

Uphill task awaits UN envoy in Myanmar

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Bt - 9 OCT 2000

BANGKOK, Sun: United Nations (UN) special envoy Tan Sri Razali Ismail, starting a four-day visit to Myanmar tomorrow, has the mammoth task of trying to break the deadlock between the military junta and the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD).

The veteran Malaysian diplomat's visit comes against the backdrop of the junta's renewed crackdown on the NLD despite fierce international criticism.

NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi and other party elders remain under de facto house arrest since they were prevented from travelling to the northern city of Mandalay on September 22.

The junta has not publicly said whether Razali will be able to meet Suu Kyi, but observers said it was highly unlikely he would make the trip without being guaranteed a meeting with the Nobel Peace prize laureate.

"If he comes and does not see her, he would certainly discredit himself," an analyst in Yangon said.

Razali will discuss "continuing violations of human rights in Myanmar", and report back to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, UN spokesman Fred Eckhard announced last Friday.

Myanmar's stubborn insistence of non-interference in its internal affairs does not bode well for Razali's second visit under UN auspices. During his first trip in July he apparently made little headway in restarting relations between the NLD and the junta.

Neither does the junta's cancellation of a visit by an European Union delegation scheduled for the end of this month.

Over the past week state media has fiercely defended Myanmar's sovereignty, saying any change must come without bullying by western powers, who it said, were in league with the NLD to destroy "peace and stability" in the country.

But some diplomats and analysts say cautiously that the junta might be more receptive during the October 9-12 talks because of the mounting external pressure.

In particular they believe Razali's nationality could be crucial if he is to persuade the junta to soften their stance.

Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohammed was the driving force behind Association of South-

East Asian Nations (Asean) decision to admit Myanmar as its ninth member state in 1997.

"Razali is the best option because he understands their sensitivity and way of thinking," said Mr Laxanachantorn Laohaphan, head of the international organisations department at Thailand's Foreign Ministry.

A political scientist and longtime Myanmar watcher in Bangkok, who asked not to be named, added: "There is a real chance this time of a breakthrough . . . because at the moment the junta is faced with a lot of concerns, in particular the threat of International Labour Organisation (ILO) sanctions."

In an unprecedented move, the ILO voted in June to call for diplomatic sanctions by all 175 members states against the junta if use of forced labour did not show signs of abating by November 30.

But the political scientist warned not to expect immediate or significant change: "The junta has always spoken toughly and it won't stop now. But YOU have to look behind the scenes and look at what is not said."

"They (the junta) are looking for opportunities to change but in their own style and without losing face," she added.

However, diplomats in Yangon cautioned against predicting the junta's response.

"You never know which way the junta will jump," said one diplomat.

The NLD won a landslide general election victory in 1990, but the junta has never recognised the result and is accused by foreign critics and human rights groups of severe repression of its opponents.

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