

U.S.-Burma Relations

HEARING

before the

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Presiding: Senator Murkowski

Testimony

by

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I want to thank you, Madame Chairwoman, for inviting me here today to discuss the situation in Burma, Burma-India relations, and how Burma represents a new, non-traditional security threat to the region. I also want to express my gratitude to Senators Mitch McConnell and Dianne Feinstein. All freedom loving Burmese welcome and honor their efforts and actions to promote democracy in Burma. Their work is widely known and deeply appreciated.

By way of background, I am a Burmese. I participated in the nationwide pro-democracy uprising in Burma in 1988. After the military coup and brutal crack-down on the peaceful demonstrators by the military regime, I had to flee my country for India where I have been living for nearly 18 years. .

I belong to the organization called Women Rights and Welfare Association of Burma based in New Delhi. I am a member of the Presidium Board of the Women's League of Burma which is an umbrella group of exiled women organizations from Burma.

I came to India not only to flee from the arrest of the military regime but also to get help from the Indian government for the restoration of democracy in Burma. The Indian government was extremely supportive of Burma's democracy movement. India was the first neighboring country to extend active support to the pro-democracy movement in Burma. The Indian government provided refuge to Burmese students who came to India after in the wake of the 1988 uprising that was brutally crushed by the military. India internationally also condemned Burma's authoritarian military regime when it refused to hand over power to Aung San Suu Kyi and her party National League for Democracy following the 1990 general elections. The NLD won those elections with over 80% of the vote.

Because India and Burma have a centuries-old historical connection, the two nations have enjoyed mutual contacts and ties in the realm of religion, culture, trade, law, political philosophy and togetherness in their struggle for Independence from colonial rule.

In 1993, the Indian government honored Aung San Suu Kyi with their highest civilian award, the Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding.

Madam Chairwoman, what was once a noble policy towards Burma based on democratic values has been replaced during the last decade by one that marginalizes aspirations for freedom of the Burmese people and our ethnic Nationalities.

Since the mid 1990's, the Indian government has sought to develop its relationship with Burma's military generals. Successive Indian government has refused to acknowledge or speak out against the horrors that Burma's military regime is inflicting on my country.

Due to a perception within Indian national security circles that better relations with Burma's military regime is needed to check its own insurgency and Chinese influence, India's relationship with Burma has considerably warmed. For example, India is now providing military training and reportedly selling arm and military hardware to the ruling junta. This apparently is to check the Chinese push to acquire more Burmese bases so it can project power into the Indian Ocean.

It is unbelievable that the relationship between India, the largest democracy in the world, and the ruling junta in Burma lacks any discussion of democracy, political pluralism, or even the simple fact that murdering political prisoners is wrong. Earlier this month, when former political prisoner Thet Naing Oo was bludgeoned to death in a political killing by the regime militias, international condemnation was swift, but India's silence was deafening.

Today, Burma is ruled by a group of thugs who lack any political legitimacy and use liberal doses of terror and intimidation to maintain their grip on power. The state they have created is what I call a non-traditional threat to our region.

For example, Burma's SPDC spends billions of dollars on arms that are used to oppress the people and outfit the second largest military in South East Asia. Madam Chairwoman, the budget for HIV/AIDS in Burma is reported by health experts at less than \$25,000/year. Burma is the epicenter of new strains of drug resistant HIV/AIDS that are transferred to China, India and throughout the region through illicit narcotics smuggling routes. The same routes that bring Burmese opium and methamphetamines (often grown and manufactured in junta controlled regions) to flood the region are also bringing these new strains of HIV/AIDS.

The recent announcement of Bird Flu is another example of the danger the regime poses to the region. On March 17, 2006, Burmese authorities announced that they found the H5N1 strain and were culling chicken and duck flocks—however, it was already happened five days before they made official announcement to the Burmese people. This delay could have—and we are still not sure if it has not—opened the door to the spreading of the disease throughout the country and made the jump into Bangladesh, India, China and other neighboring states.

