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BURMA'S WITHDRAWAL FROM THE ASEAN CHAIR: RETREAT OR DEFEAT?

- The international community and ASEAN, in particular, achieved a significant victory when the Burmese junta withdrew their claim to the 2006 ASEAN chairmanship. Succumbing to persistently applied pressure, Sr Gen Than Shwe suffered a deleterious loss of face in having to give up the much-coveted ASEAN chairmanship.
- While some apologists attempted to spin the deferral as a ploy to avoid international attention, what has happened in Burma since relinquishing the chair suggests otherwise.
- Rumors that Sr Gen Than Shwe had been ousted shook the country, causing uncertainty about the stability of the military leadership and shockwaves in the economy.
- Over 200 prisoners in the weeks leading to the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Laos in late July, apparently in an attempt to appease international opinion. However, once it became clear that Burma's claim to the chair was not supported, a crackdown on political dissidents resumed.
- The situation remains tense between the Burmese Army and ethnic groups as the SPDC reinforces its military presence in several territories.
- While international agencies are expressing increasing frustration with junta-imposed restrictions, Burma is facing a growing humanitarian crisis. World Food Program Executive Director James Morris bewailed the regime's obstruction of aid. Citing the regime's active attempts to obstruct its operations, Global Fund for HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria pulled out its funding for programs in Burma.
- The ILO called for economic action from its members after finding continued practices of forced labor and intimidation of complainants by the SPDC. The calls for sanctions drew predictable criticism from the junta.
- 2 top level UN officials have gained increased access to Rangoon despite the continued exclusion of Razali Ismail, the UN Special Envoy for Burma, and Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Burma.
- Since relinquishing the ASEAN chair, Burma's economy has been afflicted with skyrocketing prices for general household goods, fuel and transportation costs.

PRESSURE WORKS

It has been more than a month since Burma surrendered its claim on the 2006 ASEAN chair and cracks within the junta are showing. By bowing to international pressures, particularly from ASEAN, Senior General Than Shwe suffered a defeat. Since its loss of the prestigious chairmanship, pressure on the junta is mounting. Internal pressure has grown within the regime, exacerbated by severe economic deterioration. Meanwhile, food shortages are plaguing the country, there are threats of further sanctions, and ethnic groups still have not committed themselves fully to the regime's "roadmap".

While Burma's withdrawal from the chair was undoubtedly a success for ASEAN and the Burma democracy movement, continued pressure is necessary to ensure future progress in the country. It not only proved that the junta is susceptible to pressure but also that such pressure is a powerful tool that can be employed to induce change.

With the military regime in a weakened state, now is the time for ASEAN and the international community to push the junta towards genuine and comprehensive reforms for democratization in Burma.

THE CHAIR AND HOW THE JUNTA LOST IT

In the lead up to the announcement at the Laos meeting, Rangoon-based diplomats and analysts were sure that Sen Gen Than Shwe would insist on claiming the 2006 rotating ASEAN chairmanship. Many believed Than Shwe had too much to lose and he would not back down, especially since he was confident in China's support.¹ The regime's statements and behavior indicate that the deferral was an eleventh-hour response to unprecedented pressure from ASEAN governments and parliamentarians. It may have been symbolic of the regime's standing in ASEAN that SPDC Foreign Minister confirmed the decision to his Singaporean counterpart in the men's toilet.²

The ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Caucus on Myanmar (AIPMC) led the charge by sponsoring a resolution that urged ASEAN to not only replace Burma as Chairman but also to review its ASEAN membership unless there was evidence of reform.³ In editorials and press conferences AIPMC members expressed sharp criticism of the Burmese leadership. With the example set by AIPMC, ASEAN foreign ministers joined in opposing a Burma chair along with other foreign governments and international players.

The announcement came on July 26 during the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Vientiane, Laos. Validating months of sustained pressure, the announcement induced overwhelmingly positive responses by the international community, with credit being given primarily to the ASEAN governments and AIPMC for their concerted efforts.

