

## India woos Myanmar with weapons deal

South China Morning Post (Hong Kong)

May 24, 2003

By S. N. M. Abdi in Calcutta

India is exporting arms to Myanmar for the first time - cementing New Delhi's growing ties with the military junta which it once shunned for its terrible human rights record.

The Defence Ministry has confirmed the sale of 80 howitzers to the Myanmar military, but refused to divulge prices or the terms of payment. "The arms exports reveal that Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's government has pulled out all stops to befriend the military dictatorship in order to counter Chinese influence in Myanmar and Southeast Asia," said retired Lieutenant-Colonel J. K. Dutt, strategic affairs and international relations expert at Calcutta's Jadavpur University. He said the arms deal marked the beginning of a new phase in India-Myanmar relations.

Ironically, Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes is seen as a personal friend of Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. His official residence in New Delhi is a meeting point for activists of Ms Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy living in exile in India. He is believed to have opposed the deal but gave in under pressure from the Prime Minister's Office and Foreign Ministry.

Colonel Dutt said that howitzers produced by Indian ordnance factories were suited to Myanmar's hilly terrain, which is strikingly similar to India's north-east bordering Myanmar. "The guns have a high trajectory which can clear hilltops and low mountains," he said. According to a source, the arms consignment was despatched overland in Indian army trucks from the Eastern Command's 33rd Corps headquarters at Binaguri in Bengal.

Until now, China was the main weapons supplier to the Myanmar military. The junta has a "very favourable" purchase agreement with China for buying tanks, armoured personnel carriers, rocket launchers, missiles, fighter planes, ships and submarines. Analysts say the ruling junta's 500,000-strong army is far too big considering that the economy is in a shambles and Myanmar has no external enemies to contend with.

India claims it is wooing the generals because it needs Myanmar's help to fight insurgent groups in the northeast and smash drug cartels. "But India's real worry is Myanmar's military ties with China, which it is desperately trying to weaken by supplying arms to the generals," Colonel Dutt said.