

Court drama snarls Myanmar-India romance

Jessica Curtis http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/IH15Ae01.html

August 15, 2007

On nearly all counts, India-Myanmar bilateral relations are on the upswing, with fast-growing military, trade and investment links. All, that is, but on one count: the unsettling revelations emerging from a case being heard in an Indian court about the infamous 1998 Operation Leech sting.

Ever since India's Ministry of Defense claimed nearly a decade ago to have captured what it referred to as an "international gang of gun smugglers" linked to 34 ethnic-Arakan and Karen rebels who were fighting against neighboring Myanmar's military government, the follow-up investigation into the charges has led to one embarrassment after another for the Indian defense establishment.

Many of the details of what transpired on India's Andaman Islands on February 8, 1998, are still unclear. However, court observers say the more credible version of that evening's events has come in defense of the rebel Karen National Union (KNU) and National Unity Party of Arakan (NUPA).

According to the defendant rebels, they traveled overnight from southern Thailand, where they had procured arms from unknown dealers, to India's Landfall Island for a scheduled rendezvous with Indian military and intelligence officials. The two insurgent groups were in the process of moving more than US\$2 million worth of arms and ammunition on to the island, where they claim Indian intelligence officials had offered them storage facilities.

They also say the same Indian officials had provided them similar clandestine support for years, but for still-unknown reasons that abruptly changed that evening in an intelligence sting operation now famously known as Operation Leech. After mooring on the island, six NUPA leaders were immediately apprehended and led away by Indian officials, while the other accompanying 28 rebels were disarmed, shackled, and held in a different area.

According to their court testimony, some of them soon thereafter heard the sound of gunshots in the distance. The six NUPA leaders, witnesses say, have not been heard from since. The detained rebels have spent the past nine years in legal limbo, and no formal charges were filed by India's Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) until December 2004.

The CBI and Ministry of Defense had reportedly squabbled internally for years over how to proceed with the case, and critics have made suggestions of a state cover-up. By the time the case was finally transferred to a sessions court in Kolkata, several lawyers who had agreed to represent the rebels said they had been harassed by Indian officials and refused access to the defendants. One legal counsel, T Vasandar, died in mysterious circumstances, according to their defense lawyers.

Meanwhile, because of lack of evidence, the CBI was forced to drop one of the initial charges that accused the rebels of attempting to wage war against India. During the proceedings, state prosecutors have reportedly failed to produce significant pieces of evidence requested by the defense, including the ammunition seized that evening, according to Siddharth Aggarwal, the rebels' lead lawyer. Aggarwal has also complained that the court allowed three military officials allegedly involved in the sting operation to testify via video link without cross-examinations by the defense.

Conflicting claims

According to Aggarwal, his clients' defense is simple: "They were called to Landfall [Island] by the Indian authorities with the promise that ... they [would] be armed by the Indian Army in their quest for freedom against the military junta" in Myanmar. The prosecution has denied the claims, insisting that the Indian military's only contact with either rebel group was for the

purpose of conducting the sting.

Whether or not the Indian military had deeper ties to the NUPA and KNU is still in dispute. But the allegations raised at the trial have nonetheless been a public relations disaster for New Delhi, crucially at a time when several big business deals with Myanmar's military junta hang in the balance.

When the rebels were first arrested in 1998, the trial and its revelations would have been less problematic for India. Back then, New Delhi hadn't yet launched its diplomatic charm offensive toward Myanmar's generals, and then-defense minister George Fernandes openly supported and even provided sanctuary in his personal compound for exiled Myanmar pro-democracy student groups situated in India.

With India's "Look East" diplomatic strategy, which includes securing new regional sources of fossil fuels, now in full swing, the trial has highlighted the still-conflicted nature of the two sides' budding bilateral relationship and the difficulty India is having cutting ties to its past policy of at least tacit support for Myanmar's pro-democracy and rebel movements.

Beginning in the late 1990s, India slowly moved to change its position and engage Myanmar's military regime, toward the strategic aim of curbing China's growing influence in the neighboring country. Indian defense officials were and remain vexed by Yangon's agreement to allow Beijing to build a listening post at Coco Island in the Indian Ocean.

India's new policy toward Myanmar has arguably paid economic and strategic dividends for both sides, though at the expense of India's previous foreign policy that emphasized democracy promotion. Myanmar's generals have been able to diversify with a competing power their past reliance on China for arms, aid and trade. At the end of last fiscal year, according to official statistics, India-Myanmar trade had reached US\$650 million, making India Myanmar's fourth-largest trading partner after China, Singapore and Thailand.

