

## **Myanmar: America's Next Rogue State?**

*P Stobdan*

There are embryonic signs that Washington is all set to turn the heat on Myanmar. In a marked departure, UN Security Council unanimously agreed on December 2, 2005 to a US request for a "one-off" briefing by Secretary-General on "the deteriorating situation" in Myanmar. The US request followed *Tatmadow's* extension of Aung San Suu Kyi's (ASSK) house arrest and General Assembly Committee's recent approval of a resolution condemning human rights in Myanmar. The briefing on Myanmar, given informally by Deputy Secretary General Ibrihim Gambari on December 17, 2005, marked the first time the Security Council had discussed Myanmar at the official level. The US government hailed the UNSC briefing as an important landmark and a significant step forward in the future of Myanmar. The US Ambassador to the UN, John Bolton, who initiated talks on Myanmar and its inclusion in the Security Council's agenda, said, "it's obviously up to the Security Council itself to decide what steps to take next. But it's certainly the intention of the United States based on this briefing to continue advocating Security Council scrutiny of and action in this area." Sean McCormack, spokesman for the US State Department, also reiterated that the Security Council talks were essential to political change in Myanmar.

Washington asserts that Myanmar is posing a growing threat to international peace and security citing problems caused by illicit narcotics, human rights abuses, internal repression - destroying villages, targeting minorities, and forcing people to flee the country. US Ambassador John Bolton also cited reports of Myanmar trying to acquire nuclear technology.

The renewed pro-activeness on Myanmar appears to be part of its modified agenda to steer democracy as a best bet to counter terrorism. Washington, after supporting a series of regime changes in the former Soviet Republics in Ukraine, Caucasus and Central Asia, is seeking political

change in Asia. In the APEC meeting in Busan recently, President Bush pledged to help restore democracy in Myanmar. Earlier, Condoleezza Rice described the junta as “one of the worst regimes in the world.” In July, Bush signed the Burma Freedom and Democracy Act that banned imports from Myanmar.

What came on the heels of the recent US assertion was the 124-page report by the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) revealing shocking scale of the military regime’s ‘brutal and systematic’ abuse of political prisoners. President Bush’s 50-minute meeting with a Shan human rights campaigner, Charm Tong recently, indicated his seriousness on the issue. The military regime continues to hold 1,100 prisoners under detention. The move to new capital Pyinmana is the latest in a series of political manoeuvres. The shift appears to be based on the regime’s fear of a possible US attack from the sea—reinforced since the invasion of Iraq. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) is irked by report of extensive forced labour and relocations of over 10,000; and villagers forced to construct camps for army. Myanmar has threatened to opt out of ILO’s membership despite warnings by latter of “far-reaching and extremely serious consequences”.

Campaign to get Myanmar on the UNSC has been underway for some time. Former Czech President Vaclav Havel and Nobel laureate Desmond Tutu in their report *Threat to the Peace: A Call for the UN Security Council to Act in Burma* has created serious impact. Similarly, the victory of blocking Myanmar from chairing the ASEAN forum too has encouraged the West to push for change. The UN too has been strongly critical about ASSK’s detention. However, some council members do not believe that Myanmar’s situation is posing a threat to international peace and security. Russia and China and even Japan, Algeria and Brazil are not likely to allow the issue to become a UNSC agenda. Despite the ouster of Beijing’s favourite Khin Nuynt, China supports the military regime. Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao said in July 2005, China will not change its Myanmar policy “no matter how the international situation fluctuates”.

The Bush Administration, it seems, wants to ring the alarm bells about Myanmar’s effort to acquire WMD. Myanmar’s enthusiasm for acquiring ballistic missiles and to build a nuclear research facility has been in the news for quite sometime. In 2002 Yangon made announcement to develop a nuclear facility with the assistance of Russia’s Atomic Energy Ministry

(Minatom). The project, stalled earlier due to financial reasons, seems to have been revived now. Minatom is to construct 10 mega-watt pool-type nuclear research reactors in Kyaukse near Mandalay. However, the IAEA team that visited Myanmar in 2001 doubted the country's preparedness to maintain safety standards. There were reports suggesting North Korea taking over from Russia as the primary source of Myanmar's nuclear technology. Moreover, Pakistani nuclear experts have been visiting Myanmar since 2001. A delegation led by Zaifullah visited Pinyinana during this summer. The military regime is also planning to acquire an additional squadron of Russian MiG-25. All these lead to the growing suspicion in the US that Myanmar would become the next "rogue" state.

