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Do Not Forget Burma

By Laura Bush

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For two weeks, the world has been transfixed by images of Iranians taking to the streets to demand the most basic human freedoms and rights. Watching these courageous men and women, I am reminded of a similar scene nearly two years ago in Burma, when tens of thousands of Buddhist monks peacefully marched through their nation's streets. They, too, sought to reclaim basic human dignity for all Burmese citizens, but they were beaten back by that nation's harsh regime.

Since those brutal days in September 2007, Burma's suffering has intensified. In the past 21 months, the number of political prisoners incarcerated by the junta has doubled. Within the past 10 days, two Burmese citizens were sentenced to 18 months in prison. Their offense: praying in a Buddhist pagoda for the release of the jailed opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. That is only the tip of the regime's brutality. Inside Burma, more than 3,000 villages have been "forcibly displaced" -- a number exceeding the mass relocations in genocide-racked Darfur. The military junta has forced tens of thousands of child soldiers into its army and routinely uses civilians as mine-sweepers and slave laborers. It has closed churches and mosques; it has imprisoned comedians for joking about the government and bloggers for writing about it. Human trafficking, where women and children are snatched and sold, is pervasive. Summary executions pass for justice, while lawyers are arrested for the "crime" of defending the persecuted.

Rape is routinely used as a "weapon of war." In 2006, I [convened](#) a roundtable at the United Nations to address the situation in Burma and listened as Burmese activist Hseng Nong described the rape victims she had aided. The youngest victim was 8; the oldest was 80. Her words silenced the room.

Yet time and again, the women of Burma, who are often the regime's chief targets, have responded to this brutality with inspiring courage. I will never forget visiting the remote and crowded refugee camps on the mountainous border between Burma and Thailand. There, I watched the tireless efforts of Dr. Cynthia Maung to provide lifesaving medical aid for hundreds of Burmese in need, many of them ill or injured. I sat with victims of land mines who had lost legs or feet and were waiting quietly, often for hours, for basic care. Last fall, it was my great privilege to present a Vital Voices award to Charm Tong, who testified before U.N. officials at the age of 17 and eloquently described the systematic military campaign of rape and abuse that is being waged against women in Burma's Shan state. She spoke unflinchingly even though her audience included representatives of the very regime she condemned.

More of us in America should make such courage our courage. At this moment, Aung San Suu Kyi, 64 and in [fragile health](#), faces sentencing on trumped-up charges that could force her to endure five more years of [brutal captivity](#). The junta leaders wish to undermine the Nobel Peace laureate's influence ahead of next year's elections. Leaders from around the world -- including

the United States -- have called forcefully for the junta to release Aung San Suu Kyi and the 2,100 other political prisoners it is holding. Even Burma's closest allies in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations have called for her to receive proper medical care and have warned that Burma's "honor and credibility" are at stake. But the world must do more than express concern.

A [new report](#) from Harvard Law School asks the U.N. Security Council to establish a "commission of inquiry" into crimes against humanity and war crimes in Burma. Harvard's panel of international law experts has carefully catalogued what it deems as the junta's "widespread and systemic" human rights violations. The Security Council has already referred the crisis in Darfur to the International Criminal Court. It should do the same for Burma.

With U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon planning to visit Burma this summer, it is crucial that he press the regime to take immediate steps to end human rights abuses, particularly in ethnic minority areas. There have been 38 U.N. resolutions condemning these abuses, yet the horrors continue unabated. Under the junta's brutal rule, too many lives have been wasted, lives whose talents could have helped all of Burma prosper.

But Aung San Suu Kyi's continued example of civil courage -- like those brave protesters in Iran -- reminds all of us that no matter how callous the regime, it cannot lock up what she stands for: the fundamental desire of all people to live in freedom and with dignity. During the [brief moments](#) that foreign diplomats were allowed [to observe](#) her show trial, Aung San Suu Kyi calmly apologized for having to greet them in a prison, saying, "I hope to meet you in better times." We should all share her hope -- and add our voices to those who risk so much to protest tyranny and injustice in Burma and beyond.

The writer is the former first lady of the United States.