Military-to-military ties have in particular strengthened. A number of leading Indian defense officials have recently visited Yangon and, in return, junta leaders General Than Shwe and General Maung Aye have been given what the Indian press referred to as "red-carpet welcomes" on their arrival to New Delhi. India's arming of Myanmar's military has helped it crack down on other separatist groups fighting against New Delhi that in the past have operated from remote territories along the two countries' border.

That has meant the sale by India of a wide range of military hardware, including surveillance aircraft, T-55 tanks and 105mm artillery pieces. While that has certainly improved Myanmar's military capabilities, it has also raised concerns among international rights groups, which claim the arms sales will help Myanmar to fight against the same rebel groups India is accused of in the past clandestinely supporting.

In apparent exchange for the arms deals, India is vigorously lobbying Myanmar to award it the rights to natural-gas blocks in the Shwe fields off Myanmar's Arakan state. India reportedly sweetened its offer last week by proposing to develop a major new port in Arakan territories that would pave the way for more efficient fuel exports. China is also reportedly competing for the gas rights.

Some political analysts say the revelations emerging from the Operation Leech trial, including Delhi's alleged past support for rebel groups who operate in the very areas India is now bidding to develop for energy exports, have compromised its negotiating position vis-a-vis Myanmar. The KNU and NUPA have both claimed in court to have received support from Indian intelligence operatives for years before Operation Leech was launched.

Independent researchers working on Myanmar's western borders told Asia Times Online that Indian intelligence operatives likely spent years cultivating ties with rebel groups fighting Myanmar's military in the late 1980s and early 1990s and that they had made several offers of logistical support to the Arakan and Chin insurgent groups operating in Myanmar's remote western border regions.

So far these courtroom claims have not spread much further than the presiding court in Kolkata. "If the trial goes on for too long, the Indian military's contacts with Burmese rebels will be revealed ... That's why they killed the six leaders. It was because they knew too much," said David Htaw, a KNU official monitoring the case.

Brahma Chellaney, a senior Indian military analyst attached to the New Delhi-based Center for Policy Research, believes that despite the damning nature of the claims, the overall upbeat relationship between India and Myanmar is unlikely to be hurt by the trial. He contends that Myanmar's military, condemned for its repression in the court of international opinion, is now basking in its association with the world's largest democracy.

"Despite all this, the relationship between the two countries just keeps improving," Chellaney said.

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Burma/Myanmar: Its Strategic importance

by Dr. Tint Swe August 11th, 2007

<http://burmadigest.info/2007/08/11/burmamyanmar-its-strategic-importance/>

Realpolitik meant dealing with repugnant leaders like Ayub Khan and Saddam Hussein: turning a blind eye to their violation of human rights, for the sake of some small advantage over the other superpower. (Niall Ferguson)

The Geographical significance of Burma is obvious and does not change with time. However, in times of its history, there are certain circumstantial factors that define the degree of significance. An Analysis on contemporary history reveals that Burma becomes so significant that it can be either a pawn or a knight in post-9/11 era regional chess game. To justify the policy, habitually while China can stay silent, India has to deal in Realpolitik.

Kings

The conventional wisdom of the powerful Burmese Kings was to fight wars with neighbors vis-à-vis dominant neighbors who also invaded when Burmese kingdoms were weak. Burmese history students are made to memorize Ayutthaya and Chiang-Mai of Siam (Thailand), Manipur, Assam and Cachar of India and Chittagong of present Bangladesh. To replicate the military might of such brave kings who repulsed the mighty invaders or gained territories, the current regime of Burma has put sculptures of three kings at the entrance of the newly built Naypyiday capital.

Since the Pyu City-State in the 1st century BC, Burma was part of an overland trade route between China and India. Southeast Asia was at times under the control of Pagan Kingdom, which was finally flattened by Mongols in 1289. King Bayinnaung invaded Manipur in 1560 and Ayutthaya (Siam) in 1569. King Alaungpaya of the last dynasty also regained control of Manipur. King Hsinbyushin returned to Ayutthaya in 1766. Even China feared expansion of Burmese power and sent armies, but Burmese kings successfully held back four Chinese invasions between 1766 and 1769. Burmese general Bandula succeeded in conquering

Assam, bringing Burma face to face with British interests in India. Consequently three Anglo-Burmese wars made Burma a province of British India in 1886.

Indians and Chinese in colonial Burma

When the Suez Canal was put in operation, because of the huge demand for Burmese rice local farmers were forced to borrow money with high interest rate from Indian moneylenders, the Chettiars. Colonized Burmese call British Kala-phyu, the whites who brought Indians because most of the jobs, all the power, and wealth went into the hands of the Indian migrants. General Ne Win was compelled to expel all foreigners in 1960s. However, there was a difference between the fleeing Indians and the Chinese who left. All Indians returned to India while the Chinese went to third countries like, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan and the United States. While India kept aloof and did not interfere, China openly supported the communist revolt in Burma.

