

## **U.N. criticizes Myanmar and defends dialogue with junta**

By Evelyn Leopold

Reuters

UNITED NATIONS (Reuters) - Accusing Myanmar of crushing dissent, a senior U.N. official said on Wednesday the southeast Asian country's recent national convention to draw up a constitution was undemocratic and exclusionary.

Still, Undersecretary-General Ibrahim Gambari, the U.N. point man for Myanmar, formerly Burma, hoped that the country's Asian neighbors could put pressure on the ruling junta.

Defending U.N. involvement in the country, he said the world body had to pay attention to the suffering of ordinary people as the only international institution in direct contact with the military leaders.

The junta, which has ruled Myanmar for the last 45 years,

on Monday completed the first stage of drawing up the basic principles of a new constitution after 14 years working out the broad outlines. Some 1,000 hand-picked delegates attended.

"We remained concerned about the exclusive nature of the process to date, and also about reports of provisions adopted at the convention that would seemingly run counter to the objectives of national reconciliation and democratization," Gambari told a news conference.

He said he hoped the outcome of the convention would be "more inclusive, participatory and transparent."

The constitutional convention as well as another crackdown on protesters has brought a spate of renewed criticism against the junta, which has refused to be dislodged despite an election defeat in 1990 by Nobel peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party.

The government has jailed her supporters as well as students, intellectuals and opponents, which slowed down further economic development.

Gambari said Myanmar should release political prisoners and those arrested during the recent peaceful demonstrations. He said suppression of dissent made it "more difficult to maintain international support for engagement with Myanmar."

Gambari, who has been in touch by telephone with first lady Laura Bush, intends to return to Myanmar in October. Laura Bush last week telephoned U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon about the crackdown on protesters and hoped for a Security Council resolution.

### ***SECURITY COUNCIL INVOLVEMENT***

In January China and Russia vetoed a Security Council resolution calling for Myanmar to stop persecuting minority and opposition groups and take concrete steps toward

democracy. They argued the council was exceeding its mandate by involving itself in a human rights issue handled by other bodies.

France's U.N. Ambassador, Jean-Maurice Ripert, the current council president, said he expected Myanmar to be raised this month but he did not know if a resolution would be presented.

The U.S. first lady a year ago led a meeting at the United Nations of activists and experts on Myanmar and the need to keep the pressure on the reclusive southeast Asian nation.

More than 150 people in Myanmar have been detained since August 19, when activists began protests against an increase in fuel prices that nearly froze transport.

The International Committee of the Red Cross in a rare public censure detailed serious abuses against detainees and civilians in June.

But Gambari said three years ago there was no dialogue between the world body and Myanmar.

Now even Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia had expressed concern over developments in the country. He said China was also speaking to the government but did not go into detail.

"Against the big ticket issues where change is sorely needed and expected, these are obviously fairly modest steps," Gambari conceded.

But Gambari said he would not apologize for U.N. involvement in Myanmar.

"How do you bring about change in the attitude of a regime?" he asked. One could either change the regime, which the United Nations was not in a position to do, or speak to those who had influence on the government, Gambari said. "And we have decided to take the second option."

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