

Myanmar's junta faces rebuke at UN General Assembly

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UNITED NATIONS--As protests intensify against the military generals in Myanmar, world leaders at the United Nations General Assembly are expected to push the ruling junta to adopt democratic reforms.

The United States and European nations are to spearhead a diplomatic blitz at the annual gathering this week in an apparent bid to lend support to the biggest democratic campaign in two decades in the tightly ruled Southeast Asian state, diplomats said.

The move comes as Myanmar's democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi, under house arrest, appeared in public Saturday for the first time in four years, greeting and paying respect to thousands of monks and their supporters protesting in the commercial capital Yangon against the military junta.

British Foreign Secretary David Miliband has said he will raise the Myanmar issue at the UN General Assembly in New York, following a briefing on the situation at the UN Security Council last week.

His counterparts from Europe, which has put off plans for a free trade pact with ASEAN due to Myanmar's human rights record, will also be highlighting the topic at the UN meeting, diplomats said.

Both the European Union (EU) and the United States have been at the forefront of political and economic sanctions against Myanmar's junta for years but to no avail.

US President George W. Bush, who delivers his address at the UN General Assembly and holds a roundtable meeting on democracy with a group of about 20 leaders on Tuesday, is expected to add to the international pressure on Myanmar's junta.

"You've got Burma, which I think, as you know, the First Lady and the President both have spent time on, and I think it would be fair to think that that might be mentioned," said Michael Kozak, a senior official with the National Security Council, using Myanmar's former name.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice will also highlight the Myanmar crisis at a meeting with her counterparts of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) on Thursday at the sidelines of the UN talks.

She would ask them to use their influence to prod Myanmar to release Aung San Suu Kyi and carry out other democratic reforms, officials said.

Myanmar is a member of ASEAN, which also comprises Brunei, Indonesia, Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

"Among other things, Secretary Rice will press for ASEAN leverage to end the crackdown in Burma and to initiate genuine democratic reforms in Burma," Assistant Secretary of State Kristen Silverberg told reporters.

Myanmar has been a key topic at every US-ASEAN meeting and Rice, at one meeting at the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in 2005, directly lashed out at her Myanmar counterpart for political repression.

Rice may also raise the issue with her Chinese counterpart in scheduled talks Monday.

China, among Myanmar's closest allies and biggest military suppliers, has previously insisted it would not pressure the junta, saying it did not wish to interfere in the internal affairs of another country.

But in a rare move this month, Beijing's top diplomatic advisor Tang Jiaxuan gently nudged the junta to adopt democratic changes.

"China sincerely hopes that Myanmar can bring stability back to its domestic situation ... and unswervingly strive for democratic advances that conform with Myanmar's situation," Tang was quoted saying at a meeting with Myanmar's visiting Foreign Minister, U Nyan Win.

His statement came as protests, which began a month ago amid anger at a huge fuel price hike, snowballed into the most prolonged show of dissent in Myanmar since a pro-democracy uprising in 1988 was crushed by the military.

President Bush "needs to engage in strenuous diplomacy -- above all with China -- to make clear that this is a US priority," the Washington Post newspaper said in an editorial Saturday.

"And China, which has more influence in Burma than any other country has, needs to decide whether it wants to host the 2008 Olympics as the enabler of one of the world's nastiest regimes or as a peacemaker," it said.

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