

Myanmar Breaks Out of Imposed Containment

by Mike Billington

A series of developments over the past weeks regarding Myanmar's role in Asia, has further confirmed the warning issued by America's leading Myanmar (Burma) scholar. Dr. David Steinberg wrote a commentary in the March 11, 2004 issue of the *Far Eastern Economic Review* entitled: "Burma: Who's Isolating Whom?" Steinberg concluded: "The U.S. is engaged in a policy to isolate Burma. . . . It is in fact the U.S. that has isolated itself from Burma. And this can be counter-productive."

The first dramatic development took place in Hanoi on Oct. 8-9, at the Fifth Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM 5), which was attended by the nations of the European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). For the first time, Myanmar were allowed to participate as a full member, overcoming the EU's previous refusal to participate unless Myanmar was excluded. ASEAN, however, decided it would no longer allow this divisive EU effort to dictate the composition of the Asian members, which had resulted in the cancellation of a number of ministerial meetings and summits over the past months.

Demonstrating that Europe's growing economic dependence on Asia outweighs the politically charged, and grossly exaggerated, human rights complaints about Myanmar in the West, Europe gave in and attended the ASEM meeting in Hanoi. In a face-saving measure for the EU, Myanmar was asked not to send the head of state as its delegate, and the EU tightened some sanctions on Myanmar. While any sanctions are of dubious legitimacy, and certainly ineffective, the European sanctions are nowhere near as immoral and destructive, economically or politically, as those imposed by the Bush Administration and the U.S. Congress. State Department spokesman Richard Boucher recognized that point on Oct. 19, with a statement welcoming the EU sanctions, but calling on them to implement far more drastic economic restraints on the impoverished nation, like those imposed by the United States.

Progress at ASEM Summit

Although the ASEM summit made only modest advances in Eurasian cooperation, the fact that the meeting occurred at all marks progress. With German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, French President Jacques Chirac, and Japanese

Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi all on hand, the concluding Chairman's Statement proclaimed opposition to U.S. unilateralism, demanding that the United Nations reassert its "leading role" in dealing with international terrorist issues. The paragraph on Myanmar strongly encouraged the nation's diverse ethnic and political factions to "work together to ensure a successful outcome of the ongoing national reconciliation process." As to the political restraints on the National League for Democracy (NLD, the opposition group headed by Aung San Suu Kyi, who has openly supported foreign economic sanctions on the country), the ASEM Chairman's Statement said only that they "looked forward to the early lifting of restrictions placed on political parties in accordance with the assurances given by Myanmar."

In a stunning expression of the nearly universal recognition in Asia that the U.S. and EU sanctions on Myanmar are destructive and ineffective, the spokesman for the opposition National League for Democracy, U Lwin, told Reuters: "I don't think this measure will make any difference." He said that the economic sanctions from the United States were equally ineffective, and that a "meaningful dialogue" was necessary.

Japan's Prime Minister Koizumi, not normally one to say anything against U.S. policies, told the press that "Japan's view is that applying sanctions might not necessarily result in something favorable for democratization of that country."

Neo-conservative Intentions

What has not been identified by any of the opponents of the sanctions, other than Lyndon LaRouche and this magazine, is that the sanctions policy, and the broader threats against Myanmar by the George Bush/Tony Blair axis, are not actually based on concerns for human rights, even if some Congressional sponsors of the sanctions may base their support on those grounds. Rather, it is precisely because of the potential role of Myanmar, geographically and strategically, as the hub connecting South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Asia, especially China. The geopolitical planners now in power in Washington and London are committed to keeping the world divided, in classic colonial fashion, in order to extend their control over the world's mineral resources. Myanmar is a convenient target for keeping Southeast Asia, India, and China divided. The use of military or para-military forces against "soft" targets in geostrategic locations, as already demonstrated in Afghanistan and Iraq, is actively being considered, within the inner sanctums of the Bush Administration, for other locations in Asia, including the Philippines and Myanmar. Defeating the sanctions policy requires addressing that ugly reality.

