

Viewing cable 08BEIJING3612, PRC: MFA OFFICIAL CALLS FOR PATIENCE ON BURMA

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIJING 003612

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SUBJECT: PRC: MFA OFFICIAL CALLS FOR PATIENCE ON BURMA

REF: USUN 829

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Aubrey Carlson. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

1. (C) Summary: China supports UN Special Advisor Gambari's mission to Burma and the United States is "too impatient" with Gambari's mission and the political transition process in Burma, according to MFA Burma, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam Division Deputy Director Chen Chen. Acknowledging that the planned 2010 elections in Burma will leave the military holding power, Chen said the elections will serve as "a soft landing" for the regime. Continuing economic woes in Burma are a result of U.S. sanctions, and as a "neighbor," China opposes sanctions on Burma. Chen said the Burmese regime is interested in improving relations with the United States. End Summary.

2. (C) In an informal meeting with PolOff September 18, MFA Asian Affairs Department Burma, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam Division Deputy Director Chen Chen said China supports the development of democracy, economic growth, and reconciliation in Burma. Where the United States and China part ways, he said, is in the method to attain these goals. He repeated the oft-invoked Chinese refrain that the United States is too impatient for change in Burma. He said the Burmese regime would not respond positively to increased pressure from the UN Security Council. Noting the 2010 elections are "only two

years away," Chen suggested that change in Burma will be a very gradual process.

Gambari Successful Because Regime Trusts Him

¶3. (C) Hewing closely to China's position on UN Special Advisor Ibrahim Gambari's August 18-23 trip to Burma (reftel), Chen called Gambari's trip a success because of the more positive attitude displayed by Burmese leadership, but added that Gambari was embarrassed by Aung San Suu Kyi's refusal to meet him. Chen said China will keep supporting Gambari's mission, because Gambari has gained the trust of the regime.

¶4. (C) In response to PolOff's observation that "a more positive attitude" does not constitute progress in solving the issues facing Burma, Chen said it was through the hard work of the international community, including the United States, that the regime specified a timeframe for the referendum on the draft Constitution and elections. He suggested that the international community's efforts also resulted in access for relief supplies after Cyclone Nargis (though he acknowledged that the unique circumstances of Nargis make Burma's actions in relation to the cyclone an unlikely predictor of future behavior). Agreeing that the 2010 elections will simply mean the current leadership retains power in the guise of a democracy, he said the elections will serve as a "soft landing" for the regime. PolOff responded that nothing in the regime's behavior to date indicated that it is interested in an actual transition to democracy.

U.S. Sanctions Cause Continuing Economic Problems

¶5. (C) Chen acknowledged that economic problems still exist in Burma and that the conditions that resulted in the turmoil of August-September 2007 have not been addressed, but he attributed ongoing difficulties more to U.S.-led international economic sanctions than to the regime's economic mismanagement and corruption. He asserted that U.S. sanctions do not help the situation and "it is not in the culture" of Asia for one neighbor to impose sanctions on another. In addition, China and Burma's other neighbors do not want the possible negative consequences of sanctions, including, for example, an economic collapse that would precipitate a flow of refugees. He added that he does not think Aung San Suu Kyi has any particular insights into economic issues, though he agreed that her leadership would attract the kind of economic talent that could assist Burma.

¶6. (C) Chen said that the minority issue is still outstanding, as a number of armed groups still pose a threat to stability, and that their activities in the drug trade are a constant "headache" for China.

Regime Interested in Improving Relations

17. (C) Deputy Director Chen said that the Burmese regime is

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interested in improving relations with the United States, but that as long as the United States demonizes the regime, the Burmese leadership will feel threatened and not respond in the way the United States wishes. Noting bilateral discussions held in China in June 2007, PolOff said the USG identified a number of steps the regime could take to indicate sincerity for improving relations, including the release of political prisoners. Chen suggested that the military leadership would face a dilemma if it released Aung San Suu Kyi, because her release would inevitably lead to popular agitation for her to assume power in Burma, which would mean either the military would voluntarily step down and face heavy retribution or remain in power by violently clamping down on the population. The military would like to avoid both scenarios, Chen said. PolOff stated that accommodating the interests of the military regime would not promote the interests of Burma, and that China should focus more on the long-term interests of the people of Burma.

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