

# World on Alert

In maintaining silence over the events in Myanmar, many countries have put profit before principle, writes *Andrew Small*



**General Than Shwe (left) confers with LI Tiejing, chairman of the Standing Committee of China**

**T**he battered body of a Burmese monk floating face down in the Irrawaddy on its journey to the sea was the most graphic image to emerge from the saffron revolution. Along with the photograph of a Japanese journalist breathing his last, it will stand as the ultimate condemnation of the cancer of authoritarian capitalism that the neighbours of Myanmar are promoting in that benighted country.

Unfortunately, the simplistic 'people power' presentation of the confrontation in the world's media as a conflict between an evil regime and the monks and ordinary Burmese disguises the deep geo-political underpinnings of the conflict, which make it much more difficult of resolution without concerted efforts by the neighbouring countries.

But just as Thailand, India and China have till now seen it as in their interests to woo the generals,

whatever the cost to the people of Myanmar and the country's natural resources, they must surely come to recognise that propping up General Than Shwe and the rest of the thugs who make up the regime is no longer a long-term option in their own interests, even if they care nothing for the people.

While it may not be able to dictate policy to the junta, the Chinese government has the most influence, seeing the country as part of its sphere of influence and coveting its natural resources. The Chinese have not forgotten either that Rangoon (now Yangon) was the first non-communist government to recognise the communist government after the revolution in 1949.

More immediately, the Chinese plan to tap into the oil and gas resources of Myanmar through two pipelines carrying these vital fuels for the country's economic development into Kunming, the capital of



**An injured monk being led away**

Yunnan province which borders Myanmar. The oil pipeline was approved by the National Development and Reform Commission, China's top economic planning body, in the spring. In the mean time, a 2380 km gas pipeline costing more than \$1 bn is projected to transport some 170 bn cubic metres of Middle Eastern gas into China over the next 30 years. The China National Petroleum Corporation has, meanwhile, signed production sharing agreements with the Myanmar Ministry of Energy, covering crude oil and natural gas exploration projects in three deep-water blocks off the Myanmar coast. China will help development of the Myanmar oil industry with a loan of \$83 mn.

These vital links come at a time when China is hungry for energy supplies of any sort, never mind ones that come from a contiguous, friendly country and which will almost certainly guarantee security of supply across the country to Kunming. That fact alone illustrates why the Chinese government has been supportive of the generals in the name of stability and why Beijing has worked assiduously to prevent the introduction of sanctions at the United Nations.

And, if newspaper reports are to be believed, China has been giving highly

how seriously the Chinese government takes the situation and understands its own vulnerability that it was instrumental in arranging high-level contacts between the U.S. State Department and the government in Yangon even before the latest unrest.

If much of the focus at the United Nations and elsewhere over Myanmar has been on China, it could equally well have fallen upon India and Thailand, who have both elected to put profit above principle and chosen to look the other way as the dramatic events unfolded. India is in the same headlong rush for energy sources as Beijing, and decided some time ago that a policy of active engagement rather than benign neglect had to take the lead. What a pity that India cannot draw on some of its own experiences at the hands of colonialists to better the lot of the people of its neighbouring state, no matter how small by comparison.

The Thai government's treatment of, and engagement with, Myanmar democracy and opposition groups is a sorry history of sellouts and vulnerable refugees being sent back to Myanmar against their will, not to mention the historical involvement of senior Thai politicians with the cross-border drugs trade.

Perhaps, nothing better could have been expected of Thailand, but all of Myanmar's neighbours can now regain lost ground if they recognise that the current junta is unlikely to offer stability in the long term. The government in Yangon has clearly learned nothing in the 19 years since it last saw the true feelings of the people, given life on the streets of the cities of Myanmar.

The regime's opponents meanwhile have been working hard on a new vision for the country, which has nothing to do with the repression of the majority by a tiny minority but proposes a federation that would meet the needs of all tribal groups and set the country on course for the development of a proper liberal, open economy that would benefit the majority.

This vision has been taking shape with the help of the Danish government. And there are signs that China recognises that this is the way forward. One unconfirmed report claims that this constitutional drafting body — in marked contrast to the government-sponsored equivalent — has already met in Beijing. Perhaps, the generals will need to travel further afield than their fabulous new capital before long. ■