# UN special envoy leaves Burma empty-handed

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UN special envoy Ibrahim Gambari left Burma (also known as Myanmar) on Tuesday without any indication of concessions from the country's military junta. The cities of Rangoon and Mandalay are still effectively under martial law, with large numbers of troops on the streets. Heavy media censorship is in force, and night-time arrests of opposition activists appear to be continuing.

Reports have begun to filter out of Burma of hundreds, if not thousands, of detainees being held in makeshift prisons, including old factories, technical institute buildings and a racetrack. A local UN official, who had been detained then released, told the *International Herald Tribune* he had been taken to a university in Rangoon where 800 others were held in squalid conditions.

A heavy military mobilisation has ensured that protests have been limited and sporadic. On Sunday, more than 800 people marched through the town of Taunggok shouting, "Release all political prisoners" before being broken up by police and soldiers. Footage from Rangoon has shown groups of protestors gathering and chanting slogans before being dispersed.

Rangoon residents have reported military trucks patrolling the streets at night blaring out threats via loudspeakers. Estimates of the number of people detained range from 1,600 to 6,000 students, monks, journalists and opposition leaders. The official death toll from last week's clashes remains at 10, but opposition groups estimate that the number killed could be as high as 200.

Speaking before the UN General Assembly on Monday, Burmese Foreign Minister U Nyan Win accused "neocolonialists" and "political opportunists" of exploiting "protests by a small group of the Buddhist clergy" to undermine his country. He defended the military crackdown, declaring that the security forces had "to take action to restore the situation" and had used "utmost restraint".

It is certainly true that the US and other major powers have exploited the protests for their own purposes. But the demonstrations, which swelled to 100,000 last week, were neither small nor restricted to monks. Initially prompted by the imposition of intolerable price rises in August, the protest movement drew in broad layers of the population, angry at the junta's corrupt and privileged existence, its repressive rule and the steady deterioration of living standards.

The dispatch of UN envoy Gambari to Burma last week was surrounded by considerable media speculation that he could effect a compromise between the junta and opposition leaders, in particular Aung San Suu Kyi of the National League for Democracy (NLD). His every movement, from an initial discussion with Suu Kyi, to the delay in meeting Burma's top general Than Shwe, and his final talk with Suu Kyi, has been subject to close scrutiny.

Even judged by his own brief, the results of Gambari's shuttle diplomacy appear to have been minimal. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said yesterday the envoy had delivered "the strongest possible message" to Burma's military leaders but added that he could not describe the four-day trip as "a success". Gambari is due to present a report to the UN Security Council, which will meet tomorrow to discuss the situation in Burma.

Even if the trip had been "a success" in establishing "a dialogue" between the junta and opposition groups, it would have done nothing to meet the aspirations of the majority of Burmese for democratic rights and decent living standards. A "reconciliation" or power-sharing arrangement would only allow the military to consolidate its rule and the opposition to assist in implementing the unpopular economic restructuring measures being demanded by the IMF and World Bank.

In 1988, after the military cracked down on widespread protests and strikes, the NLD helped the regime survive. Suu Kyi accepted the military's promise for "free and fair" elections and shut down the opposition movement. The NLD won the 1990 elections overwhelmingly. By then, however, the regime had stabilised its rule. The generals ignored the election results and illegalised the opposition.

Behind the latest UN push for a greater role for Suu Kyi and the opposition parties lie the interests of the US and

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its European allies. The Bush administration's campaign for "democracy" in Burma is not out of concern for the democratic rights of ordinary people. It is aimed at edging out rival China, which has close economic and strategic relations with the Burmese junta, and opening up the country's cheap labour and resources to American corporations.

Burma has an estimated 3 trillion cubic metres of natural gas, which account for 1.4 percent of the world's reserves, and oil reserves of 3 billion barrels. It is also rich in other resources including timber, gems and minerals such as nickel, copper and coal. China is particularly interested in a strategic relationship with Burma as it offers the possibility of an alternative transport route to the Indian Ocean and the Middle East that avoids chokepoints such as the Malacca Straits, which the US could block in any conflict.

Many other countries are also manoeuvring for position in Burma. In response to US pressure, China has cautiously urged "all parties concerned in [Burma] to show restraint" and reportedly pressed the junta to allow Gambari's visit. At the same time, China and Russia opposed a formal condemnation of Burma in the UN Security Council.

India, which is seeking to build its influence in Burma, has been conspicuously silent. On September 23, as the protests were escalating, India's petroleum and natural gas minister Murli Deora made a state visit to Burma to sign oil and gas exploration contracts between the state-controlled ONGC Videsh Ltd and the Burmese regime. Defending India's stance, the country's former UN ambassador T.P. Sreenivasan wrote on the *Rediff.com* website: "[India] has to work quietly behind the scenes to bring about change in Myanmar. No purpose will be served by discarding its gains of recent years in enhancing India's security by open condemnation."

The Thai military junta hypocritically condemned the repressive measures of its Burmese counterparts as part of broader criticism by the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). Thailand is the largest market for Burmese exports, a major buyer of its natural gas, and a conduit for illegal trade in timber, gems and other raw materials. Singapore, as the current chair of ASEAN, has been vocal in its censure of Burma. The island state is, however, a significant source of investment for the junta as well as being a favourite destination for the generals and their families to bank their riches, seek health care, shop and play.

For all its threats of sanctions against Burma, the Bush administration has been careful not to step on the toes of the US oil giant Chevron, which took over from Unocal as the main partner of the French company Total in developing Burma's Yadana gasfield. Nine corporations are involved in offshore oil exploration in Burma including Total, Malaysia's Petronas, Thailand's PTT Exploration and Production, South Korea's Daewoo International and two Chinese state-owned companies—China National Offshore Oil Corp and China Petroleum and Chemical Corp.

Gambari's diplomatic mission had to negotiate the minefield of these competing international and regional powers, all seeking to enhance their economic and strategic interests. It is significant that one of the few issues on which all agree is for Gambari to open up talks between the junta and the opposition parties. The universal fear is that the conflict between the rival factions of the ruling elite could potentially open a fissure for the eruption of broad layers of working people—as occurred in 1988 when strikes by workers paralysed the economy and brought the generals to their knees.

Given the police-state measures in force in Burma, it is not possible to gauge the mood with any degree of certainty. There is no doubting the anger of broad layers of people over soaring prices and the regime's brutality. All the country's social statistics point to abject poverty, compounded by a lack of the most basic health and welfare services.

There are some signs that the present lull in protests may not last long. An activist, Tun Myint Aung, told the *Los Angeles Times* on Sunday: "The way of demonstrating will be changed. The steering committee for the mass movement is preparing to come out in favour of a countrywide general strike." Others told the newspaper that protests in smaller cities were under consideration.

An *Asia Times* article also reported on Tuesday that leading monks and students had formed a "strike committee" to regroup and reorganise the opposition movement for more demonstrations. "We are going for it, this is our time. We have to take this chance now as there may never be another one," a student leader told *Asia Times*.

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