

EU mulls new Myanmar sanctions, as constitution vote closes in

23 April 2008, AFP

The European Union is preparing to extend and even boost sanctions against Myanmar, the EU's Slovenian presidency said Wednesday.

"I hope that the sanctions regime will be extended for 12 months," Slovenian state secretary for European affairs Janez Lenarcic told members of the European Parliament.

"Discussions are underway in the council (of EU ministers) for the biggest possible financial sanctions," European Commission Vice President Jacques Barrot told the assembly in Strasbourg.

The EU's sanctions, adopted on November 19, included an embargo on the import of timber, gems and metals from Myanmar. It also extended the list of Myanmar leaders and their relatives subject to a travel ban and assets freeze.

EU foreign ministers are to debate them at a meeting in Luxembourg on Monday and Tuesday, and could choose to broaden, them based on the military junta's conduct in the future.

Lenarcic, whose country currently holds the EU's rotating presidency, urged the regime to allow public debate on its new draft constitution, to be put to a referendum on May 10, and end an opposition crackdown.

"The European Union continues to hope that the Myanmar authorities will allow a free and fair referendum and that they will allow international observers to be deployed," he said.

"Only a genuine, open democratisation process can lead to national reconciliation, stability and prosperity," he said.

"We call on the authorities to cease condemning political activists and to repeal the law banning criticism of the government," he added. "We also expect the Myanmar authorities to release political prisoners."

The call comes just weeks ahead of the plebiscite on a constitution that activists say was drafted with no public input, and simply enshrines the military's role in the country it has ruled for nearly half a century.

Top Myanmar activist may go blind: US

Agence France Press - 23 April 2008

Military-ruled Myanmar's imprisoned pro-democracy activist Min Ko Naing may go blind after failing to receive medical treatment, the US State Department charged Tuesday.

The de facto number two opposition leader after democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi "has not received care for an eye infection that, if left untreated, could cause loss of sight," department spokesman Tom Casey said.

Student leader Min Ko Naing was arrested in August last year along with a dozen colleagues after he participated in a peaceful march over a sudden oil price hike that triggered widespread protests later and a deadly military crackdown.

He sought permission to see an eye specialist but the authorities at the Insein Prison in Yangon, where he is being held, refused, reports said.

"We condemn the failure of Burma's authorities to provide proper medical treatment to a number of prisoners, who may suffer irreparable damages due to the lack of prompt medical attention," Casey said.

He also expressed concern that Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi had still not received the monthly visits with her doctor as had been agreed with UN Special Envoy on Burma Ibrahim Gambari.

"We urge the regime to release all political prisoners immediately," Casey said.

"The intentional withholding of necessary medical treatment for political reasons is a serious violation of human rights. While these individuals are in the custody of the regime, they should receive the medical care they require," he said.

Rights groups say there are about 1,850 political prisoners in Myanmar, at least 700 of whom were arrested after anti-junta demonstrations last September.

NLD says political prisoners denied proper medical care

Associated Press - 23 April 2008

YANGON, Myanmar - Myanmar's military junta is deliberately denying proper medical care to political prisoners, the country's pro-democracy party said Wednesday.

National League for Democracy spokesman Nyan Win said the junta's withholding of medical treatment was a deliberate and malicious act.

Nyan Win said Suu Kyi, leader of the National League for Democracy, has not been seen by her physician since January.

Calls to the junta's public relations officials went unanswered Wednesday.

Nyan Win said Min Ko Naing's eye infection needs urgent medical treatment.

Myanmar arrests keep pressure on "no" campaign

Reuters - 20 April 2008

YANGON - Myanmar's junta is intensifying its campaign of intimidation against dissidents, and conducting a propaganda drive, to ensure its new constitution gets passed in a referendum next month, opposition leaders said on Sunday.

At least 60 people have been arrested in Sittwe, capital of northwest Rakhine state, since last week's traditional New Year celebrations for wearing T-shirts urging people to vote "No" in the May 10 plebiscite.

"More than 30 have been released but at least 20 are still in detention, and the arrests are still going on," Ko Thein Hlaing, a senior member of the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) in Rakhine, told Reuters.

