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- Home Page
- «Mirror of the World»
- Support the Site
- Contacts
- Iraq-War board rules

- Articles
  - Iraq News
  - Around the World
  - Historical analysis & facts
  - Current analysis
  - Economics
  - Hot News
  - Rankings

- Forums

## RSS feeds

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## Myanmar's nuclear bombshell

By: Bertil Lintner on: 06.06.2010 [16:39 ] (135 reads)

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Myanmar's nuclear bombshell

By Bertil Lintner

BANGKOK - Myanmar's ruling generals have started a secret program to develop nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles to deliver them in a high-stakes bid to deter perceived hostile foreign powers, according to an investigative report by the Democratic Voice of Burma that will be aired later on Friday by television news network al-Jazeera.

Asia Times Online contributor Bertil Lintner was involved in reviewing materials during extensive authentication processes

conducted by international arms experts and others during the report's five-year production. In the strategic footsteps of North Korea, Myanmar's leaders are also building a complex network of tunnels, bunkers and other underground installations where they and their military hardware would be hidden against any external aerial attack, including presumably from the United States.

Based on testimonies and photographs supplied by high-ranking military defectors, the documentary will show for the first time how Myanmar has developed the capacity and is now using laser isotope separation, a technique for developing nuclear weapons. It will also show how machinery and equipment has been acquired to develop ballistic missiles.

That Myanmar is now trying to develop nuclear weapons and has become engaged in a military partnership with North Korea will dramatically change the region's security dynamic. Myanmar is a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a 10-nation grouping whose members jointly signed the 1995 Southeast Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty, also known as the Bangkok Treaty.

The nuclear bid will also put the already diplomatically isolated country on a collision course with the US. US Senator Jim Webb, who has earlier led a diplomatic drive to *engage* the junta, abruptly canceled his scheduled June 4 trip to Myanmar when he learned about the upcoming documentary. The explosive revelations about Myanmar's nuclear initiative are expected to freeze Washington's recent warming towards the generals.

It is possible that the junta's grandiose schemes could amount to little more than a monumental waste of state resources. According to one international arms expert familiar with the materials on Myanmar's program, the laser isotope separation method now being employed by Myanmar's insufficiently trained scientists *is probably one of the worst that is yet to be invented. The major countries of the world have spent billions of dollars trying to make the process work without success.*

There is thus a risk that the generals will further undermine the country's already wobbly economic fundamentals on ill-conceived weapons projects, ones that may yield little more than lots of radioactive holes in the ground and some crude Scud-type missiles.

Western military experts assert that any sophisticated bunker-buster bomb could easily penetrate the newly built network of tunnels and other underground facilities, constructed near the new capital of Naypyidaw. In light of the country's lack of technical know-how, Myanmar's desired nuclear bomb may also turn out to be a huge white elephant. It is not even certain that its homegrown missiles will fly. At least that is the conclusion of weapons' experts who have closely examined the materials that will be presented in al-Jazeera's investigative report.

The program was produced over five-years by the Democratic Voice of Burma, or DVB, a Norway-based radio and TV station run by

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## Calendar-Filter

< Jun > < 2010 >

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
		1	2	3	4	5
6	<b>7</b>	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30			
<b>Today</b>						

Myanmar exiles. They have made their case based on leaked photographs, documents and testimonies from key military defectors. The documentary was directed by London-based Australian journalist Evan Williams.

### Nuclear turncoat

The report's main source, Sai Thein Win, is a former Myanmar army major who recently defected to the West, bringing with him a trove of information never seen before outside of the country. His documentation has been scrutinized by, among others, Robert Kelley, a former US weapons scientist at the Los Alamos facility where work is conducted towards the design of nuclear weapons.

From 1992 to 1993 and 2001 to 2005, Kelley also served as one of the directors of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). "Sai Thein Win reminds us to some degree of Mordecai Vanunu, an Israeli technician at the Dimona nuclear site in the Negev desert ... Sai is providing similar information," said Kelley.

Vanunu blew the whistle on Israel's nuclear program, and, according to Kelley, Sai Thein Win has "provided photographs of items that would appear to be very useful in a nuclear program as they are specific to nuclear issues. They could be seen as for other things, but they look like they were designed for a nuclear program."

