

Myanmar Moved Away From Democracy After Protests, Burns Says

By Paul Tighe

Jan. 9 (Bloomberg) -- Myanmar's junta has rejected taking any steps toward democracy since pledging to open talks with the opposition after September's anti-government protests, U.S. Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns said.

While the regime "made a few unremarkable gestures," such as appointing a minister to meet with opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, "it has since halted even this hint of progress and, in fact, has moved backward," Burns wrote in an article for the Washington Post yesterday.

China, Myanmar's closest ally, and the Association of South East Asian nations must use their influence to support United Nations efforts to persuade the junta to release political prisoners and begin discussions on democratic changes, he wrote.

The U.S. tightened sanctions on Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, after the crackdown on protests, imposing an asset freeze on junta officials and blacklisting companies and individuals linked to the regime. The military rejected a UN report criticizing the use of "excessive force" when soldiers crushed the most serious demonstrations in 20 years, killing an estimated 31 protesters.

"The world must not turn its back on the people of Burma and allow the regime's disregard for human dignity to continue," Burns wrote. "Together, we must apply sustained and strong pressure while making clear that a successful dialogue leading to a political transition would enable Burma to make a full return to the international system."

Regime Leaders

The U.S. will continue to target regime leaders "and their cronies" with sanctions, Burns said in the article. The military is still arresting pro-democracy activists and harassing Buddhist monks and Suu Kyi, the leader of the National League for Democracy, remains under house arrest, he said.

The U.S. will press for more international sanctions unless Myanmar's leaders begin a process for democratic change and free political prisoners, President George W. Bush said Dec. 11.

China and Russia in January last year vetoed a U.S. resolution at the UN Security Council to press Myanmar to make democratic changes. China repeated its opposition to sanctions in November.

"The reality is that the regime and its policies are the greatest threat to Burma's unity, stability and prosperity," Burns wrote. "This is a horrendous track record."

Suu Kyi and other democratic leaders have said the military has a role to play in a peaceful transition to democracy. As junta leaders show no willingness to make changes, "many in their regime should be increasingly uncomfortable with their policies and the country's direction," Burns said.

National Convention

Myanmar's National Convention, begun in 2004, completed its work on proposed democratic changes in September last year. The U.S. and UN denounced the process for failing to include the NLD and ethnic groups.

The people of Myanmar are ``greatly concerned about threats of national disintegration," the official New Light of Myanmar cited Senior General Maung Aye, deputy commander-in-chief of defense services, as telling military graduates two days ago.

Myanmar's unity has been threatened regularly since independence in 1948 by separatist ethnic groups trying to divide the country, he said, according to a report on the newspaper's Web site.

``With the large number of minorities in our country, the disintegration of the union would mean splintering and general weakness, which may even lead to the loss of nationhood," the general added.

The military has ruled the nation of 47 million people since 1962. In 1990, the junta rejected the results of parliamentary elections won by the NLD. Suu Kyi has spent 12 of the past 17 years in detention and is under house arrest at her home in Yangon.

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