

Viewing cable 04NEWDELHI6983, INDIA ENCOURAGES DEMOCRACY IN BURMA

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NEW DELHI 006983

SIPDIS

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TAGS PREL, PGOV, PHUM, PTER, SNAR, IN, BM, CN, India-Burma

SUBJECT: INDIA ENCOURAGES DEMOCRACY IN BURMA

REF: A. 10/23 CAMP-PYATT E-MAIL

[B](#). NEW DELHI 6881

Classified By: PolCouns Geoffrey Pyatt, Reasons 1.4 (B,D).

[1](#). (C) Summary: India underlined its concerns about the lack of democracy in Burma during the recent visit of Rangoon's military leader Than Shwe, with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh himself delivering the message, MEA Joint Secretary (South East Asia - I) Mitra Vashishta told us on SIPDIS November 1. The decision to encourage democracy in Rangoon reflects the GOI belief that India is best placed to help Burma reform, that Aung San Sui 's "time has come and gone," and that democracy will take root in Burma only through greater engagement and people-to-people ties. Vashishta cited the October 29-31 visit to New Delhi of UN Special Envoy for Burma Razali Ismail as evidence of India's resolve to stay engaged on democracy in Burma. The GOI would welcome US suggestions on how to best to promote democracy there, and has agreed to provide grants and limited military equipment to Rangoon in an attempt to encourage cooperation against anti-India insurgents located along the Indo-Burma border. However, there are no Indian plans to conduct joint military operations with the junta. PolCouns stressed our concerns about the safety and treatment of ASSK and the democratic opposition under Burma's new Prime Minister (ref A), and urged India to continue to press for democratic reform in Rangoon. End Summary.

Democracy

[2](#). (C) Democracy topped India's agenda for the October 24-29 visit of Burma's military leader Than Shwe, MEA Joint Secretary (South East Asia - I) Mitra Vashishta told PolCouns SIPDIS and Poloff on November 1. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh himself raised the issue with Than Shwe "in a much more intense way than could be expressed" in the media, she said, noting that India had decided to raise the issue of democracy with Burma despite potentially negative consequences for the relationship. Vashishta reported that New Delhi had to battle for the inclusion of a joint statement paragraph emphasizing India's desire to see "a stable, peaceful, prosperous and democratic Myanmar." She commented that the Burmese delegation was "willing to do anything" to have that paragraph removed, adding that the inclusion of the paragraph was a "coup for India." The final version of the document released

on October 29 "expressed support for national reconciliation and an early transition to democracy in Myanmar."

13. (C) Asked about New Delhi's plan to further encourage democracy in Burma, Vashishta responded that Rangoon considers India a democratic role model, and emphasized that the GOI has the "best credentials" to promote democracy there. She mused that democracy could only be established through grass-roots initiatives, and stressed that India would do "whatever it takes" to empower the people of Burma in this respect. Referring to the increased people-to-people ties between India and Pakistan, Vashishta said that the GOI plans to pursue a similar strategy with Burma by promoting culture and sports links between the two countries. "We are much less bothered by the situation in Burma than in Pakistan," she noted, adding that she would welcome US suggestions on how to encourage greater reform in Rangoon.

14. (C) According to Vashishta, democracy in Burma is too closely linked with the greatly respected Aung San Sui Kyi (ASSK), whose "day has come and gone." She said that Than Shwe had expressed a commitment to democracy during the visit, and speculated that he would be more apt to bring about democratic reform if he could do so without losing face. PolCouns underlined US concerns about the lack of democracy in Burma and expressed the hope that India would continue to press this issue with the junta.

Engaging Burma, Meeting India's Strategic Needs

15. (C) Describing the Than Shwe trip as "entirely devoted to India's interests," Vashishta stated that New Delhi decided to proceed with the visit, even after the ouster of former-PM Khin Nyunt because the GOI did not view the replacement of Nyunt as an indication of "which way the dust would fall" on democracy. The GOI believes the coup was an "internal struggle," she said, speculating that the junta may be somewhat fragile. As evidence, Vashishta observed that Than Shwe traveled with the wives of two other powerful generals, Thura Shwe Man and Soe Win, who she mused may have been used as "hostages" to ensure tranquillity among the generals in Rangoon during Than Shwe's absence.