In addition to the Sittwe arrests, NLD spokesman Nyan Win said one party official had been arrested in Yangon for putting up a "No" poster, and several other party members had been beaten or assaulted for campaigning.

US seeks tougher UN scolding for Myanmar

Reuters - 24 April 2008

The United States circulated a new and tougher draft statement to the UN Security Council scolding Myanmar for ignoring UN demands to free prisoners and deal fairly with the opposition.

Washington hopes the UN Security Council will unanimously agree to issue the non-binding statement very soon, so that Myanmar's military junta can reflect on its message before a key constitutional referendum scheduled for May 10.

A draft of the statement, obtained by Reuters, says it regrets slow progress by the junta in meeting previous council demands for political dialogue and release of political prisoners and calls for planned elections to be open to all candidates.

The draft was similar to an earlier version circulated two weeks ago, though it included tougher language in at least one key section – telling Myanmar that it expects the council's demands to be met "on an urgent basis".

This is stronger than the wording of the previous draft, which said the demands should be met "in a timely manner".

It said that if the May referendum and elections planned for 2010 were to be "inclusive and credible," the junta must "allow full participation of all political actors," including detained opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. It called on the military to move quickly to a genuine dialogue with Suu Kyi.

Diplomats said the new draft on Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, would likely be acceptable to most members of the 15-nation council though it was unclear how China would react.

US Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad told reporters that the statement was intended to send "a strong message to the regime but also to the . . . people of Burma and to the world."

"The council cannot be silent, should not be silent in the face of what has happened and what has not happened," he said.

British Ambassador John Sawers also voiced his support for the new statement. "I think it's important that the council express itself before the referendum," he told reporters.

Myanmar Vote Needs International Observers, Says UN Investigator

Associated Press - 14 April 2008

BRUSSELS--Myanmar's planned referendum on a new constitution will be reduced to a mere "ritual" unless international observers are allowed to monitor the vote, a U.N. human rights investigator said Monday.

The military regime in Myanmar will need to allow the opposition to organize and allow more free speech rights for the May 10 referendum to have any credibility, said Paulo Sergio Pinheiro.

"How can you have a referendum without any of the basic freedoms?" he asked in an interview. "It would be important to have international observers to validate the referendum, because if not it would be just a ritual without real content."

Pinheiro said he had received reports of supporters of a "no" vote in the referendum being detained.

"How can you believe in this referendum?" Pinheiro told The Associated Press on the sidelines of a visit to the European Parliament. "I haven't seen any sign of liberalization," he said.

Myanmar detains at least 20 activists

Associated Press - 15 April 2008

YANGON, Myanmar - Myanmar's military junta detained more than 20 activists as they walked through the northwestern city of Sittwe in a peaceful rally against the country's proposed constitution, an opposition party spokesman said today.

Meanwhile, Myo Nyunt, a youth member of the opposition party and a close aide of Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, was arrested at his grandmother's home near Yangon, said Nyan Win, spokesman for the National League for Democracy.

The arrests came ahead of the country's May 10 referendum on a new constitution that critics say was drafted to perpetuate military rule.

The protesters were wearing T-shirts printed with the word "No," during a 5-day festival to celebrate Myanmar's traditional New Year's holiday.

Sittwe, the capital of Rakhine state in western Myanmar is known for its strong anti-military sentiment. It was the city where Buddhist monks first joined anti-junta rallies that swelled into nationwide protests last September.

"Arrests of NLD members and intimidation against opponents of the regime's draft constitution are becoming more frequent," Nyan Win said, adding that several activists have also been attacked by unidentified assailants.

UK expects tough action from ASEAN on Myanmar

Jakarta Post - 14 April 2008

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) must take stern action against member state Myanmar regarding its human rights situation if it wants to avoid future problems, Michael Williams, UK special envoy for the Middle East and special projects, said Sunday. Myanmar is included among the special projects being handled by Williams, who arrived in Jakarta on Sunday on a three-day visit, is slated to meet with Foreign Minister Hassan Wirayuda, the President's special envoy to Myanmar, Lt. Gen. (ret) Agus Widjojo, who visited Myanmar as a government representative last year, and other officials to discuss Myanmar and the Middle East.

