

Democracy movement launches 'Vote No' campaign

Despite regime threats and harassment, activists across Burma have been expressing their opposition to the referendum and have launched a campaign for a "No" vote in the referendum. People in Rangoon, Mandalay and other big cities have started wearing t-shirts bearing the word "NO" as part of a campaign against the regime's referendum.

March 27 marked Burma's Armed Forces Day. While the regime marked the day with a military parade in the new capital Nay Pyi Daw, more than 30 demonstrators wearing T-shirts printed with the word "NO" staged a protest outside the NLD headquarters. The protesters called on people to vote against the proposed constitution. In addition to people wearing NO t-shirts, the Democratic Voice of Burma reported that monks have been writing 'NO' on their monastery walls to remind civilians to vote No in the constitutional referendum, due to be held in May.

Regime 'prepares to crush dissent'

Rejecting calls from the UN, Burma's democracy movement, and the international community for the regime to begin genuine talks with Aung San Suu Kyi and ethnic groups, the regime is going ahead with its own constitution and elections and has been using threats, harassment and arrests aimed at forcing voters to approve the constitution. By the end of March, the regime had still not published the text of the constitution or announced an exact date for the referendum.

The authorities have threatened voters with heavy fines and prison terms if they fail to cast a 'Yes' vote in the referendum. In February, SPDC Special Branch police arrested three Rangoon residents for making comments about the referendum. The SPDC has also reportedly ordered civil servants to vote 'Yes' and offered prisoners an early release in return for a 'Yes' vote. According to a report by the NCGUB, Burma's government in exile, the regime is making preparations to crush any dissent and opposition. The State of Emergency which was imposed on 6 September 2007 remains in place and all police and riot police regiments and national auxiliary forces have been instructed to prepare to be combat ready. Riot police units have been issued with new guns and grenades. Following instructions from the Army Headquarters to strengthen its manpower before 2010, the police force has been intensifying its recruitment drive, with recruitment task forces aiming to recruit 1000 new recruits every month. They have been instructed to visit state high schools and middle schools for recruitment purposes.

The regime has also been strengthening the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), a regime backed militia organisation which has been tasked by the regime to organise the referendum. USDA training is being conducted in every township. All Defense Service personnel, government employees and their families and dependents are forced to join this organization. USDA officials have been intimidating people to join the organization, including pressuring students from middle school upwards to join. The USDA has also been offering loans to its members in order to attract more supporters. Democracy groups suspect that the loans are being made to tempt people to join with monetary incentives and so gain support for the regime's referendum.



Gambari's mission ends in failure



UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

After months of delay by the regime, the UN special envoy Ibrahim Gambari was finally allowed to visit Burma in March. However, he failed to achieve any breakthrough on this latest visit. Although he did meet Aung San Suu Kyi, Senior General Than Shwe refused to meet him. It was the

35th visit to Burma by a UN envoy, and not one has achieved a single reform.

In February 2008 the regime announced it was ignoring Gambari's reconciliation efforts and going ahead with a referendum on its own constitution that guarantees continued military rule. It has not kept any of the commitments it has given to the international community regarding human rights, political prisoners, and holding talks with Aung San Suu Kyi.

The Burma Campaign UK has called on United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon to take over UN efforts to restore democracy to Burma, following the failure of Ibrahim Gambari to achieve any breakthrough. "It is clear that the Burmese junta does not respect UN envoys," said Mark Farmaner, Director of the Burma Campaign UK. "After 18 years of failure it is time the UN tried a new approach. The Secretary General himself should lead the UN effort, and he should have the backing of a binding Security Council resolution."

Burmese MPs criticise 'weak' UN response

Burmese MPs, elected in 1990 but prevented from taking office by the ruling junta, issued an appeal to parliamentarians worldwide in March. The statement rejected the regime's new constitution and criticised the United Nations' "weak" efforts to promote democratic rule. Fourteen of the Burmese MPs said efforts by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and his Special Envoy Ibrahim Gambari have been ineffective in pressuring the military government to moderate its authoritarian policies and bring national reconciliation. "UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has remained weak, not using his position to call for the UN Security Council action on Burma and his Special Envoy Mr Gambari is apparently misleading the world body in favour of the military junta."

The parliamentarians called for the UN Security Council to impose a binding resolution instructing the junta to implement genuine democratic reforms.

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

Burmese groups accuse UN of letting Burmese people down.

The All Burma Monks' Alliance (ABMA) and the 88 Generation Students issued a statement in March accusing the UN and its special envoy, Ibrahim Gambari, of letting down the people of Burma in their quest for democracy. The statement, issued 6 months after the brutal crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrations last September stated, "With or without the help of the UN Security Council, we are ready to determine our own future. We are prepared to confront the worst."

The groups accused Gambari of "supporting the one-sided acts of the military junta and suggesting that democracy forces surrender." UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, did not escape their criticism as it was highlighted that since he has taken over the role the plight of the Burmese people has actually worsened. The groups also criticized the governments of China, Russia and South Africa for protecting the Burmese regime at the UN. The statement concluded by urging Burmese people to vote 'No' in the forthcoming referendum.

UK Government backs UN Arms Embargo on Burma

Foreign Office Minister Meg Munn stated in March that the UK government is "concerned about the lack of progress (in Burma) and, indeed, in some respects, matters have gone backwards. We would certainly consider pushing for the issue to be discussed further at the UN, and we would support a UN call for an arms embargo."

The European Union already has an arms embargo against Burma, but so far no serious steps have been taken to persuade the United Nations to impose an arms embargo, despite increasing demands for an embargo by Burmese pro-democracy organisations. The Burma Campaign UK has called on the UK Government to work actively towards securing a UN arms embargo.

