

Executive Memorandum

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Time for a U.N. Security Council Resolution on Burma

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The plague of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), the despotic military junta that rules in Burma, is no longer simply an issue of human rights abuse and economic mismanagement inside Burma's borders. The SPDC's arbitrary and secretive decisions are causing vast human suffering across Asia, including rampant drug production and smuggling, displacement of millions of political and economic refugees, and now the spread of deadly diseases such as HIV/AIDS across Burma's borders.

Refugees, Drugs, and Disease.

There are more than 500,000 documented Burmese political and economic refugees in India, China, and Thailand. The number of undocumented Burmese refugees living in Thailand is estimated to be in the millions.

Burma is the world's second largest producer of opium and heroin and a major supplier of amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS), the world's newest illicit drug. The drugs are smuggled out of Burma through Thailand, India, and China, and substantial evidence indicates that the SPDC is involved in drug production and smuggling.

The HIV/AIDS pandemic in Burma is spreading into neighboring countries, especially along drug trafficking routes. Despite the alarming situation, the SPDC has refused to cooperate with efforts by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP)

to control the pandemic, finally provoking the UNDP to close its Burmese program in 2005. The junta's willful neglect of disease control portends a black future for efforts to control avian flu and other transnational diseases.

Sanctions Versus Engagement.

The SPDC is remarkably adept at evading the international community's uncoordinated economic sanctions and efforts to freeze its assets. Without the cooperation of front-line states including Thailand, China, and India, unilateral U.S. sanctions will neither prevent international commerce nor ameliorate the regime's harshness. For example, congressional sanctions on financial services and attempts to freeze targeted assets in 2003 netted very little of the SPDC's money and disrupted its financial transactions only briefly, until the junta switched monetizing contracts from dollars to euros.

The junta is as indifferent to political engagement as it is to sanctions. In 2002, it purportedly agreed to the engagement strategies of Burma's

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- A U.N. Security Council resolution would help to build an international consensus on how best to deal with Burma and would provide the justification for an internationally coordinated escalation of punitive measures until the military junta either complies or falls.
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Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) partners and announced a “new day” of national unity by offering a series of steps toward the restoration of democracy that included releasing Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest, releasing other political prisoners, and promising universal participation in the political process.

Many observers greeted the announcement as a success for the softer engagement strategy practiced by ASEAN, India, and China over the punitive sanctions policy used by the United States and the European Union.

However, a year later, unable to endure even the pretense of reform, the SPDC rearrested Aung San Suu Kyi, closed the offices of the National League for Democracy (her political party), and arrested many other party officials. The military also arrested Prime Minister Khin Nyunt, the author of the proposed road map to democracy, and replaced him with the harder-line General Soe Win.

Growing Regional Frustration. Until recently, the other ASEAN members have been Burma’s biggest apologists. The traditional ASEAN principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other member states has dominated the group’s policy toward Rangoon. Yet now there are strong indications that the manifest failure of ASEAN’s “constructive engagement” has convinced them to abandon their long-standing policy toward the junta.

The ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Caucus Promoting Democracy and Human Rights in Burma best exemplifies this new policy environment. This group of parliamentarians from six of the 10 ASEAN countries rejects the policy of noninterference, demands the release of Aung San Suu Kyi, and promotes genuine national reconciliation. However, ASEAN members remain reluctant to impose punitive economic sanctions without a multilateral mandate from an international body.

In January 2006, Razali Ismail, the U.N. special envoy to Burma, resigned in frustration because the SPDC would not permit him to enter the country. Additionally, Burma watchers in Thailand say that

even China, the junta’s patron state, was dismayed by the arrest of Khin Nyunt and is now looking for ways to restrain the SPDC’s worst excesses.

The time is ripe for a U.N. Security Council resolution on Burma. A resolution would be a first step in harmonizing international pressure on the junta to implement a national reconciliation program and give U.N. relief agencies and disease control organizations unhindered access to Burma.

A Realistic Resolution. A Security Council resolution is the most likely diplomatic tool to build a policy consensus among the countries interested in resolving the Burmese problem. Realistically, a resolution supported by all U.N. Security Council members would probably not contain sufficient sanctions to please Congress or force the hard-headed Burmese military to immediate compliance, but it could become the justification for an internationally coordinated, gradual escalation of punitive measures until the SPDC complies or falls.

The Security Council resolution should call for:

- The release of Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners,
- A program for national reconciliation that includes the National League for Democracy,
- Immediate and unhindered access to all parts of Burma for U.N. relief agencies and other international humanitarian organizations, and
- A timeline for compliance and punitive sanctions if the SPDC fails to comply.

Conclusion. Since 1962, when the Burmese military overthrew the civilian government, the international community has unanimously condemned the junta’s behavior. Yet the junta will continue to survive for as long as the international community remains divided on its strategy. A Security Council resolution would move the international community toward an effective, coordinated process for restoring democracy in Burma.

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