

Suu Kyi to challenge verdict as global anger pours out

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi and her US co-defendant are to appeal against their convictions, lawyers said yesterday as the ruling junta faced a global wave of anger over her extended detention.

US President Barack Obama led worldwide outrage at the military regime's decision on Tuesday to give Suu Kyi another 18 months of house arrest, a verdict that shuts the Nobel peace laureate out of elections in 2010.

The UN Security Council broke up an emergency meeting with no condemnation of Myanmar and China urged respect for the country's sovereignty, but Myanmar's Southeast Asian neighbours issued a rare expression of disappointment.

In Yangon, Suu Kyi's lawyer Nyan Win said her legal team would appeal because they were "not satisfied" with the judgement, which stemmed from a stunt in which American man John Yettaw swam to her lakeside house in May.

A prison court sentenced her to three years of hard labour after finding her guilty of breaching the terms of her incarceration, but junta strongman Than Shwe commuted the punishment to a year and a half under house arrest.

"We assume that the judgement is totally wrong according to the law," Nyan Win told AFP, adding that he

had received approval from Suu Kyi to proceed and could do so on Wednesday if they received a copy of the judgement.

Police and security forces blocked off the road outside her house on Wednesday.

Lawyers for Yettaw, who was sentenced to seven years of hard labour and imprisonment, would appeal "step by step" to the Myanmar court system and if necessary urge Than Shwe to deport him, lawyer Khin Maung Oo said.

He said Yettaw was "very calm" and "hopes for the best".

Suu Kyi, 64, has been confined for 14 of the past 20 years, ever since the military regime refused to recognise her National League for Democracy's landslide victory in the last elections held in 1990.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), of which Myanmar is a member, added to the global chorus of dismay at the verdict, expressing "deep disappointment".

It also called for the immediate release of Suu Kyi but added that the 10-nation group -- which has been criticised in the past for failing to tackle the junta -- would "remain constructively engaged with Myanmar".

But China -- a key ally and major military supplier of the junta -- urged the international community to "fully respect Myanmar's judicial sovereignty", foreign ministry spokeswoman Jiang Yu said.

The UN Security Council, which counts China and Russia among its five veto-wielding members, failed to sign off on a US-drafted statement condemning the verdict on Suu Kyi.

Debate was due to resume after some delegations, including China, insisted on sending the draft statement to their capitals.

In Washington, Obama called for Suu Kyi's "immediate, unconditional release" and for the freeing of more than 2,000 other political prisoners held in Myanmar.

The US president said the "unjust" sentence against Suu Kyi would never be able to stamp out the people of Myanmar's desire for freedom, accusing the regime of "continued disregard" for UN Security Council statements.

UN chief Ban Ki-moon said he was "deeply disappointed" by the Suu Kyi verdict.

Myanmar's state media hit back at outside involvement, with the junta-controlled New Light of Myanmar newspaper deriding those who "interfere in the internal affairs of other countries".

On the streets of Yangon there was no sign of the unrest that the state media had warned against.

"People are glad that she (Suu Kyi) is at home... But things will be quiet again after one week as our people have to worry about their own lives. It is more important than politics," said security guard Zaw Naing.