"(Myanmar) is a bad reflection on ASEAN. They need to talk to Myanmar, say look, have a referendum. That's a good idea, but it has to be free and open "We just had elections in Nepal. International press was there, the UN was there. It's not going to be like that in Myanmar. Otherwise, Myanmar will continue to be a problem for Southeast Asia and ASEAN," said Williams

He added, "Because Myanmar's a member of ASEAN, it complicates relations between ASEAN and the European Union. It could even poison the relationship"

Williams, when asked if ASEAN should expel Myanmar, said, "That's for ASEAN to decide It will be for historians to judge whether Myanmar was admitted too easily to ASEAN.

It does strike me that the initial members of ASEAN have elections, parliaments, a rule of law. There are shortcomings, but those things don't even exist in Myanmar."

He went on to say, "It's only a few months ago, ASEAN had its summit in Singapore. It adopted anew charter, and ASEAN is going to establish a commission on human rights. But people outside will ask what sort of human rights commission is this when we see what's happening in Myanmar?" Williams said.

He also would discuss with Minister Hassan plans for the UN Security Council, of which Indonesia and the UK are now members, to pass a new presidential statement on Myanmar.

Asked why a UN resolution, which is legally binding, was not an option, Williams said the Security Council believed the issue remained a domestic affair.

"A lot of countries would have reservations about that The issue is a threat to regional security, I'm not sure (if it is one to global security).

"And one also has to recognize certain realities. (Myanmar's biggest ally) China is a (veto-wielding) member of the Council. Two ASEAN members are in the Council now, Indonesia and Vietnam. I think they would not be happy with a prospect of a resolution," said Williams.

Myanmar pro-democracy party calls for international observers at constitution vote

Associated Press - 11 Friday 2008

YANGON, Myanmar - Myanmar's main opposition party called Thursday for international observers to take part in the country's referendum on a new constitution that critics say would perpetuate military rule.

National League for Democracy party said the May 10 referendum "cannot be free and fair" because the rules are stacked against the military regime's opponents.

The NLD statement said the military government is allowed to campaign openly and without restriction in favor of the proposed constitution, while the party and pro-democracy activists are denied freedom of speech and face restrictions and harassment.

"An intimidating atmosphere for the people is created by physically assaulting some of the members of (the) NLD," it said in a statement.

"For these reasons, it is now obvious that the forthcoming referendum cannot be free and fair. Hence this referendum is not transparent or free and is not reliable for the people to get justice."

"Private media are not allowed to express freely their opinion and are being restricted or controlled," it said, adding that official NLD documents were being confiscated by authorities.

For people to cast their ballots without fear and to obtain credibility among the international community, "it is now urgently needed to permit international observers, including from the United Nations," it said.

Junta officials rejected the idea of international observers when it was proposed to them by United Nations special envoy Ibrahim Gambari in a meeting last month. State media said it was decided there was no precedent for it and it infringed on Myanmar's sovereignty.

State media also reported that the junta turned down Gambari's offer to have the U.N. provide technical expertise for the vote, with the government saying it could hold the polls on its own.

Myanmar warns embassies ahead of referendum

AFP - 10 April 2008

YANGON - Myanmar's military government Thursday warned foreign embassies not to support Aung San Suu Kyi's pro-democracy party, as the nation gears up for a referendum on a constitution opposed by her supporters.

The warning carried in the official New Light of Myanmar newspaper came the morning after the regime announced that the referendum would be held on May 10.

"Certain foreign powers, with the intention of interfering in the internal affairs of Myanmar, are now ... aiding and abetting some local political parties to destabilise the country," the paper said.

"Some diplomats of certain foreign embassies in Yangon regularly visit NLD (headquarters), hold talks and give directives to harm the interests of the nation and the people," the paper said.

"The embassies should stop such activities," the government mouthpiece said.

China and Myanmar Keeping the flame alight

The Economist - 10 April 2008

Two ways to repair China's image: end the torch relay and take a lead over Myanmar

WERE shooting oneself in the foot an Olympic event, China would surely be well placed for a gold. The Beijing 2008 Olympic Torch Relay, taking the flame around the world before the games begin in August, was always a risk. Of course the flame would draw protesters like moths. But the suppression of riots and protests in Tibet has ensured the torch's progress has graduated from minor diplomatic embarrassment to full-scale public-relations disaster.

