'Bangladesh should give bipartisan support to the Burmese democracy movement'

The lack of knowledge and apparent lack of interest in Bangladesh about the atrocious human rights record and contempt for democracy of the ruling military junta in neighbouring Burma is shocking. Burmese opposition NLD leader, Tint Swe, explains to Ahmede Hussain why we should be more concerned with the goings-on next door and what we can do about it

Forum: What do you think Bangladesh, Burma's next-door neighbour, can do to improve the situation in the country?

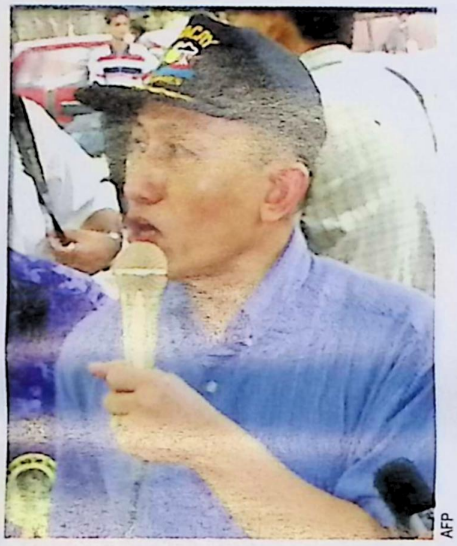
Tint Swe: Bangladesh and all neighbours of Burma should join other international efforts which are rallying around the UN mechanism aiming for national reconciliation and democratic transformation.

Bilateral issues could be better resolved with a responsible government. Moreover, Bangladesh should pronounce that cross-border flow of refugees and small arms, illicit drugs, and grave diseases routed through Burma are a threat to the region, causing huge burden for a poor and highly populated country.

The Bangladesh government can also play a positive role at various international forums, including UN, ILO, IPU, NAM, Saarc, Bimstec, etc. to support democratization.

The Bangladesh embassy in Rangoon should have regular consultations with leaders of NLD (National League for Democracy) and ethnic political parties. Trade unions should take serious note of the forced labour issue being taken up by ILO. Human rights organizations in Bangladesh should join other international human rights groups in condemnation of rampant abuses committed by the Burmese army.

Bangladeshi youth, women and students should support the non-violent efforts being carried out selflessly by Burmese students inside the country. The Bangladesh media should take the example of the Thai media to cover news from her neighbours. Like parties in the United States, Bangladesh should give bipartisan support to the Burmese democracy movement.



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We see that several multi-nationals are still doing business with the government led by the junta. What is your response to their activities?

Our position is that this is not the right time to do business in Burma because there is no trickle-down effect for the general population since the people are becoming poorer and poorer, though multi-national companies have been doing business for nearly two decades.

The regime spent 3.91% of GDP on military expenditure, while health expenditure is only 0.61% and education expenditure only 2.22%. This shows that all revenue from foreign investments is fueling the military dictatorship.

To prosper, trade and business are required to support emergence of an accountable government in Burma. The people of Burma will never forget the negative effects of exploitation caused by unchecked and unpopular business deals with this regime. The people see that those who are doing business this time are supporting the regime. This legitimate fact should be seriously considered for long-term foreign policy formulation.

Do you think UN-led sanctions can change the situation?

At this stage we are not expecting or demanding sanctions from the UN, but we are seeking dialogue, and we regard the regime as a dialogue partner. We don't want the people to suffer more because of the bad regime. All actions must be conducive to a peaceful solution.