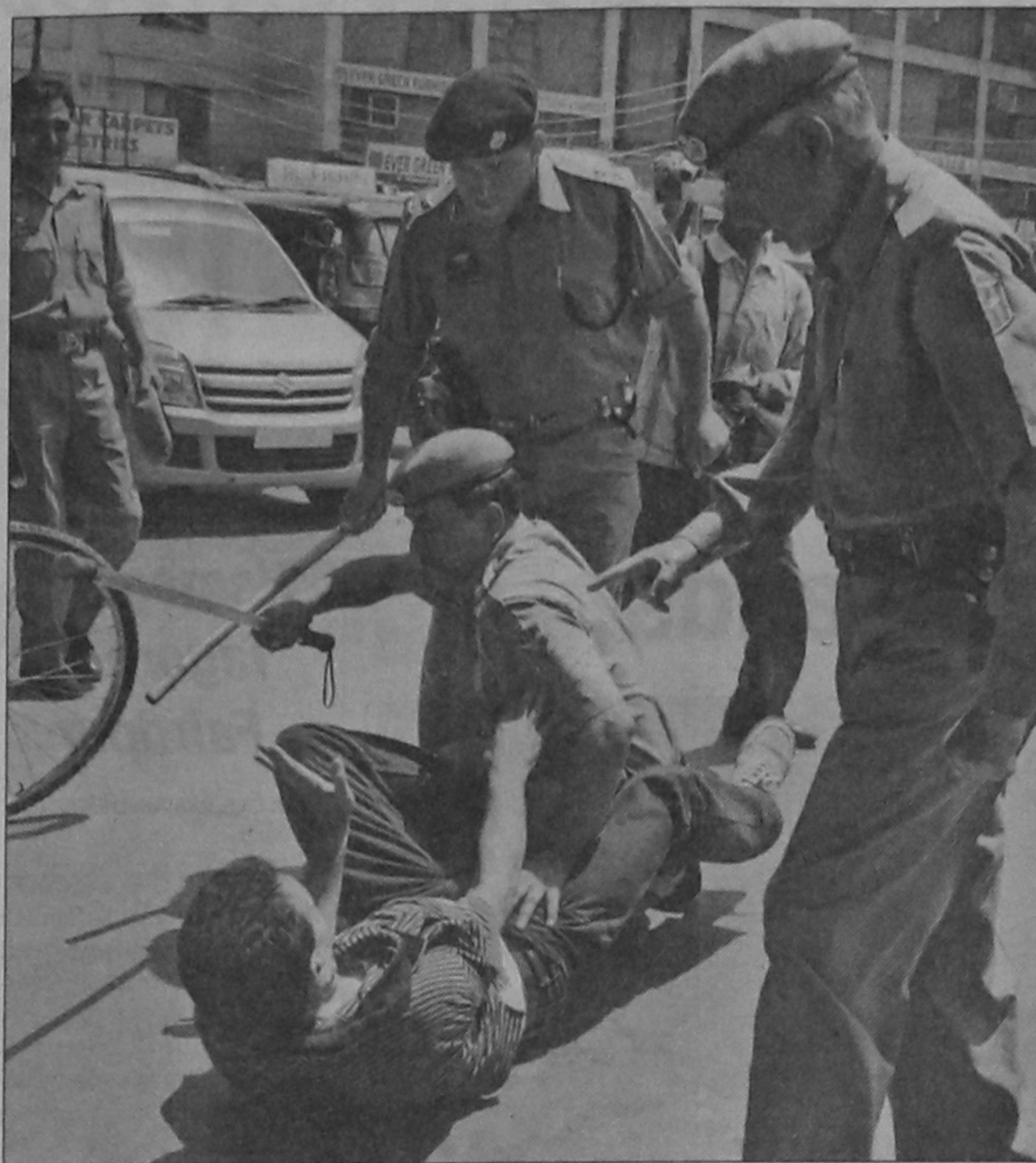


PHOTO: AFP

Indian police detain a Kashmiri state government employee during a protest in Srinagar yesterday. The demonstrators, numbering in the hundreds, took to the streets to demand a pay hike. Injuries were reported and dozens were detained by police during the protest.

FBI sees Pak hand in Mumbai attacks

AFP, Mumbai

Agents from the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) yesterday gave evidence at the trial of the sole surviving gunman of the deadly Mumbai attacks.

The first witness, an FBI electronic engineer and forensic expert, told a special prison court that he had examined one satellite phone and three global positioning systems recovered after the attacks.

The downloaded data from the devices showed a number of maps and routes, including one from off the coast of Pakistan to Mumbai, the FBI agent told the court, under condition of anonymity.

"This route starts in the ocean near the Gulf of Karachi and it goes to Mumbai. The route was stored by the user," he added.

Other locations found on the GPS system included areas of the cities of Karachi and Rawalpindi and of Mumbai.

The ten gunmen, who attacked Mumbai last November, killing 166 people and wounding more than 300 others, are said by the prosecution to have come to the city via the sea.

The surviving gunman, Mohammed Ajmal Kasab, and an accomplice are alleged to have committed the bloodiest episode in the 60-hour reign of terror, opening fire with AK-47 assault rifles and throwing grenades at commuters at the city's main railway station. Kasab is being tried on a string of charges, including waging war against India, murder and attempted murder. He faces the death penalty if convicted.

US troops storm Taliban town

AP, Dahaneh

Helicopter-borne US Marines backed by Harrier jets stormed into a strategic Taliban-held town in southern Afghanistan before dawn Wednesday, battling to gain control of the area ahead of next week's presidential elections.

Associated Press journalists traveling with the first wave said Marines were met with small arms, mortar and rocket propelled grenade fire as they flew in helicopters over Taliban lines and dropped into the town. Fighting was still under way hours later, with US Marine Harrier jets streaking overhead and dropping flares in a show of force.

Other Marines met heavy resistance as they fought to seize control of the mountains surrounding Dahaneh in the southern province of Helmand. Another convoy of Marines rolled into the town despite roadside bomb attacks and gunfire.

