



Who cares for Myanmar?

April 29, 2006

Last month, Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran spoke at a well-attended lecture organised in Washington by the Heritage Foundation. The Foreign Secretary was in the US capital to meet Bush Administration officials before the crucial vote in the US Congress on the Indo-US nuclear deal. The main thrust of Mr Saran's speech was that India and the US were two democracies and should, therefore, work together. It is in stark contrast with the position taken by New Delhi on Myanmar. A couple of weeks before his US trip, the same Mr Shyam Saran, a former Ambassador to Myanmar, visited the country with the Indian President. Both were amazingly shy about democracy. When President APJ Abdul Kalam left for a four-day trip to Yangon in March, Delhi did not hide that the main purpose of the presidential visit was to sign a deal allowing India to search for new ways to tap Myanmar's natural gas reserves. The idea was to 'balance' China's influence. For Delhi, 'engagement', the new motto coined by South Block, was more important than defending the values professed by India. The President probably never intended to speak about India's cherished concept during his visit to Myanmar, or to even call for the release of detained Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi. This fact was confirmed by Mr Shyam Saran, who told reporters in Yangon that Mr Kalam and Myanmar's junta chief, Senior General Than Shwe, did not speak about the fate of Ms Aung San Suu Kyi. Despite Delhi's 'engagement' policy, it gained little. As a newspaper remarked: "India has been trying to negotiate a three-billion-dollar deal to run a pipeline from Myanmar across Bangladesh to the eastern Indian city of Kolkata, but failed to make headway in the talks." Beijing, always more

efficient (without pretending to be motivated by democratic values), had already signed a deal for building a pipeline from the Arakan Coast to its Yunnan province. India also signed an accord that would "allow studies" on how to run a pipeline through northeast India, bordering Burma. Mr Kalam inked other insignificant agreements on satellite imagery, telecoms, and education. Another deal was to improve cooperation in Buddhist studies. Paradoxically, Ms Aung San Suu Kyi, who always lived by the precepts of non-violence and forgiveness, is herself a great Buddhist scholar (she studied at the prestigious Institute of Advanced Studies in Simla with her late British husband). The irony was probably not known to the Indian President who swears by humanism. In the meantime the great lady of Myanmar is incommunicado. An Indian reporter visiting Yangon recalls his experience in search for the residence of the frail democracy icon: "A barricade where the complex begins and a barricade at its end manned by clusters of watchful guards observing each car driving past is the only visible security. Somewhere behind the gnarled, huge trees is the house where she has been kept." Let us not forget that in May 1990, despite her continued detention since 1988, Ms Aung San Suu Kyi's party won a landslide victory in the general election; the National League for Democracy (NLD) secured 82 per cent of the seats. Till today the generals have not permitted the elected MPs to take office and Suu Kyi continues to spend her time in confinement ('protective custody' as the junta nicely calls it). One of the cruelest events in her life is the death of Michael Harris, her husband, in March 1999. She was not allowed to meet him when he was dying of a cancer. But who cares? Prof Kanbawza Win, a Senior Research Fellow at the European Institute of Asian Studies in Belgium, recently wrote: "The ASEAN countries had looked on or rather defended the Khmer Rouge when Pol Pot virtually killed more than million of its own people. Now Than Shwe is slowly but surely strangling the Burmese people with its economic policy, narcotic drugs, ethnic cleansing and environmental

degradation, yet the ASEAN countries are indirectly eulogizing the Junta with its illogical Constructive Engagement Policy."The problem is that the junta also does not care. One of the reasons is that India and China, the two heavy weights in the region, are closing their eyes. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan in his report "Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar" for the UN Commission on Human Rights particularly called upon "China, India and ASEAN member states to encourage Myanmar authorities to accelerate the pace of their political, economic and socio-humanitarian reform". But why should Beijing suddenly care for democracy?As for India, during the last ASEAN meeting in December 2005, the Indian Prime Minister shyly declared: "We are in favour of national reconciliation and Suu Kyi should be set free. But it is not my purpose to advise them (Myanmar)." With no one ready to give them 'advice', the generals have a free hand to commit all sorts of crimes against humanity. All that Mr Manmohan Singh could add was: "All shades of political views should be able to flourish but a solution to domestic problems should be found by the people of Myanmar themselves."Poor people of Myanmar: Despite the historic vote of the 1990 election, they have to survive themselves, while the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) as the junta calls itself, is more and more xenophobic. In a Pol Pot kind of move, last November, it was decided to relocate Myanmar's capital 400 km from Yangon. Most observers were caught unaware when civil servants were given a day's notice to move. Thousands were abruptly sent with their belongings to the newly built, mosquito-infested capital city. In the meantime, atrocities continue, particularly against the Karen minority. Myanmar troops have beheaded civilians and torched villages in an offensive which has forced 1,000 refugees to flee into Thailand. Thousands of others are hiding in the jungles. The Free Burma Rangers, a group of volunteers who provide aid to displaced people affirmed: "The army is burning homes, rice barns and laying land mines to stop villagers from returning to their homes and fields." The example of Nepal, though completely different,

should prompt Delhi to move fast before it is too late. South Block has no choice but to take a stronger stand against the totalitarian regime in Yangon and this can not be seen as aping the Western powers which in any case do not live next door.