

Myanmar's draft constitution bars Suu Kyi, cements military role in parliament

Associated Press - 31 March 2008

YANGON, Myanmar - Myanmar's draft constitution ensures that pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi cannot make a political comeback and guarantees a strong military presence in parliament, according to a copy of the proposed charter obtained Monday.

The draft constitution was completed in February but has not yet been made public. A copy of the 457-article, 194-page proposed charter was obtained by The Associated Press.

Most of the draft's contents adhere to guidelines adopted by a National Convention last year, after 14 years of on-and-off meetings.

One of the most disputed clauses of the draft effectively bars Suu Kyi from holding office because she was married to a foreigner, maintaining a controversial clause from the guidelines.

Suu Kyi's late husband Michael Aris was a Briton and both their children are British citizens.

In a significant change the guidelines, the draft delays when the constitution would take effect. Instead of after voters accept it in a referendum, as stipulated by the guidelines, it would become effective only after parliament's first session _ which could not happen until at least 2010.

The ruling military junta announced in February it will hold a referendum in May on the new constitution, followed by long-awaited general elections in 2010. Parliament convenes within 90 days of the election. The junta calls the process its "roadmap to democracy."

The draft charter allots 25 percent of seats in both houses of parliament to the military. It empowers the president to transfer legislative, executive and judicial powers to the military's commander in chief for a year if there is "sufficient reason" to declare a state of emergency.

The draft constitution stipulates that no amendments to the text can be made without the consent of more than 75 percent of lawmakers _ making proposed changes unlikely unless supported by the military's representatives in parliament.

The new constitution is supposed to replace the one scrapped when the current junta took power in 1988.

Myanmar's No. 2 ranked leader to visit India

AP - 30 March 2008

YANGON, Myanmar - The second-highest ranking member of Myanmar's ruling junta, Senior Gen. Maung Aye, will visit neighboring India in the near future, state-run media said Sunday.

The Myanmar-language Myanma Ahlin newspaper did not give a date for the visit of Maung Aye, who is vice chairman of the military council.

But diplomatic sources here said it would begin April 2.

An aid agreement on the US\$120 million (Euro 81 million) Kaladan project is expected to be signed during the five-day visit.

India's funding would allow for the upgrading of waterways and highways along the Kaladan river and development of Sittway port in Myanmar's northwestern Rakhine state.

Maung Aye last visited India in November 2000.

Relations between the two nations, which share a 1,331-kilometer (830 mile) border, turned cold after the military took power in Yangon in 1988 by violently suppressing pro-democracy demonstrations. Ties have improved significantly since 2000 with mutual visits by government leaders from both countries.

India is one of Myanmar's major trading partners, with the balance of trade consistently in favor of Myanmar.

Probers call for Thaksin prosecution on Myanmar loan

TNA – 31 March 2008

BANGKOK – The Thai government's Assets Examination Committee (AEC) plans to submit evidence to substantiate malfeasance charges against former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra involving a Bt4 billion bank loan earlier provided to fund a satellite project in Myanmar.

A Thaksin-related company received the satellite project funds.

AEC spokesman Sak Korsaugruang said the panel will shortly submit the compiled facts and supporting data to the Office of the Attorney General so that it will be forwarded to the Supreme Court in charge of criminal lawsuits involving persons with political positions.

The former prime minister had allegedly abused his influence to raise the amount of the Export-Import Bank of Thailand loan from three billion to four billion baht to procure telecom equipment under the Shin Satellite project in Thailand's neighbouring country.

The increased loan package approved by then prime minister Thaksin in 2004 for the Myanmar telecom project had caused a Bt670 million loss to Thailand, the Assets Examination Committee said, but the decision was meant to benefit the Shin Satellite company, owned by Mr. Thaksin's family.

Suu Kyi Supporters Protest Against Burma Charter Backed by Junta

AFP - 27 March 2008

YANGON - About 50 supporters of detained democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi protested Thursday against a constitution backed by the ruling junta, as the military staged a major parade in the capital.

Wearing white T-shirts emblazoned with the word "No," the protesters urged voters to reject the constitution in a referendum in May, and called for the military to open a dialogue with the democracy movement.

Plain clothes police videotaped the protest and took photos, but no one was arrested during the demonstration outside the ramshackle headquarters of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party in Yangon.

The protesters shouted "Our cause" as they recited their demands, including national reconciliation, dialogue with the military, and freedom for Aung San Suu Kyi.

Although the protesters called for a "No" vote in the referendum, the party leadership has not endorsed that stand. The party has only said that the constitution is unacceptable to the public, but has not called for a boycott or a "No" vote.

UN rights council condemns Myanmar's human rights record

AFP – 28 March 2008

GENEVA - The UN Human Rights Council fiercely attacked Myanmar's human rights record Friday, and urged the military regime to release all political prisoners and to take urgent measures to end abuses.

The resolution was passed by the council without a vote, although several state members expressed concerns about the draft, particularly Myanmar's neighbours and members of the Association of South-east Asian Nations.

The Filipino representative said Myanmar "must be encouraged in a constructive and less condemnatory manner", while Malaysia said the text "would have been more balanced if it had shown developments" in the country.

The draft resolution tabled by Slovenia on behalf of the European Union expressed "deep concern" at the human rights situation in Myanmar, including the repression of peaceful demonstrations last September.

It slammed the "failure of the Government of Myanmar to investigate and bring to justice the perpetrators of these violations".

The text also condemned the "systematic violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the country, continued arbitrary detentions and the continuing high number of political prisoners".

In response, Myanmar's representative complained the resolution "completely disregards the actual significant political situation in Myanmar by attempting to politicise internal affairs under the pretext of human rights obligations".

"We cannot accept this politicised approach. We totally and categorically reject the contents of the draft and disassociate ourselves from the resolution on the situation of human rights in Myanmar," he said.

US asked to join Europe beefing up humanitarian aid to Myanmar

AFP -27 March 2008

WASHINGTON - The United States should join Europe in increasing support for independent humanitarian work in military-ruled Myanmar while maintaining targeted sanctions, Refugees International said Thursday.

The US-based humanitarian advocacy group said in a report after a dispatching a mission into Myanmar that while the military junta had "shown indifference" to the West, sanctions were "hurting" the masses.

Quoting OECD figures, it said that Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, received less overseas development assistance -- a mere 2.88 dollars per person -- than any of the poorest 50 countries.

The average assistance in this tier of countries is more than 58 dollars per person.

Economic difficulties fueled the dramatic September 2007 protests led by Buddhist monks in Myanmar that resulted in a bloody crackdown by the military junta, which the United Nations says left 31 dead.

"Greater international commitment, including US funding, will be needed to adequately address the basic needs of the Burmese people," said Refugees International Vice-President Joel Charny, who assessed the humanitarian situation inside Myanmar in February.

He said Washington should "re-evaluate its policies for Myanmar, and join the UK and Europe in increasing support for independent humanitarian work inside the country with targeted sanctions" on the military junta.

Increased European humanitarian aid has been matched by a tightening of sanctions targeted specifically at the economic activities of officials and friends of the military junta reluctant to impose democratic reforms.

"A lack of political progress cannot justify the prolonged suffering of ordinary Burmese, who are in large part innocent victims of the prolonged political stalemate," Charny said.

US policy makers in Washington maintain restrictions on humanitarian assistance to Burma, with minor exceptions for HIV/AIDS and avian flu programs, in the belief that any aid provided to Myanmar-based agencies will inevitably prop up the military regime, he said.

US officials in Myanmar's biggest city of Yangon and those in regional offices in neighboring Thailand who are most familiar with the military-ruled country however support greater humanitarian assistance inside Myanmar, Charny said.

Despite this view, the Bush administration and Congressional staff who drive the US sanctions policy on Myanmar "have been reluctant to visit Burma, making it difficult for legitimate humanitarian actors to demonstrate the effectiveness of their work."