It was the first time Nato troops had entered Dahaneh, which has been under Taliban control for years. Casualty figures were unavailable due to security restrictions.

US, Nato and Afghan troops are working to protect voting sites around the country so Afghans can take part in the country's second-ever direct presidential election. Taliban militants have vowed to disrupt the elections, and attacks are on the rise around Afghanistan.

Marines said they had captured several suspects in Wednesday's push and seized about 66 pounds of opium, which the militants use to finance their insurgency. Troops hope to restore control of the town so that residents can vote in the presidential election.

One killed in Kashmir grenade blast

AFP, Srinagar

One person was killed and nine others injured Wednesday when suspected Muslim militants threw a grenade at a busy bus terminal in revolt-hit Indian Kashmir, police said.

The incident took place in Sopore town, 50 kilometres north of summer capital Srinagar.

"Militants hurled a grenade at a police bunker which missed its target and hit the civilians," a police spokesman said, adding the man who died was a 63-year-old Muslim.

Violence has escalated in the Muslim-majority region ahead of India's independence day holiday on August 15, which marks the end of British rule in 1947.

Over the past ten days, the Indian army has foiled nine attempts by rebels to infiltrate from the Pakistani zone of the disputed Kashmir region.

Gunmen kill 5 Pak preachers in Somalia

AFP, Mogadishu

Gunmen shot dead five Pakistani preachers yesterday outside a mosque in the central Somalia, local religious and police officials said.

A police official said the preachers were dragged out of the mosque in the town of Galkayo, in the semi-autonomous state of Puntland, and killed a short distance away.

"The five were from Pakistan. All the roads in the area have been sealed off and we are looking for the killers," the official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

Sheikh Mohamed Abdi Said, a spokesman of the pro-government Ahlu Sunna religious movement that controls the area, condemned the killings.

It was unclear why the five were targeted.

NEWS IN BRIEF

China urges respect for Myanmar

AFP, BEIJING: China yesterday urged the international community to respect Myanmar's judicial sovereignty, reacting to the regime's decision to prolong pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi's house arrest.

"The international community should fully respect Myanmar's judicial sovereignty," foreign ministry spokeswoman Jiang Yu said in a faxed statement to AFP.

WHO recommends Tamiflu in 'severe' swine flu treatment

AFP, GENEVA: The UN health agency yesterday stood by its advice on swine flu treatment with the antiviral drug Tamiflu in "severe and progressive" infections, despite a study which warned against use by children.

"WHO continues to recommend use of antivirals as treatment for people who are severely ill or are at risk of other health complications," the World Health Organisation said in a response to questions about the recent study. However, it also stressed that the antiviral, made by Swiss pharmaceutical giant Roche, should not be taken by those showing just mild flu-like symptoms.

Costa Rican president has swine flu

AFP, SAN JOSE: Costa Rica's President Oscar Arias, a Nobel Peace Prize winner and mediator in the Honduran political crisis, said on Tuesday he had contracted swine flu.

"The pandemic doesn't discriminate," Arias said in a statement. "I am one more case in the country, and I am subject to the same recommendations that the health authorities have established for all the population."

13 dead after plane crashes in PNG mountains

AFP, PORT MORESBY: All 13 people on board a plane carrying foreign tourists in Papua New Guinea were confirmed dead yesterday after it crashed in rugged mountains.

Nine Australians and one Japanese travelling to the popular Kokoda hiking trail were among the dead following Tuesday's crash during the short flight from Port Moresby, Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd said.

Taliban kill district police chief in Afghanistan

AFP, KUNDUZ: Taliban militants attacked a government compound in northern Afghanistan, killing the district police chief and a guard, an official said yesterday, in more pre-election bloodshed.

The attack happened in the province of Kunduz, where insecurity has spiralled this year with several attacks despite the presence of NATO troops. Locals said the insurgents set fire to the district government building.

Indonesian court rejects opposition's vote challenge

AFP, JAKARTA: Indonesia's Constitutional Court yesterday rejected opposition complaints of irregularities surrounding last month's presidential polls, confirming Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's re-election.

The court said it could find no reason to order another poll after challengers Megawati Sukarnoputri and Jusuf Kalla claimed millions of voters had been disenfranchised. "Based on all evidence and laws, we decided to reject all complaints filed by the plaintiffs," court chairman Mohammad Mahfud said while delivering the ruling.

Iran arrests four Sunni rebels

AFP, TEHRAN: Iran has arrested four members of a Sunni rebel group in the restive southeastern city of Zahedan, the ISNA news agency reported yesterday.

