

**CONGRESSIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM TASKFORCE
BURMA BRIEFING**

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U.S. COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM**

Good afternoon. On behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, I wish to thank Congressman Franks and the Taskforce on International Religious Freedom for hosting this briefing today.

Burma has long been a problem that demanded action from the international community. Gross human rights violations, humanitarian disasters, drug trafficking, refugees, and religious oppression, all make the Burmese government a threat to its own people and a threat to regional stability.

Whether by jailing peaceful Buddhist monks advocating for dialogue or systematically abusing the religious freedom of ethnic Muslims and Christians, the Burmese generals view religious association, assembly, and action as threats to its stability. For this reason, the protection and promotion of religious freedom should be a critical component of U.S. diplomatic efforts.

But given the near total grip on power maintained by the Burmese military, the question is: What can the U.S. government do to help promote democracy and human rights in Burma?

In September of last year, the world's attention was riveted by the brutal crackdown on Burmese monks and students leading peaceful protests for freedom and democracy.

Though the military junta has made a few tepid attempts to respond to international criticism—such as appointing an official to interact with Aung San Suu Kyi and allowing her to meet once with a few democratic colleagues—these efforts have not produced concrete results and have not stopped arrests and disappearances.

A recent Amnesty International report indicates that conditions on the ground continue to deteriorate. Arrests, disappearances, torture, and the defrocking of monks continue. The Burmese military continues to tighten its grip on power.

In the aftermath of the “Saffron Revolution,” the international community has an opportunity to help put Burma on the path to democracy, stability and prosperity.

There are many obstacles to promoting democracy and human rights protections in Burma. To overcome them, the United States has a role to play beyond sanctions. American leadership and diplomacy are needed help move the UN, the Association of Southeast Asian

Nations, or ASEAN, and other interested parties, including India, China, toward decisive and quick action.

Last month, the Commission held a hearing on Burma to examine, among other issues, the way in which religious freedom abuses by the Burmese military contribute to the violent repression of peaceful dissent, ongoing abuses against ethnic minorities, and regional instability. We followed the hearing with a letter to President Bush urging him to make Burma one of the Administration's highest foreign policy priorities. We applauded the efforts the Administration has already taken and urged continued and consistent American leadership and diplomatic action.

We included in the letter a list of recommendations that we believe will focus the Administration's efforts to pursue peaceful democratic change and reform in Burma, and will ensure that human rights and religious freedom remain critical elements within these efforts.

As a first step, the Commission recommended that the President establish an interagency taskforce on Burma under the National Security Council. This taskforce should be headed by a senior ranking official, to coordinate U.S. government policy on Burma.

Now the U.S. government has numerous offices working on the Burma crisis: one to implement sanctions targeting Burmese leaders and industries, another to support programs assisting non-governmental organizations that promote democracy, and another to offer relief to Burmese refugees, many of whom have fled religious freedom violations and other human rights abuses. Other offices are working to prevent trafficking in persons and to launch counternarcotics efforts.

The taskforce would ensure that Burma policy remains a consistent priority of the U.S. government and sufficient resources are allocated to pursue policy objectives in Burma.

As a second step, the Commission recommended that the President appoint a Special Coordinator on Burma at the State Department to coordinate bilateral and multilateral diplomatic efforts and to serve as the Administration's point person for efforts to bring about democratic reform in Burma.

Given the complex diplomatic hurdles faced by the those of us who want to bring about democracy and human rights in Burma—for example China and Russia opposing UN Security Council action, China and India propping up Burma's military with trade and defense alliances, and ASEAN's reluctance to take concerted action—the United States needs to focus its diplomatic and political efforts.

Getting China, India, and the ASEAN nations to apply pressure on the Burmese junta should be a priority of the Special Coordinator.

India has already taken the important step of ceasing all military sales to Burma and we hope that the Indian government will continue with other steps to raise pressure on the regime.

Beijing has reportedly told the Burmese generals that they must cooperate with the efforts of UN Special Envoy Ibrahim Gambari. U.S. leaders must urge the Chinese government to back its words with actions.

As such, U.S. bilateral diplomatic actions should work in concert with multi-lateral efforts. The U.S. government needs to intensify efforts to convince China, India, and others to strongly and unequivocally support U.N. efforts to press Burma's military regime to initiate a dialogue with its opponents.

But the United Nations should quicken the pace of its diplomacy. The UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon's Special Envoy on Burma and the UN Special Rapporteur on Burma should continue to press for unimpeded access to investigate abuses and start negotiations toward a democratic transition.

U.N. Envoy Ibrahim Gambari is scheduled to return to Burma--though Burma's generals are stalling on scheduling his return. Ambassador Gambari should press Burma's generals to signal to the world their seriousness by 1) unconditionally releasing Aung San Suu Kyi and others and allowing them freedom of association and religion, 2) ending the ongoing crackdown, and 3) publicly announcing their willingness to negotiate toward a democratic transition.

But if the military junta fails to demonstrate its willingness to change, UN diplomatic efforts should be backed by UN Security Council action. Though China and Russia have blocked past efforts, the U.S. government should continue to work on a Security Council resolution with a binding timeline and giving the UN Secretary General a clear mandate in his interactions with Burmese authorities.

The world cannot turn its back on Burma and allow the regime's brutal repression to continue. Inaction or silence allows Burma's military leaders to tighten their grip on Burma's people. The United States should continue to take a leading role in shaping bilateral and multi-lateral efforts to bring about a peaceful democratic transition.

The Bush Administration and the U.S. Congress have strongly voiced American support for liberty and democracy in Burma. But democratic change in Burma will require that the United States expend additional political and diplomatic capital.

The United States, along with other nations, must make it clear to the Burmese military that a genuine political transition to democracy would enable Burma to become a stable, peaceful, and prosperous nation. The time to act is now.