US Congressional staff and administration officials were urged to travel to Myanmar to directly assess the situation, including the ability of the UN and NGOs to provide humanitarian assistance inside the country.

The US State Department reserved comment until it had studied the Refugees International report.

"We have not seen the report. We look forward to having an opportunity to study it," a department official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said.

Myanmar promises "free and fair" referendum

Reuters - 27 March 2008

NAYPYIDAW- Myanmar's military junta has promised that May's referendum on a new constitution will be free and fair and that the charter, heavily criticised by the West, will be open to incremental improvement.

"The government will try to make the forthcoming referendum free and fair and I'd like to call on journalists to help make it a success," Information Minister Kyaw Hsan told local reporters summoned to the new capital for Thursday's "Army Day".

Foreign journalists have normally been invited to the former Burma for the March 27 ceremonials but were barred from this year's event.

Noting the gradual evolution of the U.S. constitution, Kyaw Hsan, a brigadier general, said there would be scope to improve the charter, which gives the army a quarter of the seats in parliament and the right to stage a coup whenever it wants.

"Something is better than nothing. Having a constitution is better than having no constitution. Once we have something, we can improve it gradually step by step," he said late on Wednesday.

Making a rare public appearance, junta supremo Than Shwe, who is frequently rumoured to be at death's door, inspected the ranks of soldiers from the back of an open-top Mercedes limousine before delivering a 15-minute speech.

The 75-year-old Senior General, as he is officially titled, stressed that the army would be ready to hand over power after multi-party elections slated for 2010 under the junta's seven-step "roadmap to democracy".

"Our Tatmadaw is making relentless and dedicated efforts during its tenure of shouldering state responsibility with the sincere aim of developing the country without any craving for power," he said.

The date of May's referendum has not yet been announced, although the generals have rebuffed a United Nations offer of international monitors and technical assistance in running the plebiscite.

Myanmar junta chief says civilians will lead government after polls

AFP - 27 March 2008

NAYPYIDAW, Myanmar : Myanmar's junta chief Than Shwe said Thursday that civilians would take the reins of government after elections in 2010, once a constitution is approved giving broad powers to the military.

General Than Shwe did not say when the public would be allowed to see the final version of the charter, which was drafted over 14 years of meetings by delegates largely selected by the regime.

"As the new constitution has already been drafted, it will be put to a national referendum in forthcoming May, and subsequently the multiparty general elections will follow in 2010 in line with the provisions of the constitution," he said at a military parade.

The 74-year-old general said his military government "has been making necessary preparations without losing sight of its ultimate aim, to hand over the state powers to the people."

Junta chief calls on army to crush destabilizing forces in Myanmar

AP- 27 March 2008

YANGON, Myanmar - Myanmar's junta chief marked Armed Forces Day on Thursday by urging soldiers to "crush" anyone attempting to destabilize the tightly controlled country.

Senior Gen. Than Shwe made the comments in a nationally televised speech after an annual military parade to mark the holiday, which celebrates the army's strength.

The junta chief called on his troops "to join hands with the people to crush internal and external destructive elements sabotaging stability and progress of the state."

The 75-year-old Shwe stood for an hour under the glaring tropical sun Thursday as he reviewed 13,000 troops and delivered his speech, putting to rest rampant rumors about his declining health.

Military top brass, diplomats and local journalists also attended the event, which was held at a massive parade ground in Naypyitaw, the remote administrative capital the junta relocated government offices to in 2005.

Indonesia, Thailand expect ASEAN countries to help settle crisis in Myanmar

Xinhua - 26 March 2008

JAKARTA -- Indonesia and Thailand on Wednesday said that ASEAN member countries were the best to play peaceful roles to help settle the crisis in Myanmar, the leaders of the two countries said here.

Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Thai Prime Minister Samak Sundravej told a joint press conference after a meeting at the State Palace that both countries support the Myanmar road map to democracy.

The agreement came after the failure of the United Nations special envoy Ibrahim Gambari to settle the crisis in Myanmar recently.

"On our fellow (Myanmar), both of us agree that the countries in the ASEAN region are in the best position to understand and have dialogue with the Myanmar government," Thai Prime Minister Sundravej said.

During the meeting with President Susilo, Sundravej said they discussed how Thailand, which will become the chairman of the ASEAN in July this year, and Indonesia work closely together with other ASEAN countries to develop and materialize an effective and strong ASEAN in order to settle the crisis in Myanmar.

"We also discussed how the ASEAN could play a positive role in working with Myanmar to help it face the challenges it is facing," he said.

On his turn, President Susilo said that Indonesia and Thailand insist to contribute for the crisis settlement in Myanmar.

"The cooperation of Thailand and Indonesia is aimed at contributing to the crisis settlement in Myanmar," he said.

The president reaffirmed Indonesia's support on the road map to democracy in Myanmar.

"We will give assistance to maintain the stability and integrity (of Myanmar) in its way to reach the road map," said Susilo.

Newly-elected Sundravej is on his two-day visit to Indonesia. He will leave for Thailand on Thursday.

Indonesia, which has supported the Myanmar government plan to hold a referendum in May and a general election in 2010, has asked for the transparency of the election process.

Myanmar looking at Indonesian model for democratic transition: UN envoy

AFP - 26 March 2008

SINGAPORE - Military-ruled Myanmar is looking at the Indonesian model for its planned transition to civilian rule, UN special envoy Ibrahim Gambari said in remarks published Wednesday.

"I can reveal to you that the junta has been looking for a model closer to Indonesia where there was a transition from military to civilian rule and ultimately to democracy," Gambari said in an interview with Singapore's Straits Times newspaper.

Gambari, who visited Myanmar earlier this month, said the country's military rulers were also studying the experience of Thailand, which had previously come under army rule, the report said.

The Indonesian model of transition to civilian rule was engineered by then president Suharto, an army general who seized power in 1966 in the violent aftermath of a botched coup blamed on the Indonesian communist party.

Suharto, who assumed the presidency in 1968, later retired from the military but ensured that the armed forces would continue to play a key role in the country's politics.

Under his rule, the military was guaranteed seats in parliament and officers held key posts as administrators.

Suharto also consolidated various political parties under a single party during his 30-year rule that ended following massive street demonstrations in 1998.

The Straits Times said Gambari spoke at length on the proposed Myanmar constitution, which bars detained democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi from running in the elections and is dismissed by critics as another means for the junta to remain in power.

Gambari said the charter's text includes clauses that would keep the military's dominant role in politics.

About 25 percent of the parliamentary seats would go to the junta, which would have the power to appoint personnel to key ministries such as defence, home affairs and border affairs, the report quoted Gambari as saying.

While the proposed constitution calls for a multiparty democracy with regular elections, it gives extensive powers with the president, who can appoint or dismiss legislative and judicial officials, the report added.

Activists launch underground campaign against Myanmar charter

AFP - 26 March 2008

BANGKOK - Myanmar's pro-democracy leaders have been arrested or forced into hiding, while their speeches and leaflets have been outlawed, and they have no access to the media.

But activists say they are defying the pressure and have launched an underground campaign against a constitution drafted by the nation's military rulers, who plan to put it to a referendum in May.

The 88 Generation Student Group, which kicked off the mass protests that shook the regime last year, says it is getting its message out through secretly distributed fliers and T-shirts, and emails passed clandestinely at Internet cafes.

Since speeches have been outlawed, the group is making video recordings on CDs that are copied and passed anonymously through Myanmar's main city of Yangon.

"In this way, we make our campaign in secret," said Tun Myint Aung, who is leading the group with a handful of other activists while living in hiding from the authorities.

"We are asking our people to go to the polling station and vote 'No.'

The authorities have no right to arrest anyone for voting 'No.' Let's show the enormous power of the people," he told AFP in Bangkok, speaking by telephone from a secret location inside Myanmar.

"In this way, we reject the military constitution and we reject everything that was made by the military government," he said.

Tun Myint Aung's group is made up of former student leaders who spearheaded a pro-democracy uprising in August 1988.

