans and the Burmese diaspora as a whole see the military actions as unlawful, unfair, and unacceptable, and they have joined the democratic forces to strongly condemn this military regime and urged them to return the power to the elected civilian government. In doing so, and to unite the voices more powerfully, we have formed the Free Myanmar Campaign USA which has led to the formation of the US Advocacy Coalition for Myanmar which comprises more than 10 Burmese-American organizations across the nation. This coalition has been organizing protests and events in a show of solidarity with the people inside the country and to raise awareness about the happenings in Myanmar among our American friends. The FMC and its partners are also conducting fundraising activities to help support the people impacted by the crisis, and are deeply engaged in advocacy and coordination of strategies and policy matters with the U.S. Congress, the US government, the United Nations (UN), the International community, the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), formed out of the elected parliament members of the 2020 election, and the Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) to help end the military dictatorship and resume the democratic processes in Myanmar.

Now, we must remind ourselves of the root causes of this problem in order for us to address the crisis effectively. Accordingly, first of all, the Burmese and the international community must recognize that Burma's political crisis is deeply rooted in ethnic conflict. And this ethnic conflict has to be addressed fundamentally through constitutional and institutional redesign. That constitution design must be based on the principles and the spirit of the Panglong Agreement—that allowed the formation of the Union of Burma—which guarantees equality and the rights of all ethnic groups under a federal democratic union, with a particular emphasis on the complete restructuring of the defense and security sector---that is to establish a “Federal Army” to ensure that the Burmese military as an institution is rooted out of national politics and is placed firmly under a civilian government. This possibility will involve integrating the existing Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) with the Federal Army Units and Joint Chiefs of Staff. The good news is that most of the EAOs out of the more than 20 active forces see this as a real possibility. As I talk to the people inside the country, the greatest hope that the Burman and non-Burman have in common is the hope that a Federal Army will rescue them.

But, to be able to achieve the Federal Army under a federalist constitution, the main stakeholders will all need to continue to work together and coordinate among themselves quickly and effectively.

First, one of the key, the most important factors in this revolution is the people's power. This people's movement, peaceful protests, and the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) must continue and sustain. This is the most critical power that will help us beat the military dictatorship once and for all. And I am encouraged to see Burmese-Americans, the Myanmar Diasporas and our friends, like you all, supporting and contributing to ensure the success of the people's movement.

Second, the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), formed out of the elected parliament members of the 2020 election —will need to continue to lead us in this fight. Burmese and the international community alike —we all must support the CRPH’s efforts to form a National Union Government that brings together a coalition of the 2020 elected Members of Parliament, ethnic minority forces, and diverse and inclusive stakeholders, including EAOs, General Strike Committees, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), women’s groups and others. I have every confidence that this interim Government will be able to coordinate commendably and as quickly as possible the key aspects of the movement, and will also be able to produce a federalist constitution as soon as possible.

But, in this effort, the people of Myanmar need the support of the international community.

The United States must continue to lead the international community’s effort to help address the crisis in Myanmar effectively.

We applaud President Biden for his leadership, for strongly condemning the coup, and declaring a “national emergency” of the US, correctly recognizing that the Burmese military’s actions “constitute an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States”. In addition, the US took additional measures, imposing new restrictions aimed at the military junta and their associates on March 4, March 10, and additional sanctions on March 22. And at least three resolutions on Myanmar have been introduced in the US Congress. As many of you have heard, the House resolution “condemning the coup in Burma and calling for measures to ensure the safety of the Burmese people, including Rohingya, who have been threatened and displaced by a campaign of genocide conducted by the Burmese military” just passed yesterday. I was just informed a few days ago by the staffers at the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations that the Senate bill will be voted out of the committee this week and we hope it will pass in the Senate soon after. As much as we are grateful for the support of the US President and the US Congress, we are asking more from them and from the international community. We ask the US and the international community:

