

22

Does Burma have a WMD program?

(11:02 AEDT, 7 June 2010)

At the beginning of June 2010, the Norway-based activist group and radio broadcaster known as the Democratic Voice of Burma released a documentary film and written report on Myanmar's suspected nuclear weapons program and apparent interest in acquiring ballistic missiles. Both the film and the report appeared to offer rare insights into the military regime's ambitions to secretly develop strategic weapons.

Reports produced by activist organisations always need to be treated with caution, particularly if they rely heavily on a single source. However, a documentary film and written report just released by the Oslo-based Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) appear to offer a rare insight into Burma's secret nuclear ambitions.¹

Over the past 10 years, this issue has attracted some sensational claims. For example, activist websites have stated that, with North Korean help, the Naypyidaw regime has secretly constructed an underground nuclear

¹ 'Myanmar "Nuclear Plans" Exposed', *Al Jazeera*, 4 June 2010, english.aljazeera.net/news/asia-pacific/2010/06/2010642542469132.html [page discontinued] [now at www.aljazeera.com/news/asia-pacific/2010/06/2010642542469132.html]; and Robert Kelley, 'Expert Says Burma "Planning Nuclear Bomb"', *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 3 June 2010, www.dvb.no/news/expert-says-burma-%e2%80%98planning-nuclear-bomb%e2%80%99/9527 [page discontinued].

reactor. Last August, there was a spate of news stories suggesting that Burma could have a nuclear weapon by 2014 and ‘a handful’ of such devices by 2020.²

The DVB dismisses these kinds of claims as ‘technically incredible’. In their place, it offers the detailed testimony of a well-placed Burmese army officer, supported by a large number of photographs and leaked documents. Drawing mainly on these sources, the DVB film and report describe the very early stages of what might be called an aspirational WMD program.

The DVB shares the view that Burma’s generals feel threatened and are convinced that possession of a nuclear weapon would provide an effective deterrent against external intervention.³ The regime apparently sees North Korea as a useful model to follow—despite the clear differences in strategic circumstances between the two countries.

With this external threat in mind, Naypyidaw has reportedly charged elements of Burma’s armed forces with constructing a nuclear reactor, enriching uranium and developing a nuclear weapon. To this end, the DVB claims, the regime has built a number of specialised facilities, acquired dual-use equipment from abroad and begun a range of nuclear-related experiments.

As described by the DVB’s main source, however, such activity as has occurred has been rather disjointed and marked by a lack of resources and expertise. There are also suggestions of poor management and a lack of coordination, if not incompetence. For example, some of the sophisticated machine tools imported from Europe have been so poorly maintained they are now useless.

If the DVB’s material is accurate, Burma’s WMD program—if it can be called that—does not seem to have progressed much beyond crude experiments. It is certainly a very long way from posing a credible threat to regional security. Indeed, one of the co-authors of the DVB report, a former IAEA official, believes that on the available evidence Naypyidaw has little chance of succeeding in its quest for a nuclear weapons capability.

2 Hamish McDonald, ‘Revealed: Burma’s Nuclear Bombshell’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 August 2009, www.smh.com.au/world/revealed-burmax2019s-nuclear-bombshell-20090731-e4fw.html.

3 Andrew Selth, *Burma and the Threat of Invasion: Regime Fantasy or Strategic Reality?*, Griffith Asia Institute Regional Outlook Paper No.17 (Brisbane: Griffith University, 2008), www.griffith.edu.au/business/griffith-asia-institute/pdf/Andrew-Selth-Regional-Outlook-17v2.pdf [page discontinued].

Part of the DVB's documentary film is devoted to an examination of the many underground facilities in Burma. As previously reported, these 'tunnels' appear to have been built with North Korean assistance—most with military purposes in mind.⁴ Their inclusion in the documentary is curious, as no evidence has yet been put forward to support claims that they are in some way connected to a secret nuclear program.

