

Darkness descends on Burma's Lady by the Lake

The Burmese authorities are so worried by the possibility that the UN may bow to western pressure to step up sanctions and other measures against the regime, that they have launched a diplomatic offensive at the United Nations in New York and many of the world's capital to deflect international pressure.

LARRY JAGAN

BURMA'S charismatic pro-democracy leader, Aung San Suu Kyi is set to remain in detention for at least another five years, according to diplomats based in Rangoon. Her trial will conclude soon in yet another secret session inside Insein prison. Meanwhile the international outcry and protests throughout the world, since she was arrested and charged in May, shows no signs of subsiding.

In fact General Than Shwe's master-plan to make sure the country's iconic democracy leader is in no position to "sabotage" his scheme, intended to introduce a civilian government dominated by the military after next year's scheduled elections, has badly backfired.

Instead of a quiet trial and sentencing, the international community is up in arms. "With one fell swoop, Than Shwe has undermined his own strategy of trying to sideline Aung San Suu Kyi," a senior western diplomat who knows the opposition leader well told the Daily Star. "There is now an international furore now that we haven't seen since Aung San Suu Kyi was detained six years ago. Than Shwe's actions have proved once again that she remains in everyone's mind inside and outside the country as Burma's real leader."

The Burmese authorities are so worried by the possibility that the UN may bow to western pressure to step up sanctions and

other measures against the regime, that they have launched a diplomatic offensive at the United Nations in New York and many of the world's capital to deflect international pressure. Although the Security Council adopted a weakened press statement more than a week ago voicing concern over Aung San Suu Kyi's trial and calling for the release of all political prisoners, the regime knows that a guilty verdict later this week will only fuel demands for tougher action against them at the UN.

Already Burma's generals have realised that their treatment of its pro-democracy leader has put increased pressure on them at international and regional ministerial gatherings. The issue dominated the Asian and European foreign ministers meeting in Hanoi a week ago and again at EU-ASEAN foreign ministers summit in Phnom Penh later in the week. The Burmese foreign minister skipped both meetings because he wanted to avoid being criticised and left it to the deputy foreign minister Maung Myint to deal with the issue.

Again on the weekend, at an international defence ministers' gathering in Singapore, Burma's deputy defence minister, Major General Aye Myint who is attending the security conference because General Than Shwe, who is both the country's top general and the defence minister, has refused to attend international meetings for nearly six years now to avoid being chastised about the situation in the

country felt it necessary to defend his government's actions against Aung San Suu Kyi.

"The legal action against Aung San Suu Kyi is merely the internal affairs of Myanmar, taking action through its legal system in accordance with domestic law," the deputy defence minister told the annual forum of defence ministers, annual forum of defence ministers, academics, analysts and experts.

"If offenders are not (prosecuted), anarchy will prevail, and there will be breach of peace and security," Maj-Gen Aye Myint said. She is guilty of "committing a cover-up of the truth by her failure to report an illegal immigrant," he added.

Aung San Suu Kyi is facing five years in prison if she is convicted of the charges that she broke the conditions of her current house arrest by allowing an uninvited visitor, an American Vietnam war vet John William Yettaw, who secretly swam across the lake to her back door earlier this month, to stay and gave him food and drink. She insists she is innocent. "I am not guilty because I have not committed any crime," Suu Kyi said when she gave her testimony to the court more than a week ago, according to her lawyer.

The opposition leader is accused of accepting books and other materials from her guest, who originally swam to her residence last November and left the gifts then, including a religious text of his faith, the Book of Mormons, two black robes worn by Muslims, sunglasses and a flashlight. Aung San Suu Kyi insists that the detention order prohibits her from sending out material, but not of receiving it, according to her lawyer. The authorities are responsible for the security at the house and should have prevented the intrusion; if anyone is at fault, it is the local police, he added.

The trial is anything but transparent, and most observers believe that she will be



Aung San Suu Kyi may remain in detention for another five years.

convicted and sentenced to prison. "The court was a surreal scene, all the actors in place, with the end already scripted," Mark Canning, Britain's ambassador to Burma, told *The Daily Star*. He attended the court hearing on the only two days diplomats were allowed in to observe the proceedings.

"I'm sure they will jail Daw Suu," said Aung Thein, a prominent lawyer who was helping prepare her defence when his law license was revoked on the eve of the trial opening a week ago.

Human rights groups believe revoking Aung Thein's right to practice law was the latest "blatant attempt" by the regime to intimidate lawyers who are working on political cases. More than a dozen lawyers are currently in jail for working "sensitive"

cases, including defending top monks and former student leaders arrested during the September 2007 protests that were crushed by the military.

Burma's deputy defence minister told his audience in Singapore that other countries "should refrain from interfering in [Myanmar's] internal affairs that will affect peace and security of the region." He went in to warn the international community that continued interference in Burma's internal affairs "may possibly affect mutual understanding and friendly relations [with other countries]."

