

25/04/1997

Asean won't be pressured

THE US announcement of economic sanctions against Myanmar does not come as a surprise at all after the administration's warning to that nation last week. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, criticising the Myanmar military government for failing to improve human rights, said the "leaders there are on notice that unless the clouds of repression are lifted, they will face investment sanctions under US law".

Not surprising too, is that the latest US measure already encountered early setbacks when two of its close allies in this region, Japan and Australia, said they will not follow the sanctions move. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's strong reaction to the US decision sends a clear message that Asean has its own timetable of managing its affairs and will not be pressured by external forces. Malaysia, the current chairman of the Asean Standing Committee, will talk with other nations of the seven-member grouping, he said when asked if Asean would protest against the US move. Dr Mahathir's statement is also seen as asserting the independence of Southeast Asian nations to pursue development at their own pace and choice.

In fact, one gets the impression that Malaysia is resentful of the US action, coming as it does just a little over a month before the Asean Foreign Ministers are scheduled to meet in Kuala Lumpur to discuss when to admit Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos into Asean. Dr Mahathir's categorical response that the sanctions will in no way affect the timing of Myanmar's entry and that Asean "will work very hard" towards getting that country into the grouping is no doubt a repudiation of the US move.

Dr Mahathir's simultaneous call on the US not to impose sanctions is consistent with Asean's policy of non-interference and "constructive engagement" with Myanmar in getting that country to implement gradual reforms. Isolation will not contribute to ensuring the region's peace and stability. US sanctions, like the Helms-Burton Act in a bid to isolate Cuba, have been much criticised, even by its trading partners and deemed a violation of international law by the Organisation of American States. Such moves are also viewed as interference in the internal affairs of the affected nations and infringement of their sovereignty, such rights being enshrined in the UN Charter. The latest US move will certainly not help US businesses and has been attacked by its nationals. In the March visit to Southeast Asia, the group of more than 100 US business executives spent much of the time advocating an end to US unilateral sanctions that they say have hurt business in the region, according to a New York Times article.

In the final analysis, it is important to note that the US decision on Myanmar, like similar moves against other countries, will not work and are counter-productive to its attempt to promote democracy and growth around the world. Apart from engendering anger as is seen in the response of the Myanmar Government, the sanctions will not help the ordinary people of Myanmar. If the US wants to sustain its "global leadership" and be "the most respected nation", as Albright has emphasised, it should take a leaf from Asean's way of handling its affairs. Asean's ability in tackling problems has been much lauded recently by a US foreign policy expert on this region. Isolation, sanctions and other arm-twisting actions of expediency will not earn the US more friends.

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