

Hill Passes Measure to Punish Burma With Trade Sanctions

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The Senate gave final approval yesterday to a bill that would bar all Burmese exports to the United States in an effort to punish the country's ruling junta, which has detained pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi since May 30.

The 94 to 1 vote, one day after the House approved the bill 418 to 2, sends the measure to President Bush for his signature. "We applaud passage of the legislation," White House spokesman Sean McCormack said.

"This legislation sends a clear message to the Burmese regime that their continued detention of Nobel Peace Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and their assaults on freedom cannot stand," the White House said in a statement.

The measure represents a significant policy shift for the Bush administration, which previously tried to encourage the military leadership to engage in a dialogue with Suu Kyi and Burma's ethnic groups. But lawmakers said yesterday that policy is dead, and that they will push for Burma's neighbors to adopt similar actions. They said they will also press for action against Burma, also known as Myanmar, at the U.N. Security Council.

"As long as Aung San Suu Kyi remains in prison and the Burmese people live in fear, convinced Burma's neighbors are complicit in their suffering, the problem of Burma will be an issue in America's bilateral relations with nations across Asia," Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) said.

Senate Majority Whip Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), the prime backer of the legislation, declared: "This policy of engagement has been a total failure, and that's part of what our bill is about today, to not only establish a leadership role for the United States but to lead the rest of the world in moving in a different direction."

The bill would ban the import of goods from Burma -- worth about \$356 million in 2002 -- and freeze the Burmese government's assets in the United States. It would expand the current ban on granting U.S. visas to Burmese leaders and codify the policy of opposing new international loans and technical assistance to that nation.

In a statement titled "Sanctions Used as Weapons of Mass Destruction," the Burmese government condemned the legislation. The sanctions "are imposed on target countries by the rich and powerful nations mainly with the intention to create havoc and bring hardship on the mass population of the people who need to work to live and require basic human needs to survive," the statement said.

Burma last week claimed to have sent Bush a petition signed by 350,000 textile workers appealing against the ban, which the semi-official Myanmar Times said could cut the country's export earnings by as much as one third.

European nations have also sanctioned Burma, and Japan has indicated that it will take a tougher stance and suspend future aid. But neighboring Thailand and China have said they will continue relations with the Burmese government. Lawmakers heaped scorn, in particular, on Thailand's position.

Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy won the 1990 elections, but the military voided the results. Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest from 1989 to 1995, and again for 19 months before her release in May 2002 -- a move that some administration officials had hoped would offer opportunities for greater engagement. But the outlook changed when the regime attacked Suu Kyi's supporters, killing scores, and seized her.

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