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Testimony by

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INTRODUCTION

I want to thank the Committee and Senator Brownback for inviting me to testify today on this important and timely issue. My name is Brian Joseph and I am a program officer for Asia at the National Endowment for Democracy. I have managed the NED's Burma project since 1996. The NED has been deeply involved in supporting democracy and human rights in Burma since 1990 when we made our first Burma grant. Today, thanks in large part to the strong interest the Congress has taken in Burma, the NED now awards over \$2.5 million per year in grants to 35 different Burmese groups dedicated to bringing democracy to their country. This support has been instrumental in sustaining and empowering the democratic opposition in Burma and increasing pressure on the military regime. Attached to my written testimony is a list of the Endowment's FY 2002 Burma grants. In the past, the Burmese junta has targeted the NED for its support of the pro-democracy movement in Burma. To protect the security of our Burma grantees, the NED does not publish the names of recipient organizations.

POLITICAL SITUATION

The situation inside Burma today is arguably more explosive than at any time since the 1988-1990 period when the State Law and Order Restoration Council, or SLORC, unleashed a violent crackdown that left thousands dead, in prison or in exile. When military-backed thugs attacked pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi and her convoy on a dark road outside of Monywa on May 30 of this year, all hope for a quick and peaceful negotiated settlement to Burma's long-standing political crisis evaporated.

In the short term, the regime has stopped democratic development dead in its tracks. With Suu Kyi once again in detention, National League for Democracy (NLD) offices shuttered, and scores of pro-democracy activists dead or missing, the regime looks to be firmly in control. But as long as Suu Kyi and her supporters continue to fight for democracy, the regime's grasp will be conditional on its willingness to use brute force to stay in power. The Burmese population's rejection of strong-man rule and its support for democracy are undiminished.

In October 2001, when the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), the successor regime to SLORC, announced that it was holding talks with the National League for Democracy, the international community supported efforts to build trust and understanding between the regime and the NLD. For better or worse, the international community at that time gave the regime yet another opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to national reconciliation. Although there have been indications for the past few months that the negotiations between the two parties had been stalled for quite some time, Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD continued to operate as if dialogue was still possible.

Since her release from house arrest on May 6, 2002, Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD have worked to rebuild their decimated party and to reconnect with the people of Burma. After re-opening their office in Rangoon, Suu Kyi and various NLD members began to travel the country. In less than a year, Suu Kyi made nine trips outside of Rangoon, visiting six of the seven ethnic states and drawing increasingly large and

energetic crowds as her travels progressed. Although it is impossible to know exactly what precipitated the government's decision to attack her party on May 30, the positive reception the NLD received wherever it went punctured one of the SPDC's most important self-held myths. That is, that the military alone could guarantee the territorial integrity of a united Burma.

The regime had to find a way to put Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD back in a box. A democratic opposition with widespread support from all corners of the country posed a direct threat to the military government and had to be neutralized. The May 30 nighttime attack did more than result in the re-arrest of Aung San Suu Kyi and the death of at least four, and potentially as many as 70, of her supporters. It also reconfirmed that the regime is willing to train its guns, once again, on unarmed civilians.

Prior to the May 30 attack, many Burmese dissidents and observers believed that progress, if not imminent, was at least a possibility. This perception was fueled in part by Razali Ismail, the UN special envoy to Burma. Although it is impossible to know for certain given the severe restrictions on speech and information in the country, reports indicated that the people of Burma were more or less willing to defer to the NLD and Suu Kyi and to trust their judgment that the Razali-backed dialogue, along with nonviolent protest, might eventually lead to a negotiated transition. The hope that the regime was sincere in its commitment to dialogue has now been smashed.

By carefully planning and ruthlessly executing a brazen, thuggish attack on the NLD, the regime exposed its true nature to the world. The junta is not a partner for peace and national reconciliation in Burma. It is an obstacle that must be overcome.

The regime made the cold calculation that there would be no serious repercussions, international or domestic, for its treatment of the nonviolent democracy movement led by Aung San Suu Kyi. The United States and the European Union have already proven them wrong on the first score. The people of Burma will prove them wrong on the second.

In short, the May 30 attack on the National League for Democracy and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi demonstrated three things.