Amid the elation and relief, however, all noted that much still needed to be done in order to achieve the ultimate goal of a genuine democracy in the Burma. "This (deferment) should not be seen as an excuse to ignore the urgent need for political reforms in Myanmar. Myanmar will continue to afflict ASEAN long after this debate on the chairmanship is over," said Teresa Kok, Secretary of the AIPMC.⁴

Getting Burma to succumb to international pressure however was a large step towards recognizing the impact ASEAN can have on Burma. As elucidated by U.S. Senator Mitch McConnell, "[t]his deferral serves as evidence that the illegitimate military junta does indeed respond to international pressure, particularly from its neighbors."⁵

1 Straits Times (23 May 05) Don't push Myanmar into a corner

2 AFP (26 Jul 05) Myanmar breaks decision on ASEAN chair to Singapore in restroom

3 AIPMC (28 Nov 05) Official statement issued in Kuala Lumpur

4 AIPMC (26 Jul 05) Statement on deferment of Myanmar as ASEAN chair in 2006

5 Mitch McConnell (26 Jul 05) Statement by Senator Mitch McConnell

POST CHAIR DEVELOPMENTS

After the initial widespread applause died down, a small band of apologists attempted to marginalize the influence of international pressure on the junta's decision to surrender the chair by suggesting the decision was calculated to avoid the hassles of playing the host. Robert Taylor, a London-based scholar, describes Burma's military regime as "clever" theorizing that the generals circumvented the headaches posed by an ASEAN chairmanship while giving the appearance of performing a favor for the international community.⁶

This theory, however, ignores the extent of loss suffered by the junta by failing to secure the ASEAN chair. During the past year, Than Shwe spent a considerable amount of effort and resources to ready the country for the chairmanship. Projects to upgrade hotels, meeting facilities and roads were started. Even as ASEAN foreign ministers began to vocalize concern and bombs exploded in Rangoon, the junta claimed that preparations were on course and initiated plans to expand Rangoon's International Airport.⁷

It is important to note that the hardliner led by Sen Gen Than Shwe regard compromise as a sign of defeat. The loss of the chair would have tarnished Than Shwe's domestic prestige, besides depriving his business cronies of profits that would have been gained from hosting key ASEAN meetings. And now, with the prospects of a Burma-led chair lost, pressure is mounting on the military regime. Below are some of the key developments since the retreat from the ASEAN chair that are influencing and hampering Burma's military leaders.

United Nations (UN) Diplomacy

The UN has had some recent gains in Burma. Despite the junta's continued exclusion of Razali Ismail, the UN Special Envoy for Burma, and Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Burma, the regime appears to be softening its stand on allowing 2 top level UN officials into the country.⁸

In early August, the regime opened their doors to James Morris, the Executive Director of the World Food Program (WFP) making him the most senior UN official to gain access to Burma since 2003.⁹

Mr. Morris' visit to Burma was followed by Former Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas who arrived in Rangoon on August 18 as one of UN Sec-Gen Kofi Annan's Envoys to the 2005 World Summit to discuss the summit's agenda with junta leaders.¹⁰

Humanitarian Crisis

Upon leaving Burma, James Morris described the humanitarian situation in Burma as, "serious and getting worse."¹¹ Meanwhile the UN and aid agencies have charged the junta with intentionally obstructing aid operations in Burma by imposing untenable restrictions on movement within the country.¹²

- According to the WFP, "One-third of children in Myanmar are chronically malnourished. Eight percent are acutely malnourished."¹³ Overall, around 15% of the population in Burma is suffering from "food insecurity."¹⁴
- During Mr. Morris' visit, the regime agreed to eliminate a 10% "export" tax on food purchased by the WFP to distribute internally. However Mr. Morris expressed deep frustration over a range of

