

Human Rights Problems in Burma

Testimony by
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Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this important and timely hearing. It is with a feeling of outrage and disgust that I appear here today because tomorrow a courageous champion of democracy, Aung San Suu Kyi, will be spending her 58th birthday in detention. The Burmese junta must release Aung San Suu Kyi immediately and resume a dialogue with the opposition quickly to formulate with them a plan for democratization in Burma. In light of the recent outrageous events in Burma, I will be updating you on the State Department's current strategy to respond to these events and reiterating this Administration's unwavering commitment to support the long-suffering people of Burma as they battle for democracy, improved human rights, and freedom. Both the President and the Secretary of State have taken a personal interest in Burma. Many of my comments will reiterate those of the Secretary in his recent opinion editorial in the *Wall Street Journal*.

Our worst fears for democracy in Burma have been realized. We have always doubted the sincerity of the junta's claim to desire a peaceful transition to democracy. Now, we know our doubts were justified. Their orchestration of the ambush of Aung San Suu Kyi and her supporters on May 30 and their refusal to account fully for what happened that day leaves no room for debate. The junta calling itself the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) rules through fear and brutality with

complete disregard for the rule of law, basic human rights, and the hopes and welfare of the Burmese people. Their recent actions make clear the depths to which these thugs will sink to retain power. Our response will be equally clear.

We commend the bipartisan efforts of members of Congress to shine a spotlight on the human rights problems in Burma. We also commend the Senate for passing the Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act sponsored by Senator Mitch McConnell, who has always been a great advocate for liberty in Burma. The State Department supports the goals and intent of this bill. We are working on several actions to increase pressure on the SPDC.

Already, we have extended our visa restrictions to include all officials of a puppet organization of the junta - the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) - and the managers of state-run enterprises so that they and their families can be banned as well. The United States already votes against loans to Burma from international financial institutions like the World Bank.

In addition to our existing tough sanctions, we are now working on freezing the financial assets of members of the SPDC and banning remittances to Burma. We are also considering an import ban. Finally, we hope to place restrictions on travel to Burma.

As we strengthen our own set of sanctions, we do so in conjunction with the European Union. They are implementing

their own strengthened common position which will extend an asset freeze and visa restrictions to leaders of the USDA and managers of state-owned companies. But to be truly effective Burma's neighbors must join us in increasing the pressure on the SPDC. It is time that Asian countries take responsibility for the actions of the Burmese junta that destabilize the region and smear the reputation of regional institutions like ASEAN. The Secretary is currently having frank discussions at the ASEAN Regional Forum with both members of ASEAN and other countries in attendance, including China. ASEAN loses credibility when it allows one of its members to flout its previous commitments to the organization. It is time for member countries to act decisively and firmly to address the problems in Burma that affect their region. We recognize their recent statement in favor of national reconciliation as a good first step and support their plans to send a troika delegation to Rangoon.

The SPDC's renewed campaign of violence and repression against the National League for Democracy (NLD) and Aung San Suu Kyi shows the junta's blatant disregard for the basic rights of the Burmese people and the desire of the international community to see those rights protected. The most recent crackdown is just one link in a long chain of appalling behavior toward the people and the nation the military regime claims to be protecting. The SPDC's disregard for human rights and democracy extends to every conceivable category of violation. The junta

suppresses political dissent by censorship, persecution, beatings, disappearances and imprisonment. It harasses ethnic minorities through brutal campaigns against civilians. It sharply curtails religious freedom. It subjects its people to forced labor. It recruits children to serve in the military and then brutalizes them.

The litany of abuse endured by civilians in ethnic minority regions is especially deplorable. We remain deeply troubled by widespread and brutal rapes, torture, murders, forced relocations, forced labor, confiscation of property and suppression of religious freedom in villages in the Shan, Karen, Kayah, Mon, and Rakhine States and in Tenasserim Division. The violation of the basic human rights of these minority peoples has devastating effects on individuals, their families and communities but also has regional and international implications.

The widespread use of forced labor by the SPDC, including the forced conscription of children into the army, has been an ongoing concern to the United States and the International Labor Organization (ILO). Forced labor is one of the most egregious violations of worker rights. Since the ILO's request to its constituents in December 2000 that they review their relations with Burma in light of the system of forced labor, it has been trying to work with the SPDC to eliminate forced labor. But as the ILO liaison officer in Burma said recently, forced labor

continues to be a serious problem especially in border areas controlled by the military. Our recent report on Trafficking in Persons sheds further light on the problem and the Burmese regime's insufficient response. The SPDC has tried to appease the international community through slow increases in the level of cooperation with the ILO, but this has yet to lead to any serious action to combat the problem. In May, the SPDC and the ILO agreed on a plan of action to eliminate forced labor, which if implemented in good faith could have begun to produce some substantive progress. But the International Labor Conference decided in June that the climate of uncertainty and intimidation created by the events of May 30 did not provide an environment in which the plan could be implemented in a credible manner. Forced labor is yet another area that the SPDC continues to evade its responsibility to protect the basic rights of the people of Burma and shows disdain for the rule of law.

Throughout Burma, there is no freedom of association, no freedom of expression, no freedom of the press. Well over 1,000 political prisoners languish in Burma's jails and the arrests and unlawful detentions continue. In addition to Aung San Suu Kyi, at least 100 NLD supporters were detained, or are missing or dead after the incident in late May. NLD leaders both young and old were targeted in this assault. Today, we fear for the welfare of senior leader U Tin Oo who reportedly was injured and whose whereabouts are still unknown. We have not forgotten, nor

will we forget any of these brave individuals who put their lives on the line over the past two decades to stand for justice, democracy, freedom, rule of law and the right to be heard. We, together with the international community, have pressed for the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners at every opportunity. We will continue to do so until every prisoner is released to live a life in freedom and peace.

The State Department also will continue to report honestly and accurately on the crimes of the SPDC in our reports on human rights, religious freedom, and trafficking in persons and drugs. The truth will not be hidden. The oppression of an entire nation must not stand. The international community should pull together as never before to put an end to the unchecked abuse perpetrated by this illegitimate and brutal junta. The generals must learn that such appalling behavior will deny them the benefits of participation in the global community and eventually will deny them the ability to maintain the power they stole from the legitimate democratic leadership of Burma in 1990.