- One, Senior General Than Shwe and the army hardliners are calling the shots.
- Two, the regime is willing to do whatever it deems necessary to hold on to power.
- Three, despite its rhetoric to the contrary, the SPDC understands full well that if given the opportunity the people of Burma would once again come out in mass in support of Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD.

In a country where the balance of power is so warped and where the military regime maintains absolute control over all facets of life, it is essential that efforts to

promote a transition to democracy address this imbalance directly. As long as the regime continues to believe that its actions will be met with little more than perfunctory rhetoric from governments around the world, it will not change.

Sanctions alone are not enough to effect change in Burma, but as part of a larger strategy to promote democracy, they are an essential ingredient. Coupled with continuing support for the democracy movement and humanitarian support for the hundreds of thousands of displaced Burmese, the US is a leader in supporting the struggle for democracy in Burma.

The only way the suffering of the Burmese can be relieved is through the achievement of a genuine transition to democracy. For forty years, military governments in Burma have looted and bankrupted the country, systemically hunted down and decimated ethnic minority populations, and endorsed the use of rape against citizens as a tool of war. Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD offer a credible and democratic alternative. We should support them in their efforts.

PROMOTING DEMOCRACY IN BURMA

During the year between Aung San Suu Kyi's release from house arrest in May 2002 and the attack on her and her convoy in May 2003, there was a marginal expansion of political space in Burma. Small as this opening was, it presented democracy activists

with new opportunities. For example, the NLD was able to reopen nearly one hundred district- and township-level offices and the regime allowed for greater communication between ethnic political leaders and their NLD counterparts. The regime has now shut those offices and closed those channels. Citizens again now have no way to contribute openly to the political life of their country. However, pro-democracy activist groups, based within Burma and abroad, have well-established underground channels of communications that allow for effective work inside Burma even under extremely trying circumstances.

Burma's borders with Thailand, India, China, and Bangladesh are long and porous. The geographic periphery of Burma itself is a ring of ethnic nationality states that are ruled by ethno-military organizations, the vast majority of which are either openly hostile to or at the very least weary of the regime. These conditions make it virtually impossible for the junta to shut off all channels of communication between activists in exile and the people of Burma.

As of one the principal organizations supporting democracy in Burma, the National Endowment for Democracy has provided timely, critical financial assistance to Burmese democrats since 1990. The Endowment's Burma project has grown each year and now provides more than \$2.5 million to roughly 35 groups working to advance the goals of Burma's elected representatives; to strengthen unity and self-reliance among Burma's prodemocracy and ethnic groups; and to provide independent news and information.

Independent news and information

Objective, accurate, and timely information is essential to combat the military junta's relentless disinformation campaign to discredit the prodemocracy movement, to sow distrust among the ethnic and prodemocracy groups, and to cover up its abysmal human rights record. The only newspapers legally available in Burma are the military junta-controlled official newspapers – *Kyay Mon* (The Mirror) and *Nay Pyidaw* (The Guardian) in Burmese, and *Myanmar Ahlin* (The New Light of Myanmar) in English and Burmese – and the relatively new government-sanctioned *Myanmar Times*, published by an Australian national and reportedly close to Lt. General Khin Nyunt. All radio and television is state-controlled. Magazines, including business and economics magazines, are highly censored. Internet access is limited to all but a handful of SPDC generals and their cronies. Listeners or readers of banned material are subjected routinely to intimidation and sometimes harsh prison terms. Ethnic groups face particularly severe restrictions in the use of their own languages in public life.

Prodemocracy organizations based in Thailand, India and further abroad work to counteract the SPDC-controlled media and propaganda through radio, print media, and human rights reports. As the only Burmese-run independent media outlets in the world, these newspapers, radio stations and magazines also serve as a training ground for Burmese journalists who will be called upon to establish a free press in Burma after the transition to democracy.

Radio continues to be the most efficient and effective means of reaching sizeable audiences in Burma. The BBC, Radio Free Asia, Voice of America, and the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), a Burmese-run shortwave radio station, provide the people of Burma with independent and accurate Burmese-language news and information. The NED-funded DVB also broadcasts in a number of major ethnic languages, reaching important yet isolated communities.

