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Chicago Tribune
21 November 2007

A U.N. General Assembly committee approved a draft resolution Tuesday strongly condemning the Myanmar government's crackdown on peaceful protesters and calling on the military junta to immediately release political prisoners.

The vote in the assembly's human rights committee was 88-24 with 66 abstentions. The resolution now needs the backing of the 192-nation world body. General Assembly resolutions are not legally binding but they do reflect world opinion.

The draft resolution calls on Myanmar's military government "to desist from further arrests and violence against peaceful protesters" and to lift "all restraints on the peaceful political activity of all persons by ... guaranteeing freedom of peaceful assembly and association and freedom of opinion and expression."

It also calls on the junta to provide U.N. special adviser Ibrahim Gambari with unrestricted access to all parties -- including ethnic minority representatives, student leaders and dissident monks -- and to engage with him to achieve "effective progress towards the restoration of democracy and the protection of human rights in Myanmar."

Gambari, who visited Myanmar earlier this month, said last week he was making progress in nudging Myanmar's military junta toward meaningful dialogue with the pro-democracy opposition. But he acknowledged there were "serious concerns" about "the willingness of the government to move forward in a new direction."

Myanmar, also known as Burma, tried to block a vote on the draft resolution, proposing a motion of "no action" instead. It was defeated by a vote of 88 against to 54 in favor, with 34 abstentions.

Myanmar's U.N. Ambassador U Kyaw Tint Swe called the draft resolution, supported by the United States and many Western countries, "objectionable both on grounds of procedure as well as substance."

Procedurally, he said if it was really necessary, the issue should be dealt with by the U.N. Human Rights Council in Geneva.

() Myanmar's government has been strongly criticized for sending troops to quash peaceful protests, initially led by students and then by Buddhist monks, in late September.

At least 15 people were killed, according to information authorities provided to U.N. human rights investigator Paulo Sergio Pinheiro. Dissidents and diplomats suspect the true figure is much higher.

() Calling the challenges facing Myanmar "complex and delicate," he said the U.N. should be

allowed "time and space to play a catalytic role in consolidating the national reconciliation process."

The draft resolution calls for the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners, including pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been in detention for 12 of the last 18 years.

Myanmar's military has ruled the country since 1962. The current junta took power in 1988 after crushing the democracy movement led by Suu Kyi. In 1990, it refused to hand over power when Suu Kyi's party won a landslide election victory.

Full text available at:

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/sns-ap-un-myanmar,1,6258508.story?ctrack=1&cset=true>