

“Our patience is running out”

Three months after the brutal crackdown on peaceful monks and protesters in Burma, there is no progress towards democratic reform. In fact, repression is increasing and the regime is still refusing to enter into talks, despite Aung San Suu Kyi's statement in November repeating her long-standing position that she is willing to take part in a dialogue with the military. The National League for Democracy (NLD) told the BBC in December that there had been no sign of any dialogue with the military government for the past month.

During the regime's first press conference since the crackdown, Information Minister Brigadier General Kyaw Hsan dismissed the protests as “trivial” and claimed the monks were “bogus”. He also rejected the possibility of any role for Aung San Suu Kyi or the NLD in the regime's discredited ‘roadmap to democracy’, saying “no assistance or advice from other persons is required.”

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon highlighted his growing frustration with the regime. He told a press conference in December that the international community “is very much impatient, and our patience is running out... I would like to emphasize that the return to status quo is not acceptable, and is politically unsustainable.”

UN Special Envoy Ibrahim Gambari is expected to return to Burma in January after the regime delayed a proposed trip in December, but a date has still not been set. Commentators say that this next trip will be will be make or break for his mission. There have been 35 UN Envoy visits to Burma since 1990 but they have not resulted in a single democratic reform by the regime.



Official death toll may ‘greatly underestimate reality’

UN human rights envoy Paulo Sergio Pinheiro said at least 31 people were killed during the crackdown on peaceful protesters in September. In a report to the UN Human Rights Council, Pinheiro said he had received information that the number of people killed during the protests was double the figure previously acknowledged by the regime. “Several reports of killings indicate that the figure provided by the authorities may greatly underestimate the reality,” he said. “Since the crackdown there have been an increasing number of reports of deaths in custody as well as beatings, ill-treatment, lack of food, water or medical treatment in overcrowded unsanitary detention facilities across the country,” he added.



UK backs Commission of Inquiry

The UK has said that there should be an international Commission of Inquiry into September's crackdown. The Foreign Secretary, David Miliband, said “After being denied access for four years, UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Burma, Professor Sergio Pinheiro, was finally allowed to visit Burma between 11 and 15 November. His report calls on the government of Burma to take a set of detailed immediate measures to address these concerns. He also makes clear the need for an international Commission of Inquiry or fact finding mission to visit Burma to investigate September's events in a more comprehensive manner. I urge the government of Burma to comply with these recommendations.”

EU warns it may tighten Burma sanctions

European leaders have warned that they are ready to strengthen the sanctions they introduced in November against the Burmese Junta unless the country's rulers ease repression. European Council Presidency Conclusions stated that the EU

remains seriously concerned about the conduct of the Burmese military and “stands ready to review, amend or further reinforce restrictive measures against the Government of Burma/Myanmar.”

Secretary-General holds ‘Group of Friends’ meeting

On 19 December the United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon convened the first meeting of a new international grouping on Burma, the “Group of Friends of the Secretary-General on Myanmar”. According to a UN spokesperson, the group will be “a consultative forum for developing a shared approach in support of the implementation of the Secretary-General’s good offices mandate.” The members are Australia, Indonesia, Russia, United States, China, Japan, Singapore, Viet Nam, France, Norway, Thailand, India, Portugal and the United Kingdom.

Brown and Sarkozy urge international action

In article published in the International Herald Tribune, Prime Minister Gordon Brown and President Nicolas Sarkozy urged the regime to enter into genuine dialogue with Aung San Suu Kyi and other opposition groups and ethnic leaders and called on Burma’s neighbours and the international community as a whole to unite in its efforts to bring change to Burma: “We believe that positive change will be best encouraged by following a carrot and stick approach: a combination of restrictive, targeted measures on the one hand and the alleviation of these measures as well as the prospect of a comprehensive economic initiative on the other. However, this move will become possible if, and only if, there is a clear signal that a genuine transformation leading to a new, democratic government of Burma is under way. But achieving that prize will require sustained engagement and real mobilization by the international community. We will continue to stand by the Burmese people as they prepare to mark 60 years of independence. We hope that 2008 will finally bring peace and reconciliation to Burma.”

