

"Western countries must insist on sanctions to military junta"

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Can a nut, a shrimp, cane sugar or a fistful of rice be harmful? On the face of it, no. But all these goods are among those that the military junta in power in Burma is accused of obtaining through forced labour imposed on some ethnic minorities and Muslims.

Buying them, according to the opposition, helps the generals to continue to make profits from the exploitation of poor and community less...The list of these products is marked in a paper which has been brought around Rome yesterday by a man with a humble look. His name is Sein Win, 57 years old.

Since 1990, when generals forced him to escape, he is not anymore a math professor, or a real elected MP. He has become the Prime Minister of the Burmese Government in exile,

with the consent of 250 members of the 485 members of a parliament which has never met.

He has asked the representatives of our country not to import the "results" of forced labour. This is something that should really be done: it has been decided in a resolution by the International Labour Organisation. The problem is to make sure that this will be applied.

"Many Muslims and ethnic peoples belonging to Shan, Karen and Karenni minorities are forced to work for the army. In the southern part of Burma, where the military regime is building

a pipeline, land has been confiscated without indemnity, people have been forced to leave their homes in some villages", says Sein Win, who was invited by Maria Grazia Daniele Galdi, a senator of the Centre-Left Party. " Yes, the pipeline has been built by forced labour," he says.

Aren't there good signs coming from Burma that 86 prisoners recently have been released?

"They have released those who have been jailed for showing their solidarity with Aung San Suu Kyi, when she was trying to reach the representatives of our party, the National League for Democracy, in Mandalay."

But many others prisoners are still in jail.

"Aung San Suu Kyi, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate and leader of the opposition party in the native country, is my cousin. In 1947 her father was assassinated together with mine."

Isn't it good news that your cousin is having dialogue with the military?

"Twice a week she meets with General Khin Nyunt , in the Offices of Strategic Planning. We can see some signs, but we are still far out of a solution. We welcome dialogue, the best to restore democracy. But it is just at the stage at which we are trying to build the trust with our interlocutors. We can't say that it is an irreversible process. It can still be stopped, fail, or be successful. For this reason it is important that the junta should always feel under international pressure."

Do you think sanctions favour the dialogue?

"We believe sanctions are good; obviously they are not for the army. Sanctions will be lifted only when a real transition towards a solution for democracy is set out. So far it hasn't be done."

DECLARATION BY ITALIAN SENATE

Text of declaration on February 20 by Senator Maria Grazia Daniele GALDI, representative of the Interparliamentary Union of Human Rights Committee in the Italian Senate:

"This morning a delegation of Italian parliamentarians in the Foreign Affairs Committee, led by Senator Maria Grazia Daniele Galdi, member of the Interparliamentary Union of Human Rights Committee, met a delegation of Burmese parliamentarians in exile, the Prime Minister Dr Sein Win, Dr. THAUNG HTUN (representative at the UN) and BEAUDEE ZAWMIN (representative of the Euro-Burma Office).

The Burmese parliamentarians were received by the Senate's vice-president, Rognoni, as the Senate representation. The main point of the meeting was the political situation in Burma and the request to our country not to give up its commitment to human rights.

The Burmese parliamentarians in exile also asked that the international community maintain the sanctions imposed by the European Union in several resolutions, of which that of last September is just one of many stressing the EU's commitment to human rights, and the sanctions called for by the International Labour Office against any form of forced labour.

The resolutions and the international commitments explicitly refer to sanctions which have been adopted and which should be adopted if there is no real improvement in the freedom of the people of Burma.

This meeting has been very important, and Senators of all parties participated and expressed both their solidarity and their interest in taking action. We have already seen evidence of support for this in Italy, with the petition signed by more than 200 Italian parliamentarians, along with parliamentarians from 80 other countries.

The petition demands the immediate release of parliamentarians elected in 1990 who are still in prison, and the restoration of democracy and parliamentary life in Burma.

Today's meetings are one more signal of the Senate's support for human rights and against practices such as torture, the death penalty, and the exploitation of forced labour."