Regime restricts more NGO activities

Burma's military regime has imposed new, more stringent, restrictions on the work of international Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) working in Burma, citing concerns regarding their influence on voters in the upcoming constitutional referendum in May. The regime has ordered NGOs to cease all

activities at grassroots level in health, education and counselling for HIV/AIDS patients, especially in rural areas. NGOs can only continue their work if they allow government officials to accompany them in all their activities. The regime already imposes strict restrictions on aid agencies, including refusing to let them deliver aid to large parts of Burma.

Monks boycott state examinations



A boycott of state examinations by many monks, which started on March 24, is continuing, with only about 300 monks in Rangoon and some 60 in Sittwe reportedly turning up to sit the tests. Monks are also boycotting the exams in Mandalay and in Pakokku, central Burma, where last September's demonstrations began. According to reports, thousands of monks are remaining in their monasteries rather than attend the examinations.

Protestors from September uprising sentenced for giving monks water

Recently published reports have confirmed the plight of those arrested following the September Saffron Revolution. "Bullets in the Alms bowl" by the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB) details the events leading up to, during and following the September 2007 "Saffron Revolution". It provides new insight into a premeditated campaign of brutality and the cover up designed to hide the extent of that brutality. Amnesty International reports that at least 40 protesters, including seven monks, have been given prison sentences for their part in the peaceful September 2007 uprising. Despite announcing that legal action would only be pursued against "individuals involved in arson or the possession of illegal weapons", the regime has instead used legal actions to harass its political enemies.

In late November, U Zantila, abbot of Zantila Rama monastery, was sentenced to two years in prison for defamation of the government after writing a letter of complaint about the seizure of money from

the monastery during a raid by the authorities. He was also reportedly disrobed by the authorities. On 21 December Ko Zaw Gyi and Ko Yazay were sentenced to two years, for giving water to protesting monks in September.

UN Human Rights Rapporteur slams Junta

On 14 March, UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Burma Paulo Sergio Pinheiro delivered his final report to the UN Human Rights Council. His report condemned the SPDC for its false claims of democratization; "There is a contradiction between what the government of Myanmar says it is doing, and what is really happening...If you believe in gnomes, trolls, and elves, you can believe in this process of democracy in Myanmar," said Pinheiro. He concluded that "No referendum or elections can be fair, no transition to democracy can be effective, without the release of political prisoners, the authorization for all political parties to operate, and the protection of the basic civil and political freedoms, all non-existent in Myanmar". Pinheiro highlighted that the SPDC has accelerated unlawful arrests, arresting at least 70 people were since his previous visit in November.

Meanwhile in Karen State the SPDC has increased militarization, extrajudicial killings, attacks on civilians and forced displacement. According to Pinheiro a culture of impunity thrives in the armed forces in Burma today, with those perpetrating torture, forced labour, sexual violence, and the recruitment of child soldiers going unpunished.

New UN Special Rapporteur appointed

Following the final report by Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, the UN Human Rights Commission (HRC) passed a resolution extending the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on human rights in Burma for a further year and appointed Argentine Tomás Ojea Quintana as Pinheiro's successor.

Political Prisoner dies in Bago prison

NLD member Ko Tin Win died in prison on 6 March while serving a 27 year prison sentence. He had been actively involved in the NLD party movement since the age of 14 and was charged with organising mass protests in 1999. He died aged 35.

Protestor sets himself on fire

A man set himself on fire at Burma's most famous landmark, the Shwedagon Pagoda as an act of political protest. Before setting himself on fire, he shouted "Down with the military regime". He is still in a critical condition in hospital. The Shwedagon Pagoda was the main gathering point for pro-democracy protesters during last September's uprising.

Arrests over Rambo DVDs

Two people, who are NLD members, were arrested for possession of Rambo DVDs. The new Rambo movie is set in Karen State, Eastern Burma, where the regime is engaged in ethnic cleansing against the Karen people. In Burma, the regime has banned people from watching the Rambo film but it has been sold illegally. An NLD spokesperson criticised the regime's action and said that the families had not been able to contact them.

Monasteries deserted six months after protests

Most of the monasteries in Rangoon are deserted six months after the uprising last September. Many fled the deadly military crackdown, as monasteries were raided at night-time, rooms ransacked and monks were taken to makeshift detention centres. Many monks escaped the violence, going back to their hometowns, disguised as normal people and seeking shelter in villages.

Thailand signs new investment deal in Burma

Thai Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej visited Burma in March to deepen ties with the regime and increase trade and investment. Despite coming under pressure to help promote democracy in Burma and develop a more critical engagement with the regime, Prime Minister Samak insisted that Thailand would continue doing business with Burma. Thailand is the largest importer of Burma's natural gas and a major investor in a controversial hydropower dam on the Salween River. Natural gas exports to Thailand alone earned Burma \$2.7 billion in 2007, or 45% of its total exports.

Thai police raid Karen organisations

While the Thai government increases trade and investment with the Burmese regime, Thai police raided ethnic Karen and pro-democracy organisations on the Thai Burma border. According to Mizzima News, many people suspect the raids may be as a result of pressure from the Burmese military regime.

Burmese refugees face cuts in food aid due to rising rice prices

The rapid rise in the price of rice may mean that Burmese refugees in the camps along the Thai Burma border face cuts in their food rations. The Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC), which provides food, shelter and other aid to more than 140,000 refugees along the border with Thailand, has appealed to its donors for more funds, but is seriously considering reducing the rations it currently provides the refugees as rising food prices have caused a shortfall of more than US\$6 million.



A refugee family in a camp on the Thai Burma border

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