Independence

The Burmese freedom fighters sought assistance through both India and China. However it was by chance that Aung San and his comrades got practical help from the ambitious Nippon (Japan). At the climax of independence Nehru was a good friend of Aung San. The best available photo of Burma's historical hero Aung San was when he wore the great coat given by Nehru on his way to London.

Unlike India, Burma did not join the British Commonwealth. But India and Burma were in common while going against Cold War power America for different reasons. Because of Kuomintang activities being supported by America, Burma refused to join the South-East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). Likewise India was with East bloc. Again Burma was with India and China at the Bandung Conference of 1955. Interestingly Burma was one of the first countries to recognize Israel and the People's Republic of China.

Current strategic setting

Military ruled Burma became sandwiched between ASEAN and SAARC, the two emerging blocs with different visions in Asia. Ne Win's isolationist rule kept his country out of ASEAN establishment in 1967. However, the current isolated military regime was desperate to join ASEAN and finally they made it despite the international campaign by exiled groups. India's new Look East policy had Burma in mind. The undeclared India's Burma policy was like that of ASEAN - the controversial constructive engagement. Indian patience is so admirable that while the ASEAN which accepted Burma in 1997 has become more and more vocal against Burma and its failure to restore democracy - India maintains silence since her U-turn 5 years ago in 1992.

Stroke of luck

Dictators are by and large lucky to stay in power. West or East it does not matter to them who rules Burma as long as oil and gas are made available. When on-land natural resources are about to be depleted in earlier years of the coup, the discovery of huge natural gas has helped Burmese Generals to remain in power by doing business with energy-hungry governments. Although all cities in the Middle East are highly illuminated, Rangoon and Mandalay dwellers are having electricity in six hour shifts. While Burmese gas goes to the neighbors, the entire country in Burma has been cutting trees for using fire wood for cooking.

China factor

It is an irony that the military regime of Burma is so strong that it cannot be toppled by its own people but it is a weak government in the eyes of other nations. The weak government of Burma is unable to stand up to the growing influence of China in economy and politics. China always yearns for a weak government in Burma that has a cold relationship with the West. China and Burma, having a common border of more than 2,000 kilometers, have had a long-standing Paukphaw (fraternal) friendship. Now for Burma the real national menace are the Chinese settlers and their deep rooted influence in all sectors. It is the unforeseen spin-off of dependency of the current regime on China that is slowly turning Burma into another Tibet.

India factor

In fact, the northeast insurgency of India was only an additional factor of the wider geopolitical consideration of India in their new approach to Burma. The Burmese Kachin organization had already been tamed and all NE groups have left the KIO training camps. It is during the new Look East policy that the new anti-India groups has started enjoying sanctuaries provided by the military regime with whom India has been trying to get close. It has been exactly 15 years and India is yet to dig up any substantial cooperation by the Burmese regime to suppress Indian insurgency. In fact India looks East to the dictatorship on her eastern border.

Sino-India factor

After 50 years, the discarded the Uncle Sam highway (the Burma Road) has become one of strategic importance. China and India agreed to revive for different as well as for shared reasons. What is in common is that China wants Yunnan province and India the northeast region to develop. But China looks for market to sell and India not for trade but to buy. But both have security interests, which could be uncomfortable to Burma. The regime of Burma craves for neither trade nor business but for money from both of them. Historically the two neighbors have made two different U-turns when it comes to Burma. Chinese turn took more years and was forceful with – arms supplies and political support to communist party of Burma (CPB) and arms and political support to the military regime. India took less time and was different – psychological and service (All India Radio) to pro-democracy movement and arms sales and blind political support to the military regime.

Minor strategic considerations

The billion plus population of India and China do not care about the five digit number of refugees. But Thailand bears the refugee burden most. The immigrants from Bangladesh and Burma are of different kind. Burmese politicians once made use of them as vote banks. Burma is an 85% Buddhist country and religion was manipulated for good and bad purposes. U Nu won elections partly for his favors to Buddhism. The regime, which could kill and disrobe the monks and loot the golden pagodas, pretends to be the well-wishers of Buddhism to lure its people. Likewise Buddha tooth relic diplomacy is to please China, Sri Lanka, Thailand and India.

The Burmese military intelligence apparatus is known for its excellence for knowing where a needle is in a heap of hay. The authorities are clear where paddy or wheat has to grow. So for poppy too. Among the neighbors only China and Thailand took serious notice of narcotic drugs routed from Burma. Among other countries, only America took measures to eradicate drugs that originate from Burma. But like human rights violations, drug is not a strong force to pressurise the junta of Burma. Enough is not being done.

Conclusion

It is a pity that the Analysis & decision makers in India underestimate the mindset of Burmese generals who cannot be compared with the generals from other regimes of Asia or Africa. Yes it is more important for Burmese people to read their killer generals' mind correctly. But foreign governments should also accurately read the actions of the Burmese Army. Did they keep promises? Did they respect the international charters and agreements? – Why are they silent?

For the independence of Burma, Japan or Britain never took the credit. But now both the democratic and undemocratic blocs deserve credit for allowing the lengthy military control in Aung San Suu Kyi's Burma. The typical Burmese hate to hear from the so-called high profile foreign diplomats who always utter sweet words to the Jailor-Killer Generals.

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Minister hails new strategy for dealing with Burma

Bangkok Post – 09 August 2007

Thailand yesterday welcomed the United Nations' new approach to dealing with Burma, which now includes issues other than politics in an attempt to restore democracy there. Foreign Minister Nitya Pibulsonggram said the attempts to broaden engagement with Burma would be more effective.

"It is a refreshed and significant mandate assigned by the secretary-general [of the UN], who comes from Asia, to broaden engagement with Burma on issues other than political issues. It's a good starting point with no finger-pointing at anyone, which is not working," Mr Nitya said after talks with UN under secretary-general Ibrahim Gambari.

"[Mr] Gambari is the only one I know who has access to all and sundry in Burma. So we want to be supportive to his renewed mandate," Mr Nitya said.

The Nigerian UN diplomat told reporters that he discussed a wide range of issues with the foreign minister, from human rights to democracy, the national reconciliation process and ways of engaging the Burmese government in a comprehensive way by addressing many other issues.

They include humanitarian aid, drugs, children affected by conflicts, Millennium Development Goals, education, forced labour, and health and communicable diseases.

He hoped Burma would respond positively to the new strategy and was optimistic that the internationally-criticised National Convention process in Burma would hopefully lead to more political progress, including the release of Ms Suu Kyi and other political prisoners.

Mr Nitya said the Thai approach was in line with the UN strategy.

"We want to be helpful and to eventually see that [people in Burma] can find their way towards what they can create for themselves, and to see that there will be no continuing conflicts that affect everybody," he said

A duck, six prisoners and human rights in Burma

United Press International - 09 August 2007

By Awzar Thi

Six men in Burma have been jailed on account of a duck. Anyone wanting to appreciate the real nature of human rights abuse there, and also why years of international efforts have so far failed to effect any significant change, should take interest in how and why.

This April, a crowd suddenly attacked four persons traveling through a village in the delta on motorcycles, injuring two, one seriously. The latter, Ko Myint Naing, made a complaint to the local court that village council members, police and quasi-government officials had coordinated the assault. The reason? He and his friends had been talking about human rights.

It is important to realize that even under Burma's authoritarian regime it is not illegal to promote human rights. On the contrary, officials have in the past themselves been schooled on them by Australians. They sometimes even get a mention in official propaganda. The country also has been a party to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights from the beginning and in recent years has joined two important agreements on women and children.

Myint Naing and the others were merely distributing copies of these and related domestic laws and informing villagers of their contents.

The assault attracted some passing concern. A spokesperson for a big human rights group said that the government "should order its thugs to stop harassing people for promoting human rights." Two United Nations experts called for the authorities "to take all the necessary steps to protect human rights defenders" and "conduct an independent and thorough investigation into this event."

Unsurprisingly, none of these things happened. Instead, gang attacks continued and Myint Naing and five local farmers with whom he had cooperated were themselves accused of

upsetting public tranquility, thanks in part to the duck, which in January a teenager and his friends were accused of stealing from the local council chairman. When they failed to pay the full recompense demanded, council members allegedly assaulted him and took him to the police. Myint Naing, who knew the boy, tried to help him out. Another time, he came to assist someone accused of causing a bicycle accident with a schoolteacher.

While a stolen duck and bicycle collision are unlikely to threaten the state -- even one as paranoid and introverted as that in Burma -- they were sufficient cause for Myint Naing to be rebuked in the press and jailed for eight years under a regulation once written by the British to suppress anti-colonial dissent; the farmers received four years each. Their families are struggling to survive without them.

Again the sentence attracted fleeting media interest and ritual censure from abroad. But the six are still in jail and no one has gone beyond shallow reporting and criticism to glean the full facts and what they signify about human rights abuse in Burma.

