

China urges Myanmar to pursue "democracy process"

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BEIJING (Reuters) - China urged troubled Myanmar to press forward with a "democracy process that is appropriate for the country", cautiously adding its weight to international pressure on the Southeast Asian junta to defuse public unrest.

Senior Chinese diplomat Tang Jiaxuan made the comments to Myanmar Foreign Minister U Nyan Win, who was visiting Beijing for talks on Thursday, the official Xinhua news agency reported.

Since August, Myanmar, formerly called Burma, has sought to stamp out public protests sparked by fuel price rises but reflecting frustration at the military's harsh rule.

The crackdown has been one of the harshest since the army crushed a nationwide pro-democracy uprising in 1988. Two years later, it refused to recognise a landslide election win by Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy.

Early this month, the junta completed the first stage of drawing up a new constitution but left unclear when and how it will allow the document to be written.

Domestic critics of the generals who have ruled the poor Southeast Asian country for 45 years, as well as Washington and Brussels, have called the process a sham and a distraction from engaging the democratic opposition forces.

But China backed the process as a way of defusing volatile tensions.

"China whole-heartedly hopes that Myanmar will push forward a democracy process that is appropriate for the country," Tang told the minister, according to Xinhua on Friday.

Tang, who as state councillor acts as a foreign policy adviser, said China "hoped Myanmar would restore internal stability as soon as possible, properly handle issues and actively promote national reconciliation".

Beijing is one of the few foreign capitals with friendly ties to Myanmar. China is generally hostile to Western pressure for political relaxation in other states.

China has sold millions of dollars of arms to Myanmar. It has also invested in helping the country upgrade Indian Ocean naval facilities and is a big importer of its timber and minerals.

The United States and Indonesia have said China and India should do more to pressure the junta.

Tang's comments are a further sign that China wants to prod Myanmar to temper its actions without turning against the junta.

He said the democracy process was "in the fundamental interests of the people of Myanmar and conducive to regional peace, stability and development".

In a sign Myanmar may even be testing Beijing's patience, earlier this year China's Foreign Ministry published an unflattering account of Myanmar's new jungle capital, complaining it was remote, isolated and barren.

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