Quoting the Iranian intelligence ministry, the agency said "the four... belonging to the terrorist group of Abdolmalek Rigi, were arrested in Zahedan." It said the group "planned to trigger divisions between Sunnis and Shiites by bombing several locations," and that a large quantity of explosives and weapons were found in their hideout.



PHOTO: AFP

An Afghan woman in thick veil carries her baby during an electoral rally in support of incumbent president Hamid Karzai in Kabul yesterday as Afghanistan prepares for a vote next week. The election is challenged by rising extremist violence that threatens to keep voters away in droves.

Indonesian slain militant not Noordin Top

AP, Jakarta

Indonesia's most wanted Islamist militant, accused in a string of deadly terror attacks including a bombing in Bali, was not killed in a shootout last week as initial media reports suggested and remains at large, police said yesterday.

Tests comparing the body's DNA with that of members of Noordin Muhammad Top's family came back negative, said Eddy Saparwoko, head of the national police victim identification unit. The body

was found to be that of a florist linked to Noordin who police said was a member of a terrorist cell that led last month's twin suicide hotel bombings in Jakarta.

Noordin, a Malaysian national, has been blamed for masterminding a series of deadly al-Qaida-funded attacks in Indonesia since 2003 and is a prime suspect in the July 17 hotel attacks that killed seven people.

Last month's strikes ended a four-year lull in terrorist attacks in Indonesia, the world's most populous

Muslim-majority nation. Bombings have killed more than 250 people in Indonesia since 2002, most of them on the resort island of Bali, where a 2002 attack killed 202 people.

"The DNA test didn't match with Noordin's family," Saparwoko said at a nationally televised press conference Wednesday.

Local media had reported that Noordin, a self-proclaimed al-Qaeda commander who has eluded capture in Indonesia and Malaysia since 2001, was slain in a gun battle with security forces.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Myanmar protected by its powerful neighbours

AFP, Beijing

The international community has limited leverage over Myanmar because of the ruling junta's close links with its powerful neighbours China, India and Thailand, analysts say.

The exclusive state sparked global outrage when it extended the house arrest of democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi for 18 months Tuesday, but analysts said its ties with the three Asian nations acted as a buffer to any foreign action.

"They are a huge block (against international action)," said Ian Holliday, dean of social sciences at the University of Hong Kong and an expert on Myanmar.

"China is the essential one, and India and Thailand follow in its wake."

The European Union, United States and other countries have targeted Myanmar with economic sanctions and travel bans, but the military regime has

so far proven impervious to these partly due to support from nations such as China.

The Asian giant has long helped keep Myanmar afloat through trade ties, arms sales, and by shielding it from UN sanctions over rights abuses as a veto-wielding, permanent member of the Security Council.

In return, China is assured of a stable neighbour and gets access to Myanmar's natural resources -- overall, trade between the two grew 26.4 percent to 2.6 billion dollars in 2008, according to China's ministry of commerce.

On Wednesday, it called for respect of Myanmar's judicial sovereignty in reaction to Suu Kyi's house arrest.

India was once a staunch supporter of Suu Kyi but shifted its strategy in the mid-1990s as security, energy and strategic priorities emerged.

It is also eyeing oil and gas imports from Myanmar, needs Yangon's help in



PHOTO: AFP

Myanmar protesters call for the release of detained pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi during a protest in front of the Myanmar embassy in New Delhi yesterday.

countering separatists operating along their common border, and is particularly concerned about not losing strategic ground to China in the military state.

"It would not be appropriate for India to join US-led efforts if it wants to retain any influence in Myanmar," said C Uday Bhaskar, head of the Delhi-based National Maritime Foundation think tank.

Thailand has long maintained diplomatic, defence and trade ties with Myanmar despite its human rights record.

Myanmar's biggest source of foreign exchange earnings is by far the revenue it receives from gas sales to Thailand -- some three billion dollars annually.

Thailand, meanwhile, is largely dependent on Myanmar for its energy needs, and also has investments in telecommunications there.

Lalit Mansingh, a former Indian foreign secretary, said that pressure needed

to come from regional bloc ASEAN -- the Association of Southeast Asian Nations -- of which Myanmar is part.

"It is gentle pressure that is going to succeed," he said.

But overall, the three Asian nations' ties with the military junta -- and particularly China's influence -- make it difficult for the wider international community to influence Myanmar, analysts said.

And in the current global crisis, China's increasing economic and political clout make it even harder for the international community to make a move against Myanmar, according to experts.

"That is (due to) the Chinese economic power in the current international downturn that has also increased their political power," said Colonel R. Hariharan, a retired Indian intelligence officer.

"The countries would not want to 'offend' China as they would have done very happily some years back."