

Differences emerge among the key-veto members of the UN Security Council after the 15-member body was briefed on the current situation in Burma in a closed-door session.

WASHINGTON—Sharp differences emerged among the key-veto members of the UN Security Council after Vijay Nambiar, the chef-de-cabinet of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, on Thursday briefed the 15-member body on the current situation in Burma in a closed-door session.

The differences came out in public over Burma's upcoming election, the first in 20 years, when the British and Chinese ambassadors gave opposing view points on the Security Council's approach on Burma. Many observers say the election will fail to meet international standards of fairness.

The Chinese ambassador, Li Baodong, said that the general election in any country is a matter of a sovereign state. "So that should be respected. So this principle applies to the case in Myanmar," he said.

"I think it's very important for the international community and also the Security Council, the UN, to help Myanmar [Burma], to promote a constructive, healthy environment conducive to the coming general election," he said in response to a question.

"Myanmar is one of the poorest countries in the world; so an election to be held in this country is not an easy one, but we think it's a very important step in the process of a national reconciliation, in the process of a democracy in that country," he said.

British Ambassador Mark Lyall Grant said, "We don't agree with that [Chinese viewpoint]."

Grant told reporters that Burma is an agenda item on the Security Council. "The Security Council has discussed it. It's issued statements, presidential statements, press statements in the past for the reasons that the stability, the instability that could be caused by a flawed electoral process is a threat to international peace and security. Their view is entirely right that it should be on the agenda and that the Security Council should discuss it," he said.

The British Ambassador said that his country would support any move to refer the Burmese military junta to the International Criminal Court, like Sudan was referred, but conceded that the Security Council lacks the unanimity necessary for such a referral.

"As you say, because Burma is not a state party to the ICC, it would require the Security Council to make a reference, and I don't think the Security Council is sufficiently unanimous in its view to allow such a reference to happen. We, of course, would support such a reference," he said.

Giving an account of the informal meeting of the Security Council on Burma, Grant said: "We had a useful briefing from Vijay Nambiar on recent developments in Burma, including the rejection of the appeal of Aung San Suu Kyi against her sentence, the special rapporteur's report on the human rights situation in Burma and most recently, the publication of five electoral laws in Burma."

Observers said that the session was a useful opportunity for the council to take stock for the first time since August 2009 when Burma was last discussed by the Security Council.

"Many members expressed their concern about these developments, and in particular, about the electoral laws which fall well short of what the international community expected in a free and fair process and fell short of the expectations set out in previous statements by the Security Council, which had highlighted the importance of releasing all political prisoners, of establishing a national dialogue and creating the right conditions for reconciliation," Grant said. "By contrast, we believe that these laws set up a process which is not conducive to free and fair elections later this year, and in many ways, seemed designed to target Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD opposition party and to make it very difficult for them to register for the elections."

Grant said the Security Council was pleased that Vijay Nambiar had been given a significant role, even if on an interim basis.

Ban said that he would respond to media questions after the meeting of the Group of Friends on Burma, which he has convened on Thursday.