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Aid and sanctions in Burma

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LAST MONTH the White House confirmed President Bush's support for continued US sanctions against the Burmese military junta. The United States supports humanitarian assistance coupled with limits on US investment, trade, and defense sales to the generals who rule Burma. In calling for continuation of the sanctions, first imposed by President Clinton, Bush noted that the Burmese military authorities were responsible for increasing attacks against ethnic minorities, beatings and harassment of non violent demonstrators, and the arrest of students at prayer vigils calling for the release of Burma's pro-democracy leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been who has been incarcerated for most of the past 17 years by the generals who control the country.

The statement also noted ongoing human rights violations of the junta, including the use of rape as a weapon of war and the conscription of child soldiers. Given such atrocities, the case for continued economic and political sanctions seems clear.

Yet there have been calls for lifting these sanctions from various groups, including USA Engage, primarily on the grounds that limits on US investment have not succeeded in pressuring the junta and have added to the suffering of the Burmese people.

The humanitarian impact of sanctions is by far the most difficult issue in this debate. There is little disagreement about the needs of Burma's people: Close to a third of children under age 5 are malnourished; the country accounts for more than half of all malaria deaths across Asia; TB and HIV/AIDS are widespread.

In January, we convened an international conference on infectious diseases in Burma to discuss these issues and improve responses. What we found was clear and consistent: While the health situation deteriorates, the junta continues to limit the ability of international humanitarian organization to reach those most in need.

These restrictions have prompted the Global Fund to Fight HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, and Medecins sans Frontieres in France to withdraw their programs and the International Committee of the Red Cross to shutter some of their field offices. All have cited restrictions on travel to project sites, and some have cited the insistence by the junta that its puppet organization, the Union Solidarity and Development Association, or USDA, be a partner in their programs.

It was the USDA, founded by junta leader Than Shwe and charged with a role similar to Nazi Germany's notorious Brown Shirts, that is responsible for the May 30, 2003, attack on Aung San Suu Kyi where at least 80 democracy supporters were massacred. The Red Cross suspended its highly valued program for visiting political prisoners in 2005 when the junta insisted that USDA members accompany all Red Cross visits.

Burma's generals continue to grossly under fund healthcare: National funding for health is 3 percent, while the military, now at more than 400,000 troops, consumes 40 percent.

HIV/AIDS gets a pitiful \$137,000 per year for 52 million people. UNICEF reports that government spending on healthcare in Burma amounts to 40 cents per citizen per year, compared to \$61 in Thailand.

While junta supporters argue that Burma is too poor to provide more, the generals found the funds to build a new capitol in the jungles of central Burma, Naypyidaw, with annual running costs estimated by the International Monetary Fund at \$122 million to \$244 million, and signed contracts worth more than \$3 billion for state-of-the-art military arms from China, Ukraine, Russia, and others. Moreover, the regime recently signed an agreement with Russia for a nuclear reactor. The generals are spending the resources of Burma lavishly, but not on its people.

What can those who care about the suffering of Burma's people do? Increases in humanitarian assistance are clearly necessary -- but so are increases in political pressure.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has appointed Ibrahim Gambari, a Nigerian diplomat, as his special envoy to Burma, and Gambari will need to make progress on both political and humanitarian fronts.

Aid can be delivered through international and local non-governmental organizations and through cross-border approaches. But now is not the time to reward the generals for their brutality, mismanagement, and extended detention of Suu Kyi, who retains the support of the people of Burma, who handed her party an overwhelming electoral victory the only time (1990) they had an opportunity to vote.

Bush is right to continue sanctions against the generals, and Congress should support this position. Increased aid can help the Burmese people, but it must not be allowed to slip into the coffers of junta-backed organizations. Those risking their lives for democratic change in Burma deserve our support, not the generals who continue to tyrannize their citizens.

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