

**Message of
Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, Nobel Laureate
General Secretary, National League for Democracy, Burma
to the 55th Session of
the United Nations Commission on Human Rights
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The last year has been a particularly challenging period for those of us in Burma working for democracy and human rights. The repression of the military regime worsened greatly after May 1998 when the National League for Democracy declared its intention to call for the convening of Parliament, the Parliament that was elected in May 1990.

During the last eight or nine months many members of the National League for Democracy have been detained. Well, “detained” is the euphemism used by the authorities for what we see as unlawful arrest. In addition, more than 150 members of parliament still remain under detention, some of them have been forced to resign by the military regime. There are others who have been released because their health had deteriorated badly during their time of detention. A number of working committees of the National League for Democracy were demolished by the authorities throughout the country and of course, many of our active members were forced to resign.

The repression is on a very large scale but the world has not grasped the extent of the repression because it was spread out over a number of months. If what the military regime had done over the last eight or nine months had been carried out, say within a matter of weeks, then I think the world would have sat up and taken notice.

As it is, what we have suffered over the last year is far more than what we have suffered over the last six or seven years. So we would like the international community to be aware of the fact that the human rights situation in Burma has deteriorated very badly indeed.

It has come to the point when the activities of the regime are tantamount to criminal activities. The National League for Democracy has been forced to take action under the law. We have filed suits against the home ministry and against the military intelligence because of the criminal activities conducted against the members of our party. But, as might be expected the authorities have taken no action whatsoever. Our law suits remain somewhere in the hands of the legal authorities and there seems to be no intention on the part of the military regime to correct the injustices that have been done to our party.

We are aware that the international community sympathizes with our situation and we are very grateful for all the help that has been given to us, but there is a necessity for constant

vigilance and there is a need for continued action on the part of the international community to ensure that the human rights situation in Burma does not deteriorate further.

We hope very much that at this session of the Human Rights Commission a firm resolution will come out which will protect the basic rights of the people of Burma.

What we need now is more than just mere words. We need concrete action because our people are suffering not just from an onslaught of words but from the deprivation of basic justice in our country.

Thank you very much.

Question and Answer Section:

Q: How has the party been affected by the crackdown?

Now about 150 Members of Parliament remain under detention, and we think about three or four hundred ordinary members of the party.

It is a little difficult to keep track about who has been arrested and who has been released because a lot of the people who have been released were released with the understanding that they should not get in touch with the party again. so we are not always aware of who has been released.

Also, a number of those who have been taken into detention have been put into prison without trial and of course we have not contact with them.

Well, the authorities say that these people are not under detention, that they have “invited them to have discussions” so it’s difficult to take action under the law, although of course, technically it comes under the section of illegal restraint. So we could, in a country where there is rule of law, take action against the authorities.

It has slowed down the party’s work to a certain extent, but not too much. We are used to struggle we are used to working under very hard circumstances and for us, well, it’s part of the job, as it were.

Q: Do people see political participation as a human right?

You know, I think there are many people in Burma who do not even know there such things as basic human rights. We are trying to teach them.

I think at one point a few years ago, the military regime undertook to spread the word, as it were, in Burma. I think they made some sort of undertaking to the United Nations that they would make the Universal Declaration of Human Rights universally available but they have not done so. We have tried to distribute as many copies as we can of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and those members of our party who are in constant touch with us do know that these rights exist and are aware of the 30 articles in the Declaration ... but I think the great majority of people in Burma have very little inkling of what the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is.

So to think of political participation as a human right is a big step but I think by instinct they know that they should have a right to act according to their beliefs. There are very strong feelings against this regime. The people are aware that there is gross injustice going on in this country and even if they have never heard of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights their human instinct tells them that they have a right to a certain amount of human dignity.

Q: Are people living in fear?

There is a lot of fear in Burma. Don't forget that the military regime first came to power in 1958 and after couple of years we had a democratic government for a bit and then in 1962 the military regime took over again, and since then they have lived under a very repressive dictatorship.

And in this sort of climate ... fear is a natural reaction. One of the basic things we try to teach our people is that they must question, they must have the intelligence and courage to raise questions, such as: If a member of the military intelligence walks into your house in the middle of the night, you have right to ask him whether this is an act which is acceptable under the law. Do they have an arrest warrant? Do they have the right to just come into somebody's house in the middle of the night and yank people out of their beds and start questioning them and harassing them? The simple questions as to what their rights are - these are the ones we want our people to ask, but even that takes some training.

Even if they do not know that a member of the military intelligence walking into their house in the middle of the night without a warrant is illegal, they do know there is something unjust about it, there is something wrong about it. They do know that people should have the right to sleep soundly in their beds without fear.

Q: Are children's rights recognized?

The military regime signed this convention on children's rights but I do not think they have taken any concrete action.

We run a little health clinic, not exactly a health clinic, just one day a week, we give out multivitamins, iodized salt and sugar to poor children. And if you look at those children you can be sure that the rights of children are not protected in this country. Some of them are so badly malnourished that you would imagine they came from one of those disaster areas where there has been a famine, and this is in the centre of Rangoon.

And there are many who cannot afford to go to school and sometimes I ask the children "do you go to school" and it's sad because some of the children are ashamed because they can't go to school so they say "yes". But if you ask their mothers they will say "no, we used to send the children to school but now we can't because we cannot afford it". You know that the number of children who cannot go to school has risen in Burma. I should say percentage because if course the increasing population may increase the numbers and not necessarily the percentage but in Burma the percentage of children who cannot go to school has risen and the percentage of children who cannot complete primary school has risen over the last decade.

Q: Is child labour still occurring?

Yes, but I think it is getting increasingly difficult for children to find work because even adults are facing unemployment. There was a construction boom a few years back and this boom has now died down. During the time of the construction boom, you would find many children working on these construction sites. But now even adults have difficulty finding jobs so I think children are finding it even more difficult to find work.

Q: What about laws protecting women & children?

It's a little unrealistic to talk about laws in this country, where there is no rule of law. Some of the laws look very beautiful written down but they don't apply to the ordinary people in this country and they apply even less to those who are involved in politics, to those who are working for democracy.

Q: What is the situation of women?

... certainly in Burma, as in many, many countries in the world, not just in the east, women are still second class citizens, they are still less privileged than men.

It is universally accepted now that whenever a country suffers economically, it's the women and children who suffer most and this is true for Burma as well.

There is a lot of prostitution going on and I believe one of the social problems is that now a lot of young girls who are not particularly starving are going in for prostitution because of this need to keep up with what they see as common day needs. It's partly to do, I think, with the advertising on television. You know what the advertisements are like ... all the models look glossy and they all wear very smart clothes and they always seem to live in luxury homes and I think this raises the expectations of young people ... apart from the problem of those who have to go in for work like prostitution because they are actually starving and there is no other way they can earn a living.

As I understand it is because of the spread of HIV in this part of the world there is a greater and greater demand for child prostitutes and with the poverty of the families combined with this demand, it cannot be a good thing.