An exercise intended to flaunt the new, outward-looking and confident China has displayed its dark side: nervous, repressive, prickly and stubborn. That stubbornness may rule out the obvious remedy: calling the whole farce off before someone is badly hurt. At least the International Olympic Committee should have nothing more to do with it. Protests this week in London, Paris and San Francisco were ill-tempered enough.

The passage through Delhi on April 17th could be uglier. India is home to some 100,000 Tibetans. The only stop on the torch's world tour sure to be trouble-free is Pyongyang. As for its proposed procession through Tibet in June, it is hard to imagine a more provocative or insensitive gesture.

To accuse China's critics of "politicising" a sporting event is nonsense. What has the relay to do with sport? It is not some timeworn practice integral to the games. Rather, the idea of a relay from Greece to the Olympic venue was revived by the Nazis for the 1936 Berlin Olympics, which is hardly a precedent China wants to advertise. The first "global" relay only took place for the most recent Olympics, in Athens in 2004.

But that was not such a circus. China's pride may preclude any concession, however face-saving, on Tibet, or on human-rights abuses in general.

But it is also facing criticism for its foreign policy—its links with the governments of Sudan and Myanmar in particular. Here, in theory, it can do something to show that it is indeed a responsible international "stakeholder", with diplomatic maturity as well as economic clout.

Take Myanmar. After the bloody quelling of the "saffron revolution" last September, the ruling junta threw a few sops to international opinion. It accepted visits from a United Nations envoy, opened talks with the detained opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, and gave a timetable for a political transition. China deserves some credit for forcing the junta's hand.

Myanmar's generals are nobody's puppets. But China, with its big commercial interests in the country, and its support in the UN Security Council, is now the junta's best friend.

It is time to use that position again. Confident that the outside world's focus on their misdeeds has shifted elsewhere, the generals have stalled on dialogue both with their opponents at home and the UN's envoy.

The plight of their country remains desperate. The political "process" has degenerated into a drive to impose a constitution entrenching military rule.

A referendum on this solution will be held on May 10th in a climate of vicious intimidation.

Members of the Security Council are mulling a new statement, calling for some of the minimum reforms needed for a credible vote—such as the release of opposition leaders, including Miss Suu Kyi. The first thing China can do is to allow the statement to be issued in the name of a united outside world. More than that, China could help resolve the sterile debate that has raged for two decades over "engagement" or "isolation". Isolation has never worked, because China, India and South-East Asian countries see too much commercial and strategic benefit in links with the junta. But nor has "engagement", since Western countries have imposed sanctions of varying severity, and the junta has little interest in engaging anyway.

Nobody wins gold for sitting on a fence. Despite this, there is a broad consensus about the need for reform in Myanmar. With anti-Chinese feeling mounting in Myanmar, it is not in China's interests to be perceived as the prop that always holds up a loathed regime. It could take the initiative in forming a contact group to engage the junta in talks on economic co-operation and political reform. Even if it excluded Europe and America, such a group, of China, India, some South-East Asian countries and Japan, could help show the generals that they cannot forever survive in the cracks of other countries' disagreements. And it could help show that China is not always, unequivocally, on the side of the thugs.

Myanmar sets constitutional referendum for May 10

Agence-France Press - 09 April 2008

Myanmar's military government Wednesday set May 10 as the date for a referendum on a new constitution, which pro-democracy activists have rejected as a means for the generals to entrench their rule.

The military says the referendum will clear the way for democratic elections in 2010, but the constitution would bar the regime's main opponent, detained Nobel peace prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, from running.

The regime still has not released critical information about the polls, including the location of polling stations or a roll of eligible voters.

The announcement read on state television Wednesday consisted of only two sentences from a statement by Aung Toe, who heads the commission organising the referendum, who said the date had been decided at a meeting earlier in the day in the remote capital Naypyidaw.

Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party, which has already begun urging voters to reject the constitution, said the date would give voters little time to study the 194-page basic law.

The text was only released to the public on Wednesday, and then only a handful of copies were available -- for sale -- at government bookstores.