6 International Herald Tribune (30 Aug 05) Letter from Asia: Myanmar's withdrawal: What the junta wanted?

7 Reuters (20 May 05) Singapore firm to expand Myanmar airport; Irrawaddy Magazine (11 Apr 05) Preparations for Burma's ASEAN chairmanship on course

8 Bangkok Post (1 Aug 05) Top UN official due in Rangoon: Annan visit may be discussed with junta

9 Bangkok Post (1 Aug 05) Top UN official due in Rangoon: Annan visit may be discussed with junta

10 Irrawaddy (18 Aug 05) Former Indonesian FM will meet Than Shwe

11 Irrawaddy (5 Aug 05) UN warns of humanitarian crisis in Burma

12 Inter Press Service (28 Aug 05) Junta stymies millennium development goals

13 Associated Press (4 Aug 05) U.N.: One-third of Myanmar's children chronically malnourished

14 Irrawaddy (5 Aug 05) UN warns of humanitarian crisis in Burma

other policies that continue to impede aid operations in Burma, including the array of permits, checkpoints, local taxes and other restrictions. The restrictions meant that WFP was able to deliver only 430 tonnes of the 5,500 tonnes of rice earmarked for vulnerable people in North Arakan State.¹⁵

The issue of restrictions on aid agencies came to a head when the Global Fund for HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria pulled out its funding for programs in Burma on August 18.¹⁶ Citing "an impossibly difficult environment to work in," Global Fund terminated a total of \$98.4 million allocated for a five-year period with all operations set to cease by December 1.¹⁷ This move struck a heavy blow to Burma where 330,000 suffer from HIV/AIDS, 97,000 cases of tuberculosis are reported annually and about 600,000 people get malaria yearly.¹⁸ In response, the authorities through the Country Coordinating Mechanism merely urged "reconsideration."¹⁹ Meanwhile, pro-democracy groups recently issued called for cooperation from the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) for humanitarian purposes.²⁰

PRESSURE FROM THE INTERNATIONAL LABOR ORGANIZATION (ILO)

The ILO's call for stronger actions against the junta including withdrawal of foreign direct investments incited strong reaction by the junta. By vehemently lashing out against the ILO, the junta exposed their fear of sanctions. Meanwhile, the authorities continue to commit labor violations.

During the 93rd Session of the International Labor Conference held on May 31 to June 16, 2005, a committee of the ILO chastised the junta for their continued forced labor practices and intimidation of complainants. In light of these continuing reports, the ILO called on the international community to "intensify the review of their relations with Myanmar" and "take the appropriate actions, including as regards foreign direct investment."²¹

In reaction, Lt Col Hla Swe, chairman of Magwe Division War Veterans Organization Supervisory committee suggested that Burma withdraw from the ILO.²² Although the SPDC has so far remained silent on this suggestion²³ it is possible that it was planted to test international reactions.

On July 30, 2005, the SPDC targeted the ILO and the Federation of Trade Unions of Burma (FTUB) during a military-sponsored "mass meeting" entitled "Guard Against Danger Posed by Destructionists Through United Strength of the People."²⁴

Meanwhile, in a recent press release, Amnesty International estimates tens of thousands continue to be victims of forced labor at the hands of the military regime in Burma.²⁵

MILITARY MAYHEM

The extent of the junta's instability became apparent following a serious of rumors regarding a shake-up in military leadership. The rumors, which took on varied forms and spanned several days, exposed tension in the military leadership, particularly between the country's top two generals Sen Gen Than Shwe and Vice Sen Gen Maung Aye. The rumors rocked an already fragile economy.