This is the crux of the Burmese government's attempt to deflect international criticism. "The present situation is purely a domestic matter and legal action has been

taken in accordance with the laws of the land against violation of the law," Burmese ambassadors around the world have been instructed to say. "This situation does not in anyway affect international peace and security and thus is not the concern of the UN Security Council."

Burma's military regime's real fear is the UN Security Council. "The only body that the junta really fears, is the Security Council," the former UN Rapporteur for Human Rights in Burma, Professor Paulo Sergio Pinheiro told the Daily Star. "I have personal evidence of this. So the Security Council must address this immediately as a matter of absolute urgency," he said.

Larry Jagan is a former Current Affairs Editor, Asia, BBC World Service.

Boom times are back

This led many to conclude that the emerging economies of Asia and Latin America had been growing only because of their exports to America and Europe; and would in all likelihood collapse faster and more furiously than the sophisticated economies of the West.

FAREED ZAKARIA

IT is becoming increasingly clear that the story of the global economy is a tale of two worlds. In one, there is only gloom and doom, and in the other there is light and hope. In the traditional bastions of wealth and power -- America, Europe and Japan -- it is difficult to find much good news. But there is a new world out there -- China, India, Indonesia, Brazil -- in which economic growth continues to power ahead, in which governments are not buried under a mountain of debt and in which citizens remain remarkably optimistic about their future. This divergence, between the once rich and the once

poor, might mark a turn in history.

Over the past six months, much conventional wisdom about the economy has been discredited. The old experts who spoke with confidence about unending global growth -- the boomsters -- have been debunked. But the new pundits of pessimism -- the doomsters -- have demonstrated a similar hubris, ignoring any evidence that might complicate their story. Six months ago, stock markets around the world swooned in unison as the American financial system seemed on the verge of collapse.

This led many to conclude that the emerging economies of Asia and Latin America had been growing only because

of their exports to America and Europe; that they obviously had no independent strengths of their own and would in all likelihood collapse faster and more furiously than the sophisticated economies of the West. After all, these were Third World countries.

But a funny thing happened on the way to a global depression. Once the panic that seized all global markets abated -- because it became clear the world was not going to end -- there began a fascinating and disparate recovery. The American stock market, after six plummeting months, has rebounded, so that the S&P 500 is roughly where it started the year, as is the London FTSE. Japanese stocks have fared better, up nearly 7 percent.

Around the globe, though, markets are humming. China's Shanghai index is up 45 percent, India's Sensex is up 44 percent, Brazil's Bovespa is up 38 percent and the Indonesia index is up 32 percent. Now, stock markets don't tell the whole story, but the reason many of these are rising is that the underlying economies of most of these countries are

still registering significant growth. The evidence abounds.

In April, India's car sales were 4.2 percent higher than they were a year prior. Retail sales rose 15 percent in China in the first quarter of 2009. China is likely to grow at 7 or 8 percent this year, India at 6 percent and Indonesia at 4 percent. These numbers are not just robust but astonishing when you line them up against those in the developed world. The US economy contracted at an annual rate of 6.1 percent last quarter, Europe by 9.6 percent and Japan by a frightening 15 percent, something that truly does begin to rival the 1930s.

Compare the two worlds. On the one side is the West (plus Japan), with banks that are over-leveraged and thus dysfunctional, governments groaning under debt, and consumers who are rebuilding their broken balance sheets. America is having trouble selling its IOUs at attractive prices (the last three Treasury auctions have gone badly); its largest state, California, is veering toward total fiscal collapse; and its bud-

get deficit is going to surpass 13 percent of GDP a level last seen during World War II. With all these burdens, even if there is a recovery, the United States might not return to fast-paced growth for a while. And it's probably more dynamic than Europe or Japan.

Meanwhile, emerging-market banks are largely healthy and profitable. (Every Indian bank, government-owned and private, posted profits in the last quarter of 2008!) The governments are in good fiscal shape. China's strengths are well known -- \$2 trillion in reserves, a budget deficit that is less than 3 percent of GDP but consider Brazil, which is now posting a current account surplus. Or Indonesia, which has reduced its debt from 100 percent of GDP nine years ago to 30 percent today. And unlike in the West -- where governments have run out of ammunition and are now praying that their medicine will work -- these countries still have options. Only a year ago, their chief concern was an overheated economy and inflation. Brazil has cut its interest rate substantially, but only to 10.25 percent, which means it can drop it

further if things deteriorate even more.

The mood in many of these countries remains surprisingly upbeat. Their currencies are appreciating against the dollar because the markets see them as having better fiscal discipline as well as better long-term growth prospects than the US. Their bonds are rising. This combination of indicators, all pointing in the same direction, is unprecedented.

