

## Asia and the Pacific

The rapid pace of reform in Myanmar over the past year has yielded dramatic political changes after five decades of military rule. The scale of change is seen most visibly in the election of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who lived under house arrest for over two decades, to parliament in April 2012. These reforms dramatically expanded personal freedoms, gave new momentum to cease-fire negotiations with ethnic groups, and formally ended official government censorship of the press. Amid these reforms the UN's Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on Myanmar has had increased access to meet with political actors and support national reconciliation. Yet the security environment remains vulnerable and continued risks remain, underscored by repeated outbreaks of violence in Rakhine state in 2012, which killed hundreds of people, and the continuing conflict between the government and the Kachin Independence Army.

Also achieving historic progress this year, the government of the Philippines and the

Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) signed a peace agreement in October as the International Monitoring Team (IMT) continued to observe and monitor the cease-fire.

Elsewhere in the region, 2013 marks the ten-year anniversary of the end of conflict in the Solomon Islands and of the deployment of the Regional Assistance Mission in the Solomon Islands (RAMSI), which is preparing for departure. In addition, Thailand and Cambodia, after clashes along their border in 2011, agreed to withdraw their troops from the contested area in July 2012.

### Myanmar

In 1993 the UN General Assembly created the position of the Special Adviser to the Secretary-General (SASG) on Myanmar to strengthen the UN's political engagement with the country. Four years later, the first Special Adviser took office, extending the good offices function of the Secretary-General. Through the Special Adviser, the UN seeks to support an inclusive national reconciliation process, democratic transition, and respect for human rights.

In January 2012, Vijay Nambiar was appointed Special Adviser after holding the position in an acting capacity for two years, while simultaneously serving as the chief of staff of the Secretary-General's Executive Office.

Since the new government took office in March 2011, the Special Adviser has visited Myanmar seven times, including to meet with Aung San Suu Kyi in November 2011 and to visit Rakhine state shortly after ethnic clashes erupted there in June 2012. While praising

#### Special Adviser on Myanmar

- Authorization Date 23 December 1994 (UNGA Res. 49/197)
- SASG Vijay Nambiar (India)
- Budget \$1.2 million (1 January 2012–31 December 2012)
- Strength as of 31 October 2012 International Civilian Staff: 5

*For detailed mission information see p. 287*

the reforms undertaken by the government, the Special Adviser has cautioned that Myanmar is still in the early stages of overcoming deep-seated political, security, and economic challenges.

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## Key Developments

### *Democratic Reform and Elections*

Since taking office in March 2011, President Thein Sein has overseen a series of wide-ranging political and economic reforms that have substantially altered the social and political landscape in Myanmar. In addition to amended electoral laws and the release of hundreds of political prisoners,<sup>1</sup> undertaken to allow the opposition to participate in the elections, new laws have been passed on freedom of association and assembly and on access to information and press freedoms.

The April by-elections took place in a considerably more open environment compared to the 2010 elections pushed by the democratic reforms now under way. In the lead-up to the elections, the Special Adviser repeatedly stressed the importance of credible elections as a key test of democratic progress in Myanmar. International and national monitors noted only minor irregularities in the conduct of the elections, and the results were quickly welcomed by the United Nations, the United States, the United Kingdom, the European Union, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), won forty-three of the forty-four seats it contested. This makes it the largest opposition party in the legislature, but does not significantly alter the balance of extant political power. Yet the elections represent a critical milestone for Myanmar, not least for the return of the NLD to the political process (its boycott of the 2010 elections was a clear demonstration of the credibility deficit of that vote).

The international community has welcomed the democratic reform process. In

February 2012, the Special Adviser called for the international community to ease sanctions in response to "dramatic changes" occurring in Myanmar.<sup>2</sup> In November 2012, US president Barack Obama made a historic visit to Myanmar, meeting both Thein Sein and Aung San Suu Kyi. The United States, Canada, Australia, and the European Union have all removed or eased sanctions against the regime. The United States also appointed an ambassador to Myanmar in July and the UN began normalizing its development assistance. The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the Asian Development Bank are all also reengaging with Myanmar. Myanmar will also serve as chair of ASEAN in 2014, reportedly an important incentive for domestic reform.

While many observers have called attention to the risk of backsliding, a number of developments point to the momentum of the transition. The most notable example is the government reshuffle of August 2012, widely interpreted as a move on the part of the president to surround himself with reformers and sideline hard-liners. However, the rapid pace of change and still fragile peace process present continuing risks.

### *The Peace Process and Ethnic Conflict*

Over the past year the government has devoted considerable attention to the internal peace process and has signed cease-fires with all but one of the armed groups in Myanmar, the Kachin Independence Army.<sup>3</sup> Operations against the Kachin fighters escalated at the close of the year, with the government launching aerial attacks against the rebels, dashing hopes for a new cease-fire agreement with the only remaining ethnic rebel group.

