Obama's Myanmar speech layered with popular appeal

Contributed by ERIKA KINETZ
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YANGON, Myanmar
(AP) _ President Barack Obama spoke to hundreds of students, officials and former generals in long-closed Myanmar about freedom and the importance of finding strength in diversity. But for some, the more significant message came from what he did, not what he said.

Instead of traveling to the isolated capital, Naypyitaw, Obama became the first foreign leader to meet with President Thein Sein in Yangon, Myanmar's largest city and cultural heart.

While the government says the location was chosen for logistical reasons, many cheered Obama's decision to give a speech at the University of Yangon, a place brimming with opposition history and personal memories for many in the audience, rather than sequester himself with top leaders in the empty, soulless capital built by the former military junta in 2006.

``The arrangement was made for mutual convenience,'' said Zaw Htay, the director of the president's office. ``Due to time constraints on the part of President Obama and also because Obama wanted to deliver a speech at Yangon University, it was agreed by both sides to have a meeting in Yangon.''

The diverse 1,500-member audience _ students, activists, lawmakers, former generals and members of ethnic minority groups _ mingled for several hours, listening to jazz music, while waiting for Obama to arrive. Everyone, including the former generals and parliamentarians, had to walk through the same security gauntlet. There was no VIP line, which surprised some in this hierarchical society.

``We couldn't even think of that two or three months ago,'' said Rebecca Htin, an ethnic Karen. ``The message is clear. We are moving more toward democracy. That's encouraging for me.''

``There's no separation because of Mr. Obama,'' said Nge Nge Aye Maung, the chairwoman of the Association of Myanmar Disabled Women Affairs. ``There's no ranking. We are all together. We are all human beings. That's human rights.''

Obama drew applause twice during the 30-minute speech, first when he said reform will not succeed without national reconciliation _ Myanmar has been struggling for decades to resolve a plethora of armed insurgencies _ and again when he stressed the role citizens must play in a democracy.

``That's the thing that's been denied,'' said Thant Myint-U, an author and presidential adviser. ``There hasn't been a sense of citizenship for the whole lifetime of the majority of people in that room.''

He said the most important impact of Obama's visit was not the boost it gives to reformers within the government, but the inspiration it offers people who must meet Myanmar's top-down transformation with grassroots energy if the country's transition is to succeed.

``It is much more about emboldening ordinary people to be willing to do their part in seeing through these changes,'' he said.

But there were still signs of the old days. Plainclothes government security personnel videotaped guests as they walked to the university's Convocation Hall to hear Obama talk about freedom.