US Senate push for Security Council arms embargo

48 US senators – including Presidential candidate John McCain - sent a letter to President Bush in December calling for the US to press the UN Security Council to immediately impose an international arms embargo against the regime stating that “no responsible nation should provide weapons to a regime as reprehensible as the one found in Burma ... Thousands of extraordinarily brave Burmese monks and everyday citizens insist that the time for peaceful change is now. We must continue to support their efforts.”

Philippines links Suu Kyi’s release to ASEAN ratification

The Philippines has said that the release of Aung San Suu Kyi will be a key factor in their decision to ratify the new Association of South East Asian Association (ASEAN) charter. President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo said that Burma’s military rulers must comply with the human rights elements in the charter by speeding the move toward democracy and that the release of Aung San Suu Kyi will be the “number one benchmark” to decide whether to ratify the ASEAN charter signed at its meeting last month.

Parents charged for failing to report son’s injuries

The parents of pro-democracy protestor Ko Ko Win have been charged by the Burmese authorities for failing to report their son for taking part in the pro-democracy protests in September. Ko Ko Win was severely beaten due to his part in the protests but he successfully escaped arrest and sought refuge with his parents. His parents attempted to treat their son but due to the seriousness of his injuries he died on November 3rd. Since then his parents have been sent to court and charged with Penal code section 176, “failure to report to the authority about their son’s participation in protests”.

Regime claims ‘investigation body’ into crackdown

In response to the UN Human Rights Council’s report on the crackdown on the protests in Burma, the regime has announced that they have already set up an investigating body into the killings and disappearances. Burma’s UN Ambassador claimed the body had already started its investigation and so there would be no need for any international inquiry, as proposed by UN Human Rights Envoy Pinheiro. Observers have dismissed the claim as regime spin; no such body has ever been mentioned previously and there is no evidence of any investigations by the regime.

Situation of 8 Shan Leaders in prison ‘critical’

The Shan National League for Democracy (SNLD) has warned that the health of eight Shan leaders, imprisoned since February 2003, is now in severe deterioration. The leaders have all been sentenced to lengthy prison sentences ranging from 70-200 years and have been put in separate prisons. The SNLD won the second highest number of seats at the 1990 elections. The imprisoned leaders are Chairman of SNLD Hkun Htun Oo, Major-General Sai Htin, Sai Nyunt Lwin, Sai Hla Aung, Sai Tun Nyo, Sai Myo Win Htun, Sai Nyi Moe. Another Shan leader, Sai Myint Than died in 2006 at Than Twe Prison in Arakan State.

Asylum seeker from Burma returns to Switzerland

Nearly four years ago, Burmese asylum seeker Stanley Van Tha sought asylum in Switzerland. However, he was denied asylum and the Swiss authorities deported him back to Burma, where he was arrested, subjected to three days of torture and sentenced to 19 years in jail. These events caused an outcry in Switzerland and the Justice Ministry subsequently stated they had made a mistake in deporting him. Van Tha has now rejoined his family in Switzerland and been granted asylum.

Miss Universe cancels trip to Burma

Canadian Friends of Burma (CFOB) caused headlines in December when they discovered that Miss Universe, Canadian Natalie Glebova, was planning to travel to Burma to be a judge in a Beauty Pageant. After contact from media organisations, Glebova cancelled her trip, which had also been intended to promote her beauty products. In a statement she stated that she had “cancelled my business trip, and have no plans to travel to Burma”, she then thanked CFOB for “providing me with information on this issue from a Canadian perspective.”

Qatar Airways withdraws from Burma

Qatar Airways announced the suspension of its four weekly flights between Doha and Rangoon. The airline blamed the suspension on “commercial” reasons. However, the news agency Reuters contacted a Rangoon based travel agent and found that “seat occupancy on their flights is very good”. The travel agent added “we think it could be due to the pressure from western countries”.