16. (C) Vashishta reiterated India's belief that only constructive engagement of the military regime could bring about any meaningful change, saying sanctions have only isolated Burma, and have not encouraged democratic reforms there. Burma is so isolated that members of Than Shwe's delegation wondered whether they would have to "go nuclear" to get US attention, she remarked, noting the comparison to Pakistan. She emphasized that if India also isolates Burma, no one will be able to engage Rangoon on democracy or other issues.

17. (C) Flagging that the timing of UN Special Envoy for Burma Razali Ismail's October 29-31 visit to New Delhi was not coincidental, Vashishta expressed India's desire to work with the UN on Burma. However, she argued that the organization "has lost credibility" in the eyes of developing countries and should at least make an attempt to be more "pro-Myanmar." The EU is too "obvious, shabby, shortsighted and full of contradictions" to play a meaningful role in Burma, she argued, while Thailand takes a pro-active approach to Rangoon only "because one of their ministers wants to be the next UN Secretary General."

Counter-Terrorism Agreement

18. (C) Billing the Memorandum of Understanding on "Non-Traditional Security Issues" as an agreement on counter terrorism "whatever they call it," Vashishta said the MOU outlines Rangoon's obligations to crack-down on anti-India militants operating out of Burmese territory. The GOI does not believe that Rangoon is

fueling the insurgents to pressure New Delhi because "it is not in Burma's strategic interest," but New Delhi is growing increasingly concerned about insurgent activities in the border regions. The GOB agreed to move troops to the Indo-Burmese border "not because of their interests, but because some of India's interests are now tied up with theirs," Vashishta said, citing economic development as an example. She expressed optimism that Burma was taking India's request seriously, unlike in the past. She noted that Soe Win, Burma's new PM, had previously commanded forces along the border with India. PolCouns stressed our concerns about the safety and treatment of ASSK and the democratic opposition, given Soe Win's direct involvement in the May 30, 2003 attack on ASSK and her followers (ref A). Vashishta had different information, alleging that some of the opposition parties were hopeful about a near-term political opening.

No To Military Exercises, Yes To Grants

¶9. (C) Although the India-Burma joint statement on Than Shwe's visit mentions the "possibilities of expanding cooperation" in defense, Vashishta categorically stated that joint military exercises "are absolutely ruled out," saying this is "a big, firm no." She indicated the GOI could provide limited military equipment to Rangoon, "on par with what the rest of ASEAN provides," but is "very careful" when it comes to military cooperation with Burma.

¶10. (C) Vashishta confirmed plans to provide Burma with a USD 20 million dollar grant to be used for energy, gas, and upgrading refining facilities, and said the money would be used to entice Rangoon to reform. She explained that the junta would not receive the funds unless "they do certain things," saying that India hopes to "engage them (with the grant) and slowly lay down conditions for reform." She cast this as part of New Delhi's people-to-people strategy.

China

¶11. (C) Expressing concern about Chinese influence in Burma, Vashishta said that the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) has been "learning from the master about how to hoodwink the international community" on human rights. She said that China would like an Indian Ocean port and hopes to project its influence "everywhere India does." Vashishta argued that "what you hear about the PLA in Burma is only the tip of the iceberg," as US intelligence must know. Burmese engagement with India stems in part from Rangoon's belief that "China takes them for granted," she asserted.

Religion

¶12. (C) Commenting on the delegation's visit to several important Buddhist shrines in India, Vashishta noted that over the last three years, Than Shwe had repeatedly requested a pilgrimage to the sites and speculated that the religious journey was a major factor behind the trip. She claimed that this pilgrimage was not just aimed at burnishing the junta's Buddhist credentials, but rather was related to Than Shwe's personal sense of mortality. But she added, the Burmese military did not think they had done anything wrong, and do not need to atone for their sins.

Comment

¶13. (C) Led by Foreign Secretary Saran, a former Ambassador to Rangoon, the GOI has embarked on a major diplomatic initiative with Burma. India's policy toward the GOB is pragmatic, based largely on New Delhi's security interests, but also

reflects the GOI's desire eventually to see a democratic Burma to its east. India has welcomed US input about how best to encourage democracy there, presenting an opportunity that we should seize upon to expand the US-India regional dialogue to include developments in Rangoon.

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