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A Reply to Des Ball: Burma's Nuclear Programs: A Need for Caution

Andrew Selth

Reliable information about Burma is scarce, particularly when developments touch on national security—a term with a wide meaning in the minds of the secretive military government ensconced since 2005 in its isolated new capital of Naypyidaw. Dr Ball's extensive interviews with two Burmese 'defectors' over the past few years thus have the potential to throw much needed light on two critical issues, namely Burma's relationship with North Korea and the Naypyidaw regime's nuclear ambitions. Before the defectors' claims can be accepted, however, let alone cited as evidence of a secret nuclear weapons program, a number of factors need to be taken into account.¹

Firstly, Burma and North Korea are at the centre of emotive and politically sensitive debates about human rights, nuclear proliferation and regional security. These debates rely heavily on information that is founded on inference from fragmented and de-contextualised data, ideological assumptions and worst-case scenarios. The picture is further clouded by rumours and speculation published in the news media and on activist websites. There is also the danger of individuals and groups—and possibly even certain governments—deliberately planting false or misleading stories in order to encourage anti-Naypyidaw or anti-Pyongyang sentiments. In such an atmosphere, any claims that cannot be independently verified need to be treated with caution.

The second factor is the inherent difficulty of dealing with defectors. As Dr Ball acknowledges in his article, they are rarely completely reliable or disinterested sources. Most are keen to impress their interviewers by exaggerating their own importance and the value of their intelligence. If associated with a reviled regime, either directly or indirectly, they usually try

¹ These comments are based on Andrew Selth, *Burma and North Korea: Conventional Allies or Nuclear Partners?*, Regional Outlook no. 22 (Brisbane: Griffith Asia Institute, Griffith University, 2009); and Andrew Selth, 'Burma and North Korea: Smoke or Fire?', Australian Strategic Policy Institute, *Policy Analysis*, no. 47, 24 August 2009, <http://www.aspi.org.au/publications/publication_details.aspx?ContentID=222&pubtype=9> [Accessed 3 October 2009].

to win the trust of their former opponents and critics by emphasising their new loyalties. In such circumstances, even well trained and experienced interrogators have found it difficult to separate fact from fiction, to weed out hearsay, gratuitous glosses and personal opinions, and to make allowances for cognitive predispositions and cultural biases.

The testimony of the two Burmese defectors interviewed by Dr Ball needs to be viewed in this light. Both lived for lengthy periods among the highly politicised Burmese expatriate community in Thailand, and at least one had early contact with a well known foreign activist. As intelligence sources, they must therefore be considered 'contaminated'. Also, during the time taken by Dr Ball to conduct all his interviews, the defectors would have had ample opportunity to refine and embellish their stories. Both appear to have passed on information that was not based on personal knowledge or direct experience. The fact that one seems to have used the Internet to add texture to his testimony gives rise to other concerns.

As Dr Ball has stated, the testimony of defectors can be very useful—at times even critical. Quite different informants telling essentially the same stories can indeed be 'compelling', particularly if they have related the 'facts' as they believe them to be. Yet, viewed from another perspective, close similarities in stories related by different informants can raise questions about their provenance. Also, it is not uncommon for a defector to be convinced that his testimony is accurate and important, even when it is flawed. For reasons such as these, defector testimony always needs to be rigorously tested against other sources. In Burma's case, however, this is very difficult to do.

Despite all the claims made about Burma's nuclear ambitions, there is very little hard evidence. Where it is available, the defectors' comments raise as many questions as they seem to answer. Some do not stand up to scrutiny, while others lack context. For example, in 2006 the British government dismissed reports of uranium enrichment facilities in Burma, and uranium exports.² Russia's known dealings with Burma have all been in accordance with International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) guidelines. Construction of the Russian reactor has not yet begun. Hundreds of Burmese officials may have gone to Russia for nuclear-related training, but many have been young and inexperienced, and struggled to complete their courses. Commercial satellite imagery has been shown to be an imperfect means of confirming claims of secret facilities in Burma.³

² The United Kingdom Parliament, 'Burma', Answer from Dr Howells to Miss McIntosh, *Hansard*, 18 July 2005; and The United Kingdom Parliament, 'Burma', Answer from Dr Howells to Mr Clifton-Brown, *Hansard*, 5 July 2006.

³ See, for example, James Fallows, 'About that "Ominous" Building in Burma', *The Atlantic*, 20 August 2009, <http://jamesfallows.theatlantic.com/archives/2009/08/about_that_ominous_building_in.php> [Accessed 3 October 2009].

A third factor that needs to be considered is the enormous financial, technical and practical obstacles that Burma would have to overcome to develop all elements of the nuclear fuel cycle, build a reactor in an underground facility and make a deliverable nuclear weapon. Even for more developed, technologically advanced and better resourced countries, these have constituted daunting challenges. If North Korea is as deeply involved in a secret Burmese program as the defectors claim—essentially making it a 'joint project'—then these obstacles may not be insurmountable. Even so, suggestions that Burma could produce a nuclear weapon by 2014 and a 'handful of devices' by 2020 must be considered extremely optimistic.