15 Reuters (5 Aug 05) Myanmar to lift food aid tax, barriers remain-WFP

16 BBC (19 Aug 05) UN Aids organization leaves Burma

17 Global Fund (18 Aug 05) Fact Sheet: Global Fund Termination of Grants to Myanmar; The Australian (20 Aug 05) Junta pressure forces AIDS fund out

18 The Australian (20 Aug 05) Junta pressure forces AIDS fund out

19 New Light of Myanmar (23 Aug 05) Country Coordinating Mechanism Statement

20 Democratic Voice of Burma (7 Sep 05) Burmese opposition groups welcome students' call for cooperation

21 ILO Press Release (4 Jun 05) International Labor Conference convenes Special Sitting for the fifth time in as many years to address forced labor issues in Burma

22 Associated Press (30 Jun 05) Myanmar war veterans urge military government to quit International Labor Organization

23 Democratic Voice of Burma (29 Aug 05) SPDC spokesperson refuses to answer questions on whether Burma will withdraw from ILO

24 Narinjara (8 Aug 05) SPDC attacks ILO and FTUB through "forced mass rallies" in Akyab

25 Amnesty International (8 Sep 05) Tens of thousands facing forced labor, beatings and theft

Shortly after the junta deferred the ASEAN chair, rumors cropped up that there was a rift among the generals based on internal disagreements about the ASEAN chairmanship.²⁶ What followed was an assertion of Maung Aye's authority through another cabinet reorganization - the second in less than three months.²⁷ This spurred rumors of an impending coup, which drove up the price of household commodities and gold.²⁸

Then came the rumor that Than Shwe had been forced into retirement, which was first reported by the BBC Burmese Section on August 23.²⁹ The rumors grew in intensity throughout the next day with details ranging from death by heart attack to corruption and nepotism.³⁰ It sent shockwaves through the already vulnerable economy. Shops closed, inflation rose, and price of gold increased.³¹

Although the rumors were wreaking havoc on the country, the junta itself remained silent. Without an official announcement or a public appearance by Than Shwe, rumors continued to spread about Than Shwe's failing health.³² Finally, on August 28, the SPDC held a press conference where Information Minister Brig-Gen Kyaw Hsan officially denied the rumors of a coup.³³ He said that "[Than Shwe] is at the War Office, performing his duty round the clock and is in good health."³⁴ Thailand's Foreign Minister, Dr. Kantathi Suphamongkhon confirmed this statement following a meeting with the Than Shwe on September 1.³⁵

The rumors continued to affect the country even after the press conference. The prices of commodities continued to skyrocket, inflicting further hardship on Burma's already impoverished people. Crime rates increased with more incidents of theft, robbery and gambling. Those relying on charitable donations, including orphans and Buddhist monks, found themselves in danger of starvation due to the economy's sudden downturn.³⁶

TROUBLE WITH ETHNIC GROUPS

Hostilities have resumed with renewed intensity between the SPDC Army and a number of ethnic groups, particularly where the regime has been trying to coerce groups into surrendering their weapons.

- In **Shan State**, the situation remains tense as the SPDC Army increases pressure on the Shan State Army- North (SSA-N) to surrender. On August 24th, the Third Brigade was ordered to withdraw from their controlled areas. The SSA-N, however, has been holding its ground.³⁷
- Hoping to maintain factional splits amongst the **Kachin**, the SPDC has offered security and territory in exchange for a commitment from Colonel Lasang Awng Wa's splinter group to refrain from joining any other armed groups.³⁸ Resisting these temptations has resulted in bans on business activities and arrests of businessmen associated with the group.³⁹
- The SPDC Army has increased troops on regions bordering **Shan** and **Karenni** State causing concern for the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) stationed at Nyamu Hills.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, on August 21, the SPDC presented the KNPP with the same "arms for peace" peace

26 Democratic Voice of Burma (1 Aug 05) Burma's Asean decision causing rift among junta generals

27 Agence France Presse (11 Aug 05) Myanmar reshuffles military commanders and ministers

28 Democratic Voice of Burma (1 Aug 05) Burma's Asean decision causing rift among junta generals

29 BBC Burmese (23 Aug 05) Senior General Than Shwe forced to retire

30 Democratic Voice of Burma (24 Aug 05) Rumours on Burma junta chairman in Rangoon; BBC Burmese (9 Aug 05) Senior General Than Shwe forced to retire