Newspapers and magazines published in Thailand and distributed through underground networks inside Burma and along its borders reach tens of thousands of readers. The NED supports a number of print outlets, including a Burmese-language newspaper and an English-language monthly magazine that seek out and print a diversity of opinion and commentary about democracy as well as news about Burma. Even in the face of harsh measures to curb the circulation of the paper and magazine, demand continues to grow.

Burma is a human rights catastrophe. Recent reports by NED grantees have documented the use of rape as a weapon of war in the Shan States, religious persecution of Christians in the Chin State, forced labor in Mon State, displacement in Karen State, and violation of women's rights throughout Burma. These groups work to inform the international community of the human rights conditions in Burma and to empower people in Burma to fight to protect their rights.

Institution Building Programs

Since 1962 when General Ne Win seized power, Burma has been ruled by military regimes that have decimated the country's civil society and destroyed its educational system. It is essential to develop and support alternative networks and organizations that can operate outside military control and begin to reconstruct basic elements of civil society. At present, this work must be supported through exile-based organizations with well-established links to the democracy movement inside Burma.

In line with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's repeated calls for unity in the ranks of the prodemocracy movement, support should be directed at efforts that strengthen cooperation, coordination, and unity among the various ethnic, student, and prodemocracy groups. An expanded base of support for Aung San Suu Kyi will make it harder for the military to consolidate its control while continuing to ignore her repeated calls for national reconciliation and tripartite dialogue between the NLD, the military regime, and the ethnic forces.

Women's groups based in countries that border Burma have carried out a variety of training and education programs in recent years to increase awareness of democratic values and women's human rights, to address public health concerns such as HIV/AIDS awareness and maternal and child health practices, and to provide skills training in handicrafts and agriculture as a means to increase opportunities for income-generation and self-reliance among refugees and internally displaced women. In 1999, a coalition of

these border-based women's groups joined forces to work to increase the participation of women in the struggle for democracy and human rights, build mutual understanding among all nationalities, actively participate in the national reconciliation and development process, and elevate the role of the women of Burma both at national and international levels.

The Endowment believes it is a priority to support the development of ethnic organizations so that they are better able to participate as equals in the discussions regarding the future political structure of Burma. Grants to ethnic nationality-based organizations allow them to solidify their core operations, reach more people through increased training programs, and distribute their literature to a wider audience. Assistance to ethnic groups will also complement the prodemocracy movement's efforts to build solidarity between the prodemocracy groups, most of whose members are ethnic Burmans, and the ethnic nationality forces.

Assistance should also be directed to border-based student and youth groups that work with counterparts inside the country to increase awareness of and respect for human rights and democracy through education workshops, foreign affairs training programs, and production and dissemination of materials. These dedicated students and other young peoples, who run great risks to remain in touch with and assist networks of democracy supporters throughout Burma, also disseminate the prodemocracy material of the larger movement.

Over the course of the past two years, Burmese prodemocracy organizations in exile, working in consultation with democrats inside the country, have dedicated greater attention and resources to researching and planning for a future democratic Burma. The Endowment has supported work in developing federal and state constitutions for a democratic Burma, drafting proposed labor laws, and drawing up plans for a transition to a market-based economy. Despite such efforts, transition planning is still in its infancy. Increased effort should be directed at a broad range of initiatives designed to address pressing issues that Burma will face following the transition to a democratic government. In collaboration with NGOs, think tanks, universities, and researchers, Burmese groups can develop policy alternatives with implementation plans that address issues such as education; health; the rule of law and reform of the judiciary; human rights and transitional justice; economics and public finance; agriculture; federal, state and municipal roles; energy, the environment, and natural resources; reconciliation and ethnic rights; peace building and civil society; and humanitarian needs.

Over the past 15 years, more than 10,000 university and secondary school students have left everything behind and fled Burma in order to carry on the struggle for democracy and human rights in their homeland. Those who remained in Burma, and those too young to have participated in the democracy uprising of 1988, have few opportunities: school supplies are scarce and out-of-date; teachers are poorly trained and paid; schools have been closed for extended periods on a seemingly regular basis; and students are seen as a threat to stability, not an asset to the country. Those students and prodemocracy activists whose educations were cut short when they went into exile have

had few opportunities for education and training. The more than 100,000 Burmese refugees in Thailand have little or no access to secondary education or skills-training opportunities.

