

BURMA

Situation Update

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A 'Major Disappointment'

Mr Ibrahim Gambari, UN special envoy of the Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, departed with a deep disappointment, both for the United Nations that he represents and the ethnic nationality and democratic parties inside Burma which had pinned hopes on him to overcome the political stalemate in the country.

Leading members of the ethnic nationality and democracy movements like Pu Cin Shing Thang of the United Nationalities Alliance and U Nyan Win of the National League for Democracy (NLD) expressed their disappointment when the UN envoy made a favorable reference to the 2010 election that the military junta was preparing and said they want the UN envoy to adhere to the mandate given him by the resolutions of the UN General Assembly via the UN Secretary-General, which generally can be interpreted as reopening of talks between Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the military junta to bring national reconciliation and democracy to the country.

The democratic opposition has made it very clear from the onset that it was neither recognizing the constitution that the military junta has drafted through its own convention nor the referendum which was held to approve that constitution since it was, to say the least, fraught with fraudulent practices on a national scale and conducted while people were busy coping with natural disasters caused by Cyclone Nargis in May. In fact, during his March visit this year, Mr Gambari offered to have the referendum overseen by international monitors but it was rejected by the junta. The generals also publicly rebuffed the UN envoy's call for political reform then.

Unlike previous visits, Mr Gambari's trip to Burma this time did not invoke a lot of interest from the ethnic and Burmese organizations in exile. This is probably because their expectations were not very high given the fact that the United Nations does not have enough clout to sway the Burmese generals or a stronger backing from the UN Security Council. They were also skeptical about the sincerity of the military junta which has until now been playing along with the United Nations to avoid stronger international pressure.

That sentiment obviously was not shared by the ethnic and democratic political parties inside the country which had to a certain extent banked on the UN facilitated process to reach a resolution out of the political stalemate. The strong reaction to Mr Gambari's expressing support for the elections took away whatever confidence they had in the process. They openly criticized the UN envoy this time while Daw Aung San Suu Kyi also refused to meet him.

Another reason that political parties in Burma reacted to the UN envoy's "unbecoming behavior" was because they felt that Mr Gambari was spending too much time accommodating the wishes

of the Burmese generals. He was visiting cyclone-hit areas, meeting lower level junta officials and leaders of junta-affiliated and junta-sponsored organizations, partaking in other junta suggested activities while at the same time totally neglecting the legitimate ethnic and other political leaders.

Mr Gambari, however, did meet with the elderly executives of the National League for Democracy twice -- the first time for only 20 minutes and the second time, only because Daw Aung San Suu Kyi declined to meet him.

Time to Review UN's Role

Given the fact that the supreme military leader, Than Shwe -- the only decision-maker in Burma -- did not meet him again and made the UN envoy waste his time in Burma with trivial pursuits, it is time for the United Nations to review its approach regardless of Mr Gambari being considered "an old hand in dealing with military dictators". The bottom line now is that the United Nations is not making any headway and the Burmese military junta is not budging from its position as reflected in the statement of Information Minister and member of the junta's "Spokes Authoritative Team" Kyaw Hsan who told the UN envoy that the junta "being the Transitional Government, our Government will continue to implement the seven-step Road Map in accord with the mandate of the people. We cannot accept any attempt to jeopardize or harm our process. We will oppose and wipe out those attempts to jeopardize or harm the Constitution."

Mr Gambari said he came to Burma with the following objectives:

- (1) To gain freedom for all political prisoners, including U Tin Oo and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi;
- (2) To endeavor to start direct talks between Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the junta;
- (3) To endeavor to resolve economic problems of Burma;
- (4) To have a permanent liaison officer of the UN Secretariat in Burma; and
- (5) To inform that UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon will be visiting Burma in December.

To these proposals, Mr Gambari received only noncommittal responses. Regarding the case of political prisoners, Kyaw Hsan said "the government always has a tradition to do so". On the resumption of talks, he told the UN envoy, "In recognition of your discussions, talks with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi will be held in line with the previous procedures". In other words, the NLD leader will have a chance to meet with Liaison Minister Aung Kyi and the talks will be dragged on without any result.

Concerning Mr Gambari's remaining three points, Kyaw Hsan said: "At present, the transition to democracy is being implemented with the timeframe in Myanmar as wished by the UN and international community. Hence, we assume that now is the prime time for the UN and international community to lend a helpful hand with goodwill as regards Myanmar's affairs I

would say the UN including you should extend a helping hand for peaceful and successful transition to democracy in accordance with the people's desire."

Hence, the least that Mr Gambari can do at this stage is to objectively view the true situation in Burma even if that means he will have to stop being a diplomat for a while. The democracy movement does not recognize the present, flawed constitution that favors military rule and is difficult to amend unless supported by the military but the junta is going ahead with the election on the basis of that constitution at all costs.

