

UN Myanmar envoy hopeful at start of Asian tour

BEIJING - UN envoy to Myanmar Ibrahim Gambari expressed optimism on Monday as he started his latest round of visits to Asian capitals seeking a solution to the former Burma's political problems.

'I look forward to a very constructive and, as usual, frank exchange of views,' Dr Gambari told Chinese Vice-Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Beijing.

'So that by the end of my round of consultations, which will take me to Indonesia, Singapore and Japan, I'll be able to report to the Secretary General that we are moving forward and adding to (a) kind of positive development... in Myanmar,' he added.

Dr Gambari sees regional powers as central to pushing Myanmar into political concessions, but they have been reluctant to agree to sanctions or other tough measures.

That is especially true of China, one of the military-ruled country's few foreign friends.

The junta made a surprise announcement earlier this month of a referendum on a new, as yet unfinished, constitution in May to be followed by a general election in 2010.

But opposition figures and some Western countries have voiced skepticism the junta will be willing to let the opposition compete in the vote or to relinquish power.

'I believe we are now in a critical phase in terms of development(s) in Myanmar, in terms of Myanmar's relations with neighbouring countries, with Asean, with the international community,' Dr Gambari said.

Myanmar carried out a bloody crackdown on monk-led pro-democracy demonstrators in September.

Beijing joined Western powers in deploring Myanmar's crushing of the protests in a statement by the UN Security Council.

But China has stressed the statement did not mean it would stomach harsher action or legally binding UN resolutions against Myanmar, where it has major economic and strategic stakes. -- REUTERS

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