

Think tank urges Indonesian initiative on Myanmar

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Bangkok - Indonesia should take a lead in hosting a regional meeting on Myanmar's political crisis, similar to the role it played in kick-starting the Cambodia peace-process in 1988, the Brussels-based International Crisis Group urged Thursday.

'Indonesia could play a particularly important role, perhaps by hosting a regional meeting along the lines of the Jakarta Informal Meetings (JIM) which kick-started the Cambodia peace process in 1988 to 1989,' said ICG president Gareth Evans, in the think tank's latest report on Myanmar titled *Burma/Myanmar: After the Crisis*.

The report, a copy of which was made available in Bangkok, urges Asian governments to push for multi-party talks on how to solve Myanmar's political impasse in the wake of the ruling junta's brutal crackdown on protests led by Buddhist monks in September 2007, that left at least 31 people dead and outraged the international community.

The proposal was immediately welcomed by longtime Myanmar watchers.

'I think it's a good idea, because Indonesia is one of the members of the United Nations Security Council at the moment and is also the most suitable in ASEAN to lead the process,' said Win Min, a lecturer on Myanmar affairs at Chiang Mai University.

Win Min noted that Indonesia is now led by President Susilo Bambang Yudoyono, a former army general who has a better chance of dealing with Myanmar's junta.

Myanmar's military supremo Senior General Than Shwe last year tentatively agreed to start a political dialogue with opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, but the process has proven typically slow and reflective of the junta's resistance to any threat to their stranglehold on power, which they have held in Myanmar, also called Burma, since 1962.

Suu Kyi in a rare meeting with her National League for Democracy (NLD) party leaders on Thursday expressed her pessimism with the dialogue process, advising her people 'to hope for the best but prepare for the worst.'

The international community, led by United Nations special envoy for Myanmar Ibrahim Gambari, backed by European Union special envoy Piero Fussino, have been stepping up pressure on Asian governments to hasten and broaden the dialogue process.

ICG has now also called on Asia to take the initiative.

'Myanmar's neighbours, especially China and members of ASEAN (Association of South-East Asian Nations), need to seize the moment,' said John Virgoe, ICG's South East Asia Project Director.

'Regional multi-party talks, coordinated with the UN Secretary General's special envoy, Ibrahim Gambari, and backed by the wider international community, hold out the best hope for launching a meaningful process of national reconciliation and broader reform,' said Virgoe.

Of course, it would ultimately be up to Myanmar's ruling generals to agree to such a process, but observers opined that the time was ripe to pressure them.

'They won't like it, but if ASEAN takes an initiative then China and India may follow,' said Win Min.

Thailand pushed for similar regional talks on Myanmar, dubbed the Bangkok Process, in 2004 when the country was still under the premiership of Thaksin Shinawatra.

'Thaksin did not coordinate well with China, India and the other ASEAN members so it was a failure, but the region might be more open to such a process now,' said Win Min.

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