Tun Myint Aung has managed to evade authorities by living in hiding since August.

"I'm not afraid of jail, but I'm afraid of not doing my work," he said. "I always struggle, I always take action to dismiss the military dictatorship. If I am in jail, I can't," he said.

"There is no need to hold a referendum in May. The September movement was a real referendum. People don't want military rule. People showed that," Tun Myint Aung said.

The NLD's leadership has not been allowed to meet with Aung San Suu Kyi since the junta last month announced its plans for the referendum and multiparty elections for 2010.

Without her guidance, the party has not taken a clear position on the referendum, saying only that the constitution "cannot be accepted by the people" -- but without calling for a "No" vote or a boycott.

But Tun Myint Aung said youth members of NLD were working with his group to campaign for voters to turn out in force to reject the charter.

"If they cheat in force to win the referendum, we will keep fighting for our freedom," he said.

"The military government, they don't want to abandon their throne, not even to share power with the civilians."

Jailed Myanmar protesters ill: activist

Agence France Presse – 26 March 2008

BANGKOK: Pro-democracy leaders jailed in Myanmar last year for protesting against the military government are suffering from worsening health due to poor prison conditions, an activist said Tuesday.

Tun Myint Aung, a leader of the pro-democracy 88 Generation Student Group, said that top activists like Min Ko Naing and Ko Ko Gyi had serious health problems because prison authorities were not letting them leave their cells. "Some of them are in a bad health situation, because they lock the people in their cells most of the time, so their legs are getting too weak to walk," he told AFP, speaking by telephone from an undisclosed location in Myanmar.

"Last month they were banned even from taking a bath. They aren't permitted to walk and exercise," he said.

Man sets himself ablaze in political protest in military-ruled Myanmar

Associated Press - 23 March 2008

YANGON, Myanmar - A man set himself on fire at Yangon's most famous landmark in a political protest against Myanmar's military junta, witnesses said Sunday.

Thousands of pilgrims were gathered at the city's famed Shwedagon pagoda for a Buddhist holiday Friday when a 26-year-old man shouted "Down with the military regime," doused himself with gasoline and set himself ablaze, witnesses said. They spoke on condition of anonymity, citing fear of official reprisal.

The man remained in critical condition with severe burns at a hospital Sunday, a hospital official said on condition of anonymity because he did not have the authority to speak to the press.

The incident was the first known case of self-immolation in Myanmar since the military regime took over in 1962.

Shwedagon pagoda was one of the main gathering points for Buddhist monks and pro-democracy protesters last September.

Thai PM defends investments in Myanmar

AFP – 25 March 2008

BANGKOK - THAI Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej insisted on Tuesday that the kingdom would continue doing business with neighbouring Myanmar in a bid to pressure the military regime to reform.

Thailand is one of the biggest investors and trading partners in Myanmar, spending billions of dollars a year to tap into the country's natural gas and hydropower resources to fuel its own growing economy.

Asked if Thailand would change its investment policy to add to the international pressure on the regime, Mr Samak insisted that the countries would remain good neighbours.

'Who will force Thailand to stop being friends with our neighbour? Do we have to adopt the Western opinion on what we can or cannot do?' Mr Samak told reporters.

'When we want something, and we ask Myanmar, they give it to us,' he said.

'For example, when we want electricity and we need to build a dam there, they allow us. If we need transport facilities, they let us build a port. So we are good neighbouring countries,' Mr Samak said.

Myanmar monasteries deserted six months after protests

AFP – 25 March 2008

YANGON - An elderly Buddhist monk sits in his saffron robes inside a Yangon monastery, one of just a handful of senior monks trying to teach and care for dozens of young novices reviewing their lessons nearby.

Six months ago, this monastery was full of monks who were at the forefront of pro-democracy protests that unfolded in September, eventually swelling to more than 100,000 people in the streets of Yangon.

Now this monastery -- like most others in Myanmar's main city -- is almost empty, after monks and other activists fled a deadly military crackdown that began on September 26.

"We monks have done what we could do for the people. What is the result?" the senior monk said.

"Many monks went back to their hometowns. They left the monasteries because of the suppression and their fears," he told AFP, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The violence against the monks was particularly appalling for residents in Yangon. Security forces staged night-time raids on monasteries, leaving behind blood-stained floors and ransacked rooms as they took monks to makeshift detention centres.

Most monks fled the violence, growing out their hair and seeking shelter in villages.

Although the junta last month announced a timetable for elections, with a constitutional referendum set for May and a multiparty poll in 2010, daily life remains a struggle in Myanmar, one of the world's poorest countries.

"The economic situation in Burma is worse now than at the time of the protests last year," said Sean Turnell, of Burma Economic Watch at Macquarie University in Sydney.

"The regime's response to the protests ... frightened off any would-be investors who might have thought Burma a destination for their capital," he said.

"Of course, it also frightened away foreign tourists, and the much needed foreign exchange they bring in," he added.

Monks call for boycott of religious exams to protest military rule

Associated Press - 19 March 2008

YANGON, Myanmar - A group of Buddhist monks in Myanmar called Wednesday for a nationwide boycott of upcoming religious exams to protest last year's bloody crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrators.

The call came from the All Burma Monks Alliance, which helped organize the protests in September. At least 31 people were killed when the country's military rulers broke up the demonstrations.

The monks made the call in a statement that bore the alliance's seal and was e-mailed to The Associated Press.

Web sites run by exiled Myanmar journalists also quoted monks inside the country as calling for a boycott.

The statement said that the Buddhist religion would not be endangered if the monks did not take the exams, but that the faith could not prosper under a military regime that "kills and arrests monks and desecrates religious buildings."

Thousands of monks and nuns across the country take the examinations each year, usually in April. Doing well is considered a great honor.

A successful boycott would likely be seen as a powerful symbol of resistance to the ruling junta.

Monks in Myanmar, have historically been at the forefront of protests - first against British colonialism and later against military dictatorship.

Thai FM wants engagement with Myanmar

Associated Press - 20 March 2008

WASHINGTON - Thailand's new foreign minister said Thursday that sanctions favored by the United States and other powers are not spurring change in Myanmar and urged engagement with Myanmar's military leaders instead.

Foreign Minister Noppadon Pattama, who represents the first elected Thai government since a 2006 military coup, said he discussed Myanmar and the need for a greater U.S. role in Southeast Asia with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on Thursday.

"Sanctions hardly work," Noppadon told an audience at the Center for Strategic and International Studies think tank. "If you impose more sanctions, those who will suffer are ordinary people."

Speaking on the 175th anniversary of relations between the United States and Thailand, Noppadon said "true economic engagement" would help improve the lives of Myanmar's people and would allow those countries engaged with Myanmar to push for democracy and human rights changes.

"Democratic change has to come from within and not from outside," he said.

Vietnam supports UN role and respects Myanmar sovereignty

VNA (Nhan Dan newspaper) – 20 March 2008

Vietnamese representative to the United Nations said on March 18 the country supports the UN's role in resolving the Myanmar issue and respects Myanmar's independence and sovereignty.

Ambassador Le Luong Minh, Permanent Representative of Vietnam to the Security Council, made the statement at a council meeting where Ibrahim Gambari, Special Myanmar Adviser to Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, reported his March 6-10 visit to the country.

The ambassador applauded the Myanmar Government for facilitating the meeting between special adviser Gambari and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, and committing to keep a channel of communication between the government and Suu Kyi as well as a dialogue mechanism between Myanmar and the UN.

He cited Myanmar's seven-step Road Map toward democracy, its announcement to hold a national referendum on the country's constitution in May 2008 and a general election in 2010 as positive progress in the country.

Ambassador Minh said Vietnam advocates efforts to promote dialogue between all sides in Myanmar toward national reconciliation.

He affirmed that Vietnam will continue to contribute to efforts to resolve the Myanmar issue that supports the UN's intermediation role, particularly the role held by special adviser Gambari, and respecting Myanmar's independence and sovereignty.

