UN & Myanmar

In 1961, [U Thant](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/U_Thant), then Burma's Permanent Representative to the United Nations and former Secretary to the Prime Minister, was elected [Secretary-General of the United Nations](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Secretary-General_of_the_United_Nations); he was the first non-Westerner to head any international organization and would serve as UN Secretary-General for ten years.[[77]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myanmar#_note-62) Among the Burmese to work at the UN when he was Secretary-General was the young [Aung San Suu Kyi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aung_San_Suu_Kyi).

Until [2005](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2005), the [United Nations General Assembly](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Nations_General_Assembly) annually adopted a detailed resolution about the situation in Burma by consensus.[[78]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myanmar#_note-63)[[79]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myanmar#_note-64)[[80]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myanmar#_note-65)[[81]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myanmar#_note-66)[[82]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myanmar#_note-67) But in [2006](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2006) a divided [United Nations General Assembly](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Nations_General_Assembly) voted through a resolution that strongly called upon the government of Burma to end its systematic violations of human rights.[[83]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myanmar#_note-68)

In January [2007](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2007), [Russia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russia) and [China](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/People%27s_Republic_of_China) vetoed a draft resolution before the [United Nations Security Council](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Nations_Security_Council)[[84]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myanmar#_note-UN_S200714) calling on the government of Burma to respect human rights and begin a democratic transition. [South Africa](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Africa) also voted against the resolution, arguing that since there were no peace and security concerns raised by its neighbours, the question did not belong in the Security Council when there were other more appropriate bodies to represent it, adding, "Ironically, should the Security Council adopt [this resolution] … the [Human Rights Council](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_Rights_Council) would not be able to address the situation in Myanmar while the Council remains seized with the matter."[[85]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myanmar#_note-69) The issue had been forced onto the agenda against the votes of [Russia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russia) and the [China](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/People%27s_Republic_of_China)[[86]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myanmar#_note-70) by the [United States](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States) ([veto power](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Nations_Security_Council_veto_power) applies only to resolutions) claiming that the outflow from Burma of refugees, drugs, HIV-AIDS, and other diseases threatened international peace and security.[[87]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myanmar#_note-71)

The following September after the uprisings began and the human rights situation deteriorated, the Secretary-General dispatched his special envoy for the region, [Ibrahim Gambari](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ibrahim_Gambari), to meet with the government of Burma.[[88]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myanmar#_note-72) After seeing most parties involved, he returned to New York and briefed the [Security Council](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Security_Council) about his visit.[[89]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myanmar#_note-73) During this meeting, the Burmese ambassador said that Burma "indeed [has experienced] a daunting challenge. However, we have been able to restore stability. The situation has now returned to normalcy. Currently, people all over the country are holding peaceful rallies within the bounds of the law to welcome the successful conclusion of the national convention, which has laid down the fundamental principles for a new constitution, and to demonstrate their aversion to recent provocative demonstrations.[[90]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myanmar#_note-74)

On [11 October](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/October_11) the Security Council met and issued a statement and reaffirmed its "strong and unwavering support for the Secretary-General's good offices mission", especially the work by [Ibrahim Gambari](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ibrahim_Gambari)[[91]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myanmar#_note-UN_SPV5757) (During a briefing to the Security Council in November, Gambari admitted that no timeframe had been set by the Government for any of the moves that he had been negotiating for.)[[92]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myanmar#_note-75)

United Nations envoy Ibrahim Gambari's latest round of intense shuttle diplomacy since September's "saffron revolution" produced no major breakthroughs in Yangon. It merely confirmed the suspicions of close Myanmar watchers that the military junta has no intentions to change its ways or compromise with anyone.

The regime, known officially as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), moved to expel the UN's top resident diplomat Charles Petrie even before Gambari set foot in Myanmar following his six-nation tour for diplomatic consultations. (The UN's Special Rapporteur for Human Rights, Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, who has been barred from Myanmar since 2003, however, returned there on Nov. 11 as scheduled).

The SPDC also rejected Gambari's offer of tripartite talks between the UN, ruling junta, and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Worst of all, Gambari was rebuffed by the junta leader Senior General Than Shwe, who had kept Gambari waiting for three days during his previous visit. This time, the self-effacing diplomat endured a scolding by information minister Brigadier General Kyaw Hsan, who accused the UN of being pro-West and in favor of the sanctions imposed by the United States, European Union, and Australia.

Myanmar's government is counting on its ASEAN allies to shore up support at the upcoming Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) meetings in Singapore. The government threw open its doors to welcome ASEAN journalists earlier than planned. A group of 18 reporters went on a chaperoned Myanmar jaunt and stopped-over at Naypitaw—the fairytale capital city—in the hopes that ASEAN will approve of the regime's version of "flourishing discipline." And Myanmar's new Prime Minister Thein Sein sought out friends in socialist Laos and Vietnam on a recent visit billed by the junta as introductory courtesy calls.

Singapore, the current ASEAN chair, will host both Thein Sein and Gambari at the East Asia Summit on November 21. Barring last minute changes, it will be the first time since the crisis began in August that a senior Myanmar government official will participate in high-level talks with all major players with a direct stake in resolving it. The next steps forward could emerge from these meetings even though America and the European Union are technically excluded from the summit.

The immediate goals by all the international parties concerned can be summed up as this:

A genuine, broad-based and substantive dialogue between the SPDC, Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy Party, and ethnic minority groups; real, verifiable progress toward national reconciliation; and a lifting of restrictions on Aung San Suu Kyi and all political prisoners. In short, there should be no returning to the unsustainable status quo, as Gambari put it.

Whether the ongoing diplomatic efforts will eventually yield a peaceful transition to democracy and civilian-led rule remains to be seen. What's critical for the international community is to brainstorm strategies in the same collaborative spirit that resulted in the recent unanimous UN Security Council statement deploring the Myanmar government's violent response to peaceful demonstrations. In having China sign on to the criticism, the statement was unprecedented.

While there will always be competing strategic interests by the various players, it would be a mistake for some—the United States, UK, China, Singapore, Thailand, and Malaysia—to hijack the process from the UN. Gambari, a Nigerian, is a seasoned negotiator with a track record to match the Myanmar military's 40-year reign, and he remains the best hope to break the political deadlock that has spanned two decades.

Gambari has not fully spelled out his political blueprint for Myanmar yet, though he claims there will be incentives to persuade the government to make meaningful concessions. So far, Thailand has proposed four power talks that involve the UN, China, ASEAN, and India. Yet others want to form a "Core Group" consisting of the Five Permanent Security Council Members, Japan, India, Singapore, and Norway that has long taken a traditional interest in Myanmar.[[93]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myanmar#_note-76)

Throughout this period the [World Food Program](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Nations_World_Food_Programme_in_Myanmar) has continued to organize shipments from the [Mandalay Division](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mandalay_Division) to the famine-struck areas to the north.[[94]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myanmar#_note-77)