

Testimony  
Before the  
Senate Foreign Relations  
Subcommittee on East Asian & Pacific Affairs  
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Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee today on this important matter. I am the President and Chief Executive Officer of the American Apparel & Footwear Association – the national trade association of the apparel and non-rubber footwear industries. Our association represents nearly 700 large and small companies who produce and market clothing and shoes in the United States and throughout the world. We also represent many of the suppliers to these industries.

First and foremost, the members of AAFA strongly support trade sanctions against the ruling military junta in Burma and, in particular, applaud the Senate’s action last week in approving 97 to 1 the legislation introduced by Senators McConnell and Feinstein and joined by 60 of their colleagues.

This legislation will ban all U.S. imports from Burma until the President of the United States can certify that Burma has taken significant and positive steps toward democracy and improved human rights for its people. AAFA hopes that this legislation will be part of a multilateral process that will ultimately involve more pressure from the United Nations and others in the international community.

You might ask why our association and its members would support a ban on U.S. imports from Burma. There are many reasons, but I will speak of only two.

Our association cares very deeply about labor and human rights. These issues are some of the most important factors our member companies consider when choosing a country or factory to make their shoes or garments. If a country or factory has the ability to make a high quality piece of apparel or footwear, but we are not satisfied with the labor or human rights situation, we will avoid those countries or factories.

At the request of our members, AAFA has embraced labor rights, human rights, and social responsibility not only in principle, but in practice. Corporate social responsibility represents one of the central tenets in AAFA’s mission statement and its trade policy.

AAFA has followed through on this commitment with concrete actions, of which our stand on Burma is just one of many. For example, AAFA has strongly supported the Worldwide Responsible Apparel Production program or “WRAP.” WRAP promotes a code of conduct that ensures that core labor concepts –including a minimum age and a prohibition on forced labor – are understood and practiced on the shop room floor and by management. WRAP relies upon independent, third-party monitors to certify that

individual overseas factories are in compliance with wrap's code of conduct. Many AAFA members subscribe to wrap and other similar codes of conduct that are certified by independent organizations.

We have also created a forum where our members can discuss "best practices" in corporate social responsibility, through AAFA's Social Responsibility Committee. I had the honor of presenting last week our "Excellence in Social Responsibility" awards, which I am holding here today, to members of our association who have excelled in this area, demonstrating their support of labor and human rights in the workplace.

This brings me to my second point. Our association felt it was time to take one step further our commitment to corporate social responsibility with respect to Burma. Two years ago, due to persistent and egregious violations of ILO conventions on forced labor, child labor and the overall abhorrent labor situation in Burma, the ILO took the unprecedented step of calling for its member countries to take concrete actions, including economic sanctions, against the military regime in Burma. Most countries failed to heed this call. Many of our members, however, did heed the call and publicly pledged to stop sourcing from Burma.

Since the ILO took this position, little, if any, progress has been made in Burma. Abuses of labor and human rights are still rife throughout the country. According to the U.S. Government's own report on the subject, the recently released 2002 Country Report On Human Rights Practices on Burma, the Burmese government has, and I quote "...continued to restrict worker rights, ban unions, and used forced labor for public works and for the support of military garrisons. Other forced labor, including child labor, remained a serious problem despite recent ordinances outlawing the practice." In fact, the situation has deteriorated with the economy in ruins and human rights abuses rampant due largely to the inept and corrupt policies of Burma's military rulers.

Thanks in large part to the efforts of AAFA's members and other responsible companies in this industry, U.S. apparel imports have declined significantly from Burma over the last couple of years. Despite this decline, U.S. total imports from Burma still reached \$360 million last year with U.S. imports of Burmese apparel, textiles, and footwear accounting for 85% of the total. This money helps prop up the military regime because, in our understanding, many of the apparel and footwear factories are owned by supporters of the military junta who have directly benefited from the junta's forced labor infrastructure projects and its non-existent enforcement of labor laws. The military junta would not exist without the support of these cronies.

Our association and its members realized that the only way to implement effective change at the factory level in Burma is to effectively change the government at the national level. Without effective democratic reform and protection of basic human rights at the national level, flagrant labor rights violations will continue to run rampant at the factory level.

AAFA and its members cannot make this change alone. We feel that it is time not only

for our association, but for the U.S. Government to take a stand that it will no longer tolerate or support the actions of the military regime in Burma. The most effective and only way to do this is to impose an outright ban on all U.S. imports from Burma. As the events of the last few weeks have proven, words alone have failed to effect positive change in Burma. Decisive actions, through the imposition of new sanctions, is the only route available. This is the right thing for our association, for our government, and for all other governments around the world who hold dearly the dignity and respect of all citizens.

Thank you.

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