

Asian nations talk tough on Myanmar

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YANGON, Myanmar, and SYDNEY, Australia — The United States and Indonesia believe China and India should try to exert influence on Myanmar, since other approaches to the military-ruled country have failed, Indonesia's foreign minister said on Saturday.

The public comments came on the same day Myanmar's military junta sentenced six young labour activists to between 20 and 28 years in jail at a closed trial inside Yangon's infamous Insein prison, their former lawyer said.

The six, who are in their late 20s and early 30s, were arrested for helping organize a May Day workers' rights seminar at the American Center in the former Burma's main commercial city.

Speaking to reporters after his president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, met U.S. President George W. Bush on the sidelines of the APEC meetings in Sydney, Indonesian Foreign Minister Hasan Wirajuda said Southeast Asian nations were at a loss as to what to do with their recalcitrant neighbour.

“Actually, all of us in ASEAN have in the past year ... recognized that constructive engagement by ASEAN has not produced any tangible result. We admit that,” Mr. Hasan told reporters.

Myanmar is one of the 10 members of the Association of South East Asian Nations.

“Likewise, also the West, they admit that the sanctions and pressure approach do not work. So we are both frustrated.”

Four of the sentenced activists, named as Thurein Aung, Wai Lin, Kyaw Min and Myo Min, received 20 years for sedition, five years under “illegal association” laws, and three years for immigration offences, lawyer Aung Thein said.

The other two, Nyi Nyi Zaw and Kyaw Kyaw, were found guilty only of sedition, and given a 20-year jail term plus a fine of 1,000 kyats -- about 75 U.S. cents.

“What they did at the May Day ceremony was explain labour rights to the workers,” Aung Thein, who was forced to quit as the group's attorney due to police harassment, told Reuters. “It had nothing to do with sedition.”

Mr. Yudhoyono had told Mr. Bush it was important to work with China and India. Mr. Bush came to the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation meetings with harsh words about Myanmar, which is not a member of the forum, after the junta's crackdown on escalating protests against huge fuel price rises and inflation in the isolated state.

“We must press the regime in Burma to stop arresting, harassing, and assaulting pro-democracy activists for organizing or participating in peaceful demonstrations,” Mr. Bush said in a speech to Asia-Pacific business executives on Friday.

There were no reports on Saturday of any more of the fuel price protests that have spread from Yangon to the centre and coastal northwest, and which are starting to involve the monkhood, major players in the 1988 revolt.

More than 150 people have been arrested in Myanmar since Aug. 19, when activists began protests against an increase in fuel prices that nearly halted public transport.

This week, several hundred young monks seized 13 government officials and torched their vehicles in Pakokku, 130 kilometres west of Mandalay, in an angry response to soldiers firing warning shots at a monks' protest march the previous day.

The crackdown, one of the harshest since 1988, has drawn withering criticism from the United States and European Union, and unusually strong words from Myanmar's Asian neighbours.

Even China, the generals' main trading partner and the closest they have to a friend, said it wanted to see "reconciliation and improvement in the situation".

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