Geoff Forden, another international arms expert, says Myanmar appears to be "pursuing at least two different paths towards acquiring a missile production capability. One is a more or less indigenous path. The less indigenous comes from the fact that they have sent a number of Myanmar military officers to Moscow for training in engineering related to missile design and production."

Sai Thein Win was among the Myanmar army officers sent to Russia and he has produced photographs of himself taken during his training there. He also has pictures of a top secret nuclear facility located 11 kilometers from Thabeikkyin, a small town near the Irrawaddy River in northern Myanmar.

He claims this is the headquarters of the army's nuclear battalion and that it is there the regime is trying to build a nuclear reactor and enrich uranium for weapons. Missile development, he says, is carried out at another facility near Myaing, southwest of Mandalay, in central Myanmar.

Machinery for the Myaing plant has been supplied by two German firms, which also sent engineers to install the equipment. The Germans, Sai Thein Win says, were told that "the factories were educational institutions ... those poor German engineers don't know, didn't know that we were aiming to use those machines in producing rocket parts or some parts for military use."

How useful those machines will be for missile development is questionable. Despite their training in Russia, the Myanmar engineers handling them have little or no knowledge of producing sophisticated weapons, according to experts who say the generals' apparent dream of having a nuclear reactor may also be just that: a pipedream.

Another high-ranking Myanmar military official also provided DVB's researchers with classified information related to the country's nuclear and missile program. He, however, fell out of view while in Singapore some time last year and his current whereabouts is now unknown.

Myanmar was one of the first countries in the region to launch a nuclear research program. In 1956, the country's then-democratic government set up the Union of Burma Atomic Energy Center in the former capital Yangon. Unrelated to the country's defense industries, it came to a halt when the military seized power in 1962. The new military power-holders, led by General Ne Win, did not trust the old technocrats and saw little use in having a nuclear program designed for peaceful purposes.

In 2001, Myanmar's present ruling junta aimed to revitalize the country's nuclear ambitions. An agreement was signed with Russia's Atomic Energy Ministry, which announced plans to build a 10-megawatt nuclear research reactor in central Myanmar. That same year, Myanmar established a Department of Atomic Energy, believed to be the brainchild of the Minister for Science and Technology, U Thaug, a graduate of the Defense Services Academy and former ambassador to the US. At the time, US-trained nuclear scientist Thein Po Saw was identified as a leading advocate for nuclear technology in Myanmar.

Reports since then have been murky, including speculation that the deal was shelved due to Myanmar's lack of finances. The Russian

reactor was never delivered, but in May 2007 Russia 's atomic energy agency, Rosatom, again announced it would build Myanmar 's nuclear-research reactor. Under the initial 2001 agreement, Myanmar nationals, most military personnel, were sent to Russia for training. Nearly 10 years later, Russia has yet to deliver the reactor because Myanmar "refused to allow inspection by the IAEA", according to DVB.

#### North Korean ally

Myanmar thus appears to have embarked on its own indigenous program to build a nuclear research reactor. Unconfirmed reports circulated on the Internet claim that North Korea is assisting the Myanmar authorities in the endeavor. Diplomatic relations between North Korea and Myanmar, which were severed in 1983 when North Korean agents detonated a bomb in Yangon, were officially restored in April 2007.

Only days later, a North Korean freighter, the Kang Nam I, docked at Thilawa port near the old capital. Heavy crates were unloaded under strict secrecy and tight security. A journalist working for a Japanese news agency was detained and interrogated for attempting to photograph the unloading.

Last year, the Kang Nam I was back in the news when, destined for Myanmar, it was turned back by US naval warships. At the time, it was thought to be carrying material banned under UN Security Council resolutions aimed at preventing North Korea from exporting material related to the production and development of weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

North Korea's role in Myanmar 's nascent nuclear program is still a matter of conjecture. But in May this year, a seven-member UN panel monitoring implementation of sanctions against North Korea said its research indicated that Pyongyang is involved in banned nuclear and ballistic activities in Iran, Syria and Myanmar.

The experts in the documentary said they were looking into "suspicious activity in Myanmar", including the presence of Namchongang Trading, one of the North Korean companies sanctioned by the UN. North Korean tunneling experts are also known to have provided crucial assistance to the construction of Myanmar's underground facilities.