"They just started selling copies of the constitution to the public today. It is a very short time for people to study and to understand the whole thing," party spokesman Nyan Win said.

If approved, the new charter would only take effect once parliament convenes following elections planned for 2010.

Bush condemns Myanmar after meeting with Singapore minister

International Herald Tribune - 09 April 2008

U.S. President George W. Bush and Singapore Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong on Wednesday urged Myanmar's ruling military junta on Wednesday to begin talks with opposition forces.

Bush said he and Goh talked about how Myanmar's military "shouldn't fear the voices of people. And yet they do. I'm disappointed with the progress made to date there and would urge the military leadership there to open up and respond to the will of the people."

Goh said, "The army has to be part of the solution. Without the army playing a part in solving problems in Myanmar, there will be no solution."

US envoy to ASEAN vows to push for reforms in Myanmar

Agence-France Press - 09 April 2008

WASHINGTON - The prospective first US envoy to the ASEAN said Wednesday that his key priority was prodding the Southeast Asian group to press Myanmar's military junta to embrace democratic reforms.

Scot Marciel, ambassador designate for Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) affairs, said at his confirmation hearing in the Senate that he planned to "travel extensively throughout the region" to improve ties.

"One of my highest priorities, if confirmed, will be to work with ASEAN and its member nations ... to convince Burma's rulers to end their brutal repression and begin a genuine dialogue leading to a democratic transition," he said. Burma is Myanmar's previous name.

"The problem of Burma represents one of ASEAN's biggest challenges, but also an opportunity," said Marciel, who will continue to hold his current post as deputy assistant secretary of state on confirmation as US envoy to ASEAN.

He said that if the United States and ASEAN as well as others in the international community reversed Myanmar's "dangerous downward spiral," it would be of "enormous benefit" to the people in that country and the entire region.

Marciel said that his new position was created in recognition of the growing importance of ASEAN as an institution and belief that the United States should increase its engagement and cooperation with the region.

Marciel also urged ASEAN to provide the necessary clout to a human rights mechanism it had decided to set up as part of its charter.

"As the structure and functions of that body take shape, we will urge ASEAN to give it the means to promote and protect fundamental human rights throughout the region," he said.

Marciel said nearly half of his two decade stint in the foreign service had been devoted to working in or on the ASEAN region, including assignments in the Philippines and Vietnam.

Myanmar publishes text of military-backed proposed constitution

Associated Press - 09 April 2008

YANGON, Myanmar - Myanmar's military government published the text of its proposed new constitution Wednesday. The document is supposed to be put to a vote in a public referendum next month.

The 457-article, 194-page document went on sale at government bookshops at a cost of 1000 kyat (US\$1.00; 0.64) per copy.

The charter was drafted under the strong influence of the country's ruling junta and without input from the pro-democracy movement. Its critics say it is meant to perpetuate military rule.

The ruling junta in February announced the referendum, which is to be followed by a general election in 2010. The exact dates have not yet been announced.

Myanmar blames typo for tough clause in constitution

Myanmar officials said on Wednesday that a typographical error was to blame for a tough clause restricting amendments to the military regime's proposed constitution.

Myanmar's Constitution Drafting Committee said in a letter to the country's Foreign Correspondents Club that the change was an accident caused by 'some dropped words in the new constitution'.

The letter said the clause would be corrected to read that the constitution 'shall be amended with a majority vote of more than half of those who have the right to vote', instead of 'all eligible voters who have the right to vote.'

The letter was dated April 1 from the remote capital Naypyidaw, but only received on Wednesday in Yangon.

Changing the constitution would still be difficult, because amendments would also require approval of 75 per cent of parliament.

The new basic law would give the military control of 25 per cent of the seats, making it almost impossible to approve changes without the consent of the generals.

The draft constitution also bars pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi from running in elections, while giving the military broad power to declare a state of emergency and reimpose direct rule by the generals.

Thai and Chinese oil firms join hands in Myanmar gas exploration

Deutsche Presse-Agentur - 09 April 2008

Bangkok - Thailand's PTT Exploration and Production (PTTEP) on Wednesday announced an asset swap agreement for Myanmar gas fields with China's state-owned CNOOC. Under the agreement, the state-owned PTTEP will swap 20 per cent of its stake in Myanmar's offshore concession blocks M3 and M4 for 20 per cent stakes in CNOOC's A4 and C1 blocks.

