

BCCM founding president Tony Picon: 'We want to support British companies and our other members as well'

Written by Hana Hlaik
Published in Interviews
Read 3120 times

font size Print Email



Tony Picon, the chamber's founding president and the managing director of Colliers International Myanmar. Photo: Lwin Maung Maung

The British chamber of commerce Myanmar was launched at a ceremony at the Strand hotel ballroom on July 16. The launch has given Britain the distinction of being the first country to launch a locally-registered chamber of commerce in Myanmar, says the British chambers of commerce. Mizzima Business Weekly's Hana Hlaik spoke to Tony Picon, the chamber's founding president and the managing director of Colliers International Myanmar, and asked about prospects for the BCCM and the broader economic transition.

How did it all start?
Greg Watkins, the executive director of the British chamber of commerce Thailand, initiated a small informal get-together of business people. We had an event at 50th Street [bar and grill] one and a half years ago. It was a sounding out of opinions, just to gauge interest in setting up a group. Nobody was thinking of a chamber at the time. That was really the beginning of our monthly networking events, mostly at the British club. Gradually UK trade & investment [a British government department] got more involved, as time went on the idea grew not to set up an association first, which is more usual, but to launch a chamber of commerce. UKTI provided the funding that enabled a consultant to work on setting up the chamber.

Why was UKTI so eager to have a British chamber of commerce in Myanmar?
There is an accreditation process down the line. There are some functions that the chamber can outsource from UKTI. The more mature chambers can gradually take over some functions, like providing information to companies. Mature chambers have their own office to deal with enquiries of interested businesses. It's also has to do with credibility.

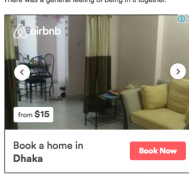
What does the chamber consider to be its key mission?
We want to support British companies and our other members as well. Members have to see value in the services the chamber provides: information, network events, briefings, breakfast meetings, also, we want to be a voice for Myanmar in contacts with local chambers in Britain. I know of a couple of local chambers in the UK who are quite interested in linking up with Myanmar companies.

Was formalising the informal group a straightforward process or did it involve red tape?
We got the wholehearted support and blessing of the UMFCCI [Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry of other related authorities]. The approval is key, otherwise you're in for a difficult process. We're a non-profit making company, we don't use company limited. That seemed to be the best way forward. We can be a foreign entity, there's no need for a majority Myanmar ownership. The liability of members is limited to the membership fee.

Tell me more about your members?
Our members are SMEs [small and medium enterprises], individuals, multinationals, companies from Myanmar and the UK. There's not a single sector dominating. We have schools, real estate companies, oil and gas companies, manufacturers. We would like to shift the balance towards Myanmar, our focus now is to drive more membership from Myanmar companies. We'll do some publicity, talk to Myanmar-language newspapers. We want to open that door. Some Myanmar companies don't realise it's open. They consider us to be a British chamber. Part of our strength, though, is that we're open to all relevant companies.

Why did you decide to transform the informal group into a chamber?
When you're an informal group you're not an entity. We couldn't accept money. It was just a database of people who regularly met, almost all of our informal members transferred to the chamber. We've got four founding patrons. Membership stands at 67 now, but with the current enthusiasm we expect to break 100 members soon. We're off to a great start.

Were British companies yearning for the support a chamber can provide?
There certainly is a yearning among British companies for support, also think that it was wise to keep things personal during our meetings in the British club. People fell close to the group and the group was very inclusive. There was a general feeling of being in it together.



Book a home in Dhaka [Book Now](#)

Now that the launch is over, what's next?
Obviously its very early days. We have ambitions to have a business centre, where companies can come in and use that as a service. For now we're operating from the British embassy, having our executive director Stephanie estimate in the office has actually worked out very well. We're moving into a new office shortly and plan to get more serious as time progresses. We're looking at sector-based breakfast briefings, it's invite only. We might for example get an expert to talk about the oil and gas industry or the legal context. Breakfast meetings are quite efficient. One of the other features we have is regular political briefings, to members only. We did one a few weeks ago. That was extremely interesting. The British

embassy is providing the briefings.

The Myanmar economy is seen as the last frontier in Southeast Asia. Are foreign companies - potential Chamber members - flocking to Myanmar?

It's a slow process. There's been a lot of talk about Myanmar opening up, but it takes time before actual physical deals are made. Trade and investment have gone up from a pretty low base. The numbers are not staggering, but it's a start. It'll give you an example. Amul International company whose food, we eat, drink, we drink and get people we play with started off here with a small presence, three people in an office, in five or ten years time they probably will have upgraded their presence considerably. Foreign companies are still feeling the water.

Many companies have regional offices in Bangkok. Do you feel that with the military takeover in Thailand and the Myanmar economy blossoming some of these offices might be relocated to Yangon?

I go back to Thailand every month. It seems on the ground everybody goes about their business as usual. In Yangon there's not the range of international schools and hospitals that families need. So many will stay in Thailand, where life is comfortable, and fly out only when they need to. It's still difficult to bring your family over, companies are feeling the water, as I said before. Some have an outpost in Myanmar. They are talking to distributors, they are looking for raw materials. After that you go to get manufacturing. That will be key.

There's talk that some potential foreign investors are waiting until after the 2015 elections. The real influx will only start after the polling. Do you agree?

Yes and no. The election outcome is one of the macro risks. For the more conservative companies it's an issue. The elections are one and a half year away now. It will take quite a few months before parliament convenes and a new government assumes power.

How long do you wait for something to happen?

I lived in Hongkong in '97. We just went on with it before the handover. I think we'll see a next wave of foreign investment after this first wave is over; companies will be re-empowering, it's a natural process, and of course the industrial revolution is about to start here. So the elections are a factor, but not as big a factor as some people make of it.

It seems the momentum of the reform process is waning. The honeymoon period is over, enthusiasm is dwindling.

People's expectations have been a little bit too high. There's still a forward momentum, but it takes time. It did in Vietnam and Cambodia. It's very positive that Myanmar people can go abroad and bring new ideas back. In five years time we will be in our office towers thinking things have really changed in the meantime we have to be realistic about the pace of the transition.

This Article first appeared in the July 31, 2014 edition of Mizzima Business Weekly.
Mizzima Business Weekly is available in print in Yangon through Innow Bookstore and through online subscription at www.mizzimaplus.com

Last modified on Monday, 04 August 2014 13:39

[Tweet](#) [Like](#) Be the first of your friends to like this.

More in this category:
+ Echoes of '1984' Interview with the new Information Minister Ya Htut +

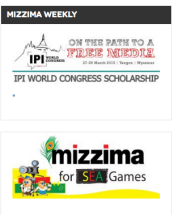
[back to top](#)



ooredoo business 0997 0000 234

- LATEST NEWS**
- Resurgent interest in a Kra canal poses threat to Dawei project
- 2015 a 'tipping point' for reform process, says UN rights envoy
- NGO voices concern over religious defamation laws
- NGO calls for protection of Kokang civilians
- Fighting focus of 1st day of 7th round of ceasefire talks
- U Htin Lin Oo to face trial for insulting religion
- 6.6 earthquake hits Indonesia

- LATEST ED/OP**
- 'Relations may change, but we will not become enemies'
- Making peace, buying time
- Coordinated measures
- Letter from Puzunglaung
- ASEAN energy interconnectedly: How Myanmar could benefit
- A gamble on the Mekong with millions of lives at stake
- The problem with Facebook



MIZZIMA WEEKLY
ON THE PATH TO A FREE MYANMAR
IPI WORLD CONGRESS SCHOLARSHIP