The DVB also refers to ballistic missiles. Short-range, medium-range and even intercontinental weapons are mentioned—almost interchangeably. There are occasional references to a reported agreement with North Korea for the provision of a ballistic missile production line and allusions to the beginnings of a Burmese research program.⁵ It would appear, however, that indigenous production of such weapons is still a long way off.

Both the film and the written report cite North Korea's involvement in the development of Burma's defence infrastructure and arms industries. Yet, there is almost no discussion of foreign participation in Burma's nascent nuclear program. This is strange, given that activist groups and others routinely portray Naypyidaw's secret WMD program almost as a joint venture with Pyongyang. Pakistan and Iran have also been mentioned in this context.⁶

One explanation for this omission might simply be that the DVB's informant was not privy to all aspects of the program. It is also possible, however, that the regime's obsession with secrecy, its distrust of foreigners and its commitment to self-reliance extend even to its nuclear ambitions. If so, the result would seem to be that the Burmese are now facing challenges well beyond their technological capabilities.

4 Andrew Selth, *Burma and North Korea: Conventional Allies or Nuclear Partners?*, Griffith Asia Institute Regional Outlook Paper No.22 (Brisbane: Griffith University, 2009), www.griffith.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/172579/burma-and-north-korea-conventional-allies-or-nuclear-partners.pdf [page discontinued].

5 Andrew Selth, 'Burma: If Not Nukes, What About Missiles?', *The Interpreter*, 11 January 2010, www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2010/01/11/Burma-If-not-nukes-what-about-missiles.aspx [page discontinued] [now at archive.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/burma-if-not-nukes-what-about-missiles].

6 Andrew Selth, 'Is there a Burma–North Korea–Iran Nuclear Conspiracy?', *The Interpreter*, 25 February 2009, www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2009/02/25/Is-there-a-Burma-North-Korea-Iran-nuclear-conspiracy.aspx [page discontinued] [now at archive.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/there-burma-north-korea-iran-nuclear-conspiracy].

The DVB film and report do not pretend to be comprehensive surveys of Burma's interest in strategic weapons. They rely heavily on the data provided by one mid-ranking officer whose access, while good, was nevertheless limited. In the written report, there are some notable gaps. In places, the language is quite loose and the analysis shallow. The technical issues raised have yet to be verified by other experts. Inevitably, there is a host of unanswered questions.

Even so, the DVB's film and report are more credible and convincing than most treatments of these matters. They help put the fragmentary, anecdotal and often exaggerated claims of the past 10 years into a more sensible perspective. The potential dangers of even an aspirational WMD program should not be underestimated, but it would appear that the world's first Buddhist bomb is still a distant prospect.

The DVB's apparent revelations raise a number of other important strategic issues. These relate, for example, to Burma's observance—or otherwise—of several international agreements, its relations with its near neighbours, its continuing membership of ASEAN and the reaction of the broader international community—in particular, the US (which is already worried about Burma's relations with North Korea).⁷

Three months ago, US Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell was asked to comment on persistent reports about nuclear proliferation by Burma. He replied that 'there are some signs that there has been some flirtation around these matters, and perhaps even more'.⁸ Washington has yet to explain what this 'flirtation' actually entails. Perhaps the release of the DVB's film and report will be the trigger that finally prompts an authoritative official statement on this issue.

7 Andrew Selth, 'Burma, North Korea and US Policy', *The Interpreter*, 18 May 2010, www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2010/05/18/Burma-North-Korea-and-US-policy.aspx [page discontinued] [now at archive.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/burma-north-korea-and-us-policy].

8 Aye Chan Naing, 'Kurt Campbell: "No Change in Burma"', *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 8 March 2010, www.dvb.no/interview/kurt-campbell-no-change-in-burma/7984 [page discontinued].

This text is taken from *Interpreting Myanmar: A Decade of Analysis*,
by Andrew Selth, published 2020 by ANU Press, The Australian
National University, Canberra, Australia.