"We are delighted to have an investment with CNOOC Ltd, which is the largest offshore oil and gas producer in China and has strong expertise in petroleum exploration and production," said PTTEP chief executive officer Anon Sirisaengtaksin.

"The company sees this success as a major step in energy cooperation between China and Thailand," he added.

PTTEP's blocks M3 and M4 are situated in the Gulf of Martaban, while CNOOC's block A4 is situated offshore the Rakhine states while block C1 is situated onshore in north-western Myanmar.

Thailand is currently the main importer of natural gas from Myanmar.

Myanmar, which faces economic sanctions in the West because of its poor human rights record, earned 2.7 billion dollars from natural gas exports to Thailand last year, according to official figures.

Myanmar's exports last year, which reached 5.9 billion dollars, were driven primarily by natural gas, which earned the impoverished country 2.7 billion dollars, or 45 per cent of the total.

Myanmar PM says new charter not for military's gain

AFP - 06 April 2008

YANGON - Myanmar's prime minister said next month's referendum on a new constitution, which gives sweeping powers to the armed forces, was not designed to benefit the military, state media said Sunday.

"The referendum is not for one person, the Tatmadaw (the military), one party and one association, but for seeking unanimous approval for a constitution," the prime minister, General Thein Sein, said.

He told the official New Light of Myanmar newspaper the proposed basic law "is instrumental for building a new democratic nation that people long for."

"The emergence of the state constitution is the duty of all citizens of Myanmar," he added.

Typo or trick? Myanmar's missing words reveal all

Reuters - 05 April 2008

YANGON - In Myanmar, the devil really is in the detail.

Close scrutineers of the former Burma's new constitution, due to be put to a referendum next month, are wondering whether the omission of four key words is just a typographical error or a dastardly trick by the military junta to keep power forever.

In a widely published outline of the charter, Myanmar's voters were led to believe that changing the constitution would need approval from 75 percent of parliament and then a simple majority -- "more than half of all eligible voters" -- in a referendum.

However, when the full document leaked out a week ago, many were surprised to see constitutional tweaks would need approval from "all eligible voters," a proviso that in reality makes any amendments impossible in a country of 53 million people.

Whether the omission of "more than half of" is deliberate or accidental is unclear, especially since Information Minister Kyaw Hsan, in a rare news conference last month, said the constitution would be open to gradual improvement after the May referendum.

Some junta opponents who were prepared to swallow the army-drafted charter, if only because it could be changed later, were alarmed by the commission and have decided to vote "no" in the plebiscite, whose precise date is yet to be announced.

"We were surprised to see the discrepancy," said one retired lawyer, who did not wish to be named.

"All my friends who had said having a constitution would be better than having no constitution have changed their minds."

The opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) of detained Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi is convinced the junta, the latest face of 46 years of military rule, is trying to pull the wool over the eyes of the people.

"It must have been changed purposely," party spokesman Nyan Win, a lawyer by training, told Reuters.

The constitution, which has not been made public officially, is a key step in the junta's seven-point "roadmap to democracy" meant to culminate in multi-party elections in 2010.

It has been widely derided by the opposition and Western governments as a blueprint for the generals cementing their grip on the power they first seized in a 1962 coup.

The charter grants the military an automatic 25 percent of seats in parliament, and gives the commander-in-chief the right to suspend the constitution at will.

The referendum discrepancy is not the only difference between the full constitution and the "detailed basic principles" that have appeared in the state-run media.

Another sentence that appears to have been slipped in at the last minute is an amnesty clause protecting any members of the State Peace and Development Council, as the junta calls itself, from future legal action.

MFA to probe alleged local link to North Korean rocket exports to Myanmar

AFP - 03 April 2008

SINGAPORE - Singapore will investigate allegations that a local trading company was linked to North Korean exports of rockets to military-ruled Myanmar, the foreign affairs ministry said on Thursday.

Japan's public broadcaster NHK reported on Wednesday, citing unnamed diplomatic sources, that Pyongyang has started exporting multiple-launch rockets to Myanmar after the two nations agreed to normalise ties last year.

It said "full-scale" exports of the weapons had been handled by an unnamed Singapore trading company, but gave no further details.

"We take such allegations very seriously and will certainly investigate," a spokesman from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a statement.

"We are committed to fulfilling our international obligations to prevent the proliferation and illicit trafficking of arms and weapons of mass destruction."

NHK said the weapons exports are in violation of economic sanctions imposed on North Korea after the communist state conducted a nuclear test in October 2006.

Multiple-launch rockets are 24 centimetres in diameter and about one metre long, each with a range of about 65 kilometres, according to the report.

China-made police trucks arrive in Yangon

Deutsche Presse-Agentur - 03 April 2008

China has delivered 80 FAW transport trucks to police grounds on the outskirts of Yangon in what may be an effort to beef up preparations for more protests, witnesses said Thursday.

They reported seeing about 40 of the 2.75-ton trucks at the Kyaik-Ka-San police grounds in Bahan Township, Yangon.

Informed sources said another 100 trucks for transporting police and troops were due to be delivered soon.

There was speculation that the trucks were part of preparations for more disturbances in the former capital, as the country gears up for a controversial referendum on a new constitution in May.

Activist who staged solo protest against Myanmar junta gets life sentence

Associated Press – 04 April 2008

YANGON, MYANMAR: A veteran activist who staged a solo protest last year against Myanmar's military junta has been sentenced to life in prison for sedition, his lawyer said Thursday (3 Apr).

Ohn Than, a member of detained pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy, was found guilty of demonstrating last year outside the U.S. Embassy in Yangon, said Aung Thein, who will represent the convicted man at his appeal.

In Myanmar, a life sentence is a maximum of 20 years in prison, Aung Thein said. Ohn Than, who is in his mid-60s, was sentenced Tuesday (1 Apr) at a trial inside Yangon's Insein Prison, he said.

Ohn Than represented himself at his trial. He was arrested for standing outside the U.S. Embassy on Aug. 23 with a placard calling for the military regime that has controlled the Southeast Asian nation since 1988 to give up power. The ruling junta held general elections in 1990 but refused to hand over power to the National League for Democracy when it won.

His solo protest came the same week that anti-government activists launched series of street protests against fuel price increases and mismanagement of the economy.

Norway Fund Won't Invest In Cos Selling Weapons To Myanmar

Dow Jones - 04 April 2008

OSLO - Norway's finance minister said Friday the country's state- controlled pension fund will no longer invest in companies selling arms or weapons technology to Myanmar.

The decision bulks up existing rules relating to the fund's investments in connection with Myanmar's military regime and associated companies.

Last spring, the Norwegian government amended the 2.02 trillion kroner (\$397 billion) Norwegian Pension Fund - Global's guidelines to explicitly bar the fund from investing in bonds issued by Myanmar.

Later in the year, the government broadened the restrictions to include a prohibition on the funding of listed Myanmar state-owned enterprises and enterprises extracting timber, metals, minerals and gemstones.

The Finance Ministry said Friday that a preliminary review of the fund's holding indicated it doesn't invest in any companies selling arms or weapons technology to Myanmar at present. Ministry Web site: <http://www.regjeringen.no>

Myanmar opposition says 6 activists arrested after protest

Associated Press - 02 April 2008

YANGON, Myanmar - Six activists who participated in a protest against Myanmar's proposed new constitution have been detained by the authorities, a spokesman for the country's main opposition party said Tuesday.

Nyan Win of the National League for Democracy said the six - three of them members of the party's youth wing - were taken from their homes in Yangon by the authorities without any explanation.

He said they were detained on Monday, four days after taking part in a demonstration outside the party's headquarters.

The protest of about 30 people, held on Armed Forces Day, urged a "no" vote in a national referendum in May.

Nyan Win described the detention of the six as an act of "intimidation" against opponents of the draft constitution.

Attempts to find the officials who detained the six were unsuccessful.

At least 40 protesters convicted in secret Myanmar trials: Amnesty

AFP - 01 April 2008

BANGKOK - At least 40 protesters in Myanmar, including seven Buddhist monks, have been sentenced to prison after secret trials over last year's pro-democracy marches, Amnesty International said Tuesday.

