

Hollywood urges UN chief to act for Myanmar's Suu Kyi

by P. Parameswaran

WASHINGTON (AFP) - Twenty-eight Hollywood celebrities have written asking UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon to personally intervene to secure the release of military-ruled Myanmar's democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi.

"We urge you to take action to secure her immediate release," said the celebrities, including movie stars Jennifer Aniston, Dustin Hoffman, Owen Wilson, Robin Williams, and Anjelica Huston, in their letter sent Wednesday.

The world's only imprisoned Nobel Peace Prize recipient, Aung San Suu Kyi, 62, has been held under house arrest in Myanmar for 11 of the past 17 years.

Her National League for Democracy won elections in 1990, but the military rulers of Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, never recognized the result.

Although she was an elected leader with her party winning 82 percent of the seats in parliament, "the military regime cruelly locked her up along with many members of her party," the celebrities told Ban.

They also noted that according to the UN, the military junta had burned down or destroyed over 3,000 villages in eastern Myanmar, forcing over one million people to flee their homes.

"This courageous, brave woman whom many call 'Burma's Nelson Mandela' should be released and the military regime should end its attacks on civilians," they said.

Their effort, organized by Oscar-winning actress Huston along with two groups, the Human Rights Action Center and US Campaign for Burma, came as pro-democracy supporters staged rare street protests against the junta in Myanmar.

Defying a clampdown on dissent that had drawn sharp condemnation from US President George W. Bush, the protestors have been staging a series of demonstrations against a staggering increase in fuel prices.

The almost daily protests mark the most sustained demonstrations against the military regime in at least nine years.

"The situation inside Burma is grave, similar to that in Darfur. The silence of the world on Aung San Suu Kyi is unconscionable," said Jeremy Woodrum, co-founder of the US Campaign for Burma.

Aung San Suu Kyi, among about 1,200 political prisoners in Myanmar, "is a woman that is taking on a brutal military dictatorship with nothing more than the truth in her heart and the support of her people," said Jack Healey, founder of the Human Rights Action Center.

Two of the signatories, Hollywood stars Eric Szmanda from the television show "Crime Scene Investigation" and Walter Koenig from "Star Trek," recently traveled to refugee camps on the Thailand-Myanmar border to press for more UN help.

Huston became interested in Aung San Suu Kyi and Myanmar after learning about the situation from Healey.

Her father, the director John Huston, led efforts against McCarthyism -- a period of extreme anti-communist suspicion inspired by the tensions of the Cold War -- in 1950s Hollywood.

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