Open Letter on Restoring the University of Yangon to its Former Glory

1. Over the past year, Myanmar has taken significant steps at national reconciliation, and in promoting rule of law, greater transparency and accountability, good governance and political, economic and social reforms. While recognizing that these things are easier said than done, prospects of good times to come in the days ahead due to these reforms, have raised high hopes and expectations on the part of the people of Myanmar.

2. Obviously, just raising hopes isn't good enough. Such hopes have often been raised in the past without getting us anywhere. The required political will, commitment, effort, and capability must be there to ensure hopes are realized. Up to now, Myanmar has not been able to satisfactorily meet these requirements. The economic and social benefits that are expected from recent reforms have yet to be delivered in tangible and concrete terms to the ordinary people of Myanmar. And this is a major challenge facing the country at present.

3. The need to respond to this challenge was highlighted by President U Thein Sein in the guidelines he announced for the "Second Stage of Reform Strategy for National Development". The announcement was made at the "Work Coordination Meeting on More Effectively Carrying out National and Regional Tasks" held at Naypyitaw on 11 to 12 May 2012. The President's guidelines called for "People Centered Development".

4. What does people centered development mean? It means a development strategy that gives priority to improving the quality of life of ordinary citizens. As Myanmar is still in the early stage of development, this will require the average family in the country to enjoy not only basic necessities (food, clothing and shelter) but conventional necessities such as access to health and education facilities, safe water, proper sanitation, convenient transport, reliable domestic power supply, an efficient telecommunications system, a decent dwelling, a pleasant and safe neighbourhood as well as social amenities such as parks, theatres, libraries, sport and recreation facilities. The President mentioned our poor people usually have to work from dawn to dusk to eke out a meager existence without time left for anything else. In a people centered development strategy, working hours will be reduced through better social organization and increased attention given to workers' welfare, which in turn will give them more leisure time to pursue cultural, social and recreational activities.

5. Let us now consider what can be done to follow-up on the mandate provided by the President for people centered development. In doing so, there is a need to keep in view rising expectations in the country, and to come up with a proposal the outcome of which is concrete and appeals to the people and for which we have the capacity to deliver in a reasonably short period. I believe doing something in the education sector has a good chance of meeting these requirements. With this in mind, I propose Restoration the University of Yangon to its Former Glory for consideration. The main objectives and tasks regarding this proposal, together with their anticipated economic and social benefits, are set out below.

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2Please see "President U Thein Sein calls for more efforts in reform process for national development", New Light of Myanmar, 12 May 2012; and "Priority task of government is to satisfy desire, fulfill requirements of people", New Light of Myanmar, 13 May 2012. For full text of statement please see http://www.president-office.gov.mm/briefing-room/daily-news/new3
6. It may be useful to begin by noting that Yangon University, or Rangoon University (RU) as it was known when I was an undergraduate student there, maybe looked upon somewhat like the Irrawaddy river. Like the Irrawaddy, RU belongs to all the people of Myanmar. It is our national heritage. It should be preserved and protected for future generations.

7. It will also be useful to recall that RU for most of its early history was one of the best and great universities in the Asian region. Remember also, Myanmar's independence movement started there.

8. Like the Irrawaddy river, RU has lost much of its former glory and splendor. Nevertheless, our recent experience with the Irrawaddy offers a valuable lesson. Last September, the people of Myanmar came out with a united, clear and strong stand on the need to protect the Irrawaddy and to restore it to its former glory. This united and strong expression of public sentiment, and decisive action by the Government in support of this people’s will yielded good results. Similar public expression of support, at this time, to restore RU to its former glory would be highly desirable. As in the case of the Irrawaddy, it will be an important landmark of national reconciliation and a memorable way to start a new chapter in our history. Moreover, it will bring immediate and tangible benefits that have so far proved elusive in our reform efforts.

9. Another factor that will be desirable to mention at the outset is that in conversations with faculty members and students of various institutes of higher learning spread out all over the countryside in the suburbs of Yangon, the main message I have got from them is: "Our biggest and enduring wish is to return to the main university campus in Yangon."

10. The point at issue regarding the above wish has to do with the heavy burden that teachers and students have to bear on account of the huge distances away from the city where these institutes are located and lack of adequate public transport to get to them. With increasing number of cars, rising population, and lack of proper traffic and town planning, the situation will get worse. The need to hold regular classes at out-of-town facilities and to rush back to the main campus to conduct evening diploma and post graduate courses have also inflicted considerable physical and mental stress on the teaching staff and have taken a heavy toll on them.

11. Given these ground realities, a good way to initiate the process of restoring Yangon University to its former glory will be to readmit students and for the faculty to conduct regular classes (both undergraduate and graduate) in classrooms that now remain largely empty. The same applies to the central residential halls on the campus. Students vacated these premises in the early 1990s and have yet to return to them. This is unfortunate as residential halls have enriched the social and cultural life of our young women and men during their college days. Hence, faculty members and students have a strong case with regard to their desire to be reinstated in their mother university.

12. There are sound economic reasons for such reinstatement and for return of faculty and students to the Yangon University campus. As we all know, recent political and economic reforms have raised expectations that Myanmar will soon be opening up for business and there will be good opportunities to make money. As a result, there has been a large influx of business people and potential investors into the country in anticipation of the economic boom. One consequence of this optimistic (though still cautious) economic outlook is that real estate values have sky-rocketed in Yangon and other major cities. Yangon University estate is in the prime area of the city. Its land, buildings, sport and recreational complexes,
and many other facilities are now worth billions. These very valuable national assets must be put to effective use to benefit the country and its people and to earn revenue for the government. If not, and if these assets are kept idle and unutilized, the loss to the nation in terms of forgone revenue and economic benefits would be tremendous.

