

Burma: UN visit raises hope Generals may be more flexible

LARRY JAGAN

THE United Nations envoy's visit to Burma has raised hopes that the ruling junta may be prepared to renew contact with the main opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD). During his three-day visit, the envoy, the under-secretary for political affairs, Ibrahim Gambari, met the detained pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, the first time she has met anyone other than her doctor, in more than two years.

The NLD leader was in good health and spirits, Gambari told diplomats. She re-iterated her willingness to be part of a dialogue process with Burma's military leaders on the country's political future, he said.

The visit was arranged at the last minute, after the UN envoy met the regime's top leader Senior General Than Shwe and several other key generals, including the number two General Maung Aye and the Prime Minister Soe Win in the country's new capital Pyinmana, some four hundred kilometres north of Rangoon.

The visit was a concession to the UN envoy in the hope that it would help prevent Burma's being put on the Security Council. During their meeting with Gambari, the generals were primarily concerned about the UN Security Council discussing Burma, according to diplomats based in Rangoon.

Gambari told Burma's generals that his hands were tied and they would have to do something to convince the international community that they were serious about introducing democratic reform and respect human rights. He strongly suggested that the regime should immediately release some key political prisoners, especially the aging journalist Win Tin and the labour activist Su Nu Nway.

Gambari is expected to brief the Security Council on his return to New York after reporting back to the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. The US is continuing to push the UN Security Council to review the situation in Burma as a matter of urgency. Last December the Council held a closed-door briefing on Burma, at which Gambari presented a very depressing view of the situation there.

Since then the junta has been pre-occupied with trying to prevent the UN Security Council discussing Burma. They have sought the support of both Beijing and Moscow -- two members of the permanent five council members with veto powers -- in their campaign to deflect the UN's interest. Both China and Russia have told Rangoon that they support Burma's position in principle but that the military regime should help them to defend them.

Behind the scenes the Chinese have been urging the junta to do

more to engage the international community, according to a government official in Beijing. If you want us to support you at the UN then give the UN access, the Chinese have reportedly told Burma's top generals. Gambari's visit is even likely to have been the result of the Chinese government advice.

The envoy also raised the UN's concern about the new government restrictions on international organisations and UN agencies' activities, including the inability of the International Labour Organisation's representative in Rangoon to carry out his duties and the official interference that caused the International Committee of the Red Cross to stop their prison visits more than six months ago.

According to diplomats in Rangoon, Gambari also raised general human rights issues with the generals, including the recent crackdown on the NLD and the attacks on the ethnic rebels Karen that has caused more than ten thousand villagers to flee their homes.

"There is no doubt that the UN envoy's meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi was an important concession, but we will have to wait and see whether it's a sign of more to come," a western diplomat told The Daily Star. Asian diplomats were more optimistic and are confident that a serious dialogue between the military and the pro-democracy parties may now be in the offing.

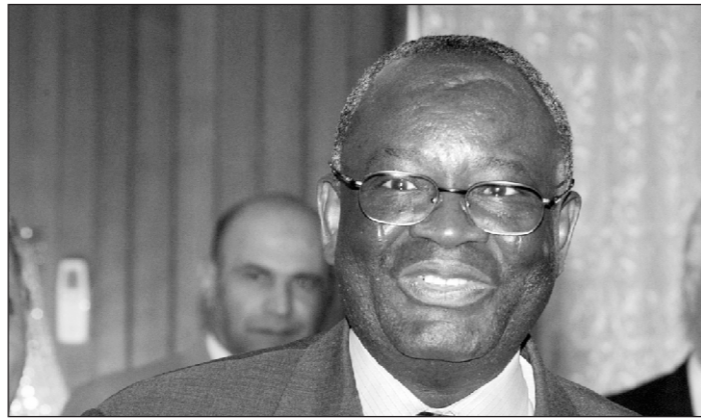
Gambari and General Than Shwe reportedly did not directly discuss the issue of whether the UN could renew its facilitating role in the country's national reconciliation process.

The Secretary General's special envoy for Burma, the former Malaysian diplomat Razali Ismail resigned earlier this year in frustration after he had been continually denied access to Burma since early in March 2004. He had been a major go-between in the dialogue process between the generals and the opposition, the NLD, including Aung San Suu Kyi, and the ethnic groups. He was also instrumental in Aung San Suu Kyi's release from house arrest the last time she was detained in May 2002.

