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The Burma blacklist grows

Published: November 13 2007 23:17 | Last updated: November 13 2007 23:17

For years, the international community has been deeply divided on the merits of using economic sanctions as a tactic to press Burma's ruling military junta to change. Often it seemed as though the only ones to be affected by import bans and consumer boycotts were common workers left jobless by shutdowns.

But in the wake of the Burmese military's recent crackdown on Buddhist monks and other anti-government protesters, the US and Australia financially blacklisted businesspeople and companies considered close to the ruling junta.

Those measures, it seems, have begun to bite. Businesspeople have been knocking on diplomatic doors in Rangoon recently, appealing for their removal from the financial blacklist.

But when they realise the futility of their pleas for mercy, some of the frustrated executives have apparently taken a different tack – naming names of other powerful business figures who are allegedly close to the generals but have escaped similar punishment.

Perhaps with these kind of informants, the financial blacklists may be expanded soon.

Wallström's turn

Of the various shadowy networks bent on world domination – the Bilderberg group, World Economic Forum and so on – the least well-known may be the Council of Women World Leaders.

This may change after Margot Wallström, the European Commission's self-styled Mrs PR, takes over the chair of its ministerial initiative from Madeleine Albright, former US secretary of state.

The Swede's appointment as chair (not chairwoman) was announced on Tuesday and will be confirmed at a global security summit in the US this week. Many of the council's members – an elite club including Mary Robinson, former Irish president, and Kim Campbell, ex-Canadian premier – will be there.

Members in power today – such as Angela Merkel of Germany – will not attend. Neither will Benazir Bhutto, opposition leader in Pakistan, for obvious reasons.

Wallström raised eyebrows by backing Ségolène Royal's failed presidential bid in France on the grounds that she was a fellow woman (rather than fellow Socialist). But she surely won't be as controversial as another member who was once a European commissioner: Edith Cresson. She helped bring down the Commission in 1999 by appointing her dentist as an adviser. She has since lost half her Brussels pension but not her membership of the exclusive club.

Chart toppers

Lord Malloch-Brown, the controversial British foreign minister, this week came in for some ribbing from his boss, David Miliband, the youthful British foreign secretary.

The outspoken lord – a former top dog at the UN who was loathed in the White House for his opposition to the Iraq war – boasted soon after arriving in London that he would be the “wise eminence” advising the callow foreign secretary.

With stories circulating about Lord Malloch-Brown's grand ministerial living arrangements, Miliband poked fun at his colleague at a lunch with Westminster journalists, suggesting the two of them should form a pop group to rival the unlikely musical pairing this week of the French and German foreign ministers.

Miliband suggested that they could perform some Elton John songs, but his proposal of “Sorry Seems to Be the Hardest Word” was vetoed.

“Then we talked about doing ‘I'm Still Standing’,” said the foreign secretary. In the end, they settled on “The Captain and the Kid”. Perfect.

Under a cloud

Brian Mulroney has done well for himself in the 14 years since stepping down as Canada's prime minister. He is a partner at a top Montreal law firm and a director of blue chips such as Archer Daniels Midland and Barrick Gold.

But Mulroney, 68, has struggled to shake off a cloud of suspicion from allegations that he profited from Air Canada's purchase of a fleet of Airbus aircraft in the late 1980s.

The fuss died down in the mid-1990s after he won C\$2.1m in a libel suit relating to the allegations. But the rumour mill started again when Mulroney belatedly acknowledged that he had received C\$300,000 from Karlheinz Schreiber, a German lobbyist. Airbus had earlier paid millions in commissions to a company connected with Schreiber.

Schreiber, now in a Toronto jail awaiting extradition to Germany on fraud and tax evasion charges, has further turned up the heat on Mulroney in recent weeks.

In a sworn affidavit, he claims that he and the former prime minister talked about the C\$300,000 payment while Mulroney was still in office, and in those discussions planned to make the payment only after he left public life.

But Mulroney is fighting back, urging the current Conservative government to set up a public inquiry into the saga. Stand by for revelations that could shatter Ottawa's reputation as one of the world's boring capitals.

Problem solved

As France braces itself for another crippling transport strike, Eurostar has come up with an ingenious solution to beating those pesky French rail workers – replace them with Brits.

With French SNCF workers due to walk out, Eurostar said it has switched from Anglo-French crews to an all-British staff to avoid disruption to the launch of its new high-speed rail service from London to Paris.

A Eurostar representative assures Observer that the company isn't trying to subvert French industrial action.

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