There is no doubt about that we need to convince the Indian government that its own national interests are best met not by coddling a murderous regime, but using its resources to help realize the aspirations of the Burmese people for a state based on democracy, individual liberties and human rights. A Burma under a democratic government can address the social ills within the country and create the dynamic economic conditions that can provide new markets for Indian (and regional) products while providing energy and materials that both India and China need to fuel their growing economies.

The formation of the Indian Parliamentarian's Forum for Democracy in Burma (IPFDB) last December was an important step in this direction. This group of Indian members of parliament is

dedicated raising the issues of Burma in the parliament, and questioning the government for its policy towards Burma. I hope that the Forum will be able to increase the amount of pressure on the government of India to review its policy towards Burma, especially as more and more members of parliament join the effort. I hope that the US Congress can strongly encourage the Indian parliamentarians to continue their great work.

I want to congratulate President Bush on raising Burma during his trip this month to India. It is encouraging to learn that President Bush and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh agreed to call for the regime to release our leader Aung San Suu Kyi. I want to urge the US to use its close relationship to convey to India the threat posed by the regime and encourage the country to play a meaningful and responsible role in the restoration of democracy in Burma.

I want to spend a moment discussing the horrible human rights situation in Burma. The military regime, SPDC's violation of human rights include the destruction of villages, massive forced relocation, rape of ethnic women and girls by the SPDC soldiers and widespread forced labor.

There are more than 1100 political prisoners, including 13 Members of Parliament elect, languishing in various jails inside Burma. Harassment of political activists, torture and murder continue unabated. Almost 700,000 refugees have poured out of Burma in recent years as a result of the military attacks against ethnic groups and political oppression. As reported by Thailand-Burma Border Consortium (TBBC), between 600,000 and one million ethnic peoples are hiding in the jungle and mountains in Eastern part of Burma to avoid the killing of the Burmese army. Recently, Burmese military attacked villages in Karen State and caused more than one thousand villagers to flee their home to become Internally Displaced Persons. According to Human Rights Watch, more than 70,000 children are forcibly recruited into Burmese military.

The report "License to Rape" produced by the Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN) and Shan Human Rights Foundation (SHRF) in 2002 documents 173 incidents of rape and other forms of sexual violence involving 625 girls and women, committed by the SPDC troops in Shan State, mostly from 1996-2001. The majority of rape incidents were committed in the areas of Central Shan State where over 300,000 villagers have been forcibly relocated from their homes since 1996 as part of an anti-insurgency campaign.

The report "Shattering Silences" by the Karen Women's Organization published in April 2004 documents 125 cases of sexual violence committed by the SPDC's military troops in Karen State from 1988 until 2004. Other sexual violence by the Burmese military and trafficking of women and girls are also documented in "Driven Away" produced by the Kachin Women's Association Thailand (KWAT), "Catwalk to the Barracks" by Human Rights Foundation of Monland (Burma) and Women and Child Rights Project (Southern Burma). I would like to submit these reports for the record.

These reports expose how the military regime is allowing its troops systematically and on a widespread scale to commit rape with impunity in order to terrorize and subjugate the ethnic peoples of Shan, Mon, Kachin and Karen States. All reports conclude that restoration of genuine peace, democracy and the rule of law in Burma are necessary to end the systematic sexual violence.

I would like to offer several policy options:

- First and foremost, continue the economic sanctions against Burma;
- I urge bringing Burma up for a resolution within the United Nations Security Council.

- Please continue regional efforts to hold ASEAN accountable for the actions of the regime. ASEAN accepted Burma into its ranks 10 years ago with the belief that constructive engagement would bring political change.
- Finally, use US diplomatic weight to engage the Indian government at all levels to convince India that a democratic Burma is in India's long-term, strategic interest; and

In closing, I here would like to express gratitude to the US Congress and Government for their efforts to help restore the democracy stolen from us by the military junta. Today, I sit here, proudly, on behalf of millions of Burmese to say "Thank You" for the US Congress and US Administration for your words, your deeds and steadfast determination to stand with us during our hours of darkness.

Thank You.