A seminar at Georgetown University in Washington on Oct. 13, chaired by Georgetown's Dr. David Steinberg, focussed on the necessity of dealing with the needs of the 135 different ethnic groupings that make up the nation of

Myanmar, in any solution to the half-century battle to achieve national unity and sovereignty. Western scholars and prominent Myanmar statesmen—including Aye Aye Thant, the daughter of former UN Secretary General U Thant, and head of the U Thant Institute, and Prof. Nay Htun, formerly the director of the Asia Pacific region for the UN Development Program (UNDP), and now the director for Asia at the University for Peace—addressed the historic breakthrough of these past years in the achievement of cease-fire agreements between the government and the armed separatist movements among the ethnic minorities, and the importance of a successful outcome to the current Constitutional Convention.

Impact of the Sanctions

The discussion, however, returned repeatedly to the destructive impact of the sanctions. One participant noted that the U.S. sanctions had forced the shutdown of a large number of Yangon's textile plants, and that studies had shown that many of the laid-off employees, mostly young women, had been forced into the sex trade. With the Yangon economy slow, but the border areas booming, because of the pacification of the rebellions and the influx of Chinese investment in the north, these sex workers have moved north, carrying the HIV-AIDS crisis into the rural areas for the first time. This is the impact of those in the West promoting "human rights" in Myanmar.

Two issues often noted by proponents of the sanctions are that the Myanmar military government has refused to relinquish power to the National League for Democracy, which is said to have won the 1990 elections. For example, Benedict Rogers, a spokesman for Christian Solidarity Worldwide, a British intelligence operation which has long supported insurgencies against the Myanmar government, was given space in the *Wall Street Journal* on Oct. 6, where he wrote that "the regime itself is illegal, since it overwhelmingly lost the 1990 elections to the NLD." As Rogers well knows, but chooses to lie about, the 1990 elections were not elections for a new government, but for delegates to a Constitutional Convention—a fact which is easily verified by a review of the leading Western press from the weeks preceding the election.

That Constitutional Convention was in fact convened, between 1993-96, but was suspended after the NLD walked out. It has now been reconstituted. The NLD, although in-

vited, has refused to attend. Nonetheless, for the first time since winning independence from the British in 1948, all the ethnic minorities have come together to debate the nation's future.

Cracking Down on Drugs

A second issue raised by Myanmar's detractors is the accusation that the government is complicit in the drug trade. The Golden Triangle, which sits on the border region of Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and China, once produced the largest portion of the world's heroin. That honor now belongs to the "democracy" created in Afghanistan through U.S. military occupation, and the open U.S. cooperation with the Afghan drug lords. As for the supposedly "rogue state" of Myanmar, the United Nations Drug Office reported on Oct. 12 that Myanmar opium poppy cultivation dropped by 29% in the past year, and by 73% since 1996. Production of opium itself has fallen by 54% in the past year alone. This is the result of the peace deals forged by the military government with the ethnic drug lords, and the successful effort to transform their livelihood to useful production.

International Diplomacy

Yet another accusation from the enemies of peace and unity in Asia is that Myanmar is returning to isolation, rejecting contact with the "international community." Here again, the argument is specious. The removal from office of Foreign Minister Win Aung in September, and, on Oct. 19, of Prime Minister Khin Nyunt, has been portrayed as a turning inward, since these two were somewhat more open to contacts with the West. The impact of these changes in the government is not clear, but it is abundantly clear that Myanmar has not turned away from international diplomacy—only from accommodation to Washington and London dictates.

While the ASEM meeting demonstrated that Myanmar is increasingly integrating with its Southeast Asian and Chinese neighbors, President Than Shwe (considered a hardliner and a virtual recluse by the West) is embarking on an historic Oct. 24-28 visit to India. This trip will consolidate a new partnership between these neighbors, who were once forced into an unrequested union under the British Raj. On the agenda will be cooperation in pacifying the separatist rebels in the northwest Myanmar/Assam border region—precisely the area where the road and rail projects connecting India with Myanmar—and ultimately connecting Asia with Europe—are being constructed. The construction of this section of the southern route of the "Eurasian Land-Bridge" has already begun, with an \$800 million project funded by India and Thailand, to complete a modern road from India, through Myanmar, into Thailand. The same route will serve as part of the revived "Burma Road" from India to China. It is hoped that rail will follow.

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