

Courage in Myanmar calls for global response

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The following editorial appeared in Thursday's Washington Post:

The most striking feature of the remarkable protests taking place across Myanmar for the past 10 days is that they are taking place at all. That Southeast Asian nation is ruled by one of the world's most repressive and brutal regimes, led by dictator Than Shwe. Those who dare speak out risk imprisonment and torture not only for themselves but for their relatives. Yet since Aug. 19, hundreds of men and women, students and Buddhist monks, have peaceably taken to the streets across Myanmar, also known as Burma, to protest economic mismanagement and political oppression. Scores have been swept into prison; many more have been beaten by government-sponsored thugs. Min Ko Naing, released in November 2004 after 15 years in prison for leading pro-democracy protests in 1988, took to the streets again -- and is once again in prison, facing a possible 20-year sentence for a nonviolent demonstration.

What response does such courage call for from the outside world? A lot more than we've seen so far, that much is certain. U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki Moon's special envoy for Myanmar has been missing in action, and Mr. Ban himself belatedly issued a mealy-mouthed statement that "encourages all parties to avoid any provocative action." Meaning what? That 50 million Burmese citizens -- disenfranchised, impoverished and press-ganged into involuntary servitude -- should refrain from "provoking" the regime by exercising their inalienable right to assemble and speak out?

The U.N. Security Council should be at the forefront of global demands for an end to repression in Myanmar. The military junta has been responsible for a kind of slow-motion Darfur. More than 3,000 villages in eastern Karen state have been razed, more than 1.5 million people displaced. Soldiers routinely bayonet peasants' pots so that they cannot cook and will go hungry. If this isn't a fit subject for the Security Council, it's hard to know why the organization exists.

The Bush administration and First Lady Laura Bush in her own right have been far more impassioned about Myanmar. Yet the United States, too, should have learned by now that rhetoric is not enough; a strategy is needed. Unlike so many dictatorships, Burma (called Myanmar by its junta) has a legitimate political authority waiting in the wings: Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy won a landslide electoral victory in 1990. She has been under house arrest for most of the years since.

Now the administration needs to make clear to other nations with influence in Myanmar - - China, India, Thailand and Singapore, to name a few -- that a democratic transition there is a U.S. policy priority and a prerequisite for peace and stability in Asia. As former South African archbishop Desmond Tutu told The Post, when "the courageous people of Burma, in spite of the viciousness of the military junta," are ready to come out by the thousands, "we in the free world cannot stand by."

<http://www.chinapost.com.tw/editorial/2007/09/01/120807/Courage-in.htm>