

For Immediate Release May 5, 2008

STATEMENT BY THE FIRST LADY ON BURMA

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

3:05 P.M. EDT

“Thank you, everybody, for coming out. I just want to make a few comments about Burma.

On Saturday, Cyclone Nargis swept through Burma. The storm affected more than 2 million people, and according to the Burmese media, killed thousands. The aftermath has left cities paralyzed, families separated and houses and businesses destroyed.

Americans are a compassionate people and we're already acting to provide help. The U.S. has offered financial assistance through our embassy. We'll work with the U.N. and other international non-governmental organizations to provide water, sanitation, food and shelter. More assistance will be forthcoming.

The United States stands prepared to provide an assistance team and much needed supplies to Burma as soon as the Burmese government accepts our offer. The government of Burma should accept this team quickly, as well as other offers of international assistance.

As they cope with this tragedy, the men and women of Burma remain in the thoughts and prayers of many Americans. It's troubling that many of the

Burmese people learned of this impending disaster only when foreign outlets -- such as Radio Free Asia and Voice of America -- sounded the alarm. Although they were aware of the threat, Burma's state-run media failed to issue a timely warning to citizens in the storm's path.

The response to the cyclone is just the most recent example of the junta's failure to meet its people's basic needs. The regime has dismantled systems of agriculture, education and health care. This once wealthy nation now has the lowest per capita GDP in Southeast Asia.

Despite the havoc created by this weekend cyclone, as far as we can tell Burma's military leaders plan to move forward with the constitutional referendum scheduled for this Saturday, May 10th. They've orchestrated this vote to give false legitimacy to their continued rule. The proposed constitution was drafted in a flawed process that excluded opposition and some key ethnic groups. It would effectively give the military a veto over any constitutional changes. The constitution would prohibit democracy activists who are current or former political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi, from taking office. To ensure their constitution becomes law, the regime has been intimidating voters and using force against dissidents. Public gatherings have been banned and printed materials may not be distributed without governmental approval.

As the date of the referendum draws near, there's been an increase in arrests of opposition party members and activists. This continues to take place, despite a call from the international community, and most recently from the United Nations Security Council, for Burma's government to ensure its referendum is free, fair and inclusive.

In response to the regime's continued repression, President Bush has instructed the U.S. Treasury Department to freeze assets of Burmese state-owned companies that are held in U.S. banks. This adds to actions last year to expand U.S. sanctions against Burma's regime, and to tighten sanctions against its top leaders. We thank the European Union, Canada and Australia for joining the United States in imposing similar restrictions. And we appeal to China, India, and Burma's fellow ASEAN members to use their influence to encourage a democratic transition.

Burma's ruling generals have had their chance to implement the good government they promised to their people. If it proceeds under current conditions, the constitutional referendum they have planned should not be seen as a step toward freedom, but rather as a confirmation of the unacceptable status quo.”

So I'm happy to take questions.

Q Mrs. Bush, could you offer us any specifics yet about the scope of the U.S. disaster relief package?

MRS. BUSH: Right now, the earliest part of the relief is money that the embassy already has, that's already there that we can distribute to other NGOs -- the World Food Program, other groups that are on the ground. If they will let our DART team in, then we'll be able to assess what else we can do. And we do have other supplies and commodities in the area -- not in Burma, but close in the area, that would be available soon for help if our DART team can get in and see what they can do.

Q And given your concerns about the ruling government there, are you also worried that any U.S. aid might not get to the people affected?

MRS. BUSH: Well, I'm worried that they won't even accept U.S. aid. And I urge the government to accept aid from the United States and from the entire international community right now, while the needs of their people are so critical.

Q Mrs. Bush, is there any evidence that the sanctions the U.S. and other nations have imposed on the leaders in Myanmar, or Burma, have had an effect?

MRS. BUSH: Only anecdotal. We have heard, and not -- probably can't really confirm -- about some of the leaders who are targeted -- actions that they've taken that make us think they don't like those targeted sanctions on the leaders themselves.

Q Madam, do you have any strong message for the dictatorship, military dictatorship in Burma as far as this democracy and this cyclone is concerned? And do you think they will have a change of heart and minds because of this tragedy?

MRS. BUSH: I hope so. I hope that there will be one good thing that comes out of such huge destruction, and that would be the government's realization that the people of Burma need help and they need more help than they can give them -- or that they've been able to give them.

And the country has just been totally decimated with both education,

agriculture -- all of the things that made Burma one of the richest countries in Asia have now been dismantled. And it's very, very important that the regime start to accept both technical help from out of the country and, obviously in this sort of disaster, very -- be able to accept the really basic help that anybody would need, any country would need and any people would need after this kind of disaster.

Q And madam, what message you have for India, what India can do?

MRS. BUSH: Well, I think India can help. India is close, on the border there. I think there are a lot of ways they could help and get help there quickly, and maybe the Burmese government would accept it more readily from the Indian government than they do from the U.S. government.

Q Mrs. Bush, why such an historic interest? This is a first, for a First Lady to come to this podium and talk about a cyclone. Why such a historic interest?