Saudi Arabia offers Junta interest free loan

The state censored newspaper Myanmar Times reports that the Saudi Embassy in Burma has stated that Burma would be eligible for 25 year interest-free loans from the Saudi National Assistance Fund. This fund is aimed at social development in areas such as healthcare, schooling and electricity generation. Burma and Saudi Arabia established diplomatic relations in August 2004 and a Saudi embassy opened in Rangoon in December 2005. Burma is preparing to open an embassy in Saudi Arabia.

India halts Burma arms sales?

Unconfirmed reports emerged in December that India has halted arms sales to Burma. In recent years India has been moving increasingly close to the regime in Burma, supplying arms, loans, and significant investments in the country. In March last year, Burma Campaign UK staged a protest outside the Indian High Commission in London to protest at India’s support for the military Junta in Burma.

Chin women refugees meet Indian politicians to urge greater action

A delegation from the Women’s League of Chinland – a group formed in India of refugees from Chin State, in western Burma, – travelled to New Delhi in December to meet with Indian politicians and Burmese and Indian organisations to update them on the human rights conditions in Chin State. During the trip the women called for the Indian people to give greater support to the Burmese democracy movement and to criticise the Burmese military for systematically violating human rights. They also called for the Government of India to continue its arms embargo against Burma, to review its economic engagement with the Junta, to discuss the Junta’s implications for regional long term stability with other regional countries and to persuade the Junta to take substantial steps towards national reconciliation.

Regime continues military build up in eastern Burma

The regime is continuing its military build up in eastern Burma in what many fear could escalate into a full-scale military offensive, similar to the massive military offensive against civilians in Karen State two years ago. The Karen National Union (KNU) report that Burma Army attacks have intensified since October. The Thailand Burma Border Consortium says that in 2007 76,000 Karen were forced to flee their homes and at least 167 villages were destroyed. Over the past decade, more than 3,000 villages have been destroyed by the army and at least half a million people displaced. The international community must act now and call for an immediate end to attacks on civilians.



Laura Bush condemns Junta and calls for Suu Kyi to be freed

In a video conference with Dr Cynthia Maung, - founder of the Mae Tao clinic which provides healthcare to Burmese refugees on the Thai-Burma

border – Laura Bush called for Aung San Suu Kyi to be freed and condemned Than Shwe for only offering “token gestures” of reform in the face of international pressure. In the call, timed to coincide with Human Rights Day, Laura Bush stated “If he and the generals are serious, they should give Aung San Suu Kyi unlimited access to the diplomatic community and other members of the Burmese opposition. She and other political leaders should be released immediately and unconditionally so they can plan a strategy for Burma’s peaceful transition to democracy”.

Aung San Suu Kyi wins 4 prestigious awards

On 10 December, Human Rights Day, the University of Cape Town awarded Aung San Suu Kyi an honorary degree. Fellow Nobel Peace Prize winner Archbishop Desmond Tutu accepted the degree on her behalf, saying that she “makes us proud to be human”. Tutu compared Burma to South Africa under apartheid and called for “a similar concerted international campaign calling for the release of all political prisoners including Aung San Suu Kyi, realistic inclusive negotiations with clear deadlines.”

The United States House of Representatives voted unanimously to award Suu Kyi with the Congressional Gold medal, the highest award it can bestow. Former winners of the prestigious award include Mother Theresa, Winston Churchill, Nelson Mandela, His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Martin Luther King Jr. Aung San Suu Kyi was also awarded

the “Rome for Peace and Humanitarian Action” prize for her “relentless commitment to and struggle for democracy and human rights in Burma”. The award was received by Dr Sein Win, the Prime Minister of Burma’s government in exile, The National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma.

Back in the UK Aung San Suu Kyi was awarded the Special Award for Lifetime Achievement in Politics by the Political Studies Association. Burma Campaign UK’s Zoya Phan received the award on behalf of Aung San Suu Kyi. Upon presenting the award Professor Jon Tonge, Chair of the PSA, said “There has never been a more deserving award. The struggle for democracy is just and gallant. It will prevail.”



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AND DEMOCRACY IN BURMA**