When Ali Alatas visited Burma last August -- as the SG's special envoy on UN reform and the millennium development goals, Than Shwe told him in no uncertain terms that Razali was no longer welcome in Burma because he was the regime regarded him as dishonest and unreliable.

Mr Razali tells us one thing and then tells the SG something totally different, Than Shwe told Ali Alatas, according to UN official who wanted to remain anonymous.

But since his last visit to Rangoon in 2004, it had been clear that the UN envoy was not going to be allowed back. Than Shwe believed Mr Razali was not impartial and was on the side of the lady-



Aung San Suu Kyi, Ibrahim Gambari, General Than Shwe.

- a junta euphemism for Aung San Suu Kyi, according to a former senior Burmese military officer. Mr Razali was also seen as being too close to the former prime minister and intelligence chief, General Khin Nyunt who was purged in October 2004 and later given a suspended forty-four year jail sentence.

So far the UN has not replaced Razali and there are divided opinions within the UN whether he should be. In the wake of Gambari's visit, Kofi Annan will now have to decide whether it is worth replacing him at all.

Asian diplomats at the UN are very keen that a new special envoy is appointed, according to sources in New York. ASEAN in particular strongly support the former Philippines resident Fidel Ramos.

"Fidel Ramos is the perfect candidate: he is Asian, he is a former general and military commander, he is a former head of state, and best of all he is several years senior to General Than Shwe," a senior South East Asian

diplomat told the Daily Star on condition of anonymity.

But there are those in the UN who believe the envoy need not be an Asian. In fact Gambari told a senior colleague within the UN that he wanted the job himself. After his successful mission to Rangoon, he may be well placed to play a role in the future.

In the meantime though, the ball is in Rangoon's court. The generals now have to show their sincerity about opening up to the international community by laying-off the NLD, releasing key political prisoners and allowing more access for humanitarian aid, according to diplomats in Rangoon.

"There is a real danger that the envoy's visit was just another well-managed publicity coup to deflect international pressure and buy more time for the regime," said a Rangoon-based European diplomat.

Larry Jagan is an internationally renowned Burma specialist.

Continuing price spiral: How to tame it?

The prices have not gone up in a day and there is no quick fix either. There are, however, measures which may give results quickly. Of them, freeing retail and wholesale markets as well as movement of goods by land and water across the country from illegal collection of tolls by party cadres, organised goons and members of governmental agencies would reduce prices immediately by a few percentage points.

GHULAM RAHMAN

DURING four and half years of BNP-led four-party alliance (FPA) government Prime Minister Khaleda Zia removed two Commerce Ministers and an advisor from their jobs ostensibly for failure to curb price spiral. Soon after coronation new Commerce Minister visited the Karwan Bazar kitchen market to check prices himself and highlight the priority he would attach to price stability. Since then prices are on the rise unabatedly and the Commerce Minister recently made a veil attempt to shift partly the responsibility for price increases to the shoulders of Awami League by saying in a gathering of business leaders in the FBCCI that price spiral is due to BNP-AL confrontation.

Alfred Marshall developed the theory of supply and demand to explain the rise and fall in prices. When the supply is more than the demand the prices fall and when demand exceeds supply the prices rise. Perhaps taking a cue from it the PM and her son propagated in public gatherings for sometime that prices are increasing because people can afford more goods and services under FPA rule. BNP Secretary General also aired the same theme by saying that with economic progress price rises. Quantity Theory of Money stipulates that prices increase when too much money chase too few goods. Therefore, the central bank has embarked on restraining monetary expansion, particularly for the private sector. The Finance Minister with all his acumen in accounting found a rational for price spiral in the increases in prices in the international market. I am not here to question their wisdom. The explanation whether demand-supply gap or expansion of money supply and rise in international prices propelling the price spiral or not is of no consequence to general public, all are indicative of government's failure to take measures to counter them timely.

Matching demand with adequate supply is the key to ensure price stability. In the aftermath of 1998 flood the apprehension was ripe that the country would confront serious food shortage and a devastating famine was imminent, which may claim as many as 200,000 lives. AL government allowed duty free import of food grains. Further, they ensured adequate supply of agricultural credit and inputs throughout the country. The farmers met the deficit shortly by increasing production. Timely interventions and coordinated actions of the ministries of finance, commerce, agriculture, industry, food and disaster manage-

ment not only averted an impending crisis, the country achieved food autarky soon.