Myanmar strengthens co-op with GMS member countries

Xinhua - 20 March 2008

Myanmar, a member of the six-country Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) Economic Cooperation, has worked for closer economic ties together with other members of the grouping by taking part in the implementation of the GMS program.

Myanmar Prime Minister General Thein Sein is due to attend a two-day Third GMS Summit scheduled for March 30-31 in Vientiane, Laos. Together with other heads of government, Thein Sein is expected to consult sharing of efforts in boosting economic cooperation among the GMS member countries.

Initiated by the Asian Development Bank, the GMS-Economic Cooperation was founded in 1992 to bring together China, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam along the Mekong river.

Since then, Myanmar has joined in signing several GMS agreements, under which the six participating countries have prioritized some 100 projects in eight sectors including investment, trade, transport, tourism, telecommunications, energy, environment and human resources development.

Covered by the Mekong project in the transport sector, Myanmar has built some major roads in its border areas such as Lashio-Museroad, Lashio-Hsipaw-Loilem-Kengtung road, and Tachilek-Kengtung-Mongla road.

Aimed at developing the international passenger and cargo transportation, trade and tourism on the Lancang-Mekong river, Myanmar joined three other countries located in the upper reaches of the Mekong river -- China, Laos and Thailand, in signing a commercial navigation agreement in April 2000 in Myanmar's Tachilek.

Gambari's Myanmar mission disappoints Western envoys

AFP - 18 March 2008

UNITED NATIONS - Western ambassadors on Tuesday voiced disappointment with the outcome of UN troubleshooter Ibrahim Gambari's latest mediation in Myanmar but vowed to keep the crisis in the Security Council's spotlight.

"We are disappointed by the lack of any concrete achievement" during Gambari's last visit to Myanmar from March 6 to 9, US Ambassador to the UN Zalmay Khalilzad told reporters after council consultations on the issue.

"The (military) regime has not responded appropriately to Gambari's initiative," he added, describing as "flawed" plans by Myanmar authorities to hold a referendum on a new constitution in May and multi-party elections in 2010.

His British counterpart, John Sawers, said Gambari gave a "not very encouraging briefing" on his latest mission to promote national reconciliation between Myanmar's government and the opposition led by democracy icon and Nobel peace prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.

He said the world community's best tool to sway the ruling junta was "the power of persuasion" and keeping the issue "in the spotlight."

France's UN Ambassador Jean-Maurice Ripert expressed alarm that the draft constitution unveiled by Myanmar authorities contained provisions aimed at preventing Aung San Suu Kyi from running in the elections.

"That is not acceptable," he added.

But Chinese Ambassador Wang Guangya, whose country is a major trade partner and arms supplier of Myanmar, insisted that Gambari's mission had achieved some progress.

"One can argue whether the glass is full or the glass is half full," he told reporters. "The situation (in Myanmar) now is better than last August and September" when the military junta crushed the biggest pro-democracy protests in nearly 20 years.

Gambari meanwhile said unity among the Security Council members was "the best way" to shore up his good offices mission.

"The United Nations is the only outsider to maintain access to both the government and Aung San Suu Kyi and to act as go-between between two," he earlier told the council.

"Encouraging the Myanmar authorities to reverse a policy mindset that has lasted this long can be challenging," he added. "But it is imperative that we continue to do so with persistence

and patience, and with legitimate expectations of tangible results from the process of engagement."

Myanmar opposes Taiwan's move for U.N. joining referendum

Xinhua - 18 March 2008

Yangon, The Myanmar government Tuesday expressed explicit opposition to Taiwan authorities' move for a referendum on joining the United Nations, the state-run Myanmar Radio and Television quoted a statement of the Foreign Ministry as reporting in a night broadcast.

"Myanmar is concerned at the undesirable escalation in cross-Strait tensions that could stem from Taiwan's continued push for the referendum as it could affect the peace and stability of the region," the statement said, reiterating Myanmar's "categorical opposition to the Taiwan authorities' any move for 'Taiwan Independence' including the attempt to hold the referendum on joining the United Nations".

"As a close and friendly neighbor of the People's Republic of China, Myanmar consistently adheres to the 'One China Policy' and always regards Taiwan as an integral part of the People's Republic of China", it added.

FM Noppadon says Thailand not spokesman for Myanmar

TNA - 15 March 2008

BANGKOK-- Thailand's Foreign Minister Noppadon Pattama said Saturday that the Samak government is not acting as spokesman for the Myanmar government in its bid to explain to the international community its so-called "roadmap to democracy".

Mr. Noppadon, who accompanied Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej for a one-day official visit to neighboring Myanmar on Friday, said he had held talks with his Myanmar counterpart U Nyan Win and urged the Myanmar government to cooperate with the United Nations in developing a democratic system in that country.

Mr. Nyan Win said he would discuss the issue with the Myanmar government and was willing to exchange information on conducting a public referendum on his country's draft constitution with Thailand, said Mr. Noppadon.

Plans by Thailand to explain to the world on its willingness to assist Myanmar should not be interpreted as Thailand having become spokesman of the Myanmar government, but was simply being carried out as an act of neighbourliness, Mr. Noppadon said.

The Thai diplomat was referring to comments made by Thai Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej yesterday after meeting Senior General Than Shwe regarding military-ruled Myanmar's plans for its self-designated "roadmap to democracy" that he would inform the leaders of European countries when he visits them in future and that he would speak at the UN General Assembly in September.

Assembly President Meets with Myanmar Envoy, Calls for National Reconciliation

UN News Centre - 17 March 2008

Meeting with the top United Nations envoy for Myanmar, General Assembly President Srgjan Kerim today called for "serious engagement and strong commitment" from all parties to further national reconciliation.

In a statement issued in New York, Mr. Kerim voiced confidence in the role and work of Special Envoy Ibrahim Gambari, who recently completed a visit to Myanmar and who is mandated by the Assembly to "promote national reconciliation, democracy and human rights."

Mr. Kerim said he was encouraged by the fact that the Special Envoy was able to meet with key figures, including pro-democracy leader and Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, as well as with the Referendum Convening Commission and the Constitution Drafting Committee.

The President appealed for "serious engagement and strong commitment from all parties to continue the process of national reconciliation that needs to be credible and inclusive," the statement noted.

Last month, the Myanmar authorities announced the holding of a constitutional referendum this May, to be followed by "multi-party democratic elections" in 2010, and Mr. Kerim today voiced hope that Myanmar's Government will be open to possibly allowing the UN a monitoring role.

This most recent mission by the Special Envoy was his third since authorities in Myanmar "cracked down severely on peaceful demonstrators" last year, as Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, noted in a report to the Human Rights Council.

Pro-democracy group urges 'No' on Myanmar constitution

AFP - 14 March 2008

YANGON - One of Myanmar's main pro-democracy groups Friday urged voters to reject the ruling junta's proposed constitution when it goes to a referendum in May.

The regime says approval of the charter will clear the way to multi-party elections in 2010, but the 88 Generation Students' Group said it would only enshrine military rule.

"This constitution is designed to protect and promote the interests, wealth and security of generals and their cronies," the group said in a statement.

"This constitution will allow the military dictatorship to perpetuate in Burma," it added, using the country's previous name.

The 88 Generation Students' Group launched anti-government protests last August, harnessing public anger over a surprise hike in fuel prices.

"With our 'No' votes, we will clean the blood and dirt stained on the bodies of our revered monks by the soldiers," the group said.

"You do not need to be afraid. The authorities have no right to arrest you for voting against this constitution. You are entitled to use your vote freely.

"By voting against this constitution, let us show the enormous power of the people. If you fail to do so, you will be afraid of the military for the rest of your life and of your next generations," it added.

UN rights expert still waiting for Myanmar visa

AFP - 14 March 2008

GENEVA - The UN human rights expert on Myanmar said Friday that he had not been issued a promised visa to visit the country on a fact-finding mission.

A statement in the afternoon from the UN said that special rapporteur Paulo Sergio Pinheiro "announced that he had received the information that his passport was ready to be picked up.

