

UN Special Envoy Says Myanmar Constitution Move "Significant"

BEIJING (AP)--The U.N. special envoy for Myanmar said Tuesday that proposals by the rulers there calling for a May referendum on a constitution written under military guidance and 2010 general elections were significant steps forward.

Ibrahim Gambari, who was in Beijing for talks with Chinese diplomats, also said China can help by sending signals to Myanmar's leaders that they need to cooperate.

"This is a significant step as it marks the first time they have established a timeframe for implementing a roadmap for democracy and multiparty elections," he told a news conference.

The Myanmar government recently announced a May referendum on a constitution written under military guidance and 2010 general elections, the first specific dates for steps in an earlier-announced "roadmap to democracy."

The plans have been widely criticized for failing to include any input from Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy, complaining the junta's recent moves toward reform weren't enough.

Suu Kyi's party, which won general elections in 1990, wasn't allowed to take power.

Gambari told a news conference after meeting Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi that he had constructive and frank talks with China. He said Beijing can help by sending signals to Myanmar's leaders that they need to cooperate.

Gambari said he hadn't seen a draft of the constitution and it was too soon to say if the United Nations would be involved in the process.

China is a key stop on Gambari's sweep through the region because Beijing is an important trading partner and arms provider for the generals who run the country.

China objects to Western criticisms of Myanmar's military regime, saying conditions in the country have improved dramatically since a violent crackdown on peaceful protests in September.

China has expressed little interest in seeing a democratically elected government take power on its southern flank and is reportedly seeking access to Myanmar's offshore natural gas deposits.

However, China has been credited with convincing Myanmar's generals to issue visas for Gambari to visit. While the junta has yet to approve another visit by the envoy, Gambari said he expects a trip again "way before April."

Gambari also is to travel to Indonesia, Singapore and Japan for talks on Myanmar.

<http://www.nasdaq.com/aspx/content/NewsStory.aspx?cpath=20080219\ACQDJON200802190416DOWJONESDJONLINE000158.htm&selected=9999&selecteddisplaysymbol=9999&StoryTargetFrame=top&mkt=WORLD&chk=unchecked&lang=&link=&headlinereturnpage=http://www.international.na>

