

The Burmese Dictatorship
By Archbishop Desmond Tutu

7 October 2004

My fellow Nobel Peace laureate, the Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, is now spending her ninth year in detention. No one has been allowed to see her in the last seven months. Fears grow for her personal security. Myanmar's military dictators ignore the appeals of the United Nations and the wider international community to let this woman of peace go free.

If only as much noise, money and effort was spent supporting the peacemakers of this world as is made in support of the use of war. If only those governments that claim to be against war showed their determination to support those at the front line of peace. If only those who say that for them war is the last resort proved this by supporting those struggling for nonviolent solutions to avert such last resorts. Where are the statesmen, the visionaries of our time, with regard to Suu Kyi's nonviolent struggle for freedom? The words of protest at her detention from world leaders ring hollow when they do not translate into action.

Whatever one's view of the war in Iraq, it continues to divide the world. Questions over whether diplomacy had been fully exhausted, whether there was a legal basis for the decision, whether the true aims of the war have been revealed, all persist. I don't want to go into these questions here. But the sincerity of governments on both sides of that divide are being tested by Myanmar. Are both sides truly committed to helping end the rule of oppressive dictators, and to using all nonmilitary means at their disposal to do so? With Myanmar, the answer so far has been a tragic no.

Suu Kyi and the people of Myanmar have not called for a military coalition to invade their country. They have simply asked for the maximum diplomatic and economic pressure against Myanmar's brutal dictators. Suu Kyi and her party, the National League for Democracy, won 82 percent of the seats in Myanmar's 1990 election. The generals in power refuse to honor the express wishes of a nation.

Instead they perpetrate their own brutal rule with 1,300 political prisoners, more child soldiers than any other country on earth, lower health spending than any other country and rape used as a weapon of war. The International Labor Organization has called the regime's systematic use of forced labor a "crime against humanity." The international response to this barbarity has been so weak that the generals can smell the inertia; they feel they can continue to get away with these things without sanction.

Indeed, starting Friday, the Asia-Europe Meeting will take place in Vietnam. There in Hanoi, state terrorists from Myanmar will sit and dine with your leaders. The same leaders who proclaim a war against terror every time they are on television or in the newspaper.

The "coalition of the willing" and the "coalition of the unwilling" ultimately have to show each other that something concrete can be done on Myanmar. For the "willing" it's to show that they will use other nonmilitary instruments at their disposal to pursue justice, and for the "unwilling" it's to prove that they have the determination to deal with a dictatorship like Myanmar's, to prove they are not appeasers of tyranny.

If you protested the war in Iraq, ask your government what it is doing to support Myanmar's peaceful struggle against its own oppressive dictatorship. For those who praised their governments for being against the war in Iraq, ask your governments what they are doing to make Myanmar a shining example of how alternatives to war can be effective. Because at the moment, governments on both sides of the Iraq debate show no gumption, no will to apply serious pressure on the oppressive dictatorship in Myanmar.

Myanmar, Asia, indeed the world, have a golden opportunity. We have a charismatic leader determined to lead her movement and her people in the way she would choose to govern, peacefully, with respect and with human dignity. Just as Nelson Mandela no longer belongs only to South Africans, I believe that in the future Suu Kyi will be a shining light for Asia and the world.

You see, ultimately the Burmese people will prevail. Neither systems, nor governments nor dictators are eternal, but the spirit of freedom is. We must continue to ask the question, whose side are we on? We cannot be neutral in the face of such barbarity. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said that in the end we will remember not the words of our enemies but the silence of our friends. For those who know oppression, inaction is the most painful silence.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984.