31 Irrawaddy (24 Aug 05) Western diplomats dismiss Rangoon coup rumor

32 Reuters (25 Aug 05) Myanmar coup rumours die but mysteries remain

33 Mizzima (28 Aug 05) Burmese Junta Denies Coup Rumours

34 Mizzima (29 Aug 05) In Burma, Junta Denies Coup, Dissidents Deny Allegations

35 Mizzima (1 Sept 05) Thai Minister talks to Burma's strongman Than Shwe

36 Democratic Voice of Burma (31 Aug 05) Rumours, inflations and instability in Burma

37 Democratic Voice of Burma (30 Aug 05) Burma junta intensifies pressure on Shan 'peace' groups

38 Mizzima (13 Aug 05) Junta Trying for a Split in Unified KSC

39 Democratic Voice of Burma (20 Aug 05) Divide and rule in action: Kachin groups accuse Burma junta of complicating situation

40 Democratic Voice of Burma (6 Aug 05) Burmese troops increased on Thai-Burma border

deal that was offered in 1995.⁴¹ Hoping for something more, KNPP General Secretary Raymond Htoo said, “[W]e don’t call it peace by just handing over weapons to the SPDC.”⁴²

- The SPDC Army continues to engage in clashes with the **Arakan Liberation Army (ALA)**. There are further reports of Arakanese villagers and headmen tortured for allegedly having contact with the ALA following such clashes.⁴³ Meanwhile, villagers in Arakan State suffer from a range of hardships at the hands of the regime, including severe rice shortages and forced labor in northern Arakan State, the confiscation of rubber plantations in Sandwoy Village, and a curfew in Akyab Village.⁴⁴
- Speculation of a covert campaign against the **United Wa State Army (UWSA)** grew as the SPDC issued an ultimatum for the surrender of unregistered motor vehicles in the Wa’s possession.⁴⁵ An increased deployment of troops in Shan State lends support to notions of increasing SPDC attempts to undermine the UWSA, previously considered one of its closest ethnic allies.⁴⁶
- The SPDC Army continued to surround Tagu Village in the **Irrawaddy** delta through mid-August after a July 7 raid that resulted in the death of a schoolteacher and the arrest of about fifty villagers.⁴⁷ Seventeen of those arrested were ethnic Karen villagers charged with assisting the Karen National Union (KNU) in the May 7 Rangoon bombing.⁴⁸ The villagers remained in detention even though Mahn Sha, Gen-Sec of the KNU, cleared them of involvement.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, the SPDC continues to place pressure on the KNU by luring ex-KNU members located in Thailand’s Kanchanaburi into surrendering through financial incentives.⁵⁰
- **Mon** villagers face increasing abuse by the SPDC Army. Ye Township residents reported having to purchase permits to be able to work on their farms. They also are forced to patrol the village.⁵¹ There are reports of forced labor and the destruction of homes and property by the Burmese Army.⁵²

CRACKDOWN ON POLITICAL PRISONERS

After relinquishing the ASEAN chair, the SPDC resumed a crackdown on political dissent at full throttle. Following the release of 253 prisoners prior to the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Vientiane, the new wave of arrests was not unexpected. The military government has often used prisoners as political hostages to be released when it is necessary to improve their image abroad.⁵³

- Between 26 July and the first week of September, Rangoon **detained 37 new political prisoners**, bringing to **48 the total number of political prisoners jailed over the last 60 days**.⁵⁴ The list includes Sa Oo Kya, a Shan State Advisory Council (SSAC) member,⁵⁵ National League for Democracy (NLD) members, as well as other political and human rights activists, students, teachers, and a cartoonist.

