

Promoting Change in Burma/Myanmar THE IMPACT OF EU POLICIES

Madam Chair of the Human Rights Sub-Committee, Mr Chair of the Development Committee, Members of the European Parliament, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for inviting me to speak.

The situation in Burma remains the same if not worse than in September 2007. The arrests of dissidents and the attack on ethnic civilian populations in the eastern part of Burma continue. The economic problems that brought about the demonstrations last year have not been addressed.

The main problem with the SPDC's 'Road Map' is that it is undemocratic and not inclusive. There are no provisions in the military's constitution that guarantees basic human rights. Power is concentrated in the hands of the president who must have military experience. There is no decentralization of administrative powers. The military is also independent of the government. The new constitution will not lead to a democracy, 'disciplined' or otherwise.

The 1990 election-winning parties have been excluded from the military's 'Road Map'. It is not clear if they will be allowed to contest the elections in 2010. Political prisoners like Daw Aung San Suu Kyi are disqualified. No provisions have been made to include ethnic nationalities like the Chin, Karen, Karenni and Shan who are still resisting the occupation of their homelands and do not have a ceasefire agreement with the military. The ethnic nationalities like the Kachin, Mon, and Wa who have ceasefire agreements with the military will be allowed to participate in the 2010 elections. But it is not clear if they will be disarmed before or after the elections.

In other words, the SPDC's 'Road Map' will not really solve any of Burma's problems. Whether the military succeeds in becoming 'legitimate' through the referendum and elections or not, will not fundamentally change the situation. Burma will remain a source of instability for the region.

What, therefore, can be done to bring about real change in Burma?

Some believe that more sanctions are needed. Others believe that a binding resolution at the United Nations Security Council will force the Burmese military to change. Yet others believe that a more widespread and violent people's uprising in Burma is needed.

Personally, I do not believe that a more violent people's uprising will bring about change in Burma. We have seen in 1988 and again last year that the military is prepared to use extreme force against an unarmed population. A political solution is needed even if there is an uprising.

As a Burmese, I am grateful to the European Union for the sanctions it has enacted to date. Sanctions have been a potent symbolic gesture. It showed the people of Burma that they are not alone, and it showed the military that their actions are totally unacceptable. But twenty years of symbolic gestures are enough. We need something more concrete today in terms of support. We also need to balance sanctions with the need to get Burma's neighbours to agree to an international consensus to bring about change in Burma.

Unfortunately, short of military interventions, no amount of UN Security Council resolutions – binding or otherwise, will convince the Burmese military to change. What then are our options?

Most political actors in Burma – political parties and the ethnic nationalities – have opted to contest the referendum in May 2008. The main objective of mobilizing the people is not necessarily to defeat the SPDC's constitution. The main objective is to promote democracy. The idea is to reinforce the concept that the people have a right to decide their own future and who they want as their government. Vote manipulation by the SPDC is a distinct possibility. But even if this does happen, the military cannot totally ignore the will of the people. The number of "NO" votes will determine the level of engagement and compromise the SPDC may be willing to negotiate in the future. Mobilizing for the referendum is also a trial run for the elections in 2010.

Given the situation, the European Union can support the people of Burma in at least three areas:

1. Urgently and actively provide increased humanitarian and development assistance. Even though the EU has provided more than 30 million euros in aid, much more can be done. For example, the 3D Fund provides anti-viral drugs for only 10,000 patients. In Burma, at least 40,000 need the drug. Humanitarian aid to Burma also amounts to less than three euro per person per year. Burma's neighbours like Laos and Cambodia receive about 30 euros per person per year. The ability of the Burmese population to cope with increased economic and social pressures is seriously diminished. Poverty, the internally displaced, refugee populations and even migrant workers should be targeted. The Thai National Security Council today estimates that there are between 3-5 million Burmese migrant workers in Thailand. Together with the hundreds of thousands of workers in India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Philippines, South Korea and Japan, it is now reasonable to estimate that at least 10% of the population of Burma is displaced. This is a huge drain on Burma's human resources. If we want to have a sustainable democracy in Burma, we need to seriously start addressing these problems today. More innovative ways to overcome SPDC restrictions and reach the most vulnerable populations wherever they are, have to be found.
2. Urgently expand the EU's human rights and democracy assistance to the people of Burma. The current campaign by the Burmese democracy movement in Burma to contest the referendum in May 2008, and plans to contest the 2010 elections should be supported - conflict transformation, democracy education, support for independent media, political party development, election campaigning, election monitoring, good governance practices, disarmament and rehabilitation of combatants, and various civil society empowerment programs. Innovative ways to overcome restrictions have to be found.
3. Continue efforts to build an international consensus on Burma. The appointment of Piero Fassino as the EU Special Envoy for Burma to support the efforts of UN Envoy Professor Ibrahim Gambari, is a step in the right direction. More effort is, however, needed to develop a comprehensive Burma strategy that will bring together Burma's neighbours and the west, especially the USA. 'Instability' rather than democracy or human rights, is the key argument to use in this context. EU policy should include how the international

community can complement and support the efforts of the democracy movement in Burma to contest the May 2008 referendum and the elections in 2010.

Thank you.

Harn Yawnghwe, Director, Euro-Burma Office, Brussels.

Answer to questions asked –

No, I am not asking the EU to recognize the SPDC Road Map or referendum. In terms of democracy and human rights, and given the fact that the winners of the 1990 election are excluded, it is not possible for the EU to accept the SPDC process. However, I am asking the EU to support the Burmese opposition's campaign to vote 'No' in the upcoming referendum.

I am not saying that the EU should do nothing, that it should not enact sanctions against the regime. But as was mentioned by Mr Fassino, the EU's Special Envoy for Burma, sanctions alone are not enough. Sanctions cannot be enacted in isolation. Sanctions should be used as a tool in a multi-pronged strategy to bring about change in Burma.

It is in this context that the situation in Burma is not as bleak as it seems. The SPDC may believe that if it wins the referendum, it will have legitimized its rule. The reality, however, is that because the SPDC cannot resolve any of Burma's problems, including the economic ones, the 'legitimacy' they hope to win is meaningless. Burma will still be a source of regional instability and Burma's neighbours can be persuaded that the situation in Burma has to change.

With respect to the UK's proposed democratization and development package mentioned by Glenys Kinnock, genuine reforms will never happen if we wait for the regime. I am advocating aid for the people of Burma, not the regime. The EU should provide aid to the people for democratization in spite of the regime. We do not have to wait for the regime to start the democratization process. We are already funding projects to promote good governance and democratic development in the ethnic areas not controlled by the military. There is transparency and accountability even if the aid is being channeled across the border. I would be happy to discuss this in more detail with the European Commission. Thank you.