"Later in the afternoon, he learned that no visa had been issued in his passport."

The outspoken Brazilian diplomat and legal scholar -- who leaves the post at the end of the month after eight years -- had mocked Myanmar's claims it was committed to democratic reform.

"If you believe in gnomes, in trolls and in elves, you can believe in this process of democracy in Myanmar," he had said.

In a report to the Human Rights Council this week, the special rapporteur said around 1,850 political prisoners were behind bars as of January in Myanmar, and that the government had "accelerated" unlawful arrests.

He added that he had continued to get reports of arrests made in relation to sweeping anti-government demonstrations last year, as well as allegations of abuse relating to the arrests.

"There's a contradiction between what the government says that it is doing and what is really happening," he said.

"Despite all the attention to the terrible crackdown, the government did not pay any attention to the Security Council nor the Human Rights Council" which had both condemned last year's violent crackdown on dissent.

While he said he did not expect rapid change, "the problem with this country is that they don't even give small concessions. I'm always asking for small concessions, but they are not able to do that."

Although the government said it wants multi-party elections "they excluded so many people from the election that I don't know who will be able to participate," Pinheiro said.

Thai premier praises Myanmar as peaceful and orderly

DPA - 16 March 2008

Bangkok - Thai Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej Sunday praised Myanmar - deemed a pariah state by most western democracies - as a peaceful and orderly country with a military leader who is a good Buddhist who prays every morning.

Samak, who led a government delegation to Myanmar's capital of Naypyitaw Friday, claimed on his weekly Sunday TV 'Samak Talk' programme that the visit had allowed him to see the other side of the coin in Myanmar.

'The general view of this country has always been one-sided, but there are two sides to a coin,' said Samak.

He described the country as being in 'peace and order' and Myanmar's military supremo Senior General Than Shwe, whom he met, as a good Buddhist who meditates and prays daily.

'Killings and suppressions are normal there but we have to know the facts,' said the Thai premier.

Samak, 72, has his own controversial past. A former rightwing nationalist, Samak was a key instigator of a brutal crackdown on pro-democracy student-led protests in Bangkok in 1976, which left at least 46 people dead, according to historical accounts.

One outcome of the trip is Thailand's decision to proceed with the construction of a hydropower dam in north-east Myanmar despite protests by environmentalists.

Thai Foreign Minister Noppodon Pattama confirmed Saturday that Thailand will push ahead with the 228-metre-high Tasang dam on the Salween river which has made little progress since the country won a concession to construct the massive project 10 years ago, the Bangkok Post reported Sunday.

Thailand currently ranks as Myanmar's third-largest foreign investor, with investments reaching \$1.34 billion as of last year. Britain ranks first with \$1.56 billion worth of investments in Myanmar, followed by Singapore with \$1.43 billion, according to figures compiled by Thailand's Foreign Trade Department.

Singapore: Myanmar Should Better Engage UN Envoy Gambari

AFP - 14 March 2008

SINGAPORE - U.N. special envoy Ibrahim Gambari remains the best prospect for political reform in military-ruled Myanmar, current ASEAN chair Singapore said Friday.

A spokesman for Singapore's foreign ministry said it was "very unfortunate" that Myanmar's military rulers did not engage Gambari "more substantively" during the envoy's recent trip but cautioned against quickly labeling the mission a failure.

"Professor Gambari's mission is a very difficult one. The Myanmar issue is complex and demands immense patience and sustained effort," the spokesman said in a statement.

"We urge the Myanmar authorities to reconsider their position. Whatever the difficulties, Professor Gambari remains the best prospect for moving the political process forward."

UN expert says unlawful arrests in Myanmar accelerating

Agence France Presse - 12 March 2008

Some 1,850 political prisoners are behind bars as of January in Myanmar, as the government "accelerated" rather than stopped unlawful arrests, a United Nations report said Wednesday.

"Rather than stop unlawful arrests, the government had accelerated them," according to the report by UN expert Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, which said that initial indications by Myanmar's military junta of a willingness to address human rights abuses has "disappeared."

In the study to be presented to the UN Human Rights Council on Thursday, Pinheiro said he continues to get reports of arrests made in relation to massive anti-government demonstrations last year -- even as a culture of impunity reigns in Myanmar.

According to information received, at least 70 individuals were arrested, with some 62 still detained since his last visit to Myanmar in November, said Pinheiro, who is ending a seven-year mandate as special rapporteur.

He also received allegations of abuse relating to the arrests, including death in custody and arrests without warrants, the study said.

The government crackdown on last year's August-September demonstrations, combined with increased military deployment in some ethnic areas have helped open "new fronts in the patterns of human rights abuses," the report said.

In economic and social sectors as well, there have been "marked signs of deterioration," said the study which also denounced "serious violations of medical neutrality."

Moreover violations of ethnic minorities, including extrajudicial killings, attacks on civilians and forced displacement continue to be reported in the eastern Myanmar state of Kayin, it said.

The report also described a culture of impunity as a key obstacle, with those perpetrating torture, forced labour, sexual violence and the recruitment of child soldiers often going unpunished.

The rapporteur urged Myanmar's junta to rapidly release all physically vulnerable political prisoners, saying it would be seen "as a good-faith gesture that would help to pave the way to democratization and reconciliation."

US say Burma's Human Rights record getting worse

Associated Press - 12 March 2008

Burma's already bad human rights record got worse last year, the United States said Tuesday.

The Burmese military government committed extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detentions, rape and torture, the US State Department said in an annual report on human rights practices around the world.

The report said that despite promises of dialogue, the government "did not honor its commitment to begin a genuine discussion with the democratic opposition and ethnic minority groups."

ILO extends Myanmar forced labour deal for one year

Agence France Presse - 12 March 2008

The International Labour Organisation said it will extend for 12 months a deal with Myanmar aimed at compensating victims of forced labour but urged the junta to do more to raise the deal's profile.

The ILO reached a deal last year with Myanmar's secretive military regime, which staved off a threat to bring the organisation's concerns about forced labour before the International Court of Justice in The Hague.

In a report published late Tuesday on their website, the ILO said that overall, the trial period has shown an "improved working relationship between the government and the ILO".

However, it said many people are still unaware of the deal, as details of the mechanism have yet to be translated and distributed into the local language.

This lack of awareness is reflected in the small number of complaints lodged -- over the 12 months ending February 25, only 74 cases were submitted, the ILO noted.

The ILO said that one legacy of the unrest was that "the general public is now undoubtedly more politically aware and more openly questioning restrictions of their rights."

"Following up a possible future constitutional commitment ... would be a significant and concrete expression of the commitment of the authorities to abandoning the still prevalent use of forced labour throughout the country," said the ILO.

Veteran journalist calls for people power to oust regime

Irrawaddy - 12 March 2008

Less than a week after an unsuccessful visit to Burma by UN Special Envoy Ibrahim Gambari, one of the country's most respected journalists has made an extraordinary appeal for a "people power" uprising to end the ruling regime's stranglehold on power.

In a recorded message addressed to Burmese both inside and outside the country, Ludu Sein Win, a prominent journalist and former political prisoner, said that he believed that force was the only way to end more than four decades of military rule.

"In the entire history of the world, there has never been a dictator who willingly gave up power once he had it firmly in his hands," he said in his message, recorded in the former capital, Rangoon.

"And there are no countries in the world which have gained liberation through the help of the United Nations," he added, in apparent reference to the failed efforts of the UN special envoy, who left the country on Monday after being chastised by the ruling generals for "bias" in favor of the democratic opposition.

Describing the deepening political, social and economic crisis facing the country, the sixty-eight-year-old veteran journalist warned the Burmese people that it was futile to pin their hopes for a better future on the diplomatic efforts of the international community.

"Don't waste your time dreaming about dialogue and considering help from the UN Security Council," he said. "We already have the power to force out the military dictatorship. That power is the force and strength of every Burmese citizen."

