

Asean Countries Vote against UN Committee Resolution on Burma

Monday 26 November 2007, by [LEDERER Edith M](#), [Wai Moe](#) (Date first published: 21 November 2007).

Asean countries are holding fast to their historical habit of ignoring human rights and the struggle for democracy in the region, in spite of the new Asean charter approved this week at the Asean Summit in Singapore.

The United Nations General Assembly's Committee for Social, Humanitarian and Culture approved a non-binding draft resolution on Tuesday that strongly condemned the human rights violations by the Burmese junta in September. The resolution must now go before the General Assembly for final approval.

The differences between the words expressed by Asean member countries following the bloody crackdown in Burma and the vote at the UN by Asean ambassadors are glaringly different.

Eighty-eight countries voted in favor of the resolution and 24 countries voted against. Sixty-six countries abstained and 14 were absent.

No Asean-member country voted in favor of the resolution.

Laos, Vietnam and Malaysia voted against the resolution. Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand abstained. Cambodia was absent.

China and India voted against.

Moreover, a report by The Associated Press on Wednesday said that confidential recommendations by Asean region diplomats advised Asean to not intervene in domestic human rights problems such as the current situation in Burma, but instead to protect member countries from foreign meddling.

The recommendations were made in a report seen by the AP. It was commissioned by Asean, whose leaders adopted a landmark charter on Tuesday that among other things set up a human rights agency.

Observers say that if the Burma resolution fails when it goes before the UN General Assembly, the secretary-general will have no mandate to act regarding Burma.

Debbie Stothard of ALTSEAN (Alternative Asean Network on Burma) said Asean's decision this week to allow Burma to sign the new Asean charter was a mistake because there is no governmental body in Burma that represents the people.

"Asean countries are hypocritical," she said. "They voted against or abstained on yesterday's UN General Assembly resolution on Burma. Before, they said they supported the UN. They supported Gambari. Now Asean did a U-turn."

She noted that when the junta objected to a briefing by the UN Special Envoy to Burma, Ibrahim Gambari, to Asean heads of state, Asean cancelled the briefing, which means the junta is controlling the regional body.

Critics of Asean's Human Rights Commission say the body offers protection to violators of human rights rather than protection to citizens from governmental abuse.

Anselmo Lee, the executive director of Forum-Asia, said his organization is very disappointed with Asean's human rights body.

"Asean cannot do anything for the Burmese people," he said. "The canceling of the UN envoy Mr Gambari's briefing is just another disappointment."

Nyo Ohn Myint, an analyst with Asean-China, said Asean uses a "wait and see" policy on Burma, because member countries do not want to lose their economic ties with Burma.

Meanwhile, Gambari told the press in Singapore on Wednesday that the UN can "make a difference" in Burma where others have failed, if it has the support of East Asia countries and the international community.

"We can make a difference this time," said Gambari. "It will work. They [Burmese generals] want to work with the UN."

Wai Moe

UN Committee Approves Burma Resolution

A UN General Assembly committee approved a draft resolution Tuesday strongly condemning the Burmese military government's crackdown on peaceful protesters and calling on the military junta to immediately release political prisoners.

The vote in the assembly's human rights committee was 88-24 with 66 abstentions. The resolution now needs the backing of the 192-nation world body. General Assembly resolutions are not legally binding but they do reflect world opinion.

The draft resolution calls on Burma's military government "to desist from further arrests and violence against peaceful protesters" and to lift "all restraints on the peaceful political activity of all persons by ... guaranteeing freedom of peaceful assembly and association and freedom of opinion and expression."

It also calls on the junta to provide UN special adviser Ibrahim Gambari with unrestricted access to all parties—including ethnic minority representatives, student leaders and dissident monks—and to engage with him to achieve "effective progress towards the restoration of democracy and the protection of human rights in Myanmar [Burma]."

Gambari, who visited Burma earlier this month, said last week he was making progress in nudging Burma's military junta toward meaningful dialogue with the pro-democracy opposition. But he acknowledged there were "serious concerns" about "the willingness of the government to move

forward in a new direction.”

Burma tried to block a vote on the draft resolution, proposing a motion of “no action” instead. It was defeated by a vote of 88 against to 54 in favor, with 34 abstentions.

Burma’s UN Ambassador Kyaw Tint Swe called the draft resolution, supported by the United States and many Western countries, “objectionable both on grounds of procedure as well as substance.”

Procedurally, he said if it was really necessary, the issue should be dealt with by the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva.

Swe said the draft resolution’s “real intention is to manipulate Myanmar’s homegrown political process and to derail the seven-step political road map that Myanmar has set for itself for transition to a democratic society.”

Burma’s junta has been strongly criticized for sending troops to quash peaceful protests, initially led by students and then by Buddhist monks, in late September.

At least 15 people were killed, according to information authorities provided to UN human rights investigator Paulo Sergio Pinheiro. Dissidents and diplomats suspect the true figure is much higher.

Thousands were arrested, though Swe said all but 91 “who have been found to have been involved in a conspiracy to commit acts of terrorism” have been released.

Swe said the draft resolution “is replete with unfounded allegations emanating from the exiles and remnants of the insurgents who are waging a systematic disinformation campaign against Myanmar, aided and funded by some of the powerful Western countries.”
Calling the challenges facing Burma “complex and delicate,” he said the UN should be allowed “time and space to play a catalytic role in consolidating the national reconciliation process.”

The draft resolution calls for the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners, including pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been in detention for 12 of the last 18 years.

Burma’s military has ruled the country since 1962. The current junta took power in 1988 after crushing the democracy movement led by Suu Kyi. In 1990, it refused to hand over power when Suu Kyi’s party won a landslide election victory.

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P.S.

* From the Irrawaddy:

http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=9386

http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=9385