

# Don't Let Burma Slide

By Morton Abramowitz

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The small flickering of possible change for the long-suffering people of Burma is being snuffed out. Unless the world acts quickly, pro-democracy leader and Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi will be finished, politically if not physically.

Seven weeks have passed since the Burmese military imprisoned her and her political associates after the violent assault on her motorcade May 30. International demands for her release fall on deaf ears. The Burmese regime apparently came to believe that allowing Aung San Suu Kyi access to the people of Burma was a mistake. She was drawing sizable crowds on her trips throughout the country, and they feared for their control.

With the exception of a brief meeting June 10 with U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan's special envoy, Razali Ismail, the Burmese government has allowed no one to see her nor revealed her whereabouts. She has effectively disappeared. Razali announced that she was uninjured and in good spirits. But his expectation that she would be released in one or two weeks has been dashed, along with the promise the Burmese government made him a year earlier to bring about national reconciliation. Instead the military has sent special envoys throughout Asia to justify her detention. Meanwhile, government news agencies defile Suu Kyi's character and Burmese authorities aggressively arrest and interrogate members of her National League for Democracy (NLD).

After her arrest the U.S. Congress enacted trade sanctions, and an executive order is being prepared to freeze assets of the Burmese leadership and ban remittances from the United States. Secretary of State Colin Powell, writing in the Wall Street Journal, rebuked the "thugs who run the Burmese government." The European Union strengthened existing sanctions, broadened its arms embargo on Burma and postponed a high-level visit. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) overlooked its principle of nonintervention and issued a cautious statement calling for the "early lifting of restrictions placed on Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD members." And an embarrassed Japan, one of Burma's largest donors, suspended new aid.

But Burma is hardly a world priority. Countries, including the United States and its European friends, have failed to lean on those nations that help the military to survive -- China, Thailand and India. The members of ASEAN have taken no practical steps to further their request for her release. And in Thailand, except for statements urging the Burmese government to return the situation to "normalcy," Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra continues his support for the Burmese military, harassing Burmese exiles and dissidents in Thailand while promoting investment in Burma. China, Burma's largest military supplier, has the greatest influence but, not surprisingly, remains silent.

Whatever the world's response, it is not working. Given the mendacity and ruthlessness of the Burmese regime Suu Kyi's survival cannot be taken for granted. If nothing happens soon, the world will drift into accepting her disappearance from the scene. And that is what Burma's leaders expect. Burma's senior general, Than Shwe, is very tough, detests Suu Kyi and is not easily susceptible to outside pressure, while his government focuses on solidifying relations with neighboring nations. The practical options for dealing with his regime are not promising. Force is out of the question, and no country is willing to bring serious pressure on China. That leaves little else but to further mobilize the world to make clear that what happens to Suu Kyi is of real importance and ensure that at least some of its military leaders understand the consequences for Burma of her continued imprisonment:

- Concerned nations should sustain tougher rhetoric condemning the Burmese government, and strongly convey the difficulty of doing business with the government without her release, with steps that might include downgrading their relations with Burma. The United States should lead the charge.
- In particular, nations should focus on Beijing. To hold China's feet to the fire, a U.N. Security Council resolution proposing a sanctions regime on Burma needs to be introduced. While China would almost certainly veto it, Beijing does not like to use its veto, and the prospect of exercising it might cause China, at least quietly, to urge the Burmese government to free Suu Kyi.
- In any event, the United Nations must not remain mostly mute on Burma. The secretary general needs to go beyond his cautious public remarks. He should start by having Razali meet with the Security Council to report on the Burma situation. That would, one hopes, be followed by the resolution recommended above.
- Outside China, ASEAN probably has the most influence on Burma. ASEAN countries should convey the difficulties that Burma's ostracism will have for relations with Burma, making it also clear that holding ASEAN meetings in Burma will be impossible while Suu Kyi is detained. The president should appoint a special envoy to pursue such an effort with ASEAN and also urge the two leaders closest to Burma, Thai Prime Minister Thaksin and Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, to visit Burma and seek Suu Kyi's release.

One cannot be sanguine about whether all of this will be done or whether it will do the trick. But a stronger international effort on Suu Kyi's behalf remains the only vehicle for securing her release. Her freedom keeps alive the possibility of political change in Burma, but there is a long way to go to achieve it. That, and her comrades, must not be forgotten in the euphoria should she actually be released.

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