This is one reason that outside approaches to human rights problems there have been wanting. Take the U.N. experts' response to this case. On the one hand, it elevated the attack victims to a category worthy of comment, as human rights defenders. Had they been assailed over a personal dispute, they would not have obtained outside interest. Had they been one of any number of persons whom police and local officials in Burma routinely assault and kill for trivial reasons they also would not have received so much notice. The young man who was beaten up because of the duck -- and against whom charges are pending -- remains of no particular interest.

On the other hand, having accorded the victims a special status, the United Nations did nothing useful for them. The two experts called for the relevant authorities to conduct an independent and thorough investigation into the attack. Which relevant authorities? If pressed, would the experts be able to identify any? And if not, what is the point of demanding action by imaginary persons and agencies? What benefit is there in pretending that something exists where there is in fact nothing?

Thus, not only do concerned outside groups and individuals fail to intervene effectively on behalf of individual victims, they also fail to enrich the impoverished dialogue on human rights in Burma through some thoughtful analysis or new insight, or even by telling the truth: that there is no one in Burma who can make an independent inquiry about anything.

Here is the challenge for work on human rights not only in Burma but also throughout Asia. Well-meaning international monitors approach and critique specific incidents in terms of global norms -- as they must -- but fail to bridge the gap between those norms and local realities through detailed studies of how and why something has actually occurred. The gap is easily identified, but little attempt is made to understand what it really means and what can be done about it. What follows instead is the pretence that there exist relevant authorities who must somehow bridge it themselves, when neither they, nor the will, exist to make it so.

Both the abuse and defense of human rights can be understood only through frank and detailed assessments of what is actually going on, rather than what is supposed to be so. To comprehend violence against human rights defenders in Burma today, it is necessary to start with the blows upon a teenager accused of stealing a village chairman's duck, rather than abstract notions of relevant authorities found only in the offices of Geneva.

The rights of the six jailed men are only as good as his, and their fates are inextricably tied. If the boy can't be helped, then what hope have they? If his problems can't be gauged and addressed, then how can theirs?

(Awzar Thi is the pen name of a member of the Asian Human Rights Commission with over 15 years of experience as an advocate of human rights and the rule of law in Thailand and Burma. His Rule of Lords blog can be read at: <http://ratchasima.net>)

8 August 2007:

UN hopes Myanmar talks lead to Suu Kyi's release

August 8, Agence France Presse

The UN special adviser on Myanmar said Wednesday he hoped the junta's ongoing constitutional talks would eventually lead to the release of detained democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Ibrahim Gambari said that even though her party was not participating in the junta's National Convention, he hoped that the talks would eventually lead to her release from house arrest.

"The international community would have preferred a more inclusive process, but nonetheless it's an important event," Gambari said of the talks.

"We hope that that will lead to even more progress on the political front, including the release of detained persons, including ASSK," he said, referring to the Nobel Peace Prize winner by her initials.

Gambari spoke after meeting with Thai Foreign Minister Nitya Pibulsonggram to discuss ways of prodding the regime to make good on its promises of democratic reform.

The diplomat arrived here after holding similar talks in Singapore, and is due to go on to Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta.

KIO awaits National Convention outcome to react

Kachin News Group - 07 August 2007

The Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) is awaiting the outcome of the final session of the National Convention (NC) and bracing itself for increased political, military and economic pressure from Burma's ruling junta, said a KIO official.

The KIO may break the 13-year-old ceasefire agreement and react politically or militarily against the ruling junta but the reaction will depend totally on whether the ruling junta considers giving autonomy to Kachin State at its constitution drafting convention in Nyaung Napyin, according to KIO officials.

The junta has avoided holding a discussion on the KIO's demand for autonomy of Kachin State in the ongoing final session of the NC being held in Nyaung Napyin, Rangoon since July 18, a KIO official told KNG today.

"We have reiterated our demand to the junta to consider autonomy for Kachin State in the ongoing NC. Now, we are waiting to see the result of the junta's NC before reacting or taking a decision, he told KNG.

The KIO is not only repeatedly being given pressure to surrender weapons but also to handover its popular military bases and business centres on the Sino-Burma border in Laiza nad Maija Yang to the junta, KIO sources added.

In Kachin State, local members of Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) backed by the junta, have sent letters of opposition to the KIO's demand for autonomy to the Township and State USDA Offices in Myitkyina on the instructions of Kachin State Commander Maj-Gen Ohn Myint, said residents.

However the junta has not held any discussions on the KIO's proposal. Five KIO delegates led by Dr. Manam Tu Ja will continue to attend the Nyaung Napyin National Convention till the conclusion, added a KIO official.

Meanwhile, the junta is making fresh recruitments for the military in Hopin, in the villages between Myitkyina-Mandalay Railway station, Putao, Phakant jade mining areas and outskirts of major townships in Kachin State, said local residents.