In the wake of last September's monk-led protests, which attracted worldwide attention, the time is right to launch a renewed effort to overthrow military rule, the veteran journalist insisted.

He is one of Burma's most outspoken advocates of independent media, and is the author of many books on the basic theory and ethics of journalism. He is also popular as a prolific writer of books on issues relating to young people.

Myanmar junta refuses to amend charter barring Suu Kyi from polls

Agence-France Press - 07 March 2008

Myanmar's ruling junta Friday flatly refused to amend its proposed constitution, which bars democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi from elections, while accusing a UN envoy of "bias" against the regime.

The information minister, Brigadier General Kyaw Hsan, made the remarks during his meeting with visiting UN envoy Ibrahim Gambari, according to state television.

"It is impossible to review or rewrite the constitution which was drawn with the participation of delegates from all walks of life. The draft constitution will be adopted in accordance with the decision by the people in the May constitutional referendum," Kyaw Hsan said.

"It is impossible to draft the constitution again," Kyaw Hsan flatly told Gambari, according to state television.

Myanmar junta rejects U.N. offer of poll monitors

Reuters - 09 March 2008

YANGON - Myanmar's military government has rejected a United Nations offer of observers for May's constitutional referendum and elections in 2010, redoubling concerns about the freedom and fairness of both polls.

"Holding the referendum for the constitution is within the State sovereignty," Sunday's official newspapers quoted referendum commissioner Thaug Nyunt as telling visiting U.N. special envoy Ibrahim Gambari.

"Arrangements have been made for the eligible voters to cast their votes freely," he added, squashing any hopes the international community might have had that independent observers would be allowed in to monitor the plebiscite.

He also spurned Gambari's offer of U.N. technical assistance, saying the former Burma's military had "enough experience" with running elections.

The last time it did so, in 1990, it ignored the result when opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi's party won more than 80 percent of the vote.

"It shows the regime has lost its appetite for cooperating with the U.N.," an Asian diplomat, who did not want to be named, said.

Gambari met Myanmar's health and planning ministers in Yangon on Sunday, as well as a deputy foreign minister.

Myanmar Accuses UN Envoy Of Favoring Aung San Suu Kyi

AFP – 07 March 2008

YANGON -Myanmar's ruling junta Friday accused visiting United Nations envoy Ibrahim Gambari of showing "bias" in favor of detained democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, accusing him of conspiring with her against the regime.

"You have acted outside your role as a mediator," Information Minister Kyaw Hsan told Gambari during a meeting Friday, according to state television.

Kyaw Hsan denounced Gambari for releasing a letter on behalf of Aung San Suu Kyi following his last visit here in November, in which she said she was willing to cooperate with the regime in starting a national dialogue.

"Most people have criticized you for showing a bias. Some also believe that you wrote this letter in advance and released it after negotiations with Ms Aung San Suu Kyi," the minister said.

"The statement you released was a danger that could have harmed the recent peace and stability of the country as well as the restoration of unity among the ethnic" minorities, he said.

"It is important for the mediator using good offices not to have any intention of orchestrating events," he added.

"There is no justice in attacking us with pressure from all sides," he said. "The United Nations should stand honestly, without any discrimination on anything."

"We were extremely surprised, and regretted that you have become involved in this thing because we didn't want to see anything about Ms Aung San Suu Kyi's statement during this period of confidence building," the minister said.

Kyaw Hsan said the junta will not accept any efforts to stall or derail the roadmap but will welcome "constructive participation" by the U.N. in its implementation. He did not elaborate.

UN's Myanmar Envoy Meets with Pro-Democracy Leader

UN News Centre, New York - 08 March 2008

The Secretary-General's Special Adviser for Myanmar met today in Yangon with detained opposition leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and members of her party, the National League for Democracy.

The meeting between Ibrahim Gambari and Ms. Suu Kyi, which took place at the Sein Le Kantha State House, lasted for an hour and a half, according to UN officials.

On this the third day, the Special Adviser also met separately with representatives of the NLD, the Pa-O National Organization, the National Unity Party and the Union Solidarity Development Association (USDA).

Arroyo to Myanmar govt: Change mind, allow UN referendum observers

GMANews.TV - 09 March 2008

MANILA, Philippines - Myanmar's rejection of a United Nations proposal for outside observers to watch its election this May is a sad day for democracy and the Southeast Asian region, President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo said Sunday.

In a statement, Mrs Arroyo "advised" Myanmar that it is not too late to accept the "modest proposal" made by the UN, and called on the government to allow outside observers as a "small but modest step" toward democratization.

"It is a sad day for democracy and our region that Myanmar has rejected the proposal put forward by the United Nations for outside observers to the May election. The very integrity of the UN has been rejected by a nation that wishes to be taken seriously by its neighbors and the world," she said.

She said a central pillar of democracy is a free and fair election, and outside observers are not a threat to any nation's sovereignty.

Rather, she said the participation of outside election observers is a sign of strength because they help show the world the credibility of the election process itself.

"We have long had observers in the Philippines and they have helped solidify and advance our democracy," she said.

Myanmar: UN Envoy Returns to Continue Push for Democratic Change

UN News Centre, New York – 06 March 2008

The Special Adviser of the Secretary-General for Myanmar arrived in Yangon today on his latest mission to encourage the authorities there to promote democratization and national reconciliation in the troubled South-East Asian nation.

This is the third visit for Ibrahim Gambari since last year's Government crackdown on peaceful protesters.

In February the authorities in Myanmar announced a constitutional referendum to be held this May, to be followed by "multi-party democratic elections" in 2010.

Following his arrival, Mr. Gambari held talks with Myanmar's Minister for Foreign Affairs. He also met with the UN Country Team, the diplomatic corps and the representative of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

Over the next few days, the Special Adviser will continue consultations with "a broad range of representatives of Myanmar society, including groups which he was not able to meet during his last visit,"

UN envoy meets Myanmar vote chief: officials

AFP – 07 March 2008

YANGON - UN envoy Ibrahim Gambari met Friday with the top official overseeing Myanmar's upcoming referendum, officials said, in a bid to press for democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi's inclusion in the process.

His meeting with Aung Toe, the Supreme Court chief justice tasked with organising the balloting, came after more than two hours of talks with the information minister, Brigadier General Kyaw Hsan, Myanmar officials said on condition of anonymity.

The content of Gambari's talks and even his itinerary has been kept under close wraps.

Myanmar's tightly controlled state media have said little about his latest mission. State television and official newspapers have limited themselves to briefly summarising Thursday's schedule, without comment.

UN envoy seeks meetings with Suu Kyi, Myanmar junta

AFP – 07 March 2008

YANGON - UN envoy Ibrahim Gambari pressed Friday for talks with Myanmar's detained democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi and top junta officials to try to bring the opposition into the regime's election plans.

Gambari went to the government's War Office here early Friday and met the information minister, Brigadier General Kyaw Shan, according to Myanmar officials who did not want to be named.

A month ago, the regime surprised the world by announcing it would hold a constitutional referendum in May, setting the stage for multiparty democratic elections in 2010.

The junta also brought in a law criminalising public speeches and leaflets about the referendum and announced that Aung San Suu Kyi would be barred from running in elections because of her marriage to a foreigner, Briton Michael Aris, who is now dead.

Foreign diplomats who met Gambari on Thursday said he was concentrating on encouraging dialogue between Aung San Suu Kyi and the regime.

He is expected to press the junta to allow some kind of campaigning during the referendum while looking for ways to include Aung San Suu Kyi and her NLD in the polls.

Asean should not recognise 'illegitimate' Myanmar poll: activists

AFP - 07 March 2008

JAKARTA - ACTIVISTS on Friday denounced a junta-backed constitutional referendum in Myanmar as 'illegitimate' and called on Asean to reject it unless steps are taken to ensure a fair vote.

The call came in a formal declaration at the end of a two-day conference here involving groups from across the region and coincides with the visit of United Nations special envoy Ibrahim Gambari to Myanmar.