A former FPA commerce minister once opined that in free market economy commerce ministry has little to do in arresting prices. He has a point, but this is not the whole story. A newly appointed minister once asked me what would make him a successful Commerce Minister. My reply was, "Sir, good relations with your cabinet colleagues, particularly with the Finance Minister". Commerce Ministry by itself in most cases can hardly influence rise and fall in prices, but a concerted governmental action can. Most items of our daily necessities -- rice, pulses, vegetables, edible oil, salt, sugar, onion, etc. -- are produced in the country. The shortages are met with imports. There could be natural as well as man-made interventions to disrupt the supply chains. For example, salt is a very sensitive item. Country's entire requirement of salt can be met with production in the coastal areas. But in an unfavourable weather serious shortages may occur.

Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC) monitor supply of inputs as well as volume of salt production. It also provides impetus for productivity and quality improvements through technological innovations and adoption by the farmers. Bangladesh Rifles is there to stop illegal smuggling from neighbouring countries. NBR is responsible to ensure minimum tariff protection to domestic producers maintaining a fine balance between producers' and consumers' interests. The Commerce Ministry allows import when there is production shortfall. The banks provide credits to producers and traders. Ministries of home, communications and shipping ensure unhindered and uninterrupted movements of supplies.

The production, processing and distribution of salt are in the private sector. Profit motive is their guiding principle. A crisis situation may provide one group or another opportunity to profit. There are many market players. The free market economy is complex, but the government has the authority and the means to mould and manipulate it. It is the responsibility of the Ministry of Commerce to monitor carefully the price situation, identify signs and causes of unusual price movements well in time and either initiate or pursue concerned ministries and departments to take corrective measures.

A former President used to check prices, particularly of cereals every day and ensured that coarse rice prices remain within the purchasing capacity of ordinary citizens through

out his long tenure. Price stability was a prime concern of Sheikh Hasina when she was Prime Minister. The country witnessed unprecedented price stability during her time. Prime Minister Khaleda Zia has been showing some interest in price situation of late. The other day she called several ministers to her office to discuss unabated price spiral and reportedly emphasised the need to contain prices before election. Soon after, at the conclusion of a follow up meeting with business leaders, Commerce Minister declared that prices will come down by June next. Similar pronouncements of his predecessor proved hollow in the past. I wish that the minister, who was a star footballer, would succeed in hitting his goal posts through.

The minister did not divulge how he will bring down the prices. In any case, The Shamokal, a vernacular daily in its May 18 issue listed several of them. It seems tariff reduction and import and distribution of essential commodities by the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB) are high on his list of contemplated actions. They may help to an extent but unlikely to have a big impact. Business syndicates will gain at the expense of the exchequer from tariff reductions and import and distribution of goods through TCB would push prices up in a likely scenario of appointment of party cadres as distributors. The minister also intends to fix prices consulting the traders. Price fixing without ensuring adequate supply simply would not work.

The prices have not gone up in a day and there is no quick fix either. There are, however, measures which may give results quickly. Of them, freeing retail and wholesale markets as well as movement of goods by land and water across the country from illegal collection of tolls by party cadres, organised goons and members of governmental agencies would reduce prices immediately by a few percentage points. However, most people perceive that the prices are exorbitant because supply and distribution of many items are controlled by powerful business syndicates with close links with ruling party high-ups. Trade liberalisation has had some unintended consequences in Bangladesh. Most essential commodities have low price elasticity. With small variations in supply their prices can be manipulated widely. Over the last decade and a half in an environment of liberal trade regime the country witnessed the rise of a few big import syndicates. They control supply of most essential items through bulk import and hoarding.

Taking advantage of opaque tariff classifications and lax banking procedures with willing cooperation

of a section of customs and bank officials and political patronage some of them have amassed large fortunes and have gained the strength to control the market. Piling of a few thousand custom revenue cases for disposal at the High Court is indicative of their power and influence. By quickly disposing these cases off the government can send a message that their hay days of honeymoon are over. The government would be able to tame the price spiral only if it succeeds in regulating or breaking the oligopoly without disruption of the supplies.

