

Tokyo to back Gambari plan to aid Myanmar

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Tokyo, despite its partial freeze on humanitarian aid to Myanmar (Burma), plans to give its backing to a U.N. plan to assist the impoverished nation in eradicating poverty, sources said.

A new framework being drawn up by Ibrahim Gambari, special adviser to U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon, is expected to focus on ways to resolve social problems stemming from deprivation as well as income disparities and issues concerning ethnic minorities.

Gambari has visited Myanmar on several occasions in an effort to prod the ruling junta to embrace democracy.

The United Nations is expected to play a central role in implementing his plan by working closely with the military government.

Foreign Minister Masahiko Komura and Vice Foreign Minister Mitoji Yabunaka were scheduled to convey Tokyo's support for the plan during meetings on Wednesday and today with Gambari, sources said.

Gambari's intention is to offer Myanmar wide-ranging support to help the transition to democratization following an announcement by the generals in the new capital of Naypyidaw earlier this month to hold a national referendum in May on a new Constitution and to transfer power to a civilian government in 2010.

In October 2007, Tokyo announced a partial freeze of its humanitarian aid to Myanmar following the shooting death of video journalist Kenji Nagai the previous month while covering street protests in Yangon (Rangoon) against the ruling junta.

Government officials in Tokyo decided that Gambari's plan has much merit and decided it should have their support.

Gambari is scheduled to visit Myanmar early next month for meetings with the leadership there.

According to diplomatic sources, the junta leaders are hesitant about accepting Gambari's plans for aid at this point for fear that Western nations will become involved in Myanmar's democratization process through the envisioned U.N. framework.

It remains uncertain whether the United States and key nations in Europe will participate in the framework, given their hard-line stand toward Myanmar over its crackdown on Aung San Suu Kyi and other pro-democracy activists.

Another concern is how the United Nations will be able to ensure its aid does not get funneled to the junta, sources said.

Japan's foreign policy has been to maintain low-level ties with the junta until it embraces democracy.

For instance, the Foreign Ministry earlier this month issued a statement in the name of its press secretary reacting positively to Myanmar's decision to announce a time frame for democratization through the referendum on a new Constitution and elections later in 2010.

Separately, Japanese police were dispatched to Myanmar earlier this month for discussions with the ruling junta as part of their investigation in Nagai's death.

Government officials want to keep such issues quite separate from the planned economic support, sources said.(IHT/Asahi: February 28,2008)

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