13. With university and college provided boarding houses and dormitories off-limits due to policy constraints, our young people have to seek room and board in private run hostels and rooming houses, which in most cases are not noted for their proper oversight, wholesome food or healthy living environment. These conditions create fertile ground for moral decay and anti-social behaviour on the part of some of our young people that cause grave concern to parents and communities. Hence, it is high time for us to deal with this social disease. One obvious way to do it is to get students back to dormitories like the central residential halls on the Yangon University campus. They will then be under the care of hall wardens and tutors, and will also be able to take advantage of the congenial atmosphere that exists for study and recreation at these places. Accordingly, undertaking measures to make full use of the facilities at the RU campus will bring substantial benefits to the country and especially to our young people. Such benefits will be immediate, highly visible, does not involve additional expenditures by the Education Ministry and will be welcomed by all the people of Myanmar.

14. The Yangon University estate in its current situation with empty buildings, spacious grounds and open spaces, and attractive recreation areas and sport complexes needing upkeep and renovation -- in the wake of sky-rocketing real estate values -- have provided massive incentives to big private firms to pursue lucrative business ventures on university property. This gives another urgent reason to get the students and faculty back on the campus to prevent further encroachment.

15. In light of all that has been said above, I would like to request our former and present sayamas, sayas, students, compatriots, colleagues and friends (both within the country and abroad), who have the relevant experience and knowledge, to come up with three things that will be crucial to restore RU to its former glory. These are:

(a) What was RU like in its earlier days as one of the best and great universities in the Asian region;
(b) What is situation of RU now; and
(c) Formulation and implementation of a plan of action to restore RU to its former glory.

16. Among the three issues noted above, item (c) is probably the most important. I am confident we will get full support on this endeavour at the national level from the Executive Branch under the leadership of President U Thein Sein, from the Hluttaw, from political parties, and also from members of the academic and business communities, the media and civil society organizations.

17. A lot of support from our neighbours and from the international community (both bilateral and multilateral) will also be coming under item (c). These include upgrading the quality of education, capacity building of staff, providing books, teaching materials, and equipment, student exchange programmes, providing scholarships, visits by foreign scholars, internships of our staff and graduate students at foreign universities, and engaging in cooperative and joint activities in many areas.

18. Another vital issue to restore RU to its former state is to follow-up on a promise made by the then President Dr. Maung Maung in 1988 -- to reconstruct the Student Union building.
19. My parents were foreign service people and when they left to take up an assignment abroad, I stayed behind in Yangon to finish my studies at RU. I stayed as a boarder in Sagaing Hall. Like other students at that time, I spent a lot of time in the Student Union building. I recall the facilities there consisted of a small reading room and a library, a restaurant, a barber shop, meeting rooms, and a recreation room with a ping-pong table.

20. I propose that reconstructing the Student Union building on the RU campus should be entirely an affair of the people of Myanmar. By this I mean funding for the project should be met solely by contributions from the people of Myanmar, both here and abroad. There should be no lower or upper limits to the amount of such contributions. Any one can give any amount she or he wishes. All contributors, regardless of the amount of the contribution, will receive the same amount of gratitude and metta from those in charge of the project.

21. I feel reasonably confident that sufficient funds will be available to build a top class Student Union building. It will have a reading room, a library, a barber shop, a restaurant and a recreation room with a ping-pong table. In addition, there will be a beauty parlour, to cater to the needs of our lady students. Of course, in keeping up with the changing times, the building will be fully air-conditioned and equipped with modern telecommunications and office facilities. There will be meeting rooms, lecture auditoriums, conference hall, and guest rooms for visiting scholars. Facilities for recreation, relaxation and social amenities will also be there. Whatever else you think should be in the building, you name it, we will put it in.

22. More than anything else, the new Student Union building will be a landmark in the national reconciliation process and it will fill a void that has been in our hearts for some time. As in the past, it will provide a place where our young people can gather, engage in free debate and discussion, and in keeping with our tradition, they will be encouraged to play an effective role in the nation building task that lies ahead.

23. Having a Student Union building without a Student Union does not seem logical. There is a good chance of getting accused of putting the cart before the horse. It is no doubt a sensitive issue. It is sensitive because old folks like us are still stuck with a mind-set of the 1960s whereas our young people have moved into the information age. However, I am sure the matter concerning the reestablishment of the Student Union will be taken care of for us by the Hluttaw and the political parties in close cooperation with the Executive Branch of the Government.

24. Personally, speaking as an old retired school teacher, I think national reconciliation to be fair and endurable must be broad-based and all-inclusive. For those who have reservations about our students and young people forming associations like other members of our society, the question we need to ask ourselves is: when we are striving so hard for reconciliation on many fronts, even with foreigners who have not been particularly kind to us, then why not also with our own young people?

25. To conclude, the well equipped and modern new Student Union building will be a gift from the people of Myanmar to the youth of the country -- a gift that bears testimony that the people have trust and confidence in them and look forward to their support and active participation in the reforms and changes that are currently underway to make Myanmar a better place.