41 Mizzima (22 Aug 05) Peace Broker contacts Burma's KNPP for "Arms for Peace" deal

42 Democratic Voice of Burma (22 Aug 05) Burma junta offers 'peace' to KNPP through go-between

43 Narinjara (12 Aug 05) Armed clash occurs between Arakan Liberation Army and SPDC; Narinjara (27 Aug 05) Burmese Army Camped Inside Village Due to Fear of Attack

44 Kaladan (1 Sept 05) Villagers from Northern Arakan, suffer famine; Narinjara (18 Aug 05) Going Outside Prohibited After 10 p.m.; Narinjara (20 Aug 05) Army confiscates land for rubber plantations in Arakan; Narinjara (1 Aug 05) Arakanese villagers forced to aid in construction of gas pipeline

45 Shan Herald Agency for News (24 Aug 05) Junta moves baffle Burma watchers. Note: The UWSA, notorious for their involvement in drug production and trafficking, were previously exempt from registering vehicles in their possession, as part of the range of benefits enjoyed through their alliance with the SPDC, especially ousted Prime Minister General Khin Nyunt.

46 Shan Herald Agency for News (25 Aug 05) Junta waging secret war against Wa

47 DVB (12 Aug 05) More Karen villagers detained in delta Burma

48 Irrawaddy (18 Aug 05) NLD members among 17 arrested for Rangoon bombings

49 Irrawaddy (18 Aug 05) NLD members among 17 arrested for Rangoon bombings

50 Democratic Voice of Burma (8 Sep 05) Burma junta lures ex-KNU members to surrender

51 Independent Mon News Agency (26 Aug 05) Villagers' farm work restricted in Ye Township

52 KaoWao (27 Aug 05) Villagers Forced to Porter

53 Irrawaddy (07 Jul 05) Prisoners of conscience are not political tools

54 Assistance Association of Political Prisoners (6 Sept 05) E-mail communication

55 Democratic Voice of Burma (5 Aug 05) Another Shan leader detained by Burma junta

- On 6 July, exactly 3 weeks before the SPDC's announcement regarding the ASEAN chair, the junta released 253 political prisoners from various prisons across the country.⁵⁶ While political prisoners were being set free, others were being arrested. Between 6 and 26 July, authorities made 12 new arrests, including 7 NLD members and Nai Sein Aye, chairman of the Mon Literature and Culture Committee.⁵⁷
- As of 6 September 2005, **1,162 political prisoners remain detained across Burma**. Six of them are still behind bars despite having already served their prison term. 14 elected MPs (13 belonging to the NLD) are still in prison.⁵⁸

FURTHER ECONOMIC DETERIORATION

The loss of the ASEAN chairmanship has further injured Burma's already weakened economy. In their attempts to secure the chair, the regime spent money they did not have to improve infrastructure and strengthen the tourism industry. In doing so, they relied on now-lost anticipated revenue from playing the ASEAN host.⁵⁹ Rumors of a coup and instability within the military leadership further damaged Burma's fragile financial systems:

- The weeks following the announcement witnessed yet another jump in the prices of commodities, increased fuel and transportation costs, and inflation.⁶⁰
- The record high oil prices also did not help Burma's economy where the price of diesel during the month of August increased by 30%, reaching the highest mark for this year.⁶¹ As a consequence, the price of consumer goods continued to skyrocket inflicting hardships on the general population unable to afford everyday necessities.⁶²

56 Assistance Association of Political Prisoners (6 Sept 05) E-mail communication

57 Kaowao (22 July 2005) Detainees interrogated after Rangoon explosion

58 Assistance Association of Political Prisoners (6 Sept 05) E-mail communication

59 Irrawaddy (27 July 2005) Burma's wasted investment

60 Shan Herald Agency for News (5 Aug 05) Consumer goods go skyhigh

61 Independent Mon News Agency (1 Sep 05) Diesel prices sky-rocket in Burma

62 Democratic Voice of Burma (31 Aug 05) Rumours, inflations and instability in Burma