The US remains the richest and most powerful country in the world. Its military spans the globe. But from the Spanish Empire of the 16th century to the British Empire in the 20th century, great global powers have always found that their fortunes begin to turn when they get overburdened with debt and stuck in a path of slow growth. These are early warnings. Unless the US gets its act together, and fast, the ground will continue to shift beneath its feet, slowly but surely.

Zakaria hosts CNN's Fareed Zakaria GPS. His paperback, *The Post-American World*, is a New York Times bestseller.

© Newsweek International. All rights reserved. Reprinted by

Resuscitating upazila parishads

Some analysts think that the resultant conflict between the MPs and the upazila chairmen is now the major obstacle to strengthening the local government system. They also fear that this may result in serious division along the party line.

HUSAIN IMAM

IF General Ershad in his nine-year military, quasi-military rule did one good thing, it was his introduction of the upazila system. At that time, his critics thought it simply a ploy to consolidate his autocratic rule all over the country, the way Field Marshal Ayub Khan tried by introducing the so-called "Basic Democracy" in the country.

Whatever might have been the intention of General Ershad, the system worked for the better. The Local Government Ordinance 1982, more commonly known as Upazila Parishad Ordinance, was eventually accepted by the people and was considered by many as a major step towards decentralisation of power.

Not that General Ershad's local government system in the name of Upazila Parishad was completely a new concept. In fact local government system of one form or another has been in existence in the sub-continent for centuries. Panchayats, an elected body with executive and judicial power, operated in rural areas of this sub-continent in the early days. But it was never a fully independent body. Often a headman, nominated by the rulers from among the dominant families in the village, controlled the panchayats.

The British who ruled this country for

nearly 200 years carried out a number of experiments with the local government system. But all those were intended to serve more of their imperial interest than welfare of the local people. It was however during the British rule, the foundation of a local self-government in rural India was laid through the passage of the Rippon resolution as Bengal Local Self-government Act 1885.

After independence of Bangladesh in 1971, the first significant change in the local government system came through the Local Government Ordinance 1976 introduced by General Zia, the then President of the republic, providing union parishad, thana parishad and zila parishad as semblance of elected bodies. The system did not work the way it should as a local body conceived by our constitution.

It was during the Ershad regime, the upazila parishad, replacing thana parishad and providing the upazila chairman for the first time principal authority in running the affairs of the upazila, brought about a new wave of enthusiasm among the rural people. Direct participation of the local people in the affairs of the upazila increased and economic activities in the rural areas centering the new upazila system got momentum.

It was however unfortunate that after nine years of more or less satisfactory



Problems at the local level can be solved more efficiently with an upazila parishad.

practice, the upazila system of General Ershad was abolished by BNP after coming to power in 1991. The government of Awami League during 1996-2001 tried to revive the system by constituting a Local Government Commission but could not make much headway because of lack of support from the lawmakers. They were apprehensive of losing their overwhelming control and share of the benefits deriving from the development work of their constituency.

Lastly, the issue of strengthening the local governments came up strongly during the two-year long caretaker government (CTG) of Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed and under pressure from the civil society and the general public the CTG had to revive the upazila system in 2008 through an ordinance empowering the upazila parishad a truly free and independent local government body directly elected by the people.

Under this new ordinance, election was held in almost all the 480 upazilas of the country on January 22, 2009, in less than a month of the ninth parliamentary election, to elect chairman, vice chairmen and members of each upazila parishad.

When all were set for functioning of the newly elected upazila parishad as a free and independent local body with renewed vigor and enthusiasm, the old issue of power sharing between the local MPs and upazila chairmen once again surfaced. The MPs in fear of losing control over the upazila activities forced the parliament to amend the upazila parishad ordinance of the caretaker government making them (the MPs) as advisers with power to dictate terms in the upazila affairs.

This has created great resentment among the upazila chairmen forcing them to unite and resist the move. They see this

as sheer encroachment on their rights as elected members of local bodies. The result being, although more than four months have passed since the upazila election was held, the upazila parishad could still not start functioning properly.

Some analysts think that the resultant conflict between the MPs and the upazila chairmen is now the major obstacle to strengthening the local government system. They also fear that this may result in serious division along the party line and in that case Awami League, with more than two third majority in both parliament and upazila parishad, will be the biggest loser.

The line of arguments both MP and upazila chairman would like to pursue is that they had to make some promises to the voters of their constituencies at the time of election regarding development work of their areas. Each side fears that interference from the other side might debar them from fulfilling their commitments. This is of course the brighter side of the line of argument. The darker side is all but secret.

It is very important for the upazila parishad functions as freely and independently. It's true that the members of parliament, as law makers, should focus their attention more on their prime responsibility of framing laws and discussing national policy matters in the parliament than meddling with the day to day functions of the upazila parishad but it is also a reality that they can not remain totally indifferent towards their commitments to the voters of their own constituencies.

Capt Husain Imam is a retired merchant navy officer.