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PRESIDENT U THEIN SEIN shares a light moment with Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra during a press conference at Government House in Bangkok on July 23. U Thein Sein on July 22 began his first official trip to Thailand since coming to power in March 2011. Economic ties were top of the agenda, with both sides recommending to the Dawei Special Economic Zone project. Full story page 18. PIC: AFP

Dr looks to rebuild 'rice bowl'

By Myo Lwin

THE government is aiming for Myanmar to regain its status as the "rice bowl" of Southeast Asia, a senior official said as he pitched the country's agriculture sector to prospective foreign investors last week.

Speaking at a two-day agriculture summit in Yangon on July 25, Deputy Minister for National Planning and Economic Development Dr Kan Zaw said there were "excellent opportunities" to expand the agriculture sector with foreign assistance.

"We are now opening all fronts between Myanmar and its business partners from all over the world," Dr Kan Zaw said in his opening remarks.

The government was aiming to "overcome" many of the existing barriers to investment, including the banking system, exchange rate, land policy, infrastructure and lack of human resources, he said.

"By taking these steps, we have to look forward to regain the position of rice bowl in the region. We have to get growth that can reduce poverty and we must try to drop the inequality to get income security," said Dr Kan Zaw.

"I hope this meeting will bring more recommendations and concrete ways forward for a better rice economy."

In a brief interview with *The Myanmar Times* after his address, Dr Kan Zaw said the country was moving "in the right direction" and invited foreign investment in the agriculture sector, which directly and indirectly employs about two-thirds of the country's workforce.

The "Into Myanmar Agri Trade, Investment and Infrastructure Summit" organised by Singapore-based Magenta Global, attracted about 200 stakeholders from the global agricultural sector, many of whom were scouting for new opportunities in Myanmar.

More than 20 presentations were made by foreign and local experts at the July 25-26 event, focusing on topics such as the rice industry, electricity, water, banking, marketing, other food crops and fertiliser.

Representatives from some foreign firms at the event said they had already started joint ventures with Myanmar partners while many are still looking for a suitable opportunity.

The spokesperson for the producer

of Tra Chang-brand ploughs said the company had seen a large increase in business, with 10,000 diesel ploughs sold in Myanmar last year.

"Normally we sell a few thousand units a year, but last year was a big increase," said Mr Issara Thammachunyang of Thai firm Siam Kubota.

Mr Simon Lutz, country manager of Victory Capital, a Cambodia-based investment management adviser that also has a presence in Vietnam, said his company was in the process of opening an office in Yangon. However, he said many prospective investors were still somewhat sceptical about the country's political stability.

"People realise that Myanmar has huge potential. Human resources and technology will be the problems here," he said.

"Business in Vietnam is slow. The market is already saturated. So, we're interested in Myanmar."

A business development adviser from fertiliser producer Yara said his firm also saw a great deal of potential to expand business in Myanmar.

The country produces 100,000 tonnes of fertiliser a year, importing about 700,000 tonnes to meet the rest of the demand.

"But we still have no idea which crop we will bring maximum income for the farmers here. Only then can we give the right solution," said Mr Adrian Ng, market development manager for Yara, which has branches in 11 countries.

A business development adviser from Malaysia, Mr Hishamuddin Koh, said the summit addressed many issues related to production, financing and marketing of agricultural products in Myanmar.

"Myanmar is now in the best position to act as a provider of food to a region where no other nations have similar resources," said Mr Koh, who has been based here for 20 years.

Myanmar has rich bio-diversity and can grow many horticultural and food crops, he said.

Myanmar exported 444,000 tonnes of rice last year earning US\$234 million, a 57 per cent increase on the 536,800 tonnes exported the previous year, according to Ministry of Commerce figures.

The government has targeted increasing rice exports by 20pc, to more than one million tonnes, this year.

From page 1

Reps ignore ministry

Earlier, Thura U Shwe Mann said the proposal was "an opportunity for all of us - citizens and our union".

"We don't need to say it is a challenge. In our country, the legislature, executive and judiciary are selected according to democratic rules. In the hlaattu, we can say yes or no, ask or order or decide the questions or proposals or bills freely and openly. The hlaattu has now implemented the people's desire, the people's opinion and the people's needs," he said.

The current government is going to do projects and plans that are in the interest of the people and the state by confiscating land. We should welcome and agree with those projects that are implemented equitably and with goodwill."

He said the discussion had raised a number of important issues, including the need for accurate land ownership maps and for government departments to work fairly and within the law while implementing policy or projects.

He said projects that require land nationalisation needed to be worthwhile, suitable and transparent. Communities needed to have some ownership over the projects, he added.

"Our representatives have conferred about U Tin Htu's proposal with goodwill. And I wish all officials who have to implement projects according to the decision of the Pyidaungsa Hluttaw do so by considering all sides so as not to harm the farmers," the speaker said.

While most representatives expressed support for the motion, not all were in favour. Among the dissenting voices was U Khin Shwe, an Anyotha Hluttaw representative and chairman of construction firm Zaykabar, who took the opportunity to defend his company against recent allegations of land-grabbing in Yangon's Mingaladon township.

He blamed a local political party, the Peace and Diversity Party, for helping the farmers campaign to have the land returned.

Department of Human Settlement and Housing Development only paid K10,000 an acre for more than 2000 acres that make up Mingaladon Park City in about 1997. My company, though, paid \$200,000 for an acre of land - which was the then-market price - for the remaining 800 acres to be used as industrial Zone 4. This was after negotiating several times with the owners of the farmers and agreeing to pay as they demanded," he said.

"Afterwards, the farmer relinquished their land according to the contract. The company took rent from tenant farmers as the nature of work required. Road were built, electricity was put up and electricity installed. Only when 80 percent of the infrastructure was completed and the plots for the houses were sold, the farmers demanded their land back through local and foreign media because of the incitement of a political party."

"Because it was sold as an industrial zone, the land could be given back to the farmers. The permit to develop industrial Zone 4 was already given by different levels of the government, including the State Peace and Development Council, Ministry of Construction, Yangon Region government and Department of Human Settlement and Housing Development. The things the farmers are saying via news media are not true." - Translated by Thiri Min Htun

Clarification

An article published on the July 16 issue of *The Myanmar Times*, titled "Quinn fight fuels food insecurity", said that the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) receives US\$9 million funding from the German and Japanese governments for four programs in Myanmar. While the article did not provide funds to UNODC, the European Union is the largest donor to the agency in Myanmar.

Quick boom turns to bust in Mandalay

Finalise contracts and ownership documentation have been rushing to the Settlement and Land Records Department office in recent days to take advantage of a tax reduction that is expected to disappear at the end of August, broker U Tin Maung said.

Under the tax break, which was brought in about five years ago and renewed each year, buyers only have to pay 15 percent of the purchase price in tax, below the normal 25pc.