

UN envoy to make new mission to Myanmar

YANGON (AFP) - UN envoy Ibrahim Gambari said Wednesday that he would return to Myanmar next month as the pro-democracy opposition said four activists had been sentenced to prison over anti-junta protests.

Gambari said that he had been invited to make a new visit to Myanmar in mid-November, when he hopes to press the regime to open talks with Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) party.

"It is important to start that dialogue without any delay. It is the only way to address the challenges," he told a press conference in Malaysia. He is in Asia trying to rally regional leaders to take tougher action on Myanmar.

Gambari was sent to Myanmar in the wake of a violent crackdown on the protests last month, which saw Buddhist monks leading up to 100,000 people in the streets of Yangon and similar actions in cities around the country.

At least 13 people died and nearly 3,000 were locked up after troops and riot police were deployed to break up the protests, which were the biggest challenge to military rule in nearly 20 years.

Four NLD members, including an 85-year-old man, have been sentenced to seven-and-a-half years in prison during a secret trial relating to the protests in the western port of Sittwe, a party spokesman said.

"They were accused of taking a leading role in the monks' protests" in Sittwe, spokesman Han Thar Myint told AFP.

"We will give them legal support," he said, adding that the NLD believes about 280 of its members are still detained.

State media said a total of 468 people remained behind bars around the country.

Amnesty International and other human rights groups have voiced fears that the detainees could be tortured or suffer other abuses.

During his last visit to Myanmar, which ended two weeks ago, Gambari was allowed to meet both Aung San Suu Kyi and junta leader Than Shwe.

The United States has demanded that he return as soon as possible to push for dialogue between the junta and the opposition, and he indicated there remained a possibility that he could return here earlier than expected.

Myanmar has faced a barrage of international action aimed at pushing the regime to ease its crackdown and forcing it to open talks with Aung San Suu Kyi, who is under house arrest in Yangon.

The United States and the European Union have tightened sanctions against the regime and pressed the United Nations to take tougher action.

Japan, one of Myanmar's biggest donors, has cancelled grants of around 4.7 million dollars over the fatal shooting of a Japanese video journalist when security forces put down last month's huge protests.

Gambari is travelling around the region to exert pressure on the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to do more to bring about democratic reforms in Myanmar, which is a member of the bloc.

"We believe all those who have an interest in peace and stability should exercise it. This is why ASEAN is important," Gambari said, but declined to specify what action they should take.

"We want them to stay engaged," he said. "What form they want to take, we leave it to them."

The junta has given little sign of relaxing its crackdown, and said in state media Wednesday that it was continuing to make arrests despite UN demands for the release of political prisoners.

"Some are still (being) called in for questioning, and those who should be released will be released," the official New Light of Myanmar newspaper said.

The junta also stepped up its rhetoric, blaming Buddhist monks for the crackdown by saying if they had remained in their monasteries, "the government would not have used force to prevent protests."

"If... they had not staged protest marches, demanding release of political prisoners, the nation would not have seen any chaos," it added.

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