

The following article appeared in the San Jose Mercury News on November 30, 2011:

On Nov. 6, Burmese soldiers burst into a church in the state of Kachin, burning and looting it, severely beating its pastor, the Rev. Yajawng Hkawng, and kidnapping 50 of its members for forced labor, including women whom they reportedly raped.

Despite the government's recent words and deeds suggesting reform, such stories remain disturbingly common in Burma, now officially known as Myanmar. Rohingya Muslims, for example, are routinely arrested and tortured when they cannot pay extortion money. Hundreds of Buddhist monks are in prison for peaceful criticism of the government, including U Gambira, who has been so badly beaten that his relatives worry about his physical and mental health.

When she arrives in Burma on Wednesday, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton should stress to her hosts the imperative of fundamental reform. Despite some positive steps taken by the new civilian government, including the release of Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and 200 other prisoners of conscience and an easing of some Internet controls, Burma remains one of the world's most egregious human rights and religious freedom violators and continues to face economic and political sanctions for its misconduct.

For nearly 50 years, Burma's ruling generals have imposed their will on the nation. The U.N.

Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Burma has accused the military of atrocities that amount to crimes against humanity and war crimes. The government has repressed democracy, denied ethnic and cultural rights, displaced hundreds of thousands, and used rape, torture, forced labor, conscription of child soldiers and extrajudicial killings to "pacify" its people.

When the nation's military held elections in 2010, the international community and Burma's people viewed them as a fraud aimed at extending its rule. Notwithstanding the civilian government's recent moves toward reform, there are few who doubt that the military remains in control.

As a result, conditions for Burma's diverse religious communities have yet to improve by any measurable degree.

Who can forget either the riveting images of thousands of saffron-robed Buddhist monks leading peaceful 2007 protests -- or the subsequent bloody crackdown? In ethnic minority areas, religious restrictions and attacks on religious leaders and institutions are critical strategies of the military's war against the Karen, Karenni, Naga and Chin peoples. Across the country, the military has removed children from Christian homes for education in Buddhist schools, determined whether Muslims may marry or travel, and even issued new regulations last month requiring religious groups to get permission for "reading the Bible, fasting, prayer ... and [saying] the rosary of the Virgin Mary."

Given Burma's troubled record, the United States, along with the international community, should view contrary steps taken by the Burmese government with a cautious eye. We commend the Obama administration for seeking to assess Burma's current attitudes on reform, but we urge it not to let isolated positive actions obscure the reality of human rights and religious freedom abuses.

The U.S. should urge Burma to match reformist rhetoric with consistent and concrete actions, including the release of all political and religious prisoners, an immediate cease-fire in ethnic minority areas and a commitment to improve its human rights record. Improvements in religious freedom should be a critical benchmark for gauging Burma's intent on genuine reform.

Until there is evidence of change, the international community and the United States should maintain economic and political sanctions. The world must keep challenging Burma to move decisively toward democracy and freedom.

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For a link to the article, go to http://www.mercurynews.com/opinion/ci_19434696