

June 29, 2010

The Honorable Jim Webb
United States Senate
258 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Webb,

I appreciate your efforts to engage with the government of Myanmar, despite the many obstacles to outreach. I also share your concern about the matter of Myanmar's alleged nuclear program arising from the publication of reports last month by the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB). I hope that this letter might add some perspective to the issue.

At ISIS, for several years we have scrutinized Myanmar's illicit nuclear trade and allegations about secret nuclear sites. I believe that the publication of the recent DVB reports and its many unconfirmed allegations should not cause the suspension of outreach to the Myanmar government. Greater transparency over Myanmar's activities is essential, and this is most likely to come about through further engagement with Myanmar.

At your request, the following are my thoughts on the matter of Myanmar's alleged nuclear program arising from the publication of reports last month by the Democratic Voice of Burma.

There are plenty of reasons to worry about Myanmar's nuclear ambitions and North Korean assistance that could greatly accelerate that effort. Recent evidence of North Korean assistance to Myanmar for the illegal procurement of dual-use machine tools from Japan has heightened concerns about the possibility that this cooperation includes nuclear help. It is the case that North Korean entities aided Syria in its construction of a covert nuclear reactor, and its late discovery by intelligence agencies has rightfully led to greater scrutiny over potential North Korean proliferation to Myanmar as well as more detailed examination of Myanmar's intentions.

Suspicions have swirled for years about Myanmar's military dictatorship building nuclear reactors, uranium conversion facilities, uranium enrichment plants, and even putting together the infrastructure to build nuclear weapons. These claims are almost always proven to be wrong or a result of bias or flawed analytical methods. Often, the allegations are based on supposed inside sources who provide oral evidence of these secret nuclear activities. Moreover, almost all of these reports are produced by groups or individuals with strong political agendas and a minimal ability to assess technical data. Their agendas inevitably raise questions about their ability to do objective analysis of Myanmar's suspected nuclear program.

One has to consider the long history of distortions and biases in this past analysis when considering the recent reports by the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) and Robert

Kelley. Although their assessments and information are an improvement over many past analyses alleging secret nuclear sites, their analysis should be approached skeptically with regard to claims of secret indigenous construction of a nuclear reactor, a uranium processing plant, a uranium enrichment plant, and nuclear weapons. These reports in particular do not offer credible evidence that Myanmar has a nuclear weapons program.

The reports contain new useful information. The inside military source has provided important insight into the purpose of specific machine tools procured by Myanmar for two large buildings, whose purpose has been debated for over two years. The source's information shows that this high precision equipment was procured under false pretenses, as Western governments, in particular Germany, have long suspected. His revelations, backed by photos, demonstrate an urgent need to implement more effective trade controls internationally against the illicit purchases of this regime. Similarly, U.N. Security Council resolutions 1718 and 1874 aimed at stopping North Korea from receiving or transferring nuclear-related goods require better implementation. These problems were highlighted in a recent report to the Security Council by a Panel of Experts mandated by resolution 1874.

But the source's statements fall short on secret nuclear facilities and the existence of a nuclear weapons program. He is not a nuclear scientist or engineer, and he did not work in the programs he alleges to exist. His information remains second-hand and requires confirmation. While the claims of the Myanmar source are troubling and merit further investigation, they are based on hearsay and conjecture. The standards of analysis in the recent reports regarding the conclusion that there exists a nuclear weapons program in Myanmar were not very high. When making an assessment that a country has a nuclear weapons program, a more extensive amount of credible evidence needs to be present.

The source provided pictures of equipment manufactured in these buildings. Robert Kelley identified several that he assessed are for use in secret nuclear programs and unlikely to be for any non-nuclear or even civilian nuclear uses. But the purposes of this equipment are subject to interpretation. Kelley and DVB have not presented anything that is a smoking gun. Kelley has assessed that this equipment offers compelling evidence of the existence of secret nuclear sites and a nuclear weapons program. Other experts known to ISIS have disagreed with Kelley on his interpretations about the nuclear purpose of this equipment. These particular objects have non-nuclear uses, and Kelley may have misidentified the purpose of the objects. The source's descriptions of some of them had to be interpreted to make a nuclear link. And their primitive nature should have at least raised more questions about whether they are actually intended for a secret reactor project, an enrichment project, or a nuclear weapons program. The problem is that Kelley and the Democratic Voice of Burma have tried to take the evidence further than warranted.

Nonetheless, the allegations about secret Myanmar nuclear activities should continue to be investigated. But this evidence should be assessed by an impartial group and independent experts not linked to a group with a strong agenda like DVB. One helpful step to that end is an evaluation by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). For

over a year, the IAEA has investigated Myanmar's activities because of questions about some of the regime's actions. Recently, the IAEA sent a letter seeking clarification from the Myanmar government, which responded reportedly in a perfunctory manner. The IAEA should press the regime for more answers. The IAEA's efforts to convince Myanmar to agree to more effective safeguards arrangements are also critical. Of course, U.S. government experts should review the new information and provide an assessment, preferably in an unclassified manner.

One conclusion that is implied by Kelley's report is that Myanmar left to its own is unlikely to succeed in building a reactor or enrichment plant. But Myanmar could reach out to North Korea for nuclear aid, just as Libya sought help from the Khan network after it was unable to create a nuclear weapons program on its own. A U.S. priority should be to make it less likely that Myanmar receives any nuclear assistance from North Korea. An essential part of doing that is through patient but careful efforts to convey to the Myanmar regime the potential costs of that path and the rewards of moving to rejoin the international community as a responsible nation.

As I indicated earlier, the publication of the recent DVB reports and its many unconfirmed allegations reiterate the need for greater transparency over Myanmar's activities and for engagement with Myanmar.

I look forward to discussing this matter further with you.

Sincerely,

David Albright
President
Institute for Science and International Security