

From New Delhi by Ramtanu Maitra

India and ASEAN oppose U.S. on Myanmar

New Delhi did not like the U.S. Secretary of State's blatantly biased views to discredit the government in Yangon.

United States Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's tirade against Myanmar, at the annual meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) with traditional Western and regional partners, held at the end of July in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, alleging that drug traffickers in Myanmar now hold high-profile positions in the nation's economic and political life, has raised a few eyebrows in Delhi and other capitals. Albright was upset at ASEAN for admitting Myanmar and Laos as full members, in July.

There is no question that Albright wanted to be blunt, as blunt as possible. "Drug traffickers who once spent their days leading mule trains down jungle tracks are now leading lights in Burma's new market economy and leading figures in its new political order," she said. Accusing ASEAN of allowing "Burma" to become a part of this elite trade group, Albright said that the ASEAN nations are vulnerable to criminals looking for a place to operate, or a place to hide.

What Delhi is trying to figure out, is why Washington, knowing full well that ASEAN and its regional partners' views about Myanmar are different, chose to be so brutally forthright. Moreover, Delhi recognizes that ASEAN, which has always accommodated Western viewpoints on trade and financial matters, is under a great deal of stress because of the civil war in Cambodia and continuing attacks on most of ASEAN member-nations' currencies by the offshore speculators, the chief culprit named so far being George Soros, the wrecker of Russia's economy.

The question that Delhi asks is: Why did Albright choose this time and this forum to deliver a one-two punch against Myanmar, whose integration into the regional economy is considered by ASEAN an important factor to maintain peace in that area and prevent the occurrence of yet another civil war à la Cambodia?

It is evident that Albright's tirade has rattled ASEAN leaders. The lining up of the European Union, Canada, and Australia to shore up Washington on the issue made ASEAN more uneasy. But what rattled them most is the statement by Albright that "Burma is now an anomaly within ASEAN." Interestingly, Albright chose to address Myanmar repeatedly as "Burma"—the name by which British colonialists used to address that country.

India, on the other hand, took an unequivocal position linking the admission of Myanmar into ASEAN as a prerequisite for bringing democracy to Yangon. Supporting the Myanmar entry, India's Finance Minister P. Chidambaram said: "I asked Myanmar and other nations to take note of the strength of public and parliamentary opinion in India with regard to democracy and freedom." Chidambaram's views were echoed in Malaysian newspapers, where analysts agreed that the entry of Myanmar into ASEAN is a development that will increase the pressure on Myanmar's authorities to opt for free and fair elections.

Myanmar's Foreign Minister U Ohn Gyaw cited progress in the drafting of a new constitution, and was taken aback at the Myanmar-bashing by the Western representatives at the ASEAN Regional Forum, a meeting

for discussing security issues in the Asia-Pacific region. He contrasted this with the warm welcome ASEAN extended to Myanmar in giving it membership.

What Myanmar's foreign minister was referring to, is the joint communiqué issued by ASEAN foreign ministers on July 25, in which they strongly criticized Western efforts to take trade action against states on human rights grounds.

The ASEAN ministers maintained that trade among nations should not be made conditional on the promotion of human rights. They expressed "concern over the emerging trend of state, provincial, and other local authorities in countries outside the region seeking to impose trade sanctions against other states on grounds of alleged human rights violations and non-trade-related issues."

For instance, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts passed a law prohibiting local government purchases from companies that do business in Myanmar. Once the law took hold in 1996, U.S. firms including Eastman Kodak pulled out of Myanmar.

Aside from opposing the United States on Myanmar's entry into ASEAN, India, on the other hand, was eager to accommodate on trade and other issues. Albright made it a point to tell ASEAN "to liberalize trade in financial services." She said, "No country can have a world-class, high-tech economy without a world-class, properly regulated financial services sector to allocate capital efficiently."

In reply, Chidambaram promised that India will work out a program to phase out quantitative restrictions in the World Trade Organization. He affirmed, "In terms of trade and investment liberalization, we will soon meet the criteria of comparability with ASEAN members of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation."