

Last month, a European Union delegation canceled its planned trip to Burma after the Burmese regime refused to allow it to meet detained opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

However, several informed EU sources suggested that some of the community's member states are still interested in visiting Naypyidaw for talks with Burmese officials even if the request to meet Suu Kyi is not granted.

*The Irrawaddy* has also learned that several EU officials who belong to the “engagement camp” are also pushing the policy of greater engagement with the regime.

Piero Fassino, the EU’s special envoy on Burma, is clearly in favor of visiting the country again. Recent requests by Fassino to visit Burma have been rejected by the junta, however, while missions he was able to undertake in the past failed miserably.

Fassino is known to have little knowledge of Burma and its political situation. So why would he want to revisit the country?

Engaging the regime in Burma is fine as long as the regime has the political will and engagement produces a tangible outcome. But the EU's engagement policy has produced nothing positive so far.

Burma campaign groups previously expressed concern that the EU envoy on Burma has on occasion appeared to publicly and privately undermine the “very common position” which he is mandated to advocate with Asian countries.

Indeed, the EU common policy is to maintain or increase sanctions against the regime and support political dialogue and national reconciliation between the opposition and the regime. It can also increase pressure if necessary, including imposing an arms embargo on Burma.

Yet the EU has still failed to employ its full economic and political pressure to produce a positive outcome in military-ruled Burma.

The complexity of the EU cannot be denied—but, alarmingly, some member states don't stick to the community's common policy, resulting in tension and confusion within the grouping.

The trouble is that the EU's Burma policy sends mixed signals to Burmese democratic forces inside and outside Burma.

*The Irrawaddy* has learned that detained democracy leader Suu Kyi herself and senior members of the now-banned NLD have recently expressed concern over the EU's policy.

It is believed that the UK, Sweden, the Czech Republic, Ireland, Denmark and the Netherlands want to maintain the EU's common policy but some other member countries, especially Germany and Spain, are pushing more of a pro-engagement line if not openly supporting the regime's sham election and some controversial and shady figures belonging to a "third force" inside Burma.

Unlike European Parliament members, bureaucrats at the European Commission (EC) have supported a dialogue with the junta and increased its cooperation with some shady allies of the junta and the "third force" while cutting funding for refugees on the Thai-Burmese border.

Cooperation with a "third force" and some shady figures supporting the regime's sham election and undermining the main opposition parties and activists and civil society groups inside and outside Burma is questionable.

What is interesting is that some EC officials have covertly supported the "third force" inside the country in the creation of a civil society. Do EC bureaucrats really believe that these half-baked "third force" people, who are merely spokesmen of the regime, can create a civil society in Burma?

No wonder Burmese inside and outside the country see EC bureaucrats as part of the problem in Burma's complicated political landscape. They appear to support a controversial "third force" inside Burma and the regime's sham election instead of increasing targeted sanctions against the regime and its cronies or supporting the UN human rights envoy's commission of inquiry on crimes against humanity.

In March, the UN Special Rapporteur on Burma stated that human rights abuses in Burma are very serious and that the UN should consider establishing a commission of inquiry into possible war crimes and crimes against humanity. So far, the EU is silent on this issue, as if the regime has committed no crimes at all.

Sadly, on the Thai-Burmese border, the EC's decision to cut funding for relief work on the Thai-Burmese border sent a shock wave through the area as the EU is one of the major donors there.

Refugee agencies on the Thai-Burmese border said they are concerned that a cut in funds could hurt medical programs for Burmese refugees.

According to London-based Burma campaign UK: "The European Commission has consistently refused to fund such aid, and has failed to provide an adequate explanation as to why, instead making vague statements about accountability and monitoring.

This argument is not credible, as the British government and other EU members with strict monitoring requirements are satisfied with monitoring of cross-border aid."

Burma Campaign UK also said: "There are around 100,000 Internally Displaced People in Eastern Burma who are in need of cross-border aid, and around 2.5 million people in Eastern Burma for whom cross-border assistance is the only or easiest way to deliver aid. Cross-border aid is also needed in other states in Burma."

On May 20, the European Parliament called on the EC "to reverse cuts in funding for refugees on the Thailand-Burma border and immediately start funding cross-border aid, especially

medical assistance.”

However, after Thailand's foreign minister said in June that the Bangkok government hoped to send Burmese refugees home after the elections a EU official told *The Irrawaddy*: “The EU does not expect that the elections in Myanmar [Burma] in 2010 will create conditions conducive to an immediate return of the predominantly Karen to eastern Burma, particularly since a ceasefire between SPDC [the Burmese government] and the Karen leadership seems unlikely to materialize and armed conflict persists to this day.”

So just what do the EU and EC currently stand for?

EU observers believe that internal confusion and rifts within the community have also compounded its Burma position and its very reputation.

*The Irrawaddy* has recently learned that some EC officials and bureaucrats take personal positions that go against not only EU common policy but also democratic principles.

They are said to be highly critical of Suu Kyi and her party's decision not to contest the coming election. Moreover, these EC officials and bureaucrats also see civil society groups, campaigners on the border and ethnic campaign movements as troublemakers.

If this is true, the integrity and dignity of the EU and its democratic principles have to be questioned. We assume these officials and bureaucrats were born in a democratic society. The irony is that they have expressed a dislike of civil society and campaign groups working for a better Burma.

The regime keeps over 2,000 political prisoners in gulags, soldiers continue to commit human rights abuses in the ethnic regions and refugees and displaced persons are stranded along the border. A climate of fear pervades the country.

However, the EU is sending conflicting signals to Burma and the pro-democracy movement—a shameful state of affairs, which has contributed to deep unhappiness among Burmese inside and outside Burma when discussing EU policy.

In a recent letter to EU foreign ministers, European-based Burma lobby groups said they were “deeply concerned that European Commission staff openly and publicly advocate against the agreed Common Position of EU member states and against the positions taken by the European Parliament in its resolutions. We believe that it is unacceptable that Commission officials who have no democratic mandate undermine the official position of democratically accountable member states and the European Parliament.”

The EU and EC should now officially clarify the issues outlined above—and Burmese democratic forces, campaign groups and exiled news groups should investigate more thoroughly EU and EC Burma policies, in order to make those organizations more accountable in this critical time for Burma.