In May, the KIO concluded the biggest military training with over one thousand young people in Laisin Bum Headquarters. The KIO too has stepped up fresh recruitment near their military bases around Kachin State and northern Shan State.

People of Kachin State are watching the changed relation between the junta and KIO and the impact it has on the local population after the conclusion of the National Convention.

Now, residents of Kachin State are worried about inevitable civil war once again between the Burma's ruling junta and the KIO, said locals.

The KIO is the strongest Kachin armed group in northern Burma and signed a ceasefire agreement with the Burma's ruling junta in 1994.

Activists mourn deaths in Myanmar's 1988 uprising

Agence France Presse - August 8, 2007

About 500 opponents of Myanmar's military regime on Wednesday mourned the deaths of hundreds killed in a pro-democracy uprising 19 years ago, and warned that the junta could face renewed public unrest.

The solemn ceremony at the Six Storey Pagoda in central Yangon was led by former student leaders who had spearheaded an uprising that began on August 8, 1988.

Many had been in prison until two years ago, but since their release have embarked on campaigns of civil disobedience with petition and letter writing drives.

While their actions have been relatively small, the freed student leaders have also breathed some life into the pro-democracy movement, which has been largely moribund since the latest arrest of their leader Aung San Suu Kyi four years ago.

"Today is an important day for us," Min Ko Naing, one of the former student leaders, said at the ceremony, which was also attended by diplomats.

In a statement, the student leaders warned that the military's drive to write a new constitution, which would effectively bar Aung San Suu Kyi from politics, risked sparking a new uprising in the country previously known as Burma.

"Another uprising in Burma today depends entirely on the current constitution drafting process," the statement said.

Min Ko Naing said that the student leaders planned to find more non-violent ways of opposing the military, which has ruled this country since 1962.

"We will take some action that the people can participate in," he said.

"These actions will be non-violent, but show the peaceful force of our will. We have to fight together with the people," he added.

7 August 2007:

Top UN Envoy on Myanmar Visits Singapore

UN News Centre, New York - Aug 6 2007

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's Special Adviser on Myanmar, Ibrahim Gambari, today arrived in Singapore on the first leg of an Asian trip that will also take him to Bangkok, Thailand; Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; and Jakarta, Indonesia.

Mr. Gambari is scheduled to meet with senior government officials at each stop on his itinerary, a UN spokesperson told reporters in New York.

All of the Special Adviser's consultations are taking place within the context of the Secretary-General's good offices mandate for Myanmar.

In June, Mr. Gambari visited European and Asian capitals for talks with government authorities.

When he was appointed Special Adviser in May, the Secretary-General's spokesperson said in a statement that Mr. Ban "looks forward to the cooperation of the Government of Myanmar and all relevant parties to the national reconciliation process, with a view to making tangible progress towards the restoration of democracy and the protection of human rights."

ASEAN Charter being revised to include foreign ministers' views

Channel NewsAsia, Singapore - 06 August 2007

SINGAPORE: There has been progress in finalising the ASEAN Charter since the recently concluded foreign ministers' meeting in Manila, said ASEAN's Secretary-General Ong Keng Yong.

Speaking at an ASEAN Think Tank Forum in Singapore on Monday, Mr Ong said the first draft is being revised to take into account the ministers' inputs and he expects the final draft to be ready for legal and language scrubbing at the end of September.

The forum, organised by the Singapore Institute of International Affairs, was an opportunity for the ASEAN chief to update regional analysts and members of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) on what was achieved at the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting last week.

Mr Ong said there has been a very good first draft of the milestone ASEAN Charter and the foreign ministers have decided that controversial issues affecting the group's standing and credibility would be sent to the leaders for a decision.

He said: "We removed the original draft where leaders should also make (a) decision based on consensus. We just (put it as) ASEAN Summit will be asked to make a decision and that's it. If you have a good chairman, he or she can go around the table and say 'Do you agree? Why do you not agree? Can we find a way to address your concern?' That is the kind of approach we are advocating and that is what I call statesmanship."

Mr Ong revealed there were members more vocal than Myanmar about the human rights provisions in the Charter.

He said: "When we talk about human rights, don't get away with the impression that the only guy who objects to whatever provisions we want in the ASEAN Charter is Myanmar."

"From my perspective as the secretary-general for the last four and a half years, Myanmar is not an issue for me with regards to human rights. You know why? Because they say, 'I have democracy, I have human rights. You can put anything in the Charter as long as you put it in a balanced way'."

"In our discussion on drafting the human rights provision, it was not Burma, as you call it, that caused all the trouble. There were four other countries that had reservations about how this paragraph was drafted and two of them were most vocal and they did not include Burma."

