



May 31, 2023

Press Release

Japan's Special Envoy for National Reconciliation in Myanmar Lacks Accountability and Transparency

Japan's Special Envoy for National Reconciliation in Myanmar, a position currently held by Yohei Sasakawa, utterly lacks accountability and transparency, Progressive Voice and Mekong Watch said today.

The absence of a detailed mandate and defined responsibilities raises serious concerns about the Special Envoy's objectives and activities, especially in light of the sham elections being planned by the Myanmar military.

Yohei Sasakawa, Chairman of the Nippon Foundation, was named Special Envoy of the Government of Japan for National Reconciliation in Myanmar (hereinafter "Special Envoy") by the government of Japan on February 25, 2013. Since then, according to media reports and his blog entries, he has made numerous trips to Myanmar and held meetings with "officials" and ethnic armed organizations seemingly as Special Envoy. However, details of the Special Envoy's mandate have never been made publicly available, and the exact objective as well as the extent of the Special Envoy's activities remain unknown.

Since the 1 February 2021 attempted coup, the Myanmar military has killed over 3,500 people and arrested over 22,700 people, including the President of Myanmar and State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. As the Myanmar military intensifies its attacks against civilians, including in its use of aerial attacks, the illegal junta is planning to hold sham "elections" in an attempt to legitimize its illegitimate coup attempt.

While the people of Myanmar have spoken out in clear opposition to the junta's sham elections, in Bangkok on February 6, 2023, Sasakawa expressed his support for the "elections," stating to the media that "The first step in democratization is elections. They must be held no matter what."

In April, 406 Myanmar civil society organizations sent a letter to Sasakawa asking him to clarify whether this statement of support for the "elections" was made in his capacity as Special Envoy and to provide details about his responsibilities as Special Envoy, how his activities as Special Envoy are funded, and the department within the Japanese government to which the Special Envoy reports (see Appendix 1). Sasakawa did not respond.

Also in April, Mekong Watch filed an information disclosure request with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, asking the ministry to disclose information it had about the activities of the Special Envoy outside of Japan including in Myanmar, such as dates, duration, objective, names of places and people visited, and names of those present at meetings. The ministry stated in response that it had no document pertaining to such information, and disclosed nothing. Mekong Watch has filed a request for a review of this non-disclosure, and also has filed a similar information disclosure request to the Cabinet Secretariat.

In May, the same 406 Myanmar civil society organizations sent a letter to the government of Japan, again asking for clarification about the responsibilities of the Special Envoy (see Appendix 2). As of today, the government of Japan has not responded.

Recently, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar also expressed concern about the Special Envoy's statement in support of the sham elections.

The government of Japan has yet to make a public statement on the issue of the military junta's sham elections. Continuing to ignore concerns expressed by hundreds of Myanmar civil society organizations who are directly impacted by Yohei Sasakawa's comments would lead to tacit endorsement of his comments. This would leave a damaging image of Japan as a rights-abiding leading democracy in Asia.

Progressive Voice and Mekong Watch reiterate calls made by 406 Myanmar organizations and urge the Japanese government to clarify its position on the sham elections and make public the specification of Sasakawa's role as the Special Envoy to Myanmar.

Khin Ohmar, Founder and Chairperson of Progressive Voice, stated: "It is deplorable that anyone would express support for what is obviously a scheme to legitimize the Myanmar military that has committed genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes. However, it would be thoroughly disappointing and alarming if such a statement of support had been made by the Special Envoy of the Government of Japan for National Reconciliation in Myanmar. It is an insult to the Myanmar people when they have their legitimate government, National Unity Government (NUG)."

Yuka Kiguchi, Executive Director of Mekong Watch, stated: "The Japanese government must clearly define the mandate of the Special Envoy for National Reconciliation in Myanmar. The Special Envoy should conduct their activities in Myanmar based on dialogue with stakeholders including the 406 Myanmar civil society organizations. Allowing the Special Envoy to conduct activities in Myanmar without transparency and without providing any explanation invites suspicion from the people of Myanmar. Such a situation would not be compatible with Japan's interests as a nation respecting democracy and rule of law."

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More information:

Appendix 1: Questions sent to Yohei Sasakawa in April 2023 from 406 Myanmar organizations

1. Please state whether your statement that "[elections] must be held no matter what" was made in your capacity as the Special Envoy of the Government of Japan for National Reconciliation in Myanmar.
2. Please elucidate the mandate and authority of the Special Envoy of the Government of Japan for National Reconciliation in Myanmar. Please state any changes or additions made to the mandate since the attempted coup in 2021.
3. Please provide the name of the division within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to which the Special Envoy of the Government of Japan for National Reconciliation in Myanmar reports.
4. Please explain the budget and compensation received as the Special Envoy of the Government of Japan for National Reconciliation in Myanmar.
5. Please provide details of your activities outside of Japan, including in Myanmar, as the Special Envoy of the Government of Japan for National Reconciliation in Myanmar, such as dates, duration, objective, names of places and people visited, and names of those present at meetings.

Appendix 2: Questions sent to the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Japan in May 2023 from 406 Myanmar organizations

1. Please elucidate the mandate and authority of the Special Envoy of the Government of Japan for National Reconciliation in Myanmar. Please state any changes or additions made to the mandate since the attempted coup in 2021.
2. Please provide the name of the division within the government of Japan to which the Special Envoy of the Government of Japan for National Reconciliation in Myanmar reports.
3. Please explain the budget and compensation received by the Special Envoy of the Government of Japan for National Reconciliation in Myanmar.
4. Please provide details of the activities of the Special Envoy of the Government of Japan for National Reconciliation in Myanmar outside of Japan, including in Myanmar, such as dates, duration, objective, names of places and people visited, and names of those present at meetings.