- 1) To recognize and strongly support the Myanmar interim government that is to be formed soon;
- 2) To Impose tougher, coordinated, and targeted sanctions on the military junta and its associates. Such sanctions must be tough enough to hit the regime hard, through a well-coordinated and high level diplomacy engagement with the US alliance in the region including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, South Korea and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) members, Japan, Australia and India. This sanction regime must be designed in a way that the effects of it on the general population is minimized while ensuring it helps produce the desired outcome – that is to help change the behavior of the military generals.
- 3) But, economic and diplomatic sanctions alone may not be enough to achieve that outcome. We are also asking the US to bring forward a resolution at the UN Security Council, including invoking Chapter VII authority under the UN Charter and the article of Responsibility to Protect (R2P). Yet, such an effort is likely to fail because China and Russia will certainly veto it. In such a case, the US and its allies—like-minded partners, such as Canada, UK, France and/or the

European Union —with the support of the Quad members-- should consider humanitarian intervention outside the existing legal framework of the UN mechanisms, including providing resources to the EOAs for self-defense;

4) The international community must also utilize as fast as and as effectively as possible the UN Mechanisms, including the UN Human Rights Council, the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice to fully investigate and continue to hold accountable the Burmese military leaders for gross violations of human rights, war crimes, crimes against humanity, or genocide. Far too long, these perpetrators have gotten away without appropriate punishment. Without accountability and justice, Myanmar can't really progress to a better future.

5) And one of the most crucial components of the international community's roles is—providing humanitarian aid to the people effected by the crisis. So we are asking the US and the international community to redouble humanitarian assistance for the people of Myanmar, ensuring this assistance flows directly to the hands of civilians and to the most vulnerable people through the NGOs, and CSOs, including through cross-border delivery. This will not only help sustain the livelihood of the already poor and vulnerable groups of people, but would also be supplementing the sanctions imposed.

While Burma as a country is facing the crisis, we should remind ourselves how the Burmese people have made some progress in the past ten years. Efforts to effectuate change through building a democratic society by investing in people and education notably were successful. This positive side of development is visibly observable, which happened relatively fast-paced--credits to both Burmese and the international community who supported and capitalized on the window of opportunity as these investments have contributed to an increase of the middle-class and college-educated population, as well as the general population that have enjoyed a taste of democracy and freedom in their real life.

Along with this societal change, Myanmar has begun to see a shift of culture from the Burman chauvinism to mutual recognition, mutual respect, mutual appreciation, and celebrating all people regardless of ethnicity or religious belief, reflected from the policy environment created by the leadership of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. This means the Burman chauvinistic culture has been shifting positively toward recognizing and appreciating diversity regardless of ethnolinguistic complexities. Again, this positive change is visible in the streets of major cities—Yangon, Mandalay and as well as other sectors of the country.

Today, we are seeing the display of incredible courage and determination of the people who are fighting this battle at the forefront on the battle ground. I am also seeing Unity among all people of Myanmar -- Burman, Non-Burman, ethnic minorities —Chin, Kachin, Karen, Kayah, Mon, Rakhine, Shan— when it comes to establishing a federalist democracy. I do not see the Burmese giving up their fight for freedom. They clearly see this is the real opportunity to break the culture of the military junta once and for all. The international community must recognize these positives and opportunities, be willing to take all means necessary to support the democratic aspirations of the people of Myanmar and to help end the military regime and create a win-win situation for all by helping create sustainable peace and democracy in the country and in the region.

On the other hand, if the US and our friends fail to win democracy in Burma this time— in this Southeast Asian Nation rich with natural resources, a nation that is at the crossroads of China, India and the rest of the world, with its strategic and geopolitical importance to the West, it will have a resounding impact on the US foreign policy interests and national security for decades to come.

As much as I do, we all must have faith in the American value and in the people of Myanmar this time around, who are effectively utilizing their own power coming from the people themselves through daily protests and the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) designed to cripple the junta. They are combining the leadership and experiences of the 1988 and 2007 uprisings, with the new, young generation with talents, creative and innovative thinking and actions, with full utilization of 21st century technological and media, pulling diverse resources together, collaborating with all types of organizations, and participated in by people from all walks of life—with clear convictions and commitments which clearly say NO to the military dictatorship.

I have a dream that one day all the people of Myanmar— regardless of one's ethnicity, nationality or religious beliefs, whether big or small, strong or weak, rich or poor— will treat one another the same, with equality, and live peacefully with love under a Federal Union with respect and dignity.

Thank you for standing with the people of Myanmar and for fighting this fight along with us. God bless you, God bless the American people, and God bless the United States of America.