

Opening Statement - December 3, 2007

Public Hearing:

After the Saffron Revolution: Religion, Repression, and the U.S. Policy Options for Burma

Monday, Dec. 3, 2007, 2:30-4:30 p.m.

Opening Statement by Richard Land, USCIRF Vice Chair

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The images of thousands of Burmese monks bravely protesting against tyranny are some of the most enduring of recent memory. What began as an almost impromptu protest over fuel prices mushroomed into a nationwide peaceful democratic groundswell.

The Burmese people again hoped for liberty, only to find more brutality and violence. We were all outraged at the sight of troops firing on peaceful demonstrators, of dead bodies in the streets of Rangoon, of police disrobing and beating monks. There are photos of blood on the ground of monasteries where monks were beaten, arrested, and carried away to uncertain fates.

Yesterday we learned of another atrocity. The military junta in Burma has charged monk U Gambira, one of the leaders of the All-Burma Monks Alliance, with treason, a charge that carries with it the death sentence.

Before he was arrested, U Gambira released this statement: "Good people in Burma are being killed or imprisoned, tortured, and then sent to forced labor camps. I sincerely ask the international community to do something to stop these atrocities. My chances of survival are very slim now. But I have not given up hope, and will try my best."

The international community needs to demand a full accounting of the latest atrocities in Burma so that we can know the full scope of the Burmese military's brutality and can hold those responsible accountable. All monks need to be freed immediately and unconditionally.

We do not know everything that has happened in the aftermath of the crackdown. Reports are emerging that suggest that the abuse of protesters was more brutal than initially described and that there were more fatalities, torture, and arrests than have been reported.

The military's bloody response to the demonstrations was a setback. But if we have learned anything from recent history we know that freedom trumps tyranny. As Burma's elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi has eloquently stated, "We will prevail because our cause is right, because our cause is just. History is on our side. Time is on our side."

But I am also reminded of another quote, this one from Dr. Martin Luther King, who wrote in 1963 that "freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressors. It must be demanded by the oppressed." The Burmese people are demanding their liberty. It is time for the world to join them fully in this cause.

Along with the U.S. government, the Commission believes that it is time for the Burmese generals to step aside and make way for a unified Burma governed by its elected leaders. That is the only way that regional security can be assured and massive humanitarian and human rights and religious freedom abuses can be resolved.

The Commission has urged, as have others, a clear UN Security Council resolution that calls for the release of Burmese prisoners, an end to the regime's crackdown, and real dialogue that leads to a peaceful transition to democracy. We have also urged the U.S. government to use its leverage and influence to convince other governments to condemn the military's violence and help work toward freedom in Burma.

What is needed today is a discussion of whether there is anything more that can be done to encourage freedom and end oppression.

There have been many Burma-related events held in Washington over the past few months. This hearing is our attempt to offer some perspective on what has happened in the aftermath of the Saffron Revolution and to answer some other pertinent questions:

- How
can we evaluate and understand the monks' leadership of the demonstrations and democracy movement and how can we account for them after the initial crackdown-how many have been arrested, disappeared, disrobed, or killed?

- How has religion played a role,
both in opposing the military junta and in the military junta's ethnic policies? How have religious freedom abuses targeting ethnic minorities been a source of communal conflict and regional instability?

- How
can we evaluate the prospects for recent UN diplomatic efforts? Is the U.S. being as effective as it can be? Do we have the diplomatic leverage and policy tools to help bring democratic change and an end to oppression in Burma?

We have three panels
here today, and two hours in which to discuss these issues. But first let me introduce the Commission, myself and my colleagues.

The
U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom is a bipartisan, independent federal agency created to monitor and report on religious freedom in other countries and provide policy recommendations to the President, Secretary of State, and Congress on how best to advance religious freedom abroad.

Joining me today are
Commissioners Felice Gaer, Nina Shea and Imam Talal Eid. We also expect some Members of Congress to attend this hearing.

To set
the stage for the witnesses, I would like first to present the videotaped testimony of a 23-year-old monk, Ashin Kavida. There are subtitles but you can also find the text in the press packets.