MRS. BUSH: Well, you know I've been interested in Burma for a long time. It started really with an interest in Aung San Suu Kyi and reading her works and just the story of a Nobel Prize winner who's been under house arrest for so long, whose party was overwhelmingly elected in an election and then never able to take office. And so it started with an interest in her, and then just the more I've seen, the more critical I see the need is for the people in Burma to be -- for the world to pay attention to the people of Burma, and for the world to put pressure on the military regime.

Q And a follow-up. What about the issue of sanitation? You talked about that, and dysentery. Could you talk a little bit more about --

MRS. BUSH: Those are the sort of things that international help would be critical for. We don't know, for instance, in the -- people were already talking about the high price of rice. We don't know -- they would have been just in the planting season -- what would happen if this big 12-foot surge of ocean water, salt water comes over the -- what would have been rice-planting ground. We just don't know, but it seems very, very dire. They were all -- already needed the help of the World Food Program, the WFP -- and now they'll need it even more.

And so it's really important for the regime to accept this kind of help to open their doors to all the help, to all of the help the U.N. could give, from U.N. AIDS* to UNICEF -- each one of the international programs that can help, as well as help from every government that is willing to help. And I know there are a lot of governments that are.

Q Why do you think that the government didn't allow the state-run media to post those warnings?

MRS. BUSH: I don't know. I have no idea.

Q Quick follow on that. Do you think that they have blood on their hands for that lack of warning?

MRS. BUSH: Well, I just think it's very, very important -- that we know already that they are very inept; that they have not been able to govern in a way that lets their country -- country, for one thing, build an economy. This is a country that's rich in natural resources. Their natural resources are being depleted as they sell them off, as far as we can tell from the outside, for the financial benefit of the regime itself and not for the good of the people. We know that.

We know these huge forests -- teak and mahogany forests may be being depleted -- that they have. Their gem shows -- last year many American gem countries [sic] and European gem countries [sic] refused to go to the big gem auctions because they didn't want to prop up the government. But we do know that a lot of -- that China, for instance, a lot of Chinese gem buyers did go.

Q Mrs. Bush, the European Union has pledged \$3 million. That initial aid offer from the United States is only \$250,000.

MRS. BUSH: That's right.

Q If they accept some assistance, how large would the U.S. --

MRS. BUSH: Well, I don't know that. I mean, we'll have to see what it would be, and I can't speak to how large that would be. But I can -- I feel sure that it would be substantial if we can give it. The money that -- the first fund, the first \$250,000 from the U.S. government is money that the

embassy already has in a fund for something like this, and they can give it immediately to the World Food Program or other NGOs that are meeting the very immediate needs.

If we can get some sort of team in there to assess what the other needs are, then I feel very assured that the United States government will follow with bigger --

Q What have they said?

MRS. BUSH: I don't know that. They haven't said anything, as far as I know.

Q Mrs. Bush, what can you tell us about the President signing legislation in the near future to award Aung San Suu Kyi the Congressional Gold Medal?

MRS. BUSH: The President will sign the legislation tomorrow, the congressional legislation that awards Aung San Suu Kyi the Congressional Medal of Honor.** And I was hoping to be here with him when he did that. I don't think I'll be here because I think I'll be going on tomorrow.

But he will, and I think that's important. I think it's just another way, like the Senate and the House caucuses on Burma, that let the people of Burma know that the United States is standing with them. And we do know that they listen to Radio Free Asia and they listen to Voice of America, and so it's very important to get our message out on those radio stations so that people in Burma know that we are aware of what's happened, and we are

very aware of the needs of the people after the cyclone.

Q Do you think that might, though, affect the military junta's willingness to receive aid from the international community, particularly the U.S.?

MRS. BUSH: I hope not. I hope that the military will realize they have to accept aid from everybody they can possibly accept it from. And maybe that will be the something good that can come out of this terrible destruction.

Q Will they let her come to the U.S. to accept the medal?

MRS. BUSH: They might let her come accept; they might not let her ever go back. I don't think she would ever do that, because she couldn't be assured that she could go home. That's why she didn't go see her husband when he was dying in England.

Q Yes. The U.S. only provides a few million dollars in annual humanitarian aid to Myanmar now. Some relief officials have raised concerns that the existing U.S. sanctions plus the sheer lack of trust between the two countries will impede the flow of any significant U.S. aid following the cyclone. And the question is, how is the U.S. government going to balance those two objectives -- the ones of maintaining financial pressure on the junta, and at the same time making sure the cyclone victims aren't victimized once again?

MRS. BUSH: Well, that's the very -- that's always the question when sanctions are part of any sort of pressure that we can put on a government. And in fact that seems to be the only kind of pressure the United States can put on Burma. Certainly we hope that India, for instance, and other countries in the neighborhood can step up if they won't accept aid from the United States.

But I think in front of their own people and in front of the world, if they don't accept aid from the United States and from all the rest of the international community that wants to help the people of Burma, that that is just another way that the military regime looks so cut off and so unaware of what the real needs of their people are.

Q Ma'am, is there any way for the Burmese leaders to salvage the referendum process? Should they scrap it, start from scratch?

MRS. BUSH: Well, I'm not going to give them any advice, but it would be very, very odd I think if they went ahead and held a referendum this Saturday.

END 3:21 P.M. EDT