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In Burma, a Cry for U.N. Help

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Last month the U.N. Security Council formally discussed the situation in Burma for the first time. For Burmese people such as us, who live under the country's oppressive regime, this was a welcome development.

The Security Council discussion is incredibly important. Over the past 10 years we have watched with dismay as our country's military ruler has repeatedly hoodwinked a stream of U.N. envoys and ignored the world body's actions. Twenty-eight resolutions from the U.N.'s General Assembly and its former Commission on Human Rights, four consecutive human rights special rapporteurs and two successive special envoys representing U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan have failed to produce political change, dialogue or national reconciliation in Burma.

Meanwhile, much of the world has failed to understand the gravity of the crisis in our country. It is shocking that the Security Council has taken so long to get involved. No fewer than 3,000 villages have been destroyed or dislocated by the military regime in eastern Burma in the past decade. During the regime's systematic attacks on ethnic populations, women have been raped, children conscripted as child soldiers and rice supplies burned. Recently the regime instituted a practice of using soldiers' bayonets to pierce the bottoms of rice bowls, leaving villagers unable to cook their most basic foodstuff.

Fleeing the cruelty of this regime, leaving smoldering villages behind, our fellow citizens run for their lives, often to inhospitable territories where the junta awaits. The cycle of terror seems without end. Because of the regime's practices, mortality rates in eastern Burma have risen to the levels of the worst conflict zones in Africa. Children are chronically malnourished, infant mortality rates are soaring, and the most common ailments have become death sentences for thousands.

We know the Security Council has responded to other cases in which there are horrendous problems with refugees and internally displaced populations, in which rape is widespread and conscripting child soldiers is the norm. Burma, with 70,000 child soldiers, waits for a similar response and resolve from the Security Council. We simply cannot understand why the council has not taken the same sort of action in Burma as it has elsewhere. Now that it has taken up the issue of Burma, it must go further and pass a resolution.

Clearly, efforts outside the Security Council have not worked. After Ibrahim Gambari, a U.N. undersecretary of political affairs and envoy to Burma, visited the country in May, the military regime doubled the sentence imposed on Aung San Suu Kyi, the world's only imprisoned Nobel Peace Prize recipient, and increased its attacks on ethnic minorities. The heightened military offensive against these communities has resulted in thousands more refugees streaming across the borders into neighboring countries.

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The regime has not stopped its brutal campaign of terror, in part because the secretary general is unable to act without the mandate of a Security Council resolution. Only a council resolution will provide the United Nations with what it needs to confront this situation.

Just last month the Burmese military arrested five of the most prominent members of our movement, including Burma's second most-famous political leader, Min Ko Naing. By writing this opinion piece, we, too, are risking our lives. Our freedom is worth the risk.

We hope that attention at the Security Council will do more to shed light on the important cultural and political context of our struggle and the threat destabilizing the region. The U.N. diplomatic corps must understand that, unlike other countries, in which factors such as religion or historical rivalries weaken public support for democracy, Burma is a nation in which the people have clearly and repeatedly articulated what they want: a democratic society. That is why the National League for Democracy and allied parties won 82 percent of the seats in parliament in our last elections, and why tens of thousands of people risk their lives to participate in our movement.

Put simply, there is overwhelming evidence that the people of Burma want an end to the dictatorship that has been forced upon them. Without this understanding and without a Security Council resolution, the United Nations is likely to fail in Burma yet again.

The writers are members of Burma's parliament, which was chosen in the country's last democratic elections but has never been permitted to meet.

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