Bangladesh has in last two decades progressed economically, but at the same time its society has lost much of its harmony and cohesion and has become fragmented and is now suffering from unprecedented internal conflicts and tensions. The efficacy of liberal trade regime and free market economic policies should be reviewed in the light of their social impacts. Increases in national income and wealth are of paramount importance but economic gains would be jeopardised any time if the distributive justice is ignored. About 50 percent of 140 million citizens of Bangladesh, after 35 years of independence, are still languishing in abject poverty of less than a dollar income per day. The number of ultra poor now almost is one third of the total population. The income inequality between the rich and the poor has increased manifold. The income of the top 5 percent of population compared to the bottom 5 percent is 84 times higher now from less than 20 times before 1990.

The Transparency International has indexed Bangladesh most corrupt country in the world for five consecutive years since 2001. Political system has become a handy tool for personal aggrandisement and enrichment. Money and muscle power has engulfed it totally. The country is also witnessing unprecedented rise in religious fundamentalism and terrorism. The pro-rich hand off laissez faire approach the FPA government is pursuing in its economic management is at the root of many of these malaises including the price spiral. What is needed is sincere engagement of the government in protecting citizens' interests by its judicious interventions in preference to narrow business interests of a few, combating corruption and bringing accountability and transparency in its own dealings. Only then it would be possible for the commerce minister to bring down the prices for the benefit of common people.

Ghulam Rahman is former Secretary, Government of Bangladesh.

NURSING IN BANGLADESH

Helping the ailing to be hale and hearty

With appropriate training, facilities and opportunities, nurses can make significant contributions towards health policies as well as towards general development thrusts that the Government is committed to, including ensuring healthcare for all the people of Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, although the nursing profession has yet to receive its due status and remuneration, there has been remarkable development in both nursing education and services.

AKHTAR BANU

NURSING is recognised all over the world as one of the vital components of all healthcare systems. Nursing personnel is one of the most important categories of health manpower in the delivery of health services in both hospitals and communities. Nurses are the important members of the health professions and have great potential in the tasks of delivering health services to the population.

The unique functions of the nurse, in addition to giving patients skilled bedside nursing care, are to coordinate the activities of all health personnel regarding patients' care, to conduct field assessment of patients' overall situation, and to be sure that patients are referred to the proper place for services. With appropriate training, facilities and opportunities, nurses can make significant contributions towards health policies as well as towards general development thrusts that the Government is committed to, including ensuring healthcare for all the people of Bangladesh.

In Bangladesh, although the nursing profession has yet to receive its due status and remuneration, there has been remarkable development in both nursing education and services.

Before partition, in East Bengal there were only three Junior Nursing Schools. After the partition in 1947, only about 50 nurses opted to come to what was then East Pakistan from India. Apprentice nurses and nursing attendants were employed to run most of the hospital services. In 1947, the first Senior Nursing School was opened at Dhaka Medical College Hospital. A British nurse at that time worked as the Matron and also served as Superintendent of Nursing Services and as the Registrar, East Pakistan Nursing Council. Bangladeshi nurses now hold all these positions. The East Pakistan Nursing Council, separated from the Bengal Nursing Council at partition. Eight women were sent to London in 1949 for their Nursing training. Most of them later took up leadership position in nursing profession.

The Junior Nursing Schools were abolished in 1960. Two more Senior Nursing Schools were opened in 1963. The number of students who sought admission in the nursing schools during this period was very low. Young Muslim women were very reluctant to come out from their homes and to accept the nursing profession as their career. Nurse leaders through "nurses week" activities including slides show, pamphlets, and talks in the girls schools tried to attract more young women into the nursing profession, with good result. The Trained

Nurses Association of Pakistan (TNAP) held a number of conferences and seminars during this period to help the nurses with their professional development and in increasing nurses' pay scale and continuing education.

In 1977, the Directorate of Nursing Services (DNS) was established by a Presidential order as a separate Directorate within the Ministry of Health and Population Control. Mrs. Rahima Khatoun was the first Director of Nursing Services. This event was another landmark in the history of Bangladesh Nursing. Since then development projects, such as the construction of nursing school building and revisions of the basic nursing curriculum have been carried out.

In the same year the College of Nursing became affiliated with the University of Dhaka. Since the 1977-78 sessions, the College of Nursing has been giving BSc degree in Nursing and in Public Health Nursing.

The one-year post basic diploma course in administration and teaching continued to be offered by the College of Nursing. In 1980, a one-year diploma course in community health nursing was begun with the intention to materialise the decentralised program of the Government for health services and to increase nurses' involvement in Primary Healthcare.

seats for nurses was increased due to socio-economic and cultural reasons that resulted in more young women coming out and taking general education. Nurses' pay scale was raised. Matrons of Hospitals and principals of Schools of Nursing were given first class gazetted status.

