

Web Memo



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Burma's Humanitarian Crisis in the Making

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On June 19, Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of Burma's democratic opposition, will celebrate her 61st birthday still under house arrest in Rangoon. She has spent well over half of her last 17 birthdays there for the unpardonable sin of winning a landslide victory over Burma's generals in a 1990 election. Her continued indefinite detention and advancing but finite aging are two lines that may ultimately meet, with potentially explosive results.

The average life span for women in Burma is 64 years, and Burma is a country where the health system, along with every other public good, is rapidly deteriorating. On the evening of June 9, Aung San Suu Kyi was admitted to a hospital for intestinal troubles. Although it is reported that she already has been released and is resting at home, this is the second time she has been hospitalized since she was re-arrested in 2003. It raises a question of what happens in Burma if she becomes seriously ill or dies.

The day after Aung San Suu Kyi was hospitalized, senior government officials in Washington, London, and other capitals expressed concern for her health and called on the junta to expedite her medical treatment. But the concern in the world's capitals goes far beyond the health of one person and extends to the peace and stability in the region.

Their worries about regional stability are easy enough to imagine. Aung San Suu Kyi is by far the most popular figure in Burma, and a prolonged illness or a lingering death would attract sympathetic crowds to the hospital. Large gatherings, even peaceful ones, are illegal in Burma and likely would draw the attention of a military with a well-earned reputation for using deadly force with little provocation and less restraint.

A mix of strong emotions, hostile crowds, and a nervous military could develop into a bloody situation without plan or warning. And if the worst were to occur, her death and funeral would also attract large crowds and potentially a military overreaction.

For the international community, unrest in Burma, depending on its ferocity, could create an enormous humanitarian crisis. The estimated millions of Burmese refugees are already a problem in the region, and bloody battles in the streets of Rangoon could dramatically increase their numbers in all the border countries.

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There would almost certainly be calls for United Nations intervention, similar to international efforts in Kosovo, Somalia, East Timor, and Darfur.

Actually, these calls for UN action have already been voiced. In September 2005, Vaclav Havel, former President of the Czech Republic, and Bishop Desmond M. Tutu, Archbishop Emeritus of Cape Town and another Nobel Peace Prize winner, commissioned a report entitled, "Threat to the Peace: A call for the UN Security Council to Act in Burma."

In their report, Havel and Tutu reviewed the historical conditions that prompted United Nations Security Council resolutions to intervene in situations deemed threats to peace. They concluded that Burma was unique in the world because all five factors they identified in UN action—overthrow of democratic government, conflict among factions, human rights violations, refugee outflows, and severe humanitarian crises—already existed in Burma in 2005.

The United States has also called for UN Security Council action. On May 31, the State Department announced that it "intends to pursue a UN Security Council resolution that will underscore the international community's concerns about the situation in Burma."

For the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the oldest and most important multilateral organization in Asia, Burma has been nothing but trouble since it joined the regional grouping. ASEAN has changed dramatically since 1990, the last time the Burmese military cracked down, and the junta should not expect a political free ride from its neighbors. This is especially true of the democratic countries—Thailand, Philippines and Indonesia—whose populations now make up a majority of Southeast Asians.

There is already a near global consensus that the situation inside Burma is unacceptable and that the ruling military junta, the SPDC, must implement its "road map for democracy." Aung San Suu Kyi's birthday should spur the United Nations Security Council to demand that the junta do just that. In addition, the Council should further demand that the SPDC allow immediate and unhindered access to all parts of Burma for UN relief agencies and other international humanitarian organizations. The UN must act now before change comes through international crisis and civil war.

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