

'BURMA CONVENTION TALKS A SHAM' - MARTENS

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EPP President Wilfried Martens said today that the Burmese junta was "at its old tricks" of pretending to oversee a transition to democracy in National Convention talks, which re-opened in Rangoon today.

Ridiculed by international human rights groups as a flagrant attempt by the military regime to buy time, the talks are being boycotted by the National League for Democracy, which won a landslide victory in free elections in 1990. NLD leader Aung San Suu Ky, victim of an attempt on her life by armed thugs last year, also remains under house-arrest.

"This is really a grotesque situation," Martens said. "The international community must not allow the debacle in Iraq to distract all its attention from this scandal and assume that any movement is a good thing. This is not movement, but a further attempt to pretend there is movement."

Martens, who in the past has offered to help broker a deal on political transition in Burma, said no-one should to under-estimate the difficulties of making peace between so many peoples after half a century of conflict. But it is a plain fact that the poverty and division of Burma is almost entirely due to an incompetent military dictatorship."

Martens said that it was not just the European Union and the US, but Burma's own neighbours in ASEAN who were impatient for the generals to accept that there was no way out but a gradual transition to democracy, and embarrassed by the lack of movement. Burma is due to take over the rotating ASEAN leadership in 2006.

The deliberate smashing of the NLD and attempts to exclude the party could only make the process more difficult, said Martens, who is also vice-president of the 100-party Christian Democrat International (CDI). "The key to a peaceful future is empowering political parties, and the kind of long, patient dialogue we saw in the European Convention," he said.