Officially, more than 3,000 people were arrested during the crackdown. The junta says the vast majority have been released.

But Amnesty said in a statement that at least 700 are still behind bars, and at least 40 of them have been sentenced to prison after secret trials.

The group urged the UN Security Council to pass a resolution reflecting the international community's concerns over the country, after a visit in March by UN envoy Ibrahim Gambari yielded no progress on the human rights situation.

"Rather than comply with the Security Council's appeals, the Myanmar authorities have instead moved to the next phase of their crackdown and suppression of the human rights of the Myanmar people with these sentences," Amnesty said.

"The Council cannot allow this to continue."

Burmese MPs blast 'weak' UN response to plight

Bangkok Post - 30 March 2008

Politicians elected to the Burmese parliament in 1990 and then prevented from taking office by the ruling junta issued an appeal to parliamentarians around the world Monday, rejecting the new military-dominated constitution and criticising the United Nations' "weak" efforts to promote democratic rule.

Fourteen of the would-be Burmese parliamentarians said efforts by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and his Special Envoy Ibrahim Gambari have been ineffective in pressuring the military government to moderate its authoritarian policies and bring national reconciliation.

"The UN Security Council, the highest authoritative body of the United Nations, has failed to take an effective and timely action to stop one-sided act of the SPDC (State Peace and Development Council) and to enforce realising of real national reconciliation and democratisation in Burma," the parliamentarians' letter said.

"UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has remained weak, not using his position to call for the UN Security Council action on Burma and his Special Envoy Mr Gambari is apparently misleading the world body in favour of the military junta."

The junta announced on February 9 that it would hold a constitutional referendum in May of this year followed by a general election in 2010.

Ban Ki-moon sent his envoy Gambari to Burma on March 6 to try to persuade the SPDC to launch a credible process of national reconciliation.

The parliamentarians and other critics of the junta have lambasted the proposed constitution as a blatant attempt to perpetuate permanent military rule and exclude opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) from participating in the transition to democratic rule.

Suu Kyi's NLD won a landslide victory in the country's only democratic election in 1990, but the junta jailed or exiled most of the winning candidates. Suu Kyi remains under house arrest in Rangoon.

In its open letter to the world's fellow-parliamentarians, congressmen and senators, the elected Burmese MPs called for the UN Security Council to impose a binding resolution instructing the junta to implement genuine democratic reforms.

It also called on the world's governments to ban all weapons sales to Burma and urged the "Chinese government to stop protecting the Burmese military regime and start cooperating with members of the UNSC (UN Security Council) to enforce positive change in Burma."

Burma stops aid for HIV victims

The Australian - 31 March 2008

THE authorities in Burma are risking lives and increasing the dangers of an HIV epidemic in the country by preventing foreign aid organisations from giving crucial help to patients suffering from AIDS.

The ban is part of Burma's growing hostility towards international organisations since the mass demonstrations by monks and political activists that were suppressed violently by the junta last September.

The Government has prevented aid workers and diplomats from visiting some projects, made it difficult for them to secure visas and expelled the head of the UN mission in Burma for drawing attention to the humanitarian catastrophe facing the country.

An HIV/AIDS project run by the opposition National League for Democracy on behalf of its detained leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, has been devastated by the arrest of its leaders and organisers by security authorities.

Last October, police arrested the monks of the Maggin monastery in the former capital, Rangoon, which acted as a hospice for AIDS patients. In the latest move, projects being run by non-government organisations in Mandalay, including the British charities Save the Children and Marie Stopes International, have been suspended by the authorities.

A constitutional referendum is due to be held in May, and the local authorities accuse foreign organisations of issuing propaganda on behalf of the NLD, an accusation they deny.

Foreign NGOs in Mandalay have been banned from taking part in work that takes them outside their local offices, a ruling that hinders outreach programs such as those that promote safe sex and the use of clean needles among drug users.

Worse, they are unable to deliver much-needed food to thousands of AIDS patients.

The authorities have offered to allow the deliveries to resume if the NGOs provide the names and addresses of patients, but aid workers refuse to comply.