

Burma's Nuclear Programme Could Be Bad News For Human Rights

Rumours about a secret nuclear programme in Burma have been circulating for years. They were so persistent it seemed likely there was something behind them, but there was no evidence to back the claims. Some individuals published exaggerated and unsubstantiated claims, which had the opposite effect they had intended, making observers more sceptical, believing the claims were politically motivated.

However, in recent months there have been a series of reports from defectors claiming Burma does have nuclear ambitions. The latest, in a documentary made by Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), and broadcast on Al Jazeera, have gained international attention. The reports even led American Senator Jim Webb to cancel a visit to Burma, which he had planned to use as a launchpad for persuading the USA to adopt a policy of appeasement towards the war criminals ruling Burma.

The documentary has detailed photographic evidence, which has been verified by experts. Burma's generals may still be a long way from developing weapons, but it appears that at the very least, the intention is there.

Burmese exiles and others around the world who support Burma's democracy movement have jumped on this news, hoping that this is what it will finally take to get the international community to take action. Here is yet more evidence that the dictatorship is a threat to international peace and security, and of how they misuse the country's resources while the population slips deeper into poverty. Surely now the international community will

Key points

- Burma's dictatorship appears to have the intention, but not the ability, to develop nuclear weapons.
- Burma's nuclear ambitions could divert international attention away from human rights, and turn the focus to disarmament.
- Efforts to secure disarmament could even lead to less pressure for political reform, not more.

finally wake up and pay attention? Can they really allow these people to remain in power?

But rather than persuade the international community to finally take action against Burma's generals, the opposite could happen. If allegations of Burma's nuclear programme are comprehensively proved, then the focus of the international community is likely to move away from human rights and democratisation, and on to an agenda of nuclear disarmament that could include economic and political 'carrots' that will entrench the dictatorship.

One example of how international focus can be diverted by a dictator's nuclear ambitions is Iran. Human Rights Watch has described the country as a 'human rights disaster'. Many of the human rights abuses committed by the government will be familiar to people from Burma, even if they are not on the same scale; the detention and torture of political activities, suppression of free speech including jailing of journalists, the use of sexual violence, and repression of ethnic minorities. But

how much attention is paid to these human rights abuses by the UN Security Council and international community?

There is also evidence that Iran funds and arms groups in neighboring countries, which means the Security Council could intervene. There have been six Security Council resolutions and one Presidential Statement on Iran. None are on human rights.

“While the international community has focused on Iran’s nuclear ambitions, Tehran has been methodically crushing all forms of dissent inside the country,” said Joe Stork, deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. “Journalists, lawyers, and civil society activists who used to speak to foreign media and human rights groups are increasingly reluctant, fearing phone and internet surveillance.”

The international community’s approach to Iran fails to give much hope for those wanting action on Burma. The approach to North Korea leaves even less hope.

North Korea’s record on human rights is even worse than Burma’s. There are more than 200,000 political prisoners, and in the 1990s the dictatorship allowed around 1 million people to die from famine. Like Burma, North Korea qualifies for UN Security Council attention as a non-traditional threat to the peace.

There have been four UN Security Council resolutions on Burma. None are on its human rights record. The entire focus has been on persuading North Korea to drop its weapons programme. The USA and international community were even prepared to fund and build ‘proliferation proof’ nuclear reactors for North Korea, providing the dictatorship with tens of millions of dollars for this purpose.

In 2007, as part of another deal to try to persuade North Korea to abandon its nuclear programme, the USA released \$20million in frozen bank accounts of North Korea’s corrupt and brutal rulers. Human rights just were not a factor.

The lesson from Iran and North Korea is that human rights take second place to stopping nuclear proliferation. Another lesson is that even when a nuclear programme is involved, China and Russia are still likely to block effective economic sanctions.

Doubtless Burma’s dictators would be delighted if international attention moved away from their human rights record. Already some speculate that a factor in US engagement with Burma has been its growing relationship with North Korea, and their trade in arms and other technologies.

If concrete evidence of Burma’s nuclear programme was discovered, Burma might, just might, finally face the kind of effective financial sanctions we have asked for on human rights grounds for so long. But based on precedent it is also possible that they could be charmed, wooed and bribed, and significant concessions made to persuade them to abandon the programme.

Burma’s generals are brutal but they are not stupid. A nuclear programme could be their ticket to relaxing international pressure for democratic reform, and normalising international relations. The exact opposite of what so many have been hoping will come out of these revelations.

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