

Joint-Business Luncheon, on Tuesday 10th October 2017 for The Swiss Thai Chamber of Commerce in collaboration with the Swiss Society Bangkok

Myanmar, Your Unknown Neighbor: Past – Politics – Perspectives

Luncheon with H.E. Ambassador Paul R. Seger, Head of Mission of the Swiss Embassy in Myanmar since October 2015.

Myanmar was for many years a closed country, controlled by a military junta. In 2011 the country started opening up and elections in November 2015 changed the political picture in Myanmar dramatically. Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD party won a landslide victory, making the Nobel Peace Prize laureate the country's de facto leader. Everyone was hopeful the country would open its economy quickly and peace would be established. But peace has not come. Since the 25th of August 2017, the Myanmar army has been engaged in what the UN calls a "textbook ethnical cleansing" of the Rohingya Muslim minority population. More than half a million people have fled to Bangladesh. Why does Aung San Suu Kyi keep silent and what is the position of the western diplomatic community? Ambassador Paul Seger gave answers in his speech.

Karin Wenger

"Aung San Suu Kyi was everyone's darling when she rose to power two years ago. Today she is still the best bet we have," said Ambassador Seger as he summarized the geopolitical shift of the last few months and the dilemma it brings for western diplomacy. When Burma, or Myanmar how it is also called, was under military dictatorship for 60 years, China was its closest ally. But Burma started opening up in 2011 and Aung San Suu Kyi who had spent 15 years under house arrest, rose to power in a historic election in 2015.

More than half a million on the run

Then the Rohingya crisis started in October 2016 and flared up again on the 25th of August this year when the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, ARSA, attacked police posts in Rakhine state, killing 12 people in its biggest attack so far. In turn, this prompted a counter-insurgency clampdown from security forces. More than half a million Rohingyas fled over the border to Bangladesh. And Aung San Suu Kyi, the peace prize laureate, said nothing to defend them. Instead, addressing the diplomatic community in Myanmar last September, she didn't even mention the word Rohingya once, nor did she criticize the army for its brutal actions. She invited the diplomats to visit the Rakhine state on a government trip, judging for themselves that not all the villages are burnt down, that there are Rohingyas who decided to stay. Ambassador Paul Seger went to see for himself, flown around in a state helicopter, accompanied by state shepherds. He saw the villages burning and said, "I'm not surprised that these people rose up after years of discrimination. If you marginalize them they will become more radical and Islamist. It's in the interest of all to find a political solution."

Geopolitical stalemate

The situation is complicated. The conflict goes back to British colonial times, when the border was open, people moved fluidly between States. It's hard to prove since when they have been living in Burma. It's hard to prove that they belong to Burma, as they say. Until they can, they will remain stateless. What is happening since August is not the first clash. 1978, in the 90s, 2012, 2015, these are all dark years for the Rohingyas and for peace in Myanmar. "The Rohingya crisis has the potential to undermine the democratic transition of the country. We see a rise in nationalism and – in the majority Buddhist country – a rise in fundamental Buddhism. We need some form of political solution." The UN security council however is blocked. The West is criticizing the actions of the army, but China and Russia support the Myanmar government and the army. China would be more than happy to welcome Myanmar back under its wings. That might be one reason, Seger doesn't believe in harsh measures, in isolation or sanctions, but instead emphasizes talks, on more intense work with the army in order to make them understand that respect for human rights comes with a reward. The West is equally shocked and scared to see the new ally slip away again.

ABC of Burma

Seger puts the recent crisis in a broader context. "We have to understand the ABC of the country: A stands for the army. 60 Years of isolation, economic suffering and then till today whatever change we want, we cannot do it without the army. B stands for Buddhism. In Burma it's a highly nationalized Buddhism with Buddhist leaders playing a vital political role. They stood up against the army in the saffron revolution of 2007, but now, some are inciting violence, instead of bringing peace. The C stands for conflict, not only the one in Rakhine with the Rohingyas. Burma has 135 ethnic groups – the Rohingyas are not considered as one of them – its armed conflicts are the longest lasting in the world. Many of the ethnic groups feel oppressed by the Bamar majority. There are twenty armed ethnic groups. Only with half of them the army and government signed a shaky ceasefire agreement two years ago. The others keep fighting for equal rights, for a federal state model. Switzerland has lots to offer to make the government understand some benefits of federalism. But at the moment peace and federalism have slipped the list of priorities. Segers outlook is rather bleak: "One possibility is a quick progress – despite the Rohingya crisis. The second is relapse to military rule. The third and most likely: The country will slow down, the peace process and economic progress will slow down. We will all have to be much more patient."