If things are not working out in Burma, it is imperative that Mr Gambari spells it out openly and let the international community do the rest.

UN Victims of Military 'Voodoo'

Unbeknownst to the UN Special Envoy Mr Gambari and UN Secretary-General Mr Ban Ki-moon, they have been the victims of a voodoo jinx that the Burmese generals had initiated..



When the two UN officials visited Burma separately, they were taken on a guided tour of Shwedagon Pagoda, particularly to a chosen site, where they were introduced to a "Buddha" image. Burmese dailies carried pictures of both UN officials paying their respects to this special image -- an image sculpted to look like Senior General Than Shwe (see pictures).

The superstitious Burmese generals believe that these two UN officials must be jinxed into feeling inferior to Senior General Than Shwe before they meet him.

Dirty Tricks

Another leader of the democracy movement has fallen victim to the "Dirty Tricks" Department of the military junta.

U Aye Thar Aung, secretary of the Arakan League for Democracy, and member of the Committee Representing People's Parliament, constituted by MPs-elect, to represent them before the Parliament can be convened, was purposely tripped while he was trying to get off a bus. He luckily escaped with bruises on his hand and knee when he tumbled.

The man who tripped him was described by U Aye Thar Aung as his "constant companion" -- a person assigned by the military to follow him wherever he goes -- who is about 20 years old and

he evidently did not like U Aye Thar Aung wandering about the city seemingly without any work, which he complained to the neighbors of U Aye Thar Aung. The young thug decided to put an end to the democracy leader's roaming days.

This is not the first time that a blatant attack on MPs elect has taken place. U Than Lwin of Madaya, MP-elect of the National League for Democracy, was punched in the eye with a knuckle-duster. U Than Lwin who is now being detained is reported to be losing sight in that eye because he has not received any medical treatment in prison.

Similar physical assaults on other NLD members have taken place before also.

Arakan State Youth Issue Ultimatum

Youths in Arakan State have issued an ultimatum to the military junta to release five NLD youths who were arrested and jailed two years each for marking the 20th anniversary of 8-8-88 nationwide mass protests by walking peacefully to pray at Buddhist temples. About 50 people were arrested on that occasion but the authorities singled out five NLD youths and two others for arrest.

The five NLD youths were sent to prison immediately while the others were freed.

Arakan youths have warned the military junta to release the five youths and all political prisoners "arrested unlawfully" by the anniversary of "Saffron Revolution" which is in September.

The youths have vowed to make their demand peacefully at first and to pursue their objective at all costs if their demand is not met.

No clarification was forthcoming.

Meanwhile, Democratic Voice of Burma reported that a clash between local youths and personnel from a police security unit resulted in the death of one soldier and hospitalization of two others.

The fight involved about 30 local Arakan youths of Sittwe and a riot police squad on 22 August "after police officers became abusive towards locals in Kathe ward" and Lieutenant Saw Myo Htun was killed on the spot, while Sergeant Zayar Thaw and another unidentified sergeant were admitted to Sittwe hospital's emergency unit.

Heavy security is reported in the wards near monasteries with military and police presence "at every electricity pole". Military personnel went round the houses of the youths who were involved in the fight and "when they were unable to find the young people, they arrested women from their families and elderly relatives instead".

Three youths turned themselves in at the police station the following morning, said DVB, but some of the family members remain in detention in Sittwe Police Station No 1.

Military Affairs Security Personnel Said Disarmed

The Independent Mon News Agency reported on 20 August that lower ranks of the Military Affairs Security Department (MAS) were disarmed for security reasons following the dismissal of top military commanders Lt Gen Ye Myint, Lt Gen Khin Maung Than, Lt Gen Kyaw Win and Lt Gen Aung Htwe in June.

The disarming was said to be restricted to "ranks lower than captain" in the MAS because of concern by the top brass that some MAS members loyal to Lt. General Ye Myint would be a security risk after his dismissal.

The MAS men are usually experts in explosive devices and the top generals are no doubt taking precautions. They may be remembering that the worst bomb blasts in Burma occurred after the Military Intelligence Service (MI) was dismantled when its boss, Gen Khin Nyunt, was sacked.

The Independent Mon News Agency, quoting an unnamed MAS source, said MAS men "in Mon and other parts of southern Burma have already been disarmed".

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi

Just before the visit of UN Envoy Gambari, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was permitted to meet her lawyer and later her family doctor.

Lawyer U Kyi Win said he and the NLD leader discussed the processes involved in filing an appeal on her behalf.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is also reported to have been given permission to meet her doctor on the first Thursday of every month. The last time her doctor was permitted to see her was in January.

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