

UN Envoy Leaves Burma Empty-handed

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As expected, Burma's junta ignores the world

Burma's military regime is clearly in no mood to compromise with the United Nations or the international community. Several ministers politely received the UN special envoy for Burma, Ibrahim Gambari earlier this week, but used the opportunity to tell the world there was no room for international mediation in Burma's political reform process.

The junta told Gambari candidly that if he really wanted to help the country then he should get sanctions lifted. No sooner had he left the country than the regime issued its biggest snub. The top military ruler, Than Shwe – who continues to refuse to see Gambari – sacked the deputy foreign minister, Kyaw Thu, who had effectively been the interface with the outside world, especially the UN and international donors in their relief and reconstruction efforts in the Irrawaddy Delta after Cyclone Nargis, which devastated the area last May.

This is likely to be the end of the road for Gambari after he left Rangoon empty-handed, having failed to meet any senior member of the junta. The Nigerian diplomat had hoped to revive the UN's efforts to broker talks between the detained pro-democracy leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, and senior members of the military regime. But his efforts seem to have completely floundered, leaving the UN to mull over its few remaining options – a possible visit by the Secretary General Ban Ki-moon in the near future.

"The prognosis is very bleak," the Chiang Mai-based Burmese academic, Win Min told Asia Sentinel. "Mr Gambari listened to both sides, but he had no opportunity to be a channel of communication or exchange of views between the two sides. He was a megaphone through which both sides shouted at each other."

Although Gambari was unable to meet Than Shwe, he did hold talks with General Thein Sein, the Burmese prime minister, who is essentially a symbolic figure who simply mouths the message from the top.

"If the UN wants to see economic development and political stability in Myanmar, the UN should first try to remove economic sanctions and visa bans," the prime minister told Gambari, according to state television. Thein Sein reportedly said economic sanctions amount to human rights violations, affecting health, economic and social conditions in the country.

The only success the envoy can point to on this trip is the fact that he did meet Aung San Suu Kyi – still under house arrest in Rangoon, where she has been for more than 13 of the past 20 years. The meeting though took place in the State Guesthouse, along with several senior members of her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD) so was not conducive to a frank exchange of views or discussion.

On Gambari's previous visit last August Aung San Suu Kyi refused to see the envoy, although she had met him on all his five previous trips. *"She obviously wanted to send a message to the*

international community this time, as well as the generals, who would have video-taped all the proceedings,” a Western diplomat based in Rangoon told Asia Sentinel.

The Nobel Laureate and the other NLD leaders reiterated the party's stance: for a political solution in Burma, all political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi should be released, there must be a genuine political dialogue between the ruling junta and the opposition, the election results of 1990 – which the NLD won convincingly but was never allowed to form a government – must be recognized and the formation of a committee to review the constitution, which was ratified by a referendum last May – though political activists and most diplomats in Rangoon have dismissed it as a sham.

“During our meeting with Mr Gambari, the NLD made a stand and he listened carefully to what we said,” the party spokesman, Nyan Win told Asia Sentinel. *“However, we have not received a response to our demands. So far, we cannot see any developments from this trip,”* he added.

For his part, the UN envoy went with limited expectations and goals, according to UN sources.

“His objectives have remained largely the same for some time,” said a western diplomat based in Rangoon. These are the release of all political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi, the start of a dialogue between the regime and Aung San Suu Kyi, the creation of a National Economic Forum to help eliminate poverty and boost development, and the establishment of a liaison office in Rangoon to support the UN's role in helping the political process.

But political prisoners are not likely to be released any time soon, especially Aung San Suu Kyi, who is expected to remain under house arrest until at least the planned elections are held sometime next year. If anything the regime is even more intent on jailing anyone who dares criticize the government or might try to mobilize opposition to the pro-regime parties in the forthcoming elections.

According to the UK-based human rights group, Amnesty International, the number of political prisoners has doubled since the crackdown on the Buddhist monk-led demonstrations in September 2007 to more than 2000. Suu Kyi also used the meeting with Gambari to draw attention to this, and in particular the draconian 65-year sentences given to more than a score of student leaders from the 1988 pro-democracy movement, for their alleged involvement in the mass anti-prices protests in 2007.

“There is no chance of the military rulers talking to the NLD, let alone the Lady [Aung San Suu Kyi],” a Burmese businessman with very close ties to some of the top generals told Asia Sentinel. *“They don't need her or her party; and if they continue to refuse to field candidates in the election the old man [Than Shwe] will be more than pleased,”* he added.

What appears to be the case now is that both parties have become even more hardline and intransigent, according to some diplomats in Rangoon. Though Suu Kyi again stressed her willingness to enter a dialogue with the regime, and that if there were genuine talks everything was on the table. The regime remained totally unmoved. *“A dialogue will be practical and successful only if the discussions are based on the reality of prevailing conditions,”* the Information Minister, Brigadier General Kyaw Hsan said in a statement published in state media the day after Gambari left Burma. *“There will be no success if it is based on unrealistic conditions.”*

On the other two issues Gambari pushed, there is room for some concessions, according to diplomats based in Rangoon and UN officials. The government recently formed an eight-member economic committee under the deputy finance minister to monitor the impact of the international economic crisis and credit crunch on the Burmese economy and suggest measures to cope with the

problems.

While there are government people and independent economists in the group, there are no members associated with the NLD. *"Conceivably this could be presented as the regime's attempt at setting up a national economic forum, as suggested by Gambari,"* a UN official told Asia Sentinel. The envoy has been pushing the junta to establish a liaison office in Burma for some time now. *"It's a work in progress,"* Gambari told Asia Sentinel more than a year ago. It is possible that the envoy has been give some firm commitments on this, but is waiting to brief the Secretary General before giving any details – as this may be the only concrete measure to come of his current visit.

But in the end the envoy has failed to pull a rabbit out of the hat. Few analysts or diplomats believe Gambari should be blamed for this. The regime has its roadmap and is sticking to it no matter what. They do not want international mediation or support. The fact that the deputy foreign minister has been sacked, though he remains the chairman of the tripartite core group which is overseeing the international relief and rehabilitation efforts – a joint effort involving ASEAN, the UN and the Burmese government – is a ominous message to the international community, according to both Asian and Western diplomats dealing with Burma.

"In the end there is only one thing the regime wants from the UN, and that's legitimacy, legitimacy and legitimacy," a respected Burmese source told Asia Sentinel. So Gambari is pushing against a brick wall if he hopes to secure any concessions at all from the junta, he added.

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