The fourth factor to be taken into account is that the defectors' claims are not new. Dr Ball has described them in detail and put them into a broader context, but stories about a secret nuclear reactor and a covert nuclear weapons program have been circulating in Thailand and on activist websites for some years.⁴ A few of the Burmese who 'defected' in 2006, and others who have come across the border since, have been interviewed by Thai intelligence agencies. It is understood that the United States and some other countries have also taken a close interest in what the defectors have had to say. Yet, despite their apparent revelations, no government or international agency has been prompted to express concern about a covert Burmese nuclear weapons program.

This raises a fifth factor, which is the lack of official comment by the United States. The Bush Administration was openly hostile to Burma's military government, and took every opportunity to criticise it strongly. The Administration also gave a high priority to stemming nuclear proliferation. Yet, even when pressed by Congress, it refused to state that Burma was pursuing a nuclear weapons program, with or without North Korean help. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the Bush Administration remained silent on this issue either because it did not believe the rumours about a secret program, or because it did not feel there was sufficient reliable evidence on which to make a public case against Naypyidaw and Pyongyang.

The Obama Administration has investigated this matter closely, as part of its comprehensive review of US policy towards Burma. The new Administration has reiterated the United States' concerns about nuclear proliferation and North Korea's activities, but it too has refused to confirm claims that Burma is pursuing a nuclear weapons program, assisted by Pyongyang. Indeed, the United States seems to have accepted Burma's assurances that it will abide by the relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions.⁵ It is also

⁴ See, for example, Roland Watson, 'Analysis of Burma's Nuclear Program', *Dictator Watch*, January 2007, <<http://www.dictatorwatch.org/>> [Accessed 3 October 2009].

⁵ Assistant Secretary Philip J. Crowley, *Daily Press Briefing*, US Department of State, Washington, 3 August 2009, <<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2009/aug/126847.htm>> [Accessed 3 October 2009].

noteworthy that Washington recently announced plans for closer engagement with Naypyidaw. This may be part of a strategy to discover more about Burma's nuclear ambitions, but such a significant policy shift seems unlikely if the United States believed Burma was already well advanced on a covert nuclear weapons program.

That said, it must be recognised that of all regional countries Burma has the greatest strategic rationale to develop nuclear weapons. Also, it is no secret that some generals in Naypyidaw feel a nuclear capability would give Burma the status, protection and bargaining power that North Korea now seems to enjoy. There is circumstantial evidence supporting reports that Burma is developing its uranium mining and processing capabilities. The acquisition of sophisticated dual-use equipment lends credence to claims that the regime is building a reactor or an enrichment facility. Since they were first raised, some obstacles to a nuclear weapons program—such as the regime's lack of funds—appear to have been overcome.⁶ In themselves, however, none of these arguments constitute hard evidence.

Burma and North Korea both have such poor international reputations that they are easy targets for criticism. Also, given their provocative and often bizarre behavior, they lend themselves easily to conspiracy theories and sensationalist stories in the news media and on Internet sites. However, this is not to say that, whenever the names of these two 'outposts of tyranny' are linked together, there are no grounds for concern.⁷ Any reports of a secret nuclear weapons program, let alone one conducted by a pariah state like Burma, require careful analysis. Some of the claims made by the defectors are credible, and other snippets of information have emerged in recent years which help raise suspicions. No-one should underestimate the lengths to which Burma's military leaders will go to stay in power, and to protect the country from perceived external threats.

Faced with all these issues, Burma-watchers are now looking to the IAEA or the United States for an authoritative description of Burma's nuclear status. Reports filtering out of Washington suggest that senior officials have received confidential briefings on this subject. However, the world is still waiting for a public statement which puts all the rumours, blogs and news stories into proper perspective. Until that appears, analysts may have to be satisfied with the findings of the International Institute for Strategic Studies. After an exhaustive study, which included careful consideration of the defectors' claims, the Institute concluded that there was insufficient

⁶ Sean Turnell, 'Burma's Insatiable State', *Asian Survey*, vol. 48, no. 6 (November-December 2008), pp. 958-76.

⁷ 'Rice Names "Outposts of Tyranny"', *BBC News*, 19 January 2005, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4186241.stm>> [Accessed 3 October 2009].

information to make a well-founded judgement about Burma's nuclear ambitions and the North Korean connection.⁸

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⁸ *Preventing Nuclear Dangers in Southeast Asia and Australasia* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2009), p. 115. See also Andrew Selth, 'Burma's Nuclear Status: Not the Last Word, but ...', *The Interpreter*, 29 September 2009, <<http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2009/09/29/Burmas-nuclear-status-Not-the-last-word-but.aspx>> [Accessed 3 October 2009].