To further support the peace process activities, the government announced the creation of a peace center to lead efforts following the completed cease-fire agreements. The Norway-led Peace Donor Support Group, designed to coordinate international support for the peace process, was also established this year. Through this mechanism the Special

Adviser announced a \$5 million support package from the UN Peacebuilding Fund to support reconciliation efforts.

Despite positive momentum in the peace process, in June 2012 violent intercommunal clashes erupted between Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine state. In response, the government deployed the army and police security units and declared a state of emergency in Rakhine. Clashes erupted again in August and later in October. Altogether the violence caused hundreds of fatalities and displaced over one hundred thousand people.

Following the government's declaration of a state of emergency in Rakhine, the Special Adviser and UN Resident Coordinator visited the area at the invitation of the government to see camps of internally displaced persons and communities affected by violence. In August the president invited a fact-finding mission from the Organization of the Islamic Conference, led by the Turkish foreign minister, a move welcomed by the Special Adviser, who had called for an impartial investigation following his visit to Rakhine. The government also announced the creation of a twenty-seven-member national commission to investigate the crisis. When clashes erupted again in October, the UN Secretary-General warned that the violence threatened to jeopardize the gains made in the political reform process.

Amid the violence, government officials arrested a number of national staff members of the UN. In August two were sentenced to prison for their alleged role in the Rakhine violence, but were pardoned by the president the following day. One UN staff member remains in detention.

#### *Future Role of the Special Adviser*

The year 2013 will mark the twentieth anniversary of the General Assembly resolution authorizing the Special Adviser's role, amid major political changes in Myanmar. With these reforms, the Special Adviser now has increased access to government and opposition figures across a broader range of issues. The adviser is already engaged in discussions around a sorely needed 2014 census and has supported the rollout of a global compact to

strengthen foreign direct investment. In addition the government has invited the UN to attend peace negotiation meetings and participate in further reconciliation activities. These are developments that would have been unlikely prior to the inauguration of the current government.

Yet at the same time, the relationship between the Special Adviser and the Myanmar government has historically been challenging and some observers argue that the government has long seen the Secretary-General's good offices function as unnecessary and are now even more convinced that the Special Adviser position should be ended.<sup>4</sup>

For its part, the UN remains open to continuing and expanding support for the government. In April 2012 the Secretary-General visited Myanmar and in an address to the parliament outlined a four-point plan to support the transitions under way: investment in health and education, increased international aid, accelerating the reconciliation process, and ensuring an inclusive political environment.<sup>5</sup> Support across these areas will be critical as Myanmar prepares for the 2014 chairmanship of ASEAN and the 2015 elections, key tests of the momentum of reforms.

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#### **Mindanao, Philippines**

After several rounds of negotiations in 2012, the government of the Philippines and the MILF signed a historic peace agreement to end a conflict that is estimated to have cost over 120,000 lives and displaced 2 million people since the 1970s.

The government of the Philippines and the MILF have been engaged in frequently stalled peace negotiations since a 1996 peace agreement. Since 2004 the IMT, with contingents from Brunei, Japan, Libya, Malaysia, Norway, and the European Union, has monitored the cease-fire between the government and the MILF. The mission also ensures compliance with international humanitarian law and human rights treaties and provides support to internally displaced people.

Since taking office in 2010, President Benigno Aquino III has made resolving the

conflict in Mindanao a priority. In 2012 the government and the MILF held a number of rounds of discussions, coming to agreement in April on a set of “decision points” to guide negotiations on a peace agreement. These negotiations were an important step after violence flared in October 2011. Negotiations in September 2012 paved the way for the signing of a framework peace agreement in October, through which the MILF agreed to end its efforts to establish an independent state and decommission its fighters, estimated to number over 10,000. The agreement creates a new political authority in Mindanao that will operate with some autonomy, a basic law to be developed by the local population, and the transfer of law enforcement authority from the Philippine armed forces to local police. The agreement also calls for a fair portion of revenues and taxation for the region.

In August 2012, prior to signing the peace agreement, the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Movement (BIFM), a splinter group from the MILF, launched a series of attacks in central Mindanao. The BIFM broke away from the MILF in 2011 in opposition to MILF negotiations with the government. The attacks, an apparent move to destabilize the continuing peace talks, killed approximately seventy-five individuals, the majority of whom belonged to the BIFM. The MILF condemned the attacks and coordinated with the government to assist in ending the BIFM’s operations. In September 2012 the BIFM pledged to stop attacks in central Mindanao.

While the signing of the peace agreement represents a major step forward in the peace process in Mindanao, continued efforts will be needed to further develop the details of the proposals and to integrate other extremist groups, including the BIFM, into the peace process. At this critical time, the IMT will continue to monitor the cease-fire until the full decommissioning of the MILF.

