

Razali's charms lost on Myanmar generals

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by Patrick Chalmers

KUALA LUMPUR: The second anniversary of Tan Sri Razali Ismail's appointment as United Nations Special Envoy to Myanmar fell this month, with his coaxing of the military junta towards democracy having yielded little.

The top UN diplomat returned to Yangon on Tuesday, trying once more to persuade Yangon generals to move forward in painfully slow national reconciliation talks.

Razali's arrival in a country condemned internationally for crushing democracy, peddling drugs and using prisoners as slave labour, marks a crossroads for a man chosen for his Asian and diplomatic pedigree.

The tall, affable 52-year-old enjoys strong support from regional and Western countries alike, but few people know what impact he's had as yet.

US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs James A. Kelly met Razali here this month.

"We compared notes on what we didn't know," was how Kelly characterised the meeting, though he saw Razali's return to Myanmar as a good sign.

Razali's early warm words and optimism have turned to frustration as months passed with no major prisoner releases or freedom from house arrest for opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

"It's moving along, maybe not as fast as it should," the diplomat told Reuters in rare off-the-cuff remarks in February.

Since then, the release and amnesty of several dozen prisoners was followed by reports of a coup plot in March and postponement of a

Razali visit due around that time.

Activists in Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), which won Myanmar's last election in 1990 but was barred from power, are getting restless at the slow progress.

More than 1,000 political prisoners remain in jail, and the government is silent on what talks have achieved - if anything.

Skepticism about the generals' good faith, around since the start of the latest initiative, has mounted.

Western diplomats in Yangon say Razali may resign if this week's trip yields nothing, a prediction seen here as premature though not impossible.

More likely for the former UN General Assembly president would be a period spent as a diplomatic conduit and good guy while the United States, Europe and Japan hike economic pressure.

The policy of engagement has yielded little, with no major prisoner releases

If that tack falls flat, he may just admit defeat and quit.

"If anybody can do it, it's Razali," said a Western diplomat here, who asked not to be identified.

"If he doesn't succeed, I think it's 'Mission Impossible'."

Razali has better credentials than most to tease results from a xenophobic Myanmar regime, mixing 10 years of experience as Malaysia's permanent UN representative with top-level diplomatic postings in Asia and the West.

During more than three decades in Malaysia's Ministry of Foreign

Affairs, Razali's assignments took him to Britain, France, India and Laos as well as various senior UN jobs ranging from security to the environment.

"Everybody is aware of Razali's conclusions for the reform of the UN, which are still the basis for discussions and negotiations years after he left," the diplomat said.

Known among New York-based diplomats at the time as bright, conscientious and controversial, Razali cut a refreshing dash in his maiden speech as General Assembly president.

"Delays and long lunches, which lead to more delays, at enormous cost, are over," he said. "So too, I trust, the torture of long, unfocused speeches."

Razali, who avoids divulging the substance of his talks with the generals, enjoys the ear of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who is one of the few voices Yangon's rulers heed.

The veteran Southeast Asian leader championed Myanmar's entry into the Asean in 1997, defying calls by Washington and European capitals for a delay intended to pressure the generals to change.

But the policy of engagement has yielded little, and Razali's patience may be wearing thin.

"He is a free man. He doesn't say it but I think he's a little bit fed up with these generals," the diplomat said.

"They do not keep their promises, they say something, they do something else," he added.

A keen golfer, businessman, environmentalist and academic, who is married with three children, Razali has lots else to do.

"If he resigns, that means nothing can be expected soon." Reuters