The Bangladesh Nurses' Association (BNA) was established in 1972 as a professional organisation separated from the Trained Nurses Association of Pakistan. The BNA played an important role in nursing professional development and in increasing nurses' pay scale and continuing education.

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In 1981, two additional Schools of Nursing in District Hospitals and 18 Schools of Nursing at Sub-Division level were opened. Long and short courses offering in-service and continuing education in specialised areas were organised throughout the country. Nurses were being sent abroad for training and on study tours.

Off-Shore Masters course started with the help of Adelaide University, Australia to produce Master Degree Holder. Nursing Research Cell has been established at the College of Nursing. Nurses were gradually serving in remote areas of the country. 4 posts of Division Assistant Director of Nursing Services (ADNS) and 64 posts of District Public Health Nursing (DPHN) were created. An ADNS in each of the four Divisions is in charge of supervising nurses in her Division. Nurses had BSc Degree in Public Health Nursing have been placed as DPHN to supervise in Upazilla Health Complexes and in the community as well as serve as Sister Tutors in

Schools of Nursing in the Districts. Nurses who have completed the BSc Degree in Nursing at the College of Nursing are involve in teaching in school of Nursing.

The Bangladesh Nursing Council (BNC) is the registering and regulating body for nurses in Bangladesh. All the nurses of Bangladesh must be evaluated by and registered with the BNC before they are eligible to practice nursing. The BNC also is responsible for the registration of all foreign nurses working in Bangladesh. The BNC maintains liaison and collaborates with its sister nursing registration bodies throughout the world, such as the Indian Nurses registration Board, the UKCC in England, and the States Registration Boards in the United States, for the purposes of reciprocity and accreditation. Ms. Zohra Khatun was the first registrar.

Now many more young women are interested in taking up nursing as their profession. There are 38 Government Schools of Nursing and 6 Schools of Nursing are attached to the private hospitals, a

total of 44 Schools of Nursing in Bangladesh.

The Nursing Education Programme is producing one professional category of nurses, the Senior Registered Nurse (SRN). The duration of education is four years, three years of general nursing and one year of midwifery (Orthopaedic/Paediatrics for male students, at present 10% seats are reserved for male students).

Total registered Nurses at present are approximately 21,000 (about 15,000 are in Govt Sector).

Nursing in Bangladesh has had continuous material and/or technical support and assistance for the development of nursing services and education programmes from a number of international organisations including WHO, UNICEF, UNDP, UNCDF, World Bank, British Council, UNFPA, USAID, DANIDA, UNESCO and ICN. WHO is providing continuous maximum support.

The Bangladesh Nurses Association (BNA) continues to function as the recognised professional organisation for nursing in Bangladesh. The BNA is a member of the Commonwealth Nurses Federation (CNF). In 1986, BNA was elected to membership of the International Council of Nurses (ICN) that is an honour for Bangladesh and recognition of the growth of nursing in Bangladesh.

The Directorate of Nursing Services under the Health Wing of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare in coordination with the Directorate General of Health Services is responsible for the overall planning and development of nursing services and nursing education in the country and is administratively responsible for the appointment, promotion, transfer, and disciplinary action for nurses



and supporting staff in schools of nursing and in hospitals. There is government sanction for four lac taka every year to reward excellent nurses for their outstanding performance.

Nursing education and services in Bangladesh has been primarily institution oriented. Now nursing education and services are becoming more community-oriented. A major curriculum revision developed with the technical assistance of WHO Senior Nurse Educator implemented in 1990, and kept revising then on. In 2004 the basic nursing curriculum has been revised with the technical support from the Prince of Songkla University, Thailand which is going to be implemented in 2006.

Nurses are now working up to the Upazilla level. There is a need to create posts at the Union levels to deliver primary health care services.

The National Education Commission is updating the education system throughout the country, including medical and nursing education. The Parliamentary Committee on Health Manpower Planning is continually studying health facilities in urban and rural areas and needs for and functions of all categories of health personnel. The DNS and BNA in response to request from this Parliamentary Committee submit recommendations for nursing manpower development in Bangladesh.

Akhtar Banu is Ex-Deputy Director of Nursing Services.