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Karenni, Shan, Chin, Mon: Security Council Should Take Up Burma's Human Rights Crisis

The United Nations Security Council should urgently consider the human rights and political situation in Burma in order to address widespread and systematic abuse of human rights by the military government, Human Rights Watch said today. Human rights groups have long urged the Security Council to take up Burma as a critical international problem. The possibility of putting Burma on the Security Council agenda has been boosted by a recent report, "Threat to Peace - A Call to the UN Security Council to Act in Burma." The report was commissioned by Nobel Peace Prize laureates Vaclav Havel, former president of the Czech Republic, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa. It calls for "an urgent, new and multilateral diplomatic initiative" on Burma and for Security Council action. Havel and Tutu say they took up the cause of Burma in part because of the continued mistreatment and house arrest of fellow Nobel laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the only Nobel winner persecuted for peaceful political dissent.

"There is ample precedent for the Security Council to take up the human rights and political situation in a country with as horrific a record as Burma – especially when suffering spills across borders," said Brad Adams, Asia director at Human Rights Watch. "After years of inaction while the military government has decimated the political opposition in Rangoon and targeted ethnic groups in border areas, there is no longer any excuse for the Security Council to duck this problem."

Human Rights Watch also said that it was time for a U.N. Commission of Inquiry to be established to investigate the longstanding dire human rights situation in Burma and the possibility that war crimes and crimes against humanity have been committed.

Burma remains one of the most repressive countries in Asia, despite promises for political reform and national reconciliation by its authoritarian military government, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC).

The SPDC restricts the basic rights and freedoms of all Burmese. It continues to attack and harass the winner of the 1990 elections, the National League of Democracy, and its leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who remains under house arrest. It also continues to commit systematic, widespread, and well-documented abuses in ongoing conflicts with ethnic minority rebel groups, including extrajudicial executions, rape, torture, forced relocation of entire villages, and forced labor. As of late 2004, an estimated 650,000 people were internally displaced in eastern Burma alone, and at least 240 villages have been destroyed, relocated or abandoned since 2002. Some 2 million Burmese have moved to Thailand, including 145,000 refugees living in camps.

"The Security Council has taken up urgent human rights and political problems in more than 20 countries this year," said Adams. "If China moves to block this effort they should explain to Aung San Suu Kyi and

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average Burmese people why their concerns are less important."

The United States has announced that it will support the move. The United Kingdom, France, and Romania are also expected to agree. However, China and Russia have made it clear in private that they oppose putting Burma on the agenda. China has deep political, military, and economic ties to the military junta in Rangoon, while Russia opposes such discussions because of its record in Chechnya.

"China is trying to portray itself as an emerging and responsible global power," said Adams. "But continuing to offer unconditional support to one of the world's most odious regimes makes it impossible to take such claims seriously. Now is the time for China to set a new course for itself in its foreign policy."

There are concerns that other Security Council members, such as the Philippines, may also oppose the move. Human Rights Watch called on democracies on the Council to put aside diplomatic and other interests and urgently take up the plight of the Burmese people.

Human Rights Watch endorsed the call of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus for the Security Council to act. As the caucus said: "The deteriorating situation in Myanmar is affecting not only those within the country but people outside its borders as well. Quite apart from its truly disgraceful human rights record, Myanmar's troubles ranging from ethnic conflicts and refugee outflows to drugs and the unchecked spread of HIV/AIDS have become a serious cause for concern for ASEAN and the international community."

"Democracies like the Philippines should be ashamed if they try to block discussion of Burma at the Security Council," said Adams. "Burma has embarrassed ASEAN over and over again. Instead of offering political cover for the junta, elected leaders of other countries should be standing side by side with Aung San Suu Kyi and others in Burma fighting for their rights."

Because of continued political support and trade with China, India, Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries, the military government in Rangoon has remained largely impervious to sanctions by the United States and European Union. The U.N. Secretary-General's Special Envoy, Rizali Ismail, and the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, have failed to persuade the government to open up the political process or improve the human rights situation. Rizali, a Malaysian with close ties to the Malaysian government, has not been allowed back into Burma since March 2004. Pinheiro, a Brazilian lawyer, has not been allowed into Burma since November 2003, when he cut short a visit after discovering a listening device in what was supposed to be a private interviewing room in Burma's notorious Insein prison.

For the Security Council to discuss a country situation, nine members must agree to put it on the agenda. Unlike with resolutions, permanent Security Council members cannot exercise a veto over this process. As the Asian Center for Human Rights has pointed out, "in 2005, the Security Council, among others, discussed the following country situations: Middle East situation, including the Palestinian question, Sudan, Burundi, Iraq, Liberia, Afghanistan, Eritrea-Ethiopia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire, Burundi, Timor-Leste, Guinea-Bissau, Georgia, Zimbabwe, Central African Republic, Somalia, Bougainville, Cyprus, Haiti, Kosovo (Serbia and Montenegro), Western Sahara, Iraq-Kuwait, Middle East-Lebanon."

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"The Burmese people shouldn't have to wait another generation for the killing to end and democracy to begin," said Adams.

"The generals have ignored all other demands to end the abuse. It is time for the collective voice of the Security Council to be heard in Rangoon."

[Source: Reuters AlertNet](#)

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