According to an unnamed Myanmar army engineer, who was also interviewed for the DVB documentary, "a batch of eight North Koreans came each time and were sent back, then another eight came and were sent back. At the Defense Industry factories, there are at least eight to 16 of them ... they act as technical advisers."

In November 2008, Gen Shwe Mann, the third-highest ranking official in Myanmar's military hierarchy, paid a secret visit to Pyongyang. Traveling with an entourage of military officers, he visited a radar base and a factory making Scud missiles, and signed a memorandum of understanding with the North Koreans to enhance military cooperation between the two countries.

A photo file and other details of the visit were leaked to Myanmar exiles and were soon available on the Internet, prompting the authorities to carry out a purge within its own ranks. On January 7 this year, one Foreign Ministry official and a retired military officer were sentenced to death for leaking the material.

#### Military insecurity

Aung Lin Htut, a former intelligence officer attached to the Myanmar Embassy in Washington until he defected in 2004, claims that soon after General Than Shwe came to power in 1992 he "thought that if we followed the North Korean example we would not need to take into account America or even need to care about China. In other words, when they have nuclear energy and weapons other countries ... won't dare touch Myanmar."

The tunnels and bunkers - some of which are large enough to accommodate hundreds of soldiers - should be seen in the same light, Aung Lin Htut has argued. "It is for their own safety that the government has invested heavily into those tunnel projects," he said.

The generals may fear not only an outside attack, which is highly unlikely according to security experts, but also another popular uprising. In 1988, millions of people took to the streets to demand an end to military dictatorship. In 2007, tens of thousands of Buddhist monks led marches for national reconciliation and a dialogue between the military government and the pro-democracy movement.

On both occasions, the generals responded with military force and brutally suppressed the popular movements. But the generals were

shaken and apparently saw the need to move themselves and vital military facilities underground and away from populated areas, as also seen in the junta's bizarre and sudden move to the new capital Naypyidaw in November 2005.

For other reasons, North Korea reacted similarly after the war on the Korean Peninsula. North Korea is believed to have one of the world's most extensive complexes of tunnels, storage facilities - and even weapons' factories - all hidden from the prying eyes of real and imagined enemies.

That is likely why Myanmar's generals see Pyongyang as a role model and why relations between the two countries have warmed since the 1990s - hardly by coincidence at the same time the US has become one of Myanmar's fiercest critics. In 2005, then-secretary of state Condoleezza Rice branded Myanmar, along with Belarus, Cuba, North Korea, Iran and Zimbabwe as "outposts of tyranny", and the US tightened financial sanctions against the regime and its supporters.

The present US administration of President Barack Obama adopted a more conciliatory approach, sending emissaries to Myanmar to "engage" the generals and nudge them towards democracy. But sources close to the decision-making process in Washington also believe that concern over Myanmar's WMD programs - and increasingly close ties with North Korea - should be equally important considerations in any new US policy towards Myanmar.

One of the negotiators recently sent to Myanmar, US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia Kurt Campbell, is interviewed in the DVB documentary. When asked about Myanmar's new security-related policies and initiatives, he replies rather cryptically: Some of it is sensitive so really can't be discussed in great detail, but I will say we have seen enough to cause us some anxiety about certain kinds of military and other kinds of relationships between North Korea and Burma Myanmar. We have been very clear with the authorities about what our red lines are ... we always worry about nuclear proliferation and there are signs that there has been some flirtation around these matters.

According to internal documents presented by the DVB, the total cost of Myanmar's tunneling projects and WMD programs is astronomical, running into billions of US dollars. This appears to be one reason why several Myanmar military officers have defected to the West - and brought with them the evidence that will be seen by global audiences on Friday.

Bertil Lintner is a former correspondent with the Far Eastern Economic Review and the author of Great Leader, Dear Leader: Demystifying North Korea Under the Kim Clan. He is currently a writer with Asia Pacific Media Services.

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**Big bucks are paid for this type of info???**

by bernie22 on 06.06.2010 [18:15 ]

This is not new news its been known for quite some time its only being released now for some kind of propaganda ploy??? What would be interesting to know is how much the defectors sold their information for?????

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