

UN Envoy Gambari Visits China Seeking Pressure on Myanmar Junta

By Ed Johnson

Oct. 24 (Bloomberg) -- United Nations envoy Ibrahim Gambari meets today with officials in China, Myanmar's closest ally, seeking increased pressure on the military regime in the Southeast Asian nation to take steps toward democracy.

"He will be updating us on the situation in Myanmar," Foreign Ministry spokesman Liu Jianchao told reporters yesterday in Beijing, adding Gambari's visit will last two days.

China is one of Myanmar's biggest trading partners. As a permanent, veto-wielding member of the UN Security Council, its support is essential for any international effort to end the political crisis in the country formerly known as Burma.

The U.S., which tightened sanctions on Myanmar following last month's violent crackdown on anti-government protesters, is pressing China and other neighbors to exert their influence on the regime. The military has ruled the nation of 47 million people since 1962.

Myanmar said earlier this year it intends to ignore U.S. sanctions, which include financial restrictions and an import ban, and use companies from China, India and France to export natural gas in Asia.

"Now is the time for Beijing and New Delhi to forgo energy deals that put money in the pockets of the junta and suspend weapons sales to this regime," Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte said in a speech in Washington yesterday, Agence France-Presse reported.

"We hope that China and India will urge the Burmese generals to work with" Gambari, Negroponte told the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, the news agency said.

Gambari, who met with junta leaders earlier this month, is scheduled to return to Myanmar in the first week of November, the UN said yesterday.

Oil Pipeline

Myanmar and China agreed to build a pipeline this year to bring oil to southern China.

India, which also neighbors Myanmar, has built close economic and military ties with the regime in recent years. The government in New Delhi rejected a report by Amnesty International in July that it plans to sell attack helicopters to the junta.

Gambari, who met with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh yesterday, told reporters in New Delhi he was "very encouraged" by India's efforts to resolve the crisis in Myanmar.

General Than Shwe's regime has faced global condemnation since it deployed soldiers Sept. 26 to crush the biggest anti-government protests in almost 20 years. At least 30 people were killed and hundreds arrested.

The UN Security Council adopted a statement on Oct. 11 that ``strongly deplores" Myanmar's use of violence against peaceful protesters. The statement was issued after China dropped its objections.

New Constitution

The junta earlier this month set up a committee to write a new constitution, completing a national convention that began in 2004. The U.S. says the process is illegitimate because it excludes ethnic groups and the main opposition National League for Democracy led by Aung San Suu Kyi.

The junta rejected the results of parliamentary elections won by the party in 1990 and Suu Kyi has since spent almost 12 years in detention.

The U.S. Treasury Department last month froze the financial assets in America of 14 junta leaders. President George W. Bush last week tightened export controls on the nation and gave the Treasury more authority to impose financial penalties on individuals.

Business Leader

Among those targeted is Myanmar tycoon Tay Za, who has close ties with the junta and has businesses spanning from gem trading to an international airline, the Wall Street Journal reported on its Web site today.

Tay Za, his wife and son, were blacklisted on Oct. 19, the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control said in a statement. Their assets in the U.S. were frozen and U.S. companies barred from doing business with them.

The impact of U.S. sanctions on the regime has been weakened by Myanmar's trade links with its neighbors and other countries in the region.

Thailand received 49 percent of Myanmar's exports last year, while India and China received 12.8 percent and 5.3 percent respectively, the U.S. government says.

China provided 34.6 percent of total official imports valued at \$1.98 billion last year, while Thailand provided 21.8 percent and Singapore 16.2 percent, according to the U.S.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, a 10-nation bloc that includes Myanmar, has been criticized by the West for not applying pressure on the junta through its economic, defense, medical and social links.

Gambari's visit to China follows talks with officials in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and India. He will travel to Japan before returning to New York on Oct. 27.

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