

New report warns crisis in Burma “puts the credibility of the UN at stake”

Release date: Monday 7th February 2011

Release time: Embargoed until 00.01 Tuesday 8th February 2011

The United Nations is at risk of losing legitimacy for failing to establish a formal inquiry into alleged crimes against humanity in Burma, according to a new report published by the German Marshall Fund and the Legatum Institute.

The report's author, Benedict Rogers, catalogues a grim list of large-scale human rights abuses and brutal oppression of ethnic minorities and opposition. For Rogers, the abuses in Burma are of such a large scale as to warrant charges of crimes against humanity under international law.

In March of last year, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Burma, Tomas Ojea Quintana, argued that “the possibility exists that some of these human rights violations may entail categories of crimes against humanity or war crimes.”

Despite repeated calls for an inquiry into the possibility of crimes against humanity, the UN General Assembly has failed to exercise its power to establish such a body. Rogers says that the regime in Burma continues to perpetrate violations of international law with impunity, and that “if the UN is to be relevant to the world today, it cannot remain idle in the face of such behaviour.”

Rogers identifies a key role for Aung San Suu Kyi in the development of Burma. Following her initial release in May 2002, she was free and able to travel the country. UN envoys had regular access, aid agencies visited Burma and she offered a glimmer of hope to both the Burmese and the international community. On the question of elections, which are tightly managed and manipulated, Rogers says that “the international community should condemn the junta's manipulations and affirm that a process that excludes Aung San Suu Kyi is illegitimate and unacceptable.”

Neither Aung San Suu Kyi nor her party, the National League for Democracy, will be represented in the new Parliament which was formed after last year's elections. The election of November 2010, the first in 20 years, saw the military dominate the polls.

Praising the role of the democracy campaigner, Rogers says:

“Aung San Suu Kyi has consistently called for a dialogue between the regime, the democracy movement which she leads, and the ethnic nationalities, and since her release she has shown extraordinary generosity and graciousness towards the regime.

It is now imperative that the UN Secretary-General take a pro-active role in seeking ways to facilitate such a dialogue. China, India and the Association of South-East Nations (ASEAN) should also use their influence to urge the regime to respond to Aung San Suu Kyi's call for dialogue.”

The report maintains that what happens in Burma affects the region, and indeed the rest of the world. Such problems include the refugee outflows to India and Thailand, a major HIV/AIDS crisis, drug production, human trafficking and even evidence of a nuclear program supported by North Korea. In the face of such threats, Rogers says:

“It cannot be in the interests of other countries to allow the regime's behaviour to go unchallenged, international law to be so routinely violated, and the authority of the United Nations to be so ignored and undermined.”

The establishment of a Commission of Inquiry by the UN is only part of the solution. According to Rogers, the introduction of a universal arms embargo on the regime is long overdue. Despite the EU, America, Canada and Australia having introduced arms embargoes, China remains the biggest provider of weapons to Burma, with North Korea and Russia also contributing. The report urges the EU and US to lead international class for a UN Security Council resolution imposing a universal arms embargo.

China's diplomatic and economic support for the military regime in Burma should be tackled, and much stronger regional pressure should be asserted to bring the junta in to line.

Rogers suggests that it is in the long-term interests of both the West and the region that Burma becomes a peaceful, stable country with a responsible, legitimate government. Short-term interests can be found as well, with commercial and energy interests in oil, gas and gems that could provide an economic foundation for Burma's future as well as contributing to the region's economic successes which have so far left Burma behind.

Concluding the report, Rogers stresses that “the international community must use every tool at its disposal,” says Rogers, “unleashing the full force of its economic, political and diplomatic creativity, to bring an end to a desperate situation in Burma.”

ENDS

Benedict Rogers will be presenting his report at the Legatum Institute (11 Charles St, Mayfair) on Wednesday 9 February at 12.30pm. To attend the event, please RSVP to iona.debarge@legatum.com

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“Next Steps on Burma” is published by the German Marshall Fund of the United States and the Legatum Institute.

Benedict Rogers is East Asia Team Leader at Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) and author of a new biography of Burma's dictator, Than Shwe: Unmasking Burma's Tyrant”. He serves as Deputy Chairman of the Conservative Party Human Rights Commission.

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