



Press Release

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President Obama meets with YHT Chairman at the historic Secretariat complex

YANGON: The President of the United States, Mr. Barak Obama, met Dr Thant Myint-U, the chairman of the Yangon Heritage Trust, this morning during his visit to the historic Secretariat complex in downtown Yangon.

Meeting the President at the main entrance to the Secretariat, Dr. Thant Myint-U accompanied him through the central courtyard to the place where the country's independence was declared in 1948. The location also contains a monument to the nation's founders, who were assassinated in 1947, and is also the site of Myanmar's first Constitutional Assembly and Parliament.

The Secretariat is the birthplace of Myanmar as an independent, democratic, and multicultural nation in 1948. It is located in the historic Yangon downtown area—one of Asia's last intact early 20th century urban landscapes. It is the most important secular historic site in the country.

The Yangon Heritage Trust is extremely pleased that President Obama visited the Secretariat and that he drove through the historic downtown area.

“The Secretariat is a place of immense significance to Myanmar's history. It's where representative government first took shape in the early 20th century, where the founding fathers of the country worked after World War II to plan for an independent and democratic nation, where independence from Britain was declared in January 1948, and where our Constituent Assembly and Parliament met from 1948 until the military takeover in 1962,” said Dr. Thant Myint-U.

President Obama drove through YHT's proposed downtown conservation area, which is along the riverfront and encompasses approximately two square kilometers. It not only contains a priceless collection of colonial-era architecture but also 144 religious sites, which include Buddhist pagodas and monasteries, Anglican and Roman Catholic Cathedrals, Baptist, Armenian, and other churches, dozens of mosques, Sunni and Shia, as well as Chinese, Hindu and Sikh temples, and a Jewish synagogue.

“There is no urban landscape in the world like downtown Yangon. It's an incredibly dynamic multi-faith and multicultural community,” said Dr Thant Myint-U.

Downtown Yangon has witnessed numerous historic events: from 1824 Anglo-Burmese War, to the Japanese Christmas bombing and invasion of 1941-2, to the Myanmar civil war in the late 1940s. Various buildings are associated with visits by figures as diverse as Ulysses Grant, Mahatma Gandhi, and Pablo Neruda (who lived in an apartment just to the south of the Secretariat during the 1920s).

“This visit is a wonderful recognition of the Secretariat and downtown Yangon’s historic importance and future potential. We urgently need to protect what’s left of our beautiful city. In a few years it will be too late,” he said.

The Yangon Heritage Trust was established in 2012 to protect the city’s threatened physical heritage. Its aim is for a 21st century Yangon that integrates its historic character, green spaces, and waterfront into a truly modern city. Over a thousand old buildings were destroyed in the 1990s and 2000s. Over 2,000 remain downtown.

The Founder and Chairman, Dr Thant Myint-U, is a historian and the author of three prize-winning books, and has served in several United Nations peacekeeping operations.

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