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Transcript

Chatham House Prize 2011: Award Ceremony

HE Madeleine Albright

US Secretary of State (1997-2001)

1 December 2011

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Madeleine Albright:

Thank you very much, Dr Niblett, Sir Major, Lord Ashdown, Lord Howell, members of the Aris family, Ambassador and Mrs. Heyn, members of the Royal Institute of International Affairs at Chatham House, and distinguished guests. I actually am speechless after watching this amazing video, and I am delighted to be here with all of you this evening and to see so many familiar faces and friends.

I have to say, the Chatham House Prize, awarded on behalf of Her Majesty the Queen, is the most prestigious honor of its kind. And it is an incredible privilege for me to accept it on behalf of one of the heroines of democracy in our era, Aung San Suu Kyi. I spoke with my dearest friend Suu about three days ago, telling her I was on my way. It was a good conversation – though slightly fuzzy because of the line – but I've had the pleasure of speaking with her and she was, as she mentioned in her remarks, very pleased at this amazing award.

As we have seen from her video, this is a woman who remains unbowed, undaunted, and un-silenced after more than two decades of repression. Years ago, I asked Vaclav Havel whether it mattered to him that during his time behind the Iron Curtain people in the West cared enough to protest and speak up on behalf of human rights. He replied that nothing did more to give hope to him and his colleagues than to know that they had friends on the outside. And clearly Aung San Suu Kyi spoke to that in her video and proclaimed the truth of those words.

Here in this elegant hall, we are thousands of miles from Rangoon but – as we have just heard – Aung San Suu Kyi is similarly grateful for your recognition today and for your support and solidarity over the many years of Burma's internal cold war.

I mention Havel and Suu Kyi together in part because they are both champions of freedom, but also because their names will forever be associated in my mind. Twenty years ago, Michael Aris came to me with a request. He wondered if I might call Havel to see if he would write a foreword to a collection of Suu Kyi's writings – which of course he was delighted to do. This was no big deal, but for me it was the beginning of a great personal connection that has grown steadily in my heart, and for Havel it was something he wanted to do. I began to care and so to learn and thus to care even more.

In 1995, I was America's ambassador to the United Nations when word arrived that Suu Kyi had been released from house arrest; this was five years

after the elections in which democratic forces had triumphed, only to have the outcome subverted by the military. We saw her release as a hopeful sign and so, when I was given the chance to visit, I quickly agreed.

I don't know how many of you have been to Burma, but it is physically beautiful and on the surface quite tranquil. The modernization so evident elsewhere in Southeast Asia has not yet arrived and in many areas, the primary source of power is neither nuclear nor oil – but oxen. The landscape is dotted with Buddhist temples, and most of the inhabitants wear traditional dress. The result would be charming if not for the underlying reality, that the country is one of the poorest on earth.

Because of 20 years of military misrule, Burma has been plagued by malnutrition, illiteracy, unemployment, deforestation and one of the globe's highest infection rates of HIV.

George Orwell wrote a book entitled *Burmese Days* – but the society I saw reminded me more of his famous work – *1984*. The military had its agents everywhere. From schools to labor unions to cultural and religious organizations, the junta made the rules and severely punished those who did not obey.

During my visit, I met first with General Khin Nyunt a senior member of the governing council. He argued, as autocrats are prone to do, that because of ethnic divisions, the country would fall apart if not ruled by an iron hand. He insisted nonetheless that his military had earned both the population's respect and, believe it or not, its love.

'That is why,' he said, 'Our people have such happy faces.'

I replied that it was no great feat to intimidate people into smiling – but that fear was a poor means for uniting a country. I urged him to come to terms with Suu Kyi and to restore Burma's democracy. He replied in a patronizing manner that the junta thought of Suu Kyi as a younger sister and that they would take good care of her.

As for democracy, he would only say, 'These things take time,' which I interpreted to mean, 'Forget about it.'

The next morning, I met with Aung San Suu Kyi. When we arrived, she was standing under the portico to her modest home, set in the middle of a garden surrounded by a high fence. She was wearing traditional clothes in shades of purple and lavender, and had a flower in her hair. After we embraced, she led me inside for breakfast. She also told me that she'd ironed all the curtains.

In our discussion, she emphasized her desire for a negotiated solution, stressing that she was not anti-military; after all, her father had been a general. She had no ambitions for herself, but felt an obligation to her people and was unwilling to compromise on the fundamental questions of democracy and human rights.

More than sixteen years have elapsed since that visit. Suu Kyi has been in and out of house arrest and many of her followers remain in jail. In 1999, when Michael Aris fell ill; the authorities cruelly denied his request to see his wife one final time. In 2007, there were hopes that the so-called Saffron Revolution would produce change – instead, there were more arrests and repression.

Then, last November, a new constitution was offered and a round of elections held. The process in many ways seemed a sham and the outcome pre-determined – yet there is a greater sense of anticipation in Burma today than at any time in the past 20 years.

The new president, Thein Sein, describes himself as a reformer, and his supporters talk openly about overhauling the old system and building in its place the kind of society for which the Burmese people have been clamoring.

Aung San Suu Kyi, who has met with the new president, says he is genuine in his desire for democratization. And she has characterized the past year as ‘eventful, energizing and encouraging.’

Several welcome steps have been taken; the loosening of censorship, the legalization of labor unions, the release of some prisoners of conscience, the suspension of a controversial dam project, and Aung San Suu Kyi’s decision just last month to re-enter the political process. Earlier this week, Hillary Clinton arrived in Burma, the first American secretary of state to visit the country in fifty years.

After so long, caution is the watchword; we would betray our understanding of the past if we were to accept the government’s promises at face value. But we would also risk the future if we were to ignore the opportunity they appear to represent. Nobody said it better, obviously, than our dear friend Aung San Suu Kyi in this video. The authorities in Burma should know that the West desires nothing more than to normalize relations, expand commercial ties, and make possible a full range of contacts.

All we ask in return is that they comply with international norms regarding the freedom and rights of their citizens, that they continue on the road to democracy, and that they learn a lesson or two from Aung San Suu Kyi.

When I met with her in 1995, I marvelled at her discipline in being able to survive five years of house arrest. Now it is 2011. At almost any point, she could have gained her liberty simply by asking to leave the country. But she refused to depart because she knew she would not be permitted back.

She refused to remain silent, because words and reason were the only weapons she had. And she refused to give up because her faith in democracy and her love for Burma were unshatterable.

For more than two decades, while we have gone about our lives, she has remained at the front lines of the battle between democracy and tyranny.

It is our responsibility – and our privilege – to stand with her, especially now with the first evidence of real progress in sight – to demand further reform, and to push and push and push until her faith is rewarded and the regime of fear has fully given way to a future of hope.

By recognizing the heroism of Aung San Suu Kyi and her fellow democrats, Chatham House has tonight bestowed its highest honor on the most deserving person possible; and it has also brought honor on itself.

Thank you all very much.