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HOW FREE IS BURMA'S SUU KYI?

Laundered Money from Drugs that Go through Hawaii Helps Keep Burma's Junta in Power

By Robert Weiner and James Lewis

The world has rejoiced in the Burmese junta's release from incarceration of 1990 national election winner, Aung San Suu Kyi. She still can't run for office or speak freely. Last week, the junta allowed Suu Kyi the Internet.

How free is Suu Kyi? Is she free to run for office in non-rigged elections and assume the prime minister role she was denied? Free to call for a civilian government, a legal product-based economy, and a halt to the drug trade funding the junta and killing thousands in Burma and around the globe?

Arresting and releasing her is a drama the regime continues to play time and again. She has been under detention in recurring waves, for over 15 years, from July 1989-July 1995, September 2000-May 2002, May 2003-November 2010, with a combination of "House" arrest and jail time. She's been played as a puppet on the junta's string. The latest "release" of Suu Kyi occurred days after the junta won an "election" while she was in jail and rules made it impossible for her party to win.

Burma is a tale of drugs, ransom, and sanctions -- and Hawaii is at the center of it.

Laundered money -- paid with drugs that go through Hawaii -- cements the junta's power. The Congressional Research Service estimates that Burma exports 1-2 billion dollars in illegal drugs annually. The Pacific Rim countries, which Burma uses to transport its exports, send crystal methamphetamine ("ice") to Hawaii on trans-Pacific cargo containers using Hawaii's ten harbors on six islands, according to Justice Department's 2010 High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area Market Analysis. It's "extremely challenging for U.S. Homeland Security and other law enforcement," says the report. "Hawaii is a transshipment port for ice methamphetamine."

The report goes on to say that 99% of Hawaii's imported goods arrive in cargo-containers with limited, if any inspection. Direct flights to and from Asia from six of Hawaii's eight airports are primary drug sources. Hawaii is a market for Burmese drugs where they can earn twice their mainland street value.

If we want to stop the drug flow to Hawaii and the U.S., we must end the drug funded junta's control -- and that's not easy. The world has been using a series of clearly ineffective sanctions with a pie-in-the-sky hope that internal rebellious forces will somehow prevail. Suu

Kyi has been careful not to verbally challenge the military leadership of Burma. Yet she has said, “Real freedom is freedom from fear.”

Suu Kyi could take a page from other historic leaders and enter exile – maybe as Burma’s Political Dalai Lama. As an exile, her voice would be unrestricted to speak on the plight of the Burmese people. We can see her hosted as a Newsmaker at the National Press Club.

In July, the State Department asserted that Burma could see “a lot of opportunities” if Suu Kyi was released. Certainly they did not mean for Suu Kyi simply to become an unwitting pawn to encourage foreign investment and aid while the regime remains repressive and blocks its elected democracy.

With worldwide drug money filling the sanctions gap, the junta leaders live in luxury while the people are impoverished. Drug baron Lo Hsing Han funded the opulent 2006 wedding of dictator Than Shwe’s daughter. According to BBC the lucky couple received \$50 million in gifts. Yet during Cyclone Nargis in 2008, they refused any outside assistance for weeks and then did little development with the money—just keeping it. Cutting the narco-lines will dent the regime’s checkbook more than sanctions.

As a gesture for the junta’s providing Suu Kyi some freedom, the U.S. should respond by filling the empty special envoy post in Burma and providing anti-narcotics targeted and monitored aid, but not providing other assistance. The former U.S. Political and Economic Chief in Rangoon, Leslie Hayden, reported that providing anti-narcotics aid to Burma would pressure the regime into “concrete results” and would slow the flow of drugs. Full commercial sanctions lifting, however, would be an undeserved boon to the junta.

The U.S. can exert pressure to keep Suu Kyi unincarcerated and help keep Burmese methamphetamine and heroin off America’s and Europe’s streets. The U.S. can support training, crop substitution, and intelligence sharing, including an opium crop survey disbanded since 2005. Knowledge is power.

To achieve real change in Burma, Suu Kyi and other opposition leaders must be allowed to campaign and run for office, and the drugs funding the junta and transiting through Hawaii must be eliminated.

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