

@CHAPTER = BURMA<R>(Myanmar)

The Bush administration's stance on Burma (Myanmar) was generally positive, although the U.S. embassy in Thailand has been slow to respond to requests for refugee status by Burmese students fleeing repression. The human rights situation in Burma continued to deteriorate sharply throughout 1989, following the bloody end in September 1988 of Burma's pro-democracy demonstrations, when at least 3000 students and other largely unarmed civilians on the streets of the capital and other cities were massacred. The Reagan administration was quick to suspend its small military and economic aid program, and the Bush administration continued to speak out against Burmese rights violations. As one diplomat in Rangoon told the *Washington Post* in March, "Since there are no U.S. bases and very little strategic interest, Burma is one place where the United States has the luxury of living up to its principles."

In a desperate move early in 1989 to restore the appearance of legitimacy and with it foreign aid, Burma's governing State Law and Order Restoration Council promised multi-party elections, which are now scheduled for May 27, 1990. While cautiously welcoming the pledge to hold elections, the U.S. appropriately criticized other government actions which undermined that pledge. In September, David Lambertson, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, said, "We have shared our views directly with the Saw Maung government and offered to assist in next year's election, without any substantive response from the Burmese."

Two months later, in November, the Bush administration in a press briefing strongly condemned the continuing house arrest of Burma's prominent opposition leaders, Aung San Suu Kyi and U Tin Oo, and the detention of thousands of opposition activists. The administration has called for the release of all political prisoners and their full participation in the elections, stating that "elections which exclude participation of those who represent Burmese aspirations for democratic change<%-20> <%0>.<%-20> <%0>.<%-20> <%0>.<%-20> <%0>cannot be regarded as free and fair."

In his November address to the Third Committee of the U.N. General Assembly, U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Thomas Pickering stressed that "the government's actions over the past few months justify doubts that a truly fair election will actually take place. For example, ordinary democratic political activity has been severely curtailed by a long-standing curfew and a decree which prohibits gatherings of more than five persons."

Elections were far from the only issue. In April, President Bush indefinitely suspended trade benefits under the Generalized System of Preferences, citing Burma's failure to respect internationally recognized workers' rights. And in August, during a massive crackdown against the opposition, U.S. embassy officials in Burma confirmed the widespread torture of prisoners and the practice of forced portering, condemning in particular an incident in July in which 500 political prisoners tied together by ropes around their waists and ankles were made to carry arms and ammunition for Burmese troops. On September 13, the State Department said, "We now have credible, firsthand reports that instances of torture,

beatings and mistreatment are commonplace and that deaths have resulted.... These reports relate accounts of cigarette burns, beatings and of the use of electric shock."

The Burmese army has engaged in similar practices in its conflict with ethnic insurgents on the border, and the administration has appropriately condemned these abuses against Burma's ethnic minority population.

In November, the Burmese press accused U.S. ambassador to Burma Burton Levin of interfering in Burmese internal affairs because of his comments on human rights. The State Department used its November 15 statement rejecting the charge to criticize the Burmese government again for human rights violations.

The weak point in the administration's policy was its position on Burmese refugees in Thailand. Following the 1988 massacre of pro-democracy demonstrators, thousands of students fled to the jungle area near the Thai border, where some 2,000 remained at the end of 1989, under threat of attack by the Burmese army. Approximately 1,000 are now in border camps in Thailand or in Bangkok. After Thailand's rapprochement with Burma in December 1988, some 300 of these students were deported from border areas and returned to Rangoon, despite evidence that they faced arrest, torture and possible execution upon their return. The administration raised concern about reports of later arrests and deaths in custody of a number of the returned students. After receiving reports of further deportations in September, U.S. embassy officials in Bangkok ordered on-site investigations by U.S. embassy consular officials in Thailand.

The U.S. embassy in Thailand was not as quick to respond to early requests for humanitarian parole by Burmese students in Thailand. At that time, U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service ("INS") officials in Bangkok reportedly stated that it was difficult to distinguish Burmese students "from all the rest who want to come" to the United States.

Following significant pressure from members of Congress, however, the Bangkok embassy reversed its position on two cases, and on August 11, the INS granted permission for two student activists who had been hiding in Thailand, Min Sun Min and Yuzana Khin, to enter the United States under the humanitarian-parole provision of U.S. immigration laws. That decision was welcome. Since then, U.S. embassy personnel in Bangkok have been directed to consider Burmese students for refugee status, although they reportedly have been slow to do so.

The international response to the severe repression in Burma has been muted, but the U.S. has tried to discourage allies from pursuing arms sales or new trade relationships with Burma. After the September 1988 crackdown and the killing of opposition demonstrators, Burma's principal donors, including Japan, West Germany and the United States, suspended aid. This was apparently the first time that Japan had used economic assistance to protest human rights abuses. That response was short-lived, however, and in February, Japan partially reinstated its \$300 million aid program, by far the largest in Burma, citing the restoration of "law and order" and signs of gradual democratization in the country. This move came too quickly and sent precisely the wrong

signal to Burma's military rulers; the U.S. had cautioned the Japanese against resuming aid too fast. Singapore provided extremely significant support to the Burmese government by way of arms sales at the moment of greatest military carnage. Pakistan has also sold arms. The administration should give these governments a similar message.

In November, Ambassador Pickering called on the United Nations to "give thorough and painstaking consideration to charges of human rights abuses in Myanmar." He should also enlist U.S. allies in calling for a special rapporteur on Burma before the U.N. Human Rights Commission.