

Go, Gambari, But Don't Expect Much

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The United Nations envoy readies for another fruitless trip to Burma

The seventh visit of the United Nations Secretary General's advisor Ibrahim Gambari, which tentatively is scheduled for Rangoon this Saturday, is yet another attempt to resolve the political crisis in Burma. This is a standing invitation Gambari received from the military junta, although given the junta's past intractability, little is expected from the visit.

Gambari's last visit to Burma, in August, was considered a failure mainly due to two reasons: first, he was not allowed to meet the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) chairman Than Shwe or the National League for Democracy general secretary Aung San Suu Kyi, Nor was he able to convince the generals to start a serious dialogue with the opposition.

The result will probably be the same. Although it is difficult to predict how the leadership will respond, it appears unlikely that Than Shwe will see the visiting envoy. Prime Minister Thein Sein or other cabinet ministers are expected to meet him, however.

The meeting does take place against the backdrop of a statement by the newly sworn Thai Prime Minister, Abhisit Vejjajiva, who in a speech to the press corps at the Foreign Press Club in Bangkok on January 14, said: "The goals of Western countries and the countries in this region for [Burma] are not different - we all want to see some changes."

That is a slightly different approach from the appeasement policies of his predecessors Thaksin Shinawatra and Samak Sundaravej. Nonetheless, geographical proximity and cultural affinity make Thailand one of Burma's major stakeholders in the entire region. Their shared economic interest and membership in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) bring the two countries even closer. And Thailand's need for gas and other resources from Burma makes any real movement highly unlikely.

Due to the continued arrest and sentencing of political dissidents, coupled by other pressing demands in the run up to the 2010 general election, there is more probability that Aung San Suu Kyi might meet Gambari this time.

In his previous visits, the U.N. special envoy was armed with a gun without ammunition. The international community, including the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, expressed their support for the role of the good offices of the secretary general, but with little commitments.

Other than releasing presidential statements and formally discussing the situation of Burma at the UN Security Council, the highest world body has not taken any concrete steps. Resolutions at the General Assembly were also symbolic and not legally binding.

Binding resolutions proposed at the Security Council have consistently been shot down by China and Russia, which contributed to a strengthened relationship between the military regime and the two

permanent powers. The Council's unequivocal support and backing is what Gambari and Ban Ki-moon need to arm themselves with.

In the absence of a firm and resolute commitment from the Security Council, Gambari needs to find alternative strategies. Regardless of what the international community says, the SPDC is determined to go forward with the scheduled 2010 election. Unlike the 1990 election, the military is well prepared this time.

The new constitution guarantees a win-win situation for the military junta. Even if Gambari is successful in convincing the military to let in international election observers, though still unlikely, the 25 percent seats reserved for the military in the parliament are enough to block any attempt to amend the constitution.

There is no doubt that different political parties, if allowed to contest, will participate in the upcoming election. The military regime learned a lesson from its humiliating defeat in the 1990 election — so much so that it will not let that happen again, and the international community must understand this.

In light of all these challenges, Gambari needs to equip himself with alternative strategies and carry a new message to the military leaders when he visits Burma. It would be naïve to expect the U.N. to consider any form of military intervention. Even if Gambari and Ban were to consider it, no country will be willing to accept such offer at this time. The office of the secretary general could recommend a Security Council's tougher action, including a binding resolution, but it will again be rejected by China and Russia.

If the UN decides to leave the Burmese people to resolve their country's problems themselves, the crisis will drag on for many more years under the military leadership with little reform. Any popular uprising, unless the military splits in rank and file, will again be brutally crushed.

What Gambari and Ban need to now do is to emphasize the mission of the "Group of Friends of the Secretary General on Myanmar" by bringing together the conflicting Eastern engagement group and the Western sanction group to engage in an effective and coordinated international approach.

One other pragmatic strategy will be pushing the new Obama administration to pursue the Congress-created special envoy post for Burma. Sanctions hurt but it alone is not effective in resolving Burma's political problems especially when there is engagement on the other end.

While sanctions are in place, the new envoy should start initiating a 'carrot and stick' policy by working together with key international players. The one similar to the North Korean six-party talk model should be given emphasis on Burma. It was not only the stick that worked but also the carrot. The US offered energy and food assistance to the North Korean leadership. A similar initiative should be taken by both the U.S. and U.N. in dealing with the Burmese military generals.

The Burma talks, also a six-party negotiation involving the United States, European Union, ASEAN, China, India, and Burma should be initiated. In the beginning, the junta and some countries might resist the proposal, but we need to remember that the North Korean talks were also initially not supported by all parties.

The international community must understand that Burma's problem is ethno-political, and not just political. The present Union of Burma was formed by different independent nationalities at the Panglong agreement in 1947. Any democracy, without addressing the country's multi-ethnic problems, will lead to another crisis. As much as the military regime is core of the problem, it is also an indispensable part of the solution.

P.S.

Nehginpao Kipgen is the General Secretary of US-based Kuki International Forum (www.kukiforum.com) and a researcher on the rise of political conflicts in modern Burma. From Asia Sentinel.

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