Opposition Leaders Threaten Rallies Against Myanmar's "Sham" Constitution

Associated Press - 04 August 2007

BANGKOK, THAILAND: Nearly 100 opposition leaders warned Saturday (Aug 4th) that they would urge Myanmar's citizens to vote against a "sham" constitution being drafted unless they were allowed to take part in the process.

In a letter to United Nation's Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, the 92 leaders also called on the international body to urge the junta to enter talks with detained opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy and ethnic political parties on bringing democracy to the country.

"If the (junta) continues to implement its seven-step road map without cooperating with the peoples' representatives and without listening to the real desire of the people of Myanmar and repeated requests from the international community, (its) orchestrated constitution would be surely challenged by the people," according to the letter sent to The Associated Press Saturday.

"We will be joining with them to oppose this sham-constitution and leading to educate and organize the people to vote against it in the referendum," the leaders said. "We promise to the people who voted for us that we will not let them down."

The 92 signers were elected to parliament in 1990, a vote which the National League For Democracy won in a landslide. But the junta, which took power in 1988 after crushing pro-democracy demonstrations, refused to hand over power. Eight-four of the 92 are members of the NLD.

Acting Prime Minister Thein Sein, also the chairman of the National Convention Convening Commission, said the majority of the population supports the ongoing convention, but that a small "negative-looking group" opposes it.

He warned legal action would be taken against anyone who tries to derail the process. Violators face up to 20 years in jail.

In their letter, the opposition leaders proposed a series of measures they said were necessary to avoid "a national crisis."

Among them are finishing the convention as soon as possible, and then entering talks with the NLD and other opposition parties on a timetable for completion of the democracy process and the role of parliament members during the transition to elections.

They also called for the NLD and other political parties to be given a central role in drafting the constitution, which then would lead to fresh elections and the abolishment of the junta which is also known as the State Peace and Development Council.

Neither the United Nations nor a spokesperson for the government of Myanmar could be reached for comment.

88 Generation Urges Burma to Spurn Junta's New Constitution

Irrawaddy News - 06 August 2007

The pro-democracy 88 Generation Students group urged all Burmese people to reject a forthcoming constitution based on new guidelines being finalized by the country's National Convention, according to a statement released by the group in advance of the 19th anniversary of the 1988 democracy uprising on August 8.

"Preventing the negative consequences of another disempowered and detrimental State Constitution will be the duty of all people of Burma," the statement said.

"We are seriously concerned about the new constitution and issued this statement to urge the people to demand their rights," Pyone Cho, one of the 88 Generation student leaders, told The Irrawaddy on Monday.

Pyone Cho said that looking back to the past, the 1974 constitution, which adopted a one-party system and didn't fulfill the will of the people, ended in the 1988 democracy uprising. He added that the 88 Generation Students believe any constitution that grants the rights of the people and represents their will is going to succeed and endure.

The people of Burma, Pyone Cho said, will show their true desire toward the new constitution when a referendum is held to ratify it, and their desire will follow the example of the 1990 election, which saw a landslide victory for Burma's opposition party the National League for Democracy.

2 August 2007:

EU calls for transparency in Myanmar's National Convention

Japan Economic Newswire - 02 August 2007

The European Union on Thursday called for military-ruled Myanmar to make the process of holding the National Convention more transparent.

"I will never call it a positive thing but something that moves," Javier Solana, the European Union's high representative for the common foreign and security policy, told reporters.

"What we want is the process to be transparent but as of the moment, it has not been done or guaranteed that it's going to be like that," Solana said.

He raised the issue of continued detention of political dissidents and the slow implementation of its so-called road map to democracy in a retreat session of the ASEAN Regional Forum in Manila on Thursday, his spokeswoman said.

Solana also said, "We continue to be very concerned about the situation in Myanmar, particularly with the release of the prisoners, all the prisoners."

"Myanmar did not respond to what we said," he added.

According to human rights groups, more than 1,100 prisoners are still in prison. Suu Kyi is also under house arrest. The Nobel Peace laureate has spent more than 12 of the last 18 years under house arrest.

Solana said that Monday's consensus among the ASEAN foreign ministers to include a human rights mechanism as an integral part of an ASEAN charter which ASEAN is trying to finish before a leaders' summit in November will put pressure on Myanmar to improve its human rights record. But he said the European Union will not change its policy on Myanmar even if the ASEAN charter includes a human rights body.

Bush renews Myanmar import ban

Agence France Presse - 01 August 2007

Washington - US President George W. Bush renewed Wednesday a ban on all imports from military-ruled Myanmar under a sanctions regime imposed over the suppression of Aung San Suu Kyi's democracy movement.

