

# Web Memo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 1104  
June 2, 2006

## Bringing Burma to the U.N. Security Council

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On May 31, 2006, the State Department announced that the United States would “pursue a U.N. Security Council resolution that will underscore the international communities concerns about the situation in Burma.”<sup>1</sup> It’s about time. The military has ruled Burma since 1962, and this effort, if it succeeds, would be the first time that the U.N. Security Council has taken action.

The actions of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), the despotic military junta that rules Burma, extend beyond human rights abuses and economic mismanagement inside Burma’s borders. The SPDC’s arbitrary and secretive decisions cause vast human suffering across Asia through extensive drug production and rampant smuggling, displacement of millions of political and economic refugees, and now the spread of deadly diseases such as HIV/AIDS and avian flu.

### Refugees, Drugs, and Disease

More than 500,000 documented Burmese political and economic refugees live in India, China, and Thailand. The number of undocumented Burmese refugees living in Thailand alone is estimated to be in the millions and growing. More than 100,000 additional refugees have crossed into Thailand since the April-May Burmese army offensive against the Karen minority along Thailand’s border.

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. Furthermore, despite initial denials, the junta admitted that it had discovered more than 100 outbreaks of avian flu around Mandalay in March 2006. The junta is permitting British and Australian experts to visit farms but is censoring outside information on the bird flu epidemic. The news blackout on bird flu risks continued spread of the disease through simple ignorance of the problem. The junta’s willful neglect of disease control portends a black future for efforts to control avian flu and other transnational diseases.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
<http://www.heritage.org/research/AsiaandthePacific/wm1104.cfm>

Published by The Heritage Foundation  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002-4999  
(202) 546-4400 · heritage.org

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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 exemplifies this new policy environment. This group of parliamentarians from six of the ten ASEAN countries rejects the policy of noninterference, demands the release of Aung San Suu Kyi, and promotes genuine national reconciliation.

In January 2006, Razali Ismail, a Malaysian diplomat and the U.N. special envoy to Burma, resigned in frustration because the SPDC would not permit him to enter the country. For their part, the ASEAN countries sent a formal representative to talk with the SPDC, but the junta would only meet him in his ministerial capacity.

Many observers are concerned that China will not support a U.N. resolution against Burma, but even famously patient Beijing is getting annoyed with the hardheaded generals in Rangoon. Burma watchers in Thailand say that China was dismayed by the arrest of Prime Minister Khin Nyunt and is now looking for ways to restrain the SPDC's worst excesses. China is also affected by the flow of refugees, disease, and drugs. Further, Burma's uncontrolled logging is damaging China's reputation in the WTO. In May, China closed the China-Burma border to all timber trade. In response, members of the Burmese army are reportedly attacking Chinese migrant workers.

### **A Realistic Resolution**

A Security Council resolution is the most achievable 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 hardheaded Burmese military into 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 towards an effective, coordinated process for restoring democracy in Burma.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of State, Press Statement by Sean McCormack, May 31, 2006.