

Singapore FM: ASEAN will continue engaging Myanmar, says sanctions won't work

The Associated Press

Published: October 22, 2007

SINGAPORE: Southeast Asian nations are reluctant to impose sanctions on military-ruled Myanmar following the junta's crackdown on pro-democracy protesters because they believe further isolation would hamper the country's reconciliation efforts, a Singaporean official said Monday.

Foreign Minister George Yeo rejected suggestions in Parliament that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations should impose sanctions on the military regime to pressure it to resolve the crisis peacefully.

"Some external pressure can be helpful, but ... talking about sanctions or expulsion now would make national reconciliation harder, not easier, to achieve," he said.

The European Union and the United States have pressed for expanded sanctions against Myanmar. U.S. President George W. Bush has also urged China and India to do more to pressure Myanmar's military rulers, and announced new measures on Friday targeting the assets of Myanmar's leaders and tightening controls on U.S. exports to the country.

But Yeo said sanctions would be ineffective against a country already "predisposed toward isolationism" and could likely exacerbate divisions there.

"Without the military, Myanmar can dissolve into civil war. The country has many ethnic groups, a number of which are still armed and can easily start rebellions in the border regions," Yeo told lawmakers. "The last thing we want is a Yugoslavia or an Iraqi situation at our doorsteps."

Yeo said ASEAN had limited economic leverage over Myanmar, a member of the regional bloc with rich oil and gas resources, and that Singapore's economic and military links with it were limited.

Singapore's trade with Myanmar last year amounted to 1 billion Singapore dollars (US\$684 million; €77 million) — just 0.1 percent of the city-state's total trade, Yeo said. However, a lawmaker noted that Thailand and Singapore, both ASEAN members, were among Myanmar's biggest investors.

Yeo said ASEAN's priority was to support mediation efforts by U.N. envoy Ibrahim Gambari, who is on a six-nation tour to press Asian nations — in particular China and India — to take the lead in resolving the crisis.

Yeo also said ASEAN expects Myanmar to attend the group's annual summit in Singapore next month and sign a charter under which a regional human rights body will likely be created.

"The preference of all ASEAN countries is to continue engaging Myanmar and keeping it in the family," Yeo said. "Next month, we're having the ASEAN summit, during which

Myanmar is bound to be discussed. We fully expect Myanmar to be present and to sign the ASEAN charter."

ASEAN has been hailed for deciding to create a regional human rights body under its proposed new charter. But human rights officials say the body is unlikely to be empowered to impose sanctions or take a tough approach to violators like Myanmar, given ASEAN's policies of deciding issues by consensus and not interfering in member countries' domestic affairs.

Myanmar's military junta said last week it detained nearly 3,000 people during a crackdown on protesters, adding that hundreds remain in custody and that it is still hunting for others. At least 10 people were killed when troops fired into crowds of peaceful protesters last month.

<http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2007/10/22/asia/AS-GEN-Singapore-Myanmar.php>