The Endowment places a high priority on expanding opportunities for Burmese to receive training opportunities, whether as interns or as part of structured projects. The Endowment looks to support ethnic organizations as they work to improve their ability to resist the junta's efforts to destroy ethnic cultural cohesion by harshly punishing any use of indigenous languages in local schools – a blatant violation of international human rights standards protecting indigenous cultures and languages. Ethnic leaders are painfully aware that primary education, even in Burmese, much less in ethnic languages, is severely inadequate in their enclaves. These leaders know that the current generation of youth must receive better educations if the leadership is to hold out any hope for a more prosperous life.

Despite the cease-fire agreements between ethnic groups and the government in the mid-1990s, people and groups inside Burma are as vulnerable as ever to the regime's abuses. Recent estimates put the number of internally displaced persons at more than 500,000. It may even exceed 1,200,000 out of a total population of about 46 million people. Efforts should be made to provide humanitarian relief through prodemocracy activist groups to non-combatant opponents of the military junta, especially ethnic minorities, women, and students, in order to encourage greater unity among those

struggling for democracy, relieve the hardships suffered by displaced persons and victims of political repression, and strengthen self-reliance as a means of staving off exploitation.

CONCLUSION

The State Peace and Development Council rules Burma with an iron fist. The regime believes that it alone is responsible for maintaining unity and securing the peace in Burma. Although Burma experts often discuss splits in the military and divisions between the intelligence and army branches of the junta, the military seems fairly united. Absent some crushing event, the regime seems unlikely to turn on itself. But, if the regime is so secure in its position, why has it not been able to rid itself once and for all of the democracy movement?

The simple answer is because the democracy movement derives its strength from the people of Burma and is led by one of the world's most courageous, committed, and principled leaders. The democracy movement also draws strength from the international community. When international organizations such as the ILO take unprecedented steps to address forced labor abuses in Burma or when the US passes tough sanctions legislation, the effect is twofold – it punishes the regime for its behavior and bolsters the democracy movement, which has consistently urged governments around the world to avoid doing anything that will prop up the regime.

The organizations and projects that the Endowment supports have also made a significant contribution to the struggle for democracy and human rights in Burma. Through our grants program, we have supported a range of Burmese-, English- and ethnic-language independent media projects; internal labor- and student-organizing efforts; human rights education, advocacy and research; and coalition building among the various prodemocracy and ethnic forces. These groups are the lifeline to their colleagues inside Burma.

The regime is unlikely to negotiate in good faith with a partner whose principles and popularity makes it inherently a threat to the regime, but whom the regime believes lacks actual power. The NLD represents a real threat to the regime. The challenge is to continue to strengthen the NLD while weakening the regime so that any future dialogue will be between equals. Clearly, that is easier said than done. There is no easy answer to the challenge presented by Burma. Yet in one significant way the situation is very promising, for there is a peaceful and legitimate alternative to the regime. That alternative is Aung San Suu Kyi and her colleagues in the NLD – to this day the clear winner in the last free election to be held in this shackled land. They deserve our full and open support.

The United States should continue to pursue a strategy in Burma that combines punitive measures that target the regime while simultaneously supporting efforts to build a strong democratic alternative. Specifically, the United States Government should :

- 1) Continue to take a leading role in the international community to hold the Burmese generals responsible for their conduct.
- 2) Work with our allies in Asia – Japan and Thailand in particular – to ensure that their Burma policies reflect a strongly pro-democratic agenda.
- 3) Encourage the UN secretary general to become engaged on a sustained and personal basis. Specifically, the US should work with the United Nations to introduce democratic benchmarks, including the right of the NLD to open and staff offices, and to publish a newspaper. These benchmarks must include a specific timeframe for their implementation. The current UN-backed process, which has no enforcement mechanism, has run its course and should be scrapped.
- 4) Work with our ally Thailand to ensure that it provides a safe and secure environment for nonviolent Burmese prodemocracy activists working in exile.

Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to testify here today about this important topic and, more importantly, for your ongoing support of the work the NED does to promote democracy in Burma.