The declaration in the Indonesian capital - the home of the Association of South-east Asian Nations secretariat - demanded that Myanmar allow in Asean and UN monitors during the

referendum, declare a ceasefire with ethnic minority rebels and release all detained activists as a precondition for recognition.

'If Asean goes along with such an illegitimate process, it risks undermining its own credibility,' the declaration said.

Myanmar monk tells story of killings

Associated Press – 06 March 2008

JAKARTA, Indonesia - A Myanmar monk called for a global weapons embargo on his country, telling human rights activists and foreign governments Thursday the junta's military leaders must not be allowed to use guns against his people again.

U Awbata said he struggles to shake memories of Myanmar soldiers opening fire on fellow monks, stomping on their heads and pummeling them with batons during protests last September.

"It doesn't matter how many tears I shed," U Awbata said, speaking on behalf of dozens of monks who fled after the military crackdown and live in exile. "I cannot erase these images from my mind."

"The military generals have used their guns to crush and kill their own people," U Awbata said.

He called on the international community "to work together and urge those countries selling arms to Burma to stop doing so."

U Awbata was speaking in Indonesia's capital, Jakarta, at a three-day gathering bringing together activists, Myanmar exiles, and embassy officials seeking ways to increase the role of Southeast Asian countries in improving human rights in Myanmar.

"Violence and repression is still rampant in Burma but is no longer making media headlines," conference organizer and rights group Kontras said in a statement. The world must increase pressure on the regime "to democratize and put an end to its mass abuses."

UN envoy arrives in Myanmar to push for reforms

AFP - 06 March 2008

YANGON - UN envoy Ibrahim Gambari arrived Thursday in Myanmar to try to press the ruling junta to include detained opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi in its plans for a referendum and eventual elections.

Gambari met foreign diplomats Thursday, and was later expected to speak with UN officials here.

On previous missions, he has also been allowed to meet Aung San Suu Kyi and senior government officials, but no talks have been scheduled yet.

On his last visit he was shunned by the regime's reclusive leader, Senior General Than Shwe, and it was unclear if the envoy would see him this time.

Even Gambari's departure date has not been set, although diplomats expect him to leave on Sunday.

Belgium drops Myanmar rights case against Total

AFP - 05 March 2008

BRUSSELS - Belgian authorities dropped Wednesday a legal case brought by refugees from Myanmar targetting the French oil group Total, which they accused of crimes against humanity, their lawyer said.

Investigators looking in to the matter "declared the case closed," lawyer Xavier Deswaef told AFP, describing the decision as "surreal".

Although his clients could lodge one final appeal against the decision, they would "think twice before" pursuing further action, Deswaef said.

Last October, Belgian authorities reopened the long-running case in which the refugees accused Total of having used forced labour provided by the military regime to build a gas pipeline.

The four refugees accuse Total of having provided logistic and financial support in the 1990s to the military junta, which they hold responsible for forced labour, deportations, murder, arbitrary executions and torture.

Total has also faced legal action in France against its labour practices in Myanmar, where it has operated since 1992.

But last year the group was cleared of charges in France that it relied on forced labour to build the 1.2-billion-dollar (785-billion-euro) gas pipeline after an out-of-court settlement with the alleged victims.

The Belgian case has run for six years, during which changes to the law have muddied the judicial waters.

However, the court ruled that the defendants should benefit from a 2005 decision in their favour, even though the relevant legislation had subsequently been toughened up.

Myanmar-China pipelines yet to be approved

Reuters - 06 March 2008

BEIJING - China is still considering a plan to build gas and oil pipelines from army-ruled Myanmar to its southwestern province of Yunnan, a senior provincial official said on Thursday, defending economic ties with the former Burma.

"There is this idea, this suggestion, and each side is studying it," said Yunnan's Communist Party boss Bai Enpei who, in the Chinese hierarchy, outranks the provincial governor.

"But whether or not it will happen, when it will happen and how it will happen have yet to be finally confirmed," Bai told Reuters in a rare interview.

The official Xinhua agency had reported that China's top economic planner last April approved construction of a pipeline to carry crude from the port of Sittwe in Myanmar to Kunming, Yunnan's provincial capital.

China is also expected to lay a pipeline to transport natural gas from Myanmar, after winning last year a deal to buy the output from two major blocks operated by South Korea's Daewoo International Corp.

But Bai said that neither plan had been sealed.

"The building of both the oil and gas pipelines is still being considered," Bai said on the sidelines of China's annual meeting of parliament.

"What has been approved is a study on building the pipelines, rather than the building of them," he added.

"This is a very important project for Yunnan. We are proactively pushing it," Bai said. "We have neither gas nor oil. It will be good for our economy. But there's still a lot of work to be done before this project can happen."

Lots of questions remained to be answered, he added, though talks were ongoing.

"Will there be enough gas? What demands will the Myanmar government make?" Bai said.

Bai said China's presence in Myanmar was a good thing, and that it helped the country develop.

"We have built a road to Myanmar. The people there support it, as does the government," he said. "Of course, we ensure that Chinese companies operate legally in Myanmar."

Suu Kyi's party fails in bid to sue Myanmar junta

AFP – 05 March 2008

YANGON - The pro-democracy party of Myanmar's detained opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi's said on Wednesday they had failed in a bid to sue the military government for not recognising their 1990 election victory.

'We went to the Supreme Court to sue the government, as they had failed in their responsibility to summon the people's parliament,' NLD spokesman Nyan Win said.

'But it was rejected, even through we went to the highest court.'

The party said in a statement that their chairman Aung Shwe went to the Supreme Court on February 29 to make their case, but it was rejected the same day without a hearing.

They had argued that the junta's own election laws enacted in 1989 stated that an elected parliament should convene after the polls, and therefore the military regime had failed to abide by its own laws.

'The authorities had a responsibility to organise the people's parliament, with the representatives, in accordance with the law,' the statement said.

Mandalay monks launch anti-referendum poster campaign

Irrawaddy – 04 March 2008

Buddhist monks in Mandalay in upper Burma on Monday launched a harshly worded poster campaign urging a "Vote No" against the government's referendum on a draft constitution, said sources close to the campaign.

Meanwhile, the All Burma Monks Alliance earlier issued a hard-hitting statement ridiculing the referendum, the election and the regime.

Teams of volunteers have put up anti-regime posters in Amarapura Township in Mandalay, a monk who asked not to be identified told The Irrawaddy on Tuesday.

"The posters say the current situation is more important than 'a fire on your head,'" he said. "If your head is on fire, only you will die. If you endorse the constitution, the next generation will also die."

The posters warn people not to endorse the draft constitution for the sake of children, he said. The posters were put up in at least six locations in Amarapura Township, including several monasteries and Yadanapon University.

The posters call the junta's leader, Snr-Gen Than Shwe, "Killer Than Shwe" and say the draft constitution is a plan to colonize citizens under military rule. The posters also say, "Free Burma!" and "Free Daw Aung San Suu Kyi!" said the source.

"We don't accept a colonizing constitution," the posters proclaim. "We should reject the constitution in the referendum. We should bury our fear."

In a separate poster campaign in other townships in Mandalay, posters urged monks to boycott the official examinations held by the government.

"Monk activists called on other monks not to participate in the government-organized monk examinations which are scheduled to be held this month," said a monk in downtown Mandalay. He said only about 20 percent of the eligible monks have registered for the examinations.

Earlier, the All Burma Monks Alliance (ABMA), a group of anonymous monks who played a leading role in the September pro-democracy uprising, released a statement on February 11 condemning the junta's decrees (1/2008 and 2/2008) calling for a referendum on the draft constitution in May and a general election in 2010.

The ABMA said the decrees were unjust because the regime has failed to honor the 1990 election results. A tripartite dialogue between the junta, the main opposition parties and ethnic groups is the only way to achieve true national reconciliation, said the statement.

"We condemn the junta decrees because they wipe out people's desires and prolong the military rule in the country," the statement said.

