

President U Thein Sein delivered speech to the nation regarding recent riots in Meiktila and other parts of the country

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Nay Pyi Taw, 28 March

The following is the full text of speech delivered by President of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar U Thein Sein to the nation regarding recent riots in Meiktila and other parts of the country.

My fellow citizens,

I would like to take this opportunity to explain to you the circumstances giving rise to the recent violence in Meiktila and the attempts by a small number of people to spread this violence to other parts of the country. I am deeply saddened to find out that a simple private dispute led to such deadly violence and those instigators, taking advantages of the disingenuousness of the public, attempted to exploit the situation to engineer violence in other parts of the country. I would like to reflect my government's position on what has happened.

In general, I do not endorse the use of force to solve problems. However, I will not hesitate to use force as a last resort to protect the lives and safeguard the property of general public. The police forces whose prime responsibility is the implementation of rule of law must perform their duties decisively, bravely and within the constraints of the constitution and by-laws.

Individual freedom, which we consider to be a fundamental ingredient of democracy, can only mean freedom that does not infringe on the civil liberties of others. Our Constitution guarantees the right of all citizens to worship freely any religion they choose. I would like to warn all political opportunists and religious extremists who try to exploit the noble teachings of these religions and have tried to plant hatred among people of different faiths for their own self-interest: their efforts will not be tolerated.

We will take all necessary and effective action to stop their operations in accordance with our Constitution and our existing laws. All perpetrators of violence will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.

We must expect these conflicts and difficulties to arise during our period of democratic transition. With a united effort, we must face and overcome these challenges together. As we rebuild our society, we must rise above decades of historical bitterness, confrontational approaches, and a zero-sum attitude in solving our differences. I want to call on all citizens to rise above the old ways of doing things and bring together our diverse backgrounds and chart together a path towards a new kind of society, based on mutual respect, democratic deliberation and consensus-building, to solve the challenges we face and will continue to face during our historic transition.

We have already seen the beginning of a different approach following the violence in Meiktila. To rebuild mutual understanding and trust in the community, we have worked to bring together civil society, leadership from various religious communities and assistance from international organizations, and encouraged responsible reporting from the media. In addition, the Tatmadaw has also played a pivotal role in safeguarding property and assisting victims.

I am proud to see a concerted effort from civil society organizations, leaders of communities, government agencies and security forces to prevent the spread of conflict to other cities and towns. This indicates that citizens from different ethnic and religious groups are working together to create a peaceful society based on democratic norms and a proud nation that is based on mutual respect and understanding.

We did not resort to the use of force immediately mainly because we do not want to risk any possible endangerment of our ongoing democratic transition and reform efforts.

That said, I am firmly committed to using the power vested in me by the Constitution to deploy our security forces and to use existing laws to prevent and protect the life, liberty and security of my fellow citizens. My fellow citizens, I want to urge you to cooperate with each other on the basis of compassion, tolerance, open-mindedness, and empathy.

As a nation it is our firm belief that only an inclusive democratic society based on equality for all citizens will ensure peace and stability, especially in a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-faith country such as ours. Despite our differences, we must find a common ground to coexist peacefully while upholding our democratic ideals. It is my firm belief that we will be able to overcome both our immediate and future challenges if we can embrace our differences and stand united in face of adversity as one people. We must see our diversity not as a problem to be managed but as a fundamental strength of our nation. In short, we must find strength and take pride in diversity.

I would like to make a commitment to the people of Myanmar. In this time of change towards an open society, my government will share information in a truthful and

transparent manner. I would also like to request a commitment from you in return. As citizens of this country, we must also distinguish fact from fiction and overcome the dangers posed by rumors in a wise and open-minded manner. If we can keep our commitments, we can overcome these challenges while building a harmonious society that safeguards human dignity.

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