

GAMBARI – SUCCESS OR FAILURE?

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's statement

Many believe that the mission of the UN Special Envoy, Ibrahim Gambari, was a failure. Gambari did not meet with SPDC Chairman, Senior-General Than Shwe. He only met with 'Relations Minister' U Aung Kyi.

Gambari was also taken to task by Information Minister General Kyaw Hsan for not preventing the US, EU and Australia from enacting more sanctions, or stopping the UN Security Council from issuing a Presidential statement. Gambari's proposals, above all, a three-way talk among Senior-General Than Shwe, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, and Gambari, were rejected. And prior to Gambari's visit, the SPDC expelled the head of the UN Country Team in Burma for criticizing the regime.

The negatives seem to outweigh the positives. The SPDC is being defiant and aggressive, showing that it does not care what the world thinks.

But is that really the case? If so, why in the first place did Than Shwe agree to talk with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, albeit under certain conditions? He need not even have addressed the question of talking to her if it was really a non-issue. Why did he appoint a 'Relations Minister' even before she agreed to cooperate? What was he trying to prove? And to whom? From being a non-person, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is now the center of attention. She is shown on TV regularly. Also, why did the SPDC agree to let UN Human Rights Rapporteur, Sergio Pinheiro, visit the country to investigate the recent demonstrations? He had been refused entry for four years.

Why is the SPDC making these gestures? Obviously they are trying to buy time as usual and to get the pressure off. They are hoping that in time, the world will forget about Burma and the military can continue to do its business as usual. However, the flip side of this answer is that the pressure is working. The SPDC is hurting and it is trying to find a way out of the dilemma. If so, what should our response be?

Of course, it would be naïve to assume that the military is trying to find a way to solve the problem. Their grip on power is the problem, and the generals are not going to give it up if they can help it. But they know they need to respond to the public discontent and the international outrage. They have to find a way out.

The military also knows that the economic problems will not go away. Some of them understand that beating up and killing the monks was a fatal error. The international consensus is also proving to be far more sustained than in the past.

Some democracy advocates are afraid that the generals will once again succeed in hoodwinking the international community. They want to step up the pressure with sanctions and get the UN Security Council to pass a binding resolution. They want the generals to admit defeat and ask for mercy.

But is that the best way to bring about change in Burma? Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has sacrificed everything to better the lot of the people of Burma. She has patiently endured all hardships. Can we let her take the lead in this matter? She is continuing to

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meet with the SPDC's 'Relations Minister' to try and work out some modalities and a time frame. She is consulting with the National League for Democracy, and has invited others, including the ethnic nationalities, to join her in making the dialogue process a success. Do we not believe that she knows what she is doing? Let us allow Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to speak for herself. Let her determine the timing and set the agenda.

All these consultations will take time. This will also give the generals time to re-group – therein lies the danger that the world might once again forget Burma. But Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has welcomed the facilitation role of the United Nations and the SPDC has also invited Gambari to return. Burma's neighbours and ASEAN are also not going to let the SPDC return to business as usual. There is a reasonable chance that, in spite of themselves, the generals will have to enter into a substantive dialogue. The key is for the outside world to give the process a chance.

Gambari's essential mission was to help establish a dialogue between the SPDC and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. In that he has been successful. It is a much larger achievement than it seems given that the generals do not want a dialogue. We should not reject the talks prematurely but help Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to make the talks meaningful and thereby help to improve the lives of the people of Burma.

Harn Yawngwe, Euro-Burma Office – 12 November 2007.

Text of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's Statement – 8 November 2007

"I wish to thank all those who have stood by my side all this time, both inside and outside my country. I am also grateful to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Mr. Ban Ki-moon, for his unwavering support for the cause of national reconciliation, democracy and human rights in my country.

"I welcome the appointment on 8 October of Minister Aung Kyi as Minister for Relations. Our first meeting on 25 October was constructive and I look forward to further regular discussions. I expect that this phase of preliminary consultations will conclude soon so that a meaningful and timebound dialogue with the SPDC leadership can start as early as possible.

"In the interest of the nation, I stand ready to cooperate with the Government in order to make this process of dialogue a success and welcome the necessary good offices role of the United Nations to help facilitate our efforts in this regard.

"In full awareness of the essential role of political parties in democratic societies, in deep appreciation of the sacrifices of the members of my party and in my position as General Secretary, I will be guided by the policies and wishes of the National League for Democracy. However, in this time of vital need for democratic solidarity and national unity, it is my duty to give constant and serious considerations to the interests and opinions of as broad a range of political organizations and forces as possible, in particular those of our ethnic nationality races.

"To that end, I am committed to pursue the path of dialogue constructively and invite the Government and all relevant parties to join me in this spirit.

"I believe that stability, prosperity and democracy for my country, living at peace with itself and with full respect for human rights, offers the best prospect for my country to fully contribute to the development and stability of the region in close partnership with its neighbors and fellow ASEAN members, and to play a positive role as a respected member of the international community."

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