The Myanmar military government on December 5 reconvened, after a nine month break, the National Convention (NC) to draft a new constitution. The political roadmap announced in August 2003 envisaged a new draft constitution; a national referendum; election for parliamentary representatives; and to form a "genuine and disciplined democratic system". There had been palpable signs earlier of a determinant and relatively moderate former Prime Minister, Khin Nyunt implementing the *7-Step Roadmap*. He bought peace with armed-insurgent groups and built sufficient rapport with ASSK. However, the military regime's roadmap lacked specific time frame or itinerary; indeed, of important details of "transition process". The chart (a better word than map) shows the military effectively controlling all the procedures and processes of "democratisation". *Tatmadaw* wants to exercise complete control over the road, the map or the chart. A law introduced recently severely restricts open debate on the constitution. This law No 5/96 is likely to be enforced against those offering new format. The opposition remains steadfast on restricting *Tatmadaw's* future role in politics. The current ceasefire with insurgents appears fragile; more so with those outside the legal fold who may seek a greater role and higher protection of rights. These along with power struggle within the regime, which became intense after Khin Nyunt's departure, could derail the NC process. The lack of credibility of the NC is another issue as the western powers have thrown their weight behind the opposition's legitimacy. The UN special rapporteur, Sergio Pinheiro, has already stated that ASSK's continuing detention meant the NC is no longer legitimate. But the regime sees the NC being currently at a delicate political stage and as such feels that the release of ASSK and Tin Oo could disrupt the process. Their release may not come about until the main principles of

the constitution are ready and the way is clear for a referendum to seek its popular endorsement. ASSK's popularity undoubtedly remains intact but some of the pro-democracy groups and ranks within NLD do not seem to be happy with her leadership style.

As national reconciliation falters under the military's rule, Myanmar has been forced to forgo its turn of chairing the ASEAN in 2006. In fact, the ASEAN is already feeling the heat from the US. The ASEAN members at the 11<sup>th</sup> Summit (December 12-13 in Kuala Lumpur) have departed from their usual non-interference policy to express frustration over the lack of reforms and urged the Myanmar regime to "expedite" progress towards democracy. Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar bluntly asked the regime to release all political prisoners, while Indonesia's spokesman Marty Natelegawa said "we wanted to express as strongly as possible our disappointment that the issue has dragged on and that it remained unresolved, which has implications for the credibility of ASEAN." This does indicate that the ASEAN is now effectively abandoning "constructive engagement," though engagement is still necessary. The decision to send a mission to Yangon in January led by Syed Hamid to seek the release of ASSK is significant in this context. However, the junta is unlikely to allow the ASEAN mission the opposition leaders and ethnic leaders, which will once again make the exercise futile.

So far, neither the engagement strategy practiced by many Asian countries nor the punitive sanction policy used by US and EU has produced any positive results. A section in the US thinks that sanctions would not work against Myanmar because it is a pre-industrial state and can limp along on its own. There is merit in this argument because the limits and effectiveness of sanctions have been explored, both theoretically and empirically.

An uncomfortable fact is that the *Tatmadaw* cannot be wished away easily. But its rationale to exercise powers—protecting the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity—appears to be both an exaggeration and an illusion. There is, however, a growing need to deal with the failure of the West and the ASEAN to break the impasse with Myanmar. The UN along with India, Thailand and China—Myanmar's principal neighbours, should start a trilateral process under the "1+3 framework" to chart an Action Plan, which could be the starting point for an agreed, workable (not theoretical or dogmatic) approach to breaking the stalemate. After

securing the confidence of all the concerned parties and actors, the group could work out procedures and mechanisms to assist the process of national reconciliation and political transition. The group should also provide adequate guarantee for Myanmar's security. There is a need for coordinated EU, US, Japan and ASEAN approaches by way of economic and other measures in support of the politico-sociological proposals of the 1+3. It would be quite natural to demand that, once the Action Plan is internationally accepted, the West would lift the economic sanctions. Meanwhile, the UN should consider engaging the *Tatmadaw* and its professional military in international peace keeping and peace building missions.

India being Myanmar's neighbour cannot ignore China's changing Myanmar policy. Beijing could be making conciliatory gesture towards opposition leader without antagonising the military regime, with the belief that without the NLD's participation, the process could be long and difficult. India has supported, quietly, the democratic process in many neighbouring countries, including Myanmar. If we are not careful, the democratic agenda supported by India for many years could be usurped by China. It is also in India's interest that the US does not suddenly foment a major crisis in our strategic neighbourhood.

P Stobdan is Senior Fellow at IDSA.