



SECURITY COUNCIL REPORT UPDATE REPORT



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MYANMAR

Expected Council Action

The Council will receive a briefing on 20 September from the Secretary-General's Special Advisor on Myanmar, Ibrahim Gambari, covering the Secretary-General's Good Offices efforts in relation to Myanmar.

This will be the first time that Myanmar has come up in the Council since a US inspired draft resolution was vetoed on 12 January 2007. The Council is not expected to take any action at this stage, unless the deteriorating situation clearly becomes a threat to international peace and security.

Recent Developments

For almost a month the Myanmar government has been unable to quell growing protests around Yangon as well as in several cities outside it. This is the first time there have been demonstrations on this scale in Myanmar since 1988 when the government violently subdued the democracy movement.

The demonstrations began on 19 August in reaction to the government's steep hike in fuel prices. Forceful suppression of the protestors seems to have triggered wider demonstrations.

Two weeks ago Buddhist monks lent their voice to the movement when they held a peaceful protest in Pakokku, a Buddhist centre. In Myanmar monks historically have been at the forefront of protests, first against the British colonial government and then the military dictatorship and they played a prominent role in the failed 1988 pro-democracy movement. Tensions between government officials and the monks escalated when several monks were hurt by officials during the Pakokku demonstration. The monks reacted by briefly kidnapping security officers and burning their cars. The government then posted police in front of monasteries in key cities.

On 18 September there were several protest marches involving hundreds of monks and civilians who joined them. Tear gas was used to break up the demonstrations in the northwestern city of Sittwe. Reports indicate that some monks were arrested and hit. The monks have also threatened not to take alms or offerings from anyone associated with the government—an action which has serious significance in a strongly Buddhist country like Myanmar.

The Secretary-General on 23 August issued a statement calling on all parties “to exercise maximum restraint in responding to protests” and to avoid “provocative action”. The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, Paulo Sergio Pinheiro called for the release of all protestors as has Louise Arbour, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. Arbour also singled out the situation in Myanmar for special mention in her address to the Human Rights Council on 13 September 2007.

The international community has also expressed concern about the situation in Myanmar. Among those who have condemned the Myanmar government's actions are the US, UK and EU who have all called for the release of all those detained. US First Lady Laura Bush, who has a personal interest in the issue, has urged the Secretary-General to press the Council to take up the issue. The US congress has also asked the Council to hold a meeting on human rights violations in Myanmar.

China called on Myanmar to pursue the democracy process and to restore internal stability, handle issues properly and promote national reconciliation.

ASEAN members (who traditionally adhere to the organisation's non-interference in domestic affairs policy) are becoming more openly critical of Myanmar. In speaking to the press during the recent Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, both the Philippines Foreign Minister Alberto Romulo and Indonesian President Susilo Yudhoyono acknowledged that there was frustration in ASEAN at the failure of their "constructive engagement policy" with Myanmar. The press reported that Yudhoyono and US President George Bush had also agreed on the need to get countries in the region involved.

The Myanmar government has reacted by accusing Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), of instigating the unrest and trying to derail its political process. It has also accused the UK and the US of backing its opponents.

The Myanmar government completed the first stage of its "roadmap to democracy" in early September, producing the guidelines for a new constitution. (Myanmar has not had a constitution since 1988 when it was suspended.) Observers have noted that a constitution based on these guidelines would simply legitimise military rule. The National Convention process has been criticised as flawed for not including opponents of the government like the NLD. The government's proposed next step is the drafting of a constitution after which a referendum would be held, possibly in 2008, followed by elections the next year.

At the end of June the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) publicly censured Myanmar's government accusing it of committing serious abuses against detainees and civilians. The ICRC has very rarely criticised a government in this way.

At the end of June US state department officials held talks with Myanmar military leaders in Beijing. The talks were brokered by China.

Gambari, who was appointed the Special Advisor on Myanmar three months ago, held consultations in Washington, Beijing, Moscow, Paris, Brussels, London, Singapore, Bangkok, Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur. In a press conference on 3 September, Gambari said that the crackdown by Myanmar's government called into question the government's commitment to democratisation and made it more difficult to maintain international support for Myanmar. He is likely to visit Myanmar in mid-October at the invitation of the Myanmar government.

Options

The most likely option is that the Council will listen to the briefing and members may ask questions or make statements to guide the approach to be taken by Gambari and the Secretary-General in the coming weeks. The majority appear to favour a low-key discussion of Myanmar in the Council at this stage. The clear divisions that still exist over this issue will probably prevent any formal action.

A possible option might be to have the president brief the press orally after the Council's briefing.

Another possible option is for members to reach agreement on Gambari briefing the Council in a closed formal session when he returns from Myanmar next month.

If the situation in Myanmar deteriorates seriously in the coming weeks options could include a presidential statement or a press statement voicing the Council's concern about the situation.

Options also exist for widening consultations and cooperation on Myanmar by the establishment of possible structures on Myanmar. These could include:

- requesting the Secretary-General to form a Group of Friends, similar to the one for Georgia, made up of interested parties in the region and interested Council members to initiate new ways of engaging with the Myanmar government (there is an existing Informal Consultative Group on Myanmar but it is a large

- group that comes together only for occasional briefings from the Secretariat); or
- encourage the formation of a small group of key parties to begin talks similar to the six-party talks with North Korea led by China.

Key Issues

The most immediate key issue for the Council is whether to respond to the continuing unrest in Myanmar at this time. The Council will have to decide at which point the situation warrants a response, bearing in mind the language in the 2005 World Summit outcome document.

A related issue is how any response should be graduated and when and how to take a first step. One possibility would be to set up structures such as a Group of Friends (which would not be the Council as such) which would comprise a number of Council members and which would be able to interact with the Council on a regular basis.

Another key issue is trying to maximise the possibility that Myanmar will engage with the international community. A related issue is how to avoid any perception that the UN is being used as a public relations tool. The open invitation to Gambari and visits this year by the Deputy Coordinator for Human Affairs and the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict were promising signs. However, concrete results are now seen as even more important.

Council Dynamics

Most members are expecting a low-key briefing and for there to be no formal action taken. Council members who were keen to get Myanmar on the agenda appear ready to tackle the issue in a more low-key manner for now.

However, if the situation does deteriorate significantly members like the US and UK, who co-sponsored the January resolution, might push for some sort of Council action, particularly as both US President George Bush and UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown have shown strong interest in the issue.

China's position that the situation in Myanmar should not be on the Council's agenda, as it is not a threat to international peace and security, has not changed. It is, however, open to assisting any country that is trying to normalise relations with Myanmar. In this role it brokered talks with the US at the end of June.

Countries like Indonesia, South Africa, Congo and Qatar, which abstained when the draft resolution was put to a vote in January, are still likely to have some difficulties in agreeing to formal Council action on this issue at this stage.

UN Documents

Selected Letter
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> S/2006/742 (15 September 2006) was the letter from US ambassador John Bolton requesting a meeting of the Council to discuss Myanmar. An annex to this letter contains Bolton's 1 September letter asking for Myanmar to be placed on the Council's agenda.
Draft Resolution
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> S/2007/14 (12 January 2007) was the draft resolution which was vetoed by China and Russia.
Other
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> S/PV.5526 (15 September 2006) was the record of the discussion before putting the provisional agenda that included the situation on Myanmar to the vote. S/Agenda/5526 (15 September 2006) was the provisional agenda for the meeting that added Myanmar to the Council agenda.
Selected General Assembly Resolutions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A/RES/59/263 (23 December 2004) requested the Secretary-General to provide his good offices and pursue his discussions with the government and people of Myanmar.