The US Congress last week voted overwhelmingly in favor of extending the measures for another year. Bush signed them into law Wednesday, the White House said in a brief statement.

Two months ago Bush renewed sanctions that prohibit new investments and exports of financial services to Myanmar and that deny visas to top junta officials.

After the Senate approved the import ban last week, Democratic Senator Dianne Feinstein said the sanctions regime should remain in place until Myanmar's military rulers embrace true political reform.

"Any delay (in extending the ban) will only serve to benefit the ruling military junta in Myanmar, or Burma," she said.

"The junta to date has failed to take any meaningful steps to release Suu Kyi and thousands of political prisoners."

Myanmar bans foreign language ads after 'hidden' Danish message

Agence France Presse - 02 August 2007

YANGON - Myanmar has banned ads in foreign languages except English after a newspaper advertisement last week carried a hidden message calling the nation's junta leader a killer, an editor said Thursday.

Myanmar's press scrutiny board issued the ban earlier in the week during a meeting with a group of private publishers, said the editor of a weekly journal, who declined to be named.

"We were told not to accept advertisements in any other languages except Burmese and English," he said.

"Of course, this restriction came because of the ad in the Myanmar Times last week," he said.

Danish artists ran an ad in the weekly Myanmar Times on July 23 that contained a hidden message calling for freedom in the military-run country and branding Myanmar's top ruler, Senior General Than Shwe, "a killer."

The half-page ad with a sun and a palm tree was purportedly promoting tourism in Myanmar for Scandinavian holidaymakers, and contained a poem extolling the pleasures of travel.

But the first letter in each line of the poem spelled the word "freedom," while the name of the supposed travel agency, Ewhsnahtrellik, is "Killer Than Shwe" spelled backwards.

Peters tells Myanmar of human rights concerns

New Zealand Government Press Release

Rt Hon Winston Peters

Minister of Foreign Affairs

31 July 2007

Foreign Minister Winston Peters expressed concern at the human rights situation in Myanmar when he met his counterpart U Nyan Win in Manila today.

"We met because Myanmar is our ASEAN coordinating country for the next three years, and we take our regional responsibilities to ASEAN seriously," said Mr Peters, who is in Manila for the ASEAN Regional Forum and associated meetings.

"Our position on Myanmar has not changed, however. New Zealand remains deeply concerned about the political and human rights situation, and the lack of genuine reform

there. We will continue to express these concerns to Myanmar directly and through appropriate regional forums.

"We would like to see Myanmar's seven-point roadmap for a return to democracy fully implemented so that we can fully engage with them across the spectrum of our mutual interests.

"I also told Minister Nyan Win that the only way for Myanmar to rebuild its economy and improve the lives of its people will be to win back the confidence and support of the international community by restoring democracy.

"We note ASEAN's views that engagement with Myanmar, and its continued membership of ASEAN, is the best way to seek to influence developments there," Mr Peters said.

Myanmar's status as coordinating country means it represents ASEAN in New Zealand's regular meetings with the organization. Other ASEAN countries routinely attend ASEAN-New Zealand dialogue meetings, both at Ministerial and officials level. These meetings are co-chaired by New Zealand and Myanmar, with the officials meeting due to be held in New Zealand in December.

Australia blasts 'insensitive' Myanmar

Agence France Presse - 31 July 2007

MANILA - Australia added to mounting criticism of Myanmar on Tuesday, calling the ruling junta so "insensitive" to world opinion that no form of pressure had any effect on its dismal human rights record.

Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said he had expressed his frustrations directly in a meeting with his Myanmar counterpart Nyan Win on the sidelines of a regional security summit in Manila.

"It seems to me that nothing has worked," Downer told a news conference at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) meeting in the Philippine capital.

"There have been sanctions, there has been so-called constructive engagement, there have been human rights dialogues, there have been visits, there have been representations, there have been threats," Downer said.

"But nothing moves the leadership of Burma."

Fierce objections from Myanmar helped water down language in ASEAN's draft charter to create a regional human rights commission, and the country has repeatedly snubbed calls to make good on pledges to move toward democracy.

The country, formerly known as Burma, has also ignored international pressure to free democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi, who has spent most of the last decade and a half in detention.

"What amazes me about Burma is that... the leadership seems completely insensitive to and impervious to the views of outside world. And I don't mean Western countries, I mean ASEAN countries," Downer said.

"I think that's a shame. I think they should listen to what the broader community of countries in southeast Asia has to say."

Downer said he hoped China, India and other countries would exert more pressure on Myanmar to help ASEAN push for reforms in the reclusive state, which has been run by the military for more than 40 years.