

U.N.: Burma agrees to earlier envoy visit

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AP

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — Burma's military rulers have agreed to allow U.N. envoy Ibrahim Gambari to return earlier than previously announced for a trip the U.N. hopes will "kick-start" talks between the government and opposition, the U.N. said.

The U.N. announcement Tuesday that the government was willing to move up Gambari's return to early November instead of mid-November came a day after the world body announced the junta had agreed to a visit by U.N. human rights investigator Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, who had been barred from Burma since 2003.

Burma's government has been strongly criticized for sending troops to quash peaceful protests, initially led by students and then by Buddhist monks, in late September. The military junta said 10 people were killed, but diplomats and dissidents say the death toll is likely much higher. Thousands were arrested, and the hunt for participants is reportedly continuing.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon sent Gambari to Burma after the government crackdown, and he met earlier this month with junta leader Senior Gen. Than Shwe. He also met twice with detained pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi. But Gambari has so far failed to bring about a dialogue between the two sides.

The U.N. Security Council and the secretary-general had been pressing the government to move up its invitation for Gambari to return in mid-November, so he can try to promote efforts at national reconciliation and moves toward democracy.

The U.N. Human Rights Council had urged an immediate investigation of the rights situation in Burma at an emergency session on Oct. 2 where it condemned the crackdown on the demonstrators. Romanian Ambassador Doru-Romulus Costea, who chairs the 47-nation rights council, told Burma's U.N. envoy in Geneva that Pinheiro would be able to travel "at any time should the government of Burma give its approval."

Pinheiro is in New York and is expected to discuss his latest report on human rights in Burma on Wednesday.

In preparation for a return visit, Gambari is currently on a six-nation tour of key Asian nations, discussing the situation in Burma and urging support from key nations.

U.N. spokeswoman Michele Montas announced Tuesday that Gambari "expects to visit Burma in the first week of November as the Burma government agreed to bring forward his standing invitation to the country."

"While the exact travel dates have yet to be arranged, Mr. Gambari will be going to the country directly from the region," she said.

Gambari has already visited Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia, and he wrapped up a visit to India on Tuesday and flew to Beijing. His final stop will be Japan, Montas said.

"Mr. Gambari has been urging India and other regional countries to actively encourage the government of Burma to continue to cooperate with the secretary-general's good offices efforts, including by addressing continuing human rights concerns and by

encouraging Burma to receive Mr. Gambari as early as possible in order to kick-start a dialogue with the opposition," she said.

Gambari held "detailed and substantive discussions" Tuesday with India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and other senior officials, Montas said.

After the meeting, Gambari told reporters in New Delhi that "the common objectives we all share is a peaceful, stable and prosperous Burma that embarks on a national reconciliation process that is all-inclusive, a democratization process that is accelerated and a country which has full respect for the human rights of its own people."

Montas announced Monday that in a letter to Ban on Friday, Burma's Foreign Minister Nyan Win suggested that Pinheiro's visit take place before the Nov. 17 summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

The 10-nation southeast Asian bloc, which includes Burma, has expressed "revulsion" at the violent repression of the demonstrations and urged the government to exercise restraint and seek a political solution.

At a press briefing Tuesday following a meeting of ASEAN finance ministers in New York, Singapore deputy finance minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam said the bloc abhors the situation in Burma, but still does not believe economic sanctions "make sense."

"We think we should keep up external pressure, but the evidence so far has been that economic sanctions have not worked in Burma because it is a country which is used to isolation and the regime is not averse to continuing isolation," said Shanmugaratnam.

Burma's junta took power in 1988 after crushing the democracy movement led by Suu Kyi. In 1990, it refused to hand over power when Suu Kyi's party won a landslide election victory.

The protests in Burma began Aug. 19 after the government hiked fuel prices in one of Asia's poorest countries. But they are based in deep-rooted dissatisfaction with the repressive military rule that has gripped the country since 1962. The protests were faltering when Buddhist monks took the lead late last month.

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