

Western Sanctions on Burma a Waste, Says Asean official

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June 11, 2007—Western sanctions to force democracy on military-ruled Burma are pointless because the country will survive as long as it is supported by giant neighbors China and India, a senior Southeast Asian official said Monday.

“We should look at some other ways of doing it instead of just carrying on applying sanctions. Sanctions for what?” said Ong Keng Yong, the secretary-general of the 10-country Association of Southeast Asian Nations of which Burma is also a member.

“Myanmar [Burma] is not part of the global economy. They are no big shakes. Even if you pull out everybody from Myanmar, every economic investor, they are not going to collapse simply because their two big neighbors will always be willing to sustain them,” Ong said, referring to China and India, which are not members of Asean.

“Everybody is just banking on the isolation strategy but it doesn’t work,” he told reporters in Kuala Lumpur on the sidelines of a business conference he is attending here.

With its strategic location, Burma is courted by both China and India, which are rivals for regional dominance in the Indian Ocean area. Still, China has gained the upper hand by providing large amounts of aid to the junta, and with its investments, effectively controls the economy of Burma’s northern border provinces.

India, which has a flourishing trade with Burma, also refuses to join the tough economic and political sanctions imposed by the US and Europe.

The current junta seized power in 1988 after crushing a pro-democracy movement. It held an election in 1990 but refused to hand over power after it was won by the National League for Democracy party. The NLD’s leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, has been detained under house arrest for 11 of the last 17 years.

Ong said Asean is unhappy about Suu Kyi’s detention, but there isn’t much that the bloc can do. Asean has a policy of non-interference in member nations’ domestic affairs, and does not adopt sanctions, but has recently taken a harder line with Burma, urging it to hasten its progress toward democracy.

“This is the sad thing about Asean... Asean doesn’t want to talk about punitive measures. You are asking the government to release Suu Kyi (under) international pressure but that will never happen,” he said.

The top US diplomat to Burma, Shari Villarosa, last month defended sanctions but admitted they haven’t worked. She said a policy of engagement is also unlikely to yield results.

“The military has proved to be impervious to much of anything,” she said.

Burma's government says it expects its foreign trade to exceed US \$8 billion in the fiscal year through March 2008. Trade volume for just-ended fiscal year jumped 40 percent to \$7.93 billion from \$5.54 billion the previous year, according to the Commerce Ministry.

With both diplomacy and engagement failing to prod Burma on its path to democracy, Ong said Asean needs to find a "face saving" way out. An Asean charter, or constitution, being drawn now may help compel Burma to relent, he said, although he did not spell out exactly what that would be.

But the charger should not be seen as an instrument drafted to punish Burma, he said.

P.S.

* From The Irrawaddy:

<http://www.irrawaddy.org/headlines/june11d.php>

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