

ASEAN will never suspend Burma, says Malaysia

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South-east Asian countries will never suspend Burma from their 10-nation bloc despite its bloody crackdown on mass protests, Malaysia's foreign minister said after talks with a UN envoy.

The military regime in Burma has come under heavy international pressure since quelling last month's peaceful rallies, but Syed Hamid Albar dismissed suggestions the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) could suspend its membership.

"If you want Myanmar (Burma) to continue to be engaged, first we should not be talking about suspending. Nobody can talk when you are threatening with all sorts of things," the foreign minister told a press conference.

"Secondly, there is no mechanism for suspension in ASEAN. ASEAN will never take that route," he said after a meeting with United Nations special envoy Ibrahim Gambari.

Mr Gambari is on a regional tour trying to increase pressure on the regime to halt its violent suppression of dissent, release political detainees and launch talks with the pro-democracy opposition.

Malaysia sponsored Burma to join ASEAN in 1997, but has recently become highly critical of the ruling generals, who snubbed Mr Syed Hamid during a visit last year.

However, the minister said Burma's neighbours must work to prevent the impoverished nation from becoming even more internationally isolated, notably by fostering dialogue between it and the United Nations.

Mr Syed Hamid was upbeat about developments in Burma since Gambari's first visit earlier this month, noting that the situation remained calm and that the regime had appointed an official to maintain "relations" with detained democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

He said, however, that more needed to be done, but he stressed that change must come from within the country.

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