UN envoy to visit Myanmar Thursday

AFP – 03 March 2008

UNITED NATIONS - UN troubleshooter Ibrahim Gambari will return to Myanmar on Thursday, a UN spokeswoman said Monday.

Michele Montas said Gambari, UN chief Ban Ki-moon's special adviser on Myanmar, would leave Tuesday for the visit at the invitation of the government.

She told a press briefing that Gambari would arrive in the Southeast Asian nation on Thursday "and hopes to stay as long as necessary and to consult with a broad range of representatives of Myanmar society, including all the groups which he was not able to see during his last visit (last year)."

Montas said details of the program were still being worked out and noted that Gambari "looks forward to the continued cooperation of the Myanmar government."

It will be Gambari's third visit to Myanmar since the junta's deadly crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrators in September.

Three People Arrested for Comments on Referendum

The Irrawaddy - 03 March 2008

Three Rangoon men were arrested on Friday for casual comments they made about the Burmese referendum and general election, according to sources.

A businessman who spoke on condition of anonymity told The Irrawaddy on Monday that three car brokers at the Rangoon car market were taken away by Burmese special police after they made casual comments in support of the main opposition National League for Democracy.

"Members of the USDA [Union Solidarity and Development Association, the pro-junta mass organization] came and talked about the new constitution and referendum at the car market on Friday," said the source.

"Then the brokers told the USDA members in joking that they 'should not waste their time' because in the final days people would vote as recommended by the NLD [led by Aung San Suu Kyi]. Later the special police came and arrested three of them."

Aung Thein, a lawyer in Rangoon, said the arrests may be the first such cases since the junta passed a new decree on February 26 forbidding negative comments about the referendum, which allows a sentence of up to three years imprisonment.

"But we don't know if the people arrested will be charged under that decree," he said.

He said that authorities have an option to charge people who speak out against the constitutional process under emergency acts 3 and 4 under decree 5/96 announced in 1996, barring negative comments. Anyone found guilty under that decree could receive up to 20 years in prison.

Meanwhile, five people, mostly family members of 88 Generation Students group members, were arrested last week.

They are Thanda Win, the wife of Mya Aye, a leader of the 88 Generation Students group; Hla Moe, the husband of 88 group member Mie Mie; Kanet, the brother of Marky, an 88 group member; and Naing Htwe and May Mie Lwin.

No reasons for the arrests are known at this time among the Rangoon activist community.

Indonesia may host meeting of group on Myanmar

Japan Economic Newswire - 29 February 2009

Indonesia may host a meeting of a group of 14 nations assisting U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki Moon in his efforts to spur changes in Myanmar, an official said Friday.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Kristiarto Legowo earlier declined to confirm whether the meeting will take place in Indonesia.

However, when asked whether U.N. special envoy on Myanmar Ibrahim Gambari raised a proposal for the meeting to be held in Jakarta during his visit last week to Indonesia, Legowo said, "It was touched on, but it's still at a very early stage."

"We need to discuss it further, for example about the modalities. So, we want to hear more details," he told a small group of reporters at his office.

The idea came up following suggestions from Myanmar advocates in the United States that Ban should convene the next meetings of the group in such Asian capitals as Jakarta or Beijing, thus making regional countries more committed and involved in U.N.-led mediation efforts.

The Group of Friends of the Secretary General on Myanmar is a consultative forum for developing a shared approach in support of the implementation of the secretary general's good offices mandate for Myanmar.

Consisting of Australia, Indonesia, Russia, the United States, China, Japan, Singapore, Vietnam, France, Norway, Thailand, India, Portugal and Britain, the group met in an informal format in the U.N. headquarters in New York in December and early this month.

Detained Myanmar activists face new charge carrying 20-year jail term

Associated Press - 29 February 2008

YANGON, Myanmar - A lawyer says Myanmar's military junta has charged about 20 pro-democracy activists under a security law that carries a prison sentence of up to 20 years.

The dissidents were detained in connection with last year's mass pro-democracy demonstrations, which were violently suppressed in September by the government.

The activists, being held at Yangon's notorious Insein prison, were earlier charged with violating the Printing and Publishing Act, which carries a maximum seven-year prison term.

They include prominent activists Min Ko Naing and Ko Ko Gyi of the 88 Generation Students group, whose demonstrations against economic hardship helped spark the broader September protests.

Defence lawyer Aung Thein says no trial has yet been scheduled, adding that he has not yet been able to meet his clients.

Singapore and Myanmar junta

Jakarta Post – 02 March 2008

Djoko Susilo

President George W. Bush recently issued an executive order, banning Americans from doing business with companies controlled by persons or institutions related to the Myanmar junta.

Many of the companies blacklisted by the U.S. Treasury Department are listed and operating in Singapore. On top of the list is Asia World Ltd., which is controlled by Steven Law and his father Lo Hsing Han. Both of them are good friends of Gen. Than Shwe.

Early last month, the U.S. government also issued an executive order banning Americans doing business with Htoo Trading Company Ltd., a Myanmar group of companies owned by Tay Za, who also operates Air Bagan, a private airline company. Air Bagan regularly flies between Yangon and Singapore, and flights are reportedly often full of passengers connected to the junta and its cronies.

It seems that they enjoy spending their money in Singapore. They don't think about the poverty in their country and that most of their fellow Myanmar citizens live extremely difficult lives.

Singapore is not only a major recipient of Myanmar money, it is also one of Myanmar's biggest Southeast Asian investors. Temasek Holdings, for example, is estimated to have invested more than US\$3 billion in Myanmar. Other Singapore companies are also busy doing business with the junta.

They think it is a good time to do business with Myanmar while other countries are choosing not to. Singapore is only concerned with money. Singaporean cronies would do business with vicious dictators and perhaps even the devil as long as they got their money.

By providing investments, important materials and equipment not easily available from the West, Singapore has helped the Myanmar junta perpetuate its brutal rule over the Myanmar people. Unforgivable crimes against humanity, such as killings, rape, torture and detaining people without trial, have occurred under the junta, but the Singapore government continues to support the regime blindly.

We rarely hear strong condemnation and criticism against the junta. Within ASEAN, Singapore is seen as an obstacle in pushing Myanmar forward in improving their human rights conditions. As a wealthy nation, Singapore is more interested in making money than improving human rights.

Without financial and technical support from Singapore, the junta would be greatly weakened and might seek peaceful political solutions with the National League for Democracy. Thus, the continued support from Singapore means prolonging the suffering of Myanmar's people, destroying hope that the crisis will be over soon. Perhaps the distance between the two countries is great enough for Singapore to turn a blind eye to all the crimes committed by the junta. There is too much money to be made.

Ironically, the Singapore government, which is known for hanging drug dealers, is happy to have a 'love affair' with the Myanmar regime, which is strongly associated with drug barons. We believe that Singapore's authorities know all about the Myanmar drug dealers who use their legitimate businesses in Singapore as a guise for their black business.

Take Lo Hsing Han, for example. The owner of Asia World Pty. Ltd. has been blacklisted and branded as 'the godfather of the drug Mafia' in Southeast Asia, yet he has companies based in Singapore. He and his son, Steven Law, live happily on the island.

According to some reports, the Singapore government has also helped the junta build a cyber-warfare center in Yangon. The junta's intelligence officers may intercept all telecommunication traffic into Myanmar from more than 20 countries. Singapore has also been known as a military procurement center for the regime. It is known to have supplies of mortar, grenade launchers and other deadly weapons from Singapore. In short, Singapore has armed the regime.

In addition to their military connection, there are more and more Singapore companies doing business in Myanmar. They are, among others, DBS Group Holdings Ltd., Golden Aaron Pty. Ltd., Shangri-La Hotels, OCBC Bank, United Overseas Bank Group, Kuok Group and more.

It is time for the Singapore government and businessmen to use their conscience and moral obligation to stop aiding the junta. Act now or more people will be killed, raped and tortured by the junta which is assisted and kept in power by all the investments and financial facilities provided by Singapore.

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