### Solomon Islands

RAMSI was established by the Pacific Islands Forum in 2003 in response to a five-year period of civil strife and conflict in the Solomon

#### International Monitoring Team (IMT)

- Authorization Date 27 October 2009 (Agreement on the Civilian Protection Component [CPC]), 22 June 2001 (Agreement on Peace Between the Government of the Philippines and the MILF)
- Start Date 10 October 2004
- Head of Mission Major General Dato’ Abdul Rahim bin Mohd Yusuff (Malaysia)
- Strength as of 30 September 2012 Military Observers: 53

#### Regional Assistance Mission in the Solomon Islands (RAMSI)

- Authorization Date 2000 (Biketawa Declaration)
- Start Date July 2003
- Special Coordinator Nicholas Coppel (Australia)
- Participating Police Force Commander Paul Osborne
- Military Commander Brenton Gasteen
- Budget \$257.1 million (1 October 2011–30 September 2012)
- Strength as of 30 September 2012 Troops: 164  
Civilian Police: 155  
International Civilian Staff: 131  
National Civilian Staff: 130

Islands between the Malatian and Guale ethnic groups. The environment in which the mission first deployed was characterized by a lack of rule of law with high levels of corruption and intimidation.

After making early gains in security, particularly in securing the surrender of militants, RAMSI turned to long-term institution building in the Solomon Islands. The 2009 partnership framework between RAMSI and the Solomon Island government identified three pillars for the mission’s activities: law and justice, economic governance and growth, and machinery of government.

As RAMSI approaches a decade of deployment, the mission and the Solomon Island government are focusing on its transition, with the military component of the mission expected

to depart in the second half of 2013. The police component of the mission—the Participating Police Force (PPF)—will become the mission’s main focus during its transition phase, expected to continue through 2017. To guide its work, the PPF and the Solomon Island police have developed a transition strategy through 2013 that reflects the resumption of executive policing by the Solomon Island police and the increasing focus for the PPF on institutional strengthening and capacity building.

RAMSI and the Solomon Island government are also in discussions on how RAMSI-supported assistance activities can be shifted to bilateral donors, including Australia and New Zealand. However, this transition will take place amid continued challenges to the Solomon Islands that could risk reversal of the gains made since 2003. During a visit to Australia in August 2012 to discuss RAMSI’s transition, Solomon Islands prime minister Gordon Darcy Lillo identified youth unemployment, the dearth of economic infrastructure, and the lack of institutional leadership as pressing obstacles.<sup>6</sup>

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### Thailand-Cambodia

The territory surrounding the Preah Vihear temple on the border of Cambodia and Thailand has long been contested between the two countries. In 1962 the case was brought to the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which awarded the temple to Cambodia while the

territory around the temple remained in dispute. In 2008 the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) designated the temple as a World Heritage site in Cambodia. The decision brought the conflict to the surface again and eventually resulted in fierce clashes in 2011. In its capacity as ASEAN chair in 2011, Indonesia offered to send monitors to observe a cease-fire.

At the same time, the case was brought back to the ICJ, which as an interim measure called for both countries to remove their troops from the area and to allow for the deployment of the Indonesian observers. While the observers were never allowed to deploy, in July 2012 Cambodia and Thailand agreed to remove their troops from the disputed area while awaiting the final decision of the ICJ. While the dispute remains far from resolved, the goodwill shown by both countries augers well for more peaceful negotiations on the future of the territory.

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### Conclusion

Major political developments in Myanmar, considerable progress in Mindanao and at the Thai-Cambodia border, and continued stability in the Solomon Islands are all welcome steps forward in peace consolidation in Asia and the Pacific. Looking ahead, the changing nature of engagement in these settings portends a shifting role for international peace operations in the region.

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### Notes

1. Despite the cumulative release of nearly 700 individuals, it is estimated that hundreds of political prisoners are still held in Myanmar’s jails. Both the Secretary-General and the Special Adviser have repeatedly urged the government to release remaining political prisoners. See IRIN, “Myanmar: Final Push on Political Prisoners Needed,” 27 September 2012, <http://www.irinnews.org/Report/96402/MYANMAR-Final-push-on-political-prisoners-needed>.

2. Voice of America, “UN Envoy Urges Lifting of Burma Sanctions,” 23 February 2012, <http://www.voanews.com/content/un-envoy-urges-lifting-of-burma-sanctions-140355173/168461.html>.

3. This is the first of a three-step reconciliation plan. The second step is to engage in wider discussions with each group on cultural, political, and socioeconomic issues, which has already begun. Here the government has already reached agreement with the Karen National Union for independent, and possibly international, cease-fire monitors. The final step envisioned is to bring all ethnic groups together to determine the contours of a comprehensive peace agreement.

4. International Crisis Group, "Reform in Myanmar: One Year On," 11 April 2012, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/south-east-asia/burma-myanmar/b136-reform-in-myanmar-one-year-on.pdf>.

5. UN News Centre, "On Historic Visit, Ban Praises Myanmar's Progress and Urges Further Partnership," 30 April 2012, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=41888#.UIgxNGl25bo>.

6. "Solomon Islands Calls for Post-RAMSI Assistance," *Australia News Network*, 26 August 2012, <http://www.radioaustralia.net.au/international/2012-08-26/solomon-islands-calls-for-postramsi-assistance/1004296>.