

INTERNATIONAL

The World's Grimace

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Delaying democracy • By Jared Genser and Meghan Barron

How long must the Burmese wait?

On Tuesday, the Burmese junta extended the detention of the pro-democracy leader and the world's only imprisoned Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Aung San Suu Kyi, for an additional year. This marks the fifth consecutive year that Suu Kyi's house arrest has been prolonged and a new law for General Than Shwe, who regularly runs roughshod over the rule of law — even draconian national security laws of the regime's own creation.

Suu Kyi has spent more than 12 out of the last 18 years under house arrest since she and her allies won 82 percent of the parliamentary seats in Myanmar's 1990 elections.

Myanmar's State Protection Law permits house arrest without charge or trial for up to five years total, renewable for up to one-year increments at a time. On Saturday, the final extension allowable by law expired. Notwithstanding the UN's four prior findings that the application of Burmese law itself is a violation of international law, let alone that it has no legal basis to continue to detain her, the junta decided to flout its own law and keep her in custody.

As a result, Aung San Suu Kyi is to spend yet another year illegally confined to a solitary existence in Yangon in her dilapidated home, which lost part of its roof and electrical power in Cyclone Nargis. One would have hoped the junta had more pressing matters to address.

In the aftermath of the cyclone, some 134,000 Burmese are now dead or missing — over 40 percent

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of which are believed to be children. And the United Nations reports that only 42 percent of the storm's 2.4 million affected victims have received any humanitarian relief. Although foreign aid workers have begun reaching remote areas of the country, it would come as no surprise if the junta backs away from fulfilling the commitment Than Shwe made to the UN secretary general, Ban Ki Moon, to allow "all foreigners" in to provide relief to the Burmese people.

Over the years the junta has made many commitments to the UN that have been broken. For example, under immense pressure after last fall's Safon Revolution, Myanmar committed to engage in meaningful negotiations with Suu Kyi. After she participated in a series of meetings with the regime's interlocutor, Than Shwe imposed unworkable conditions as a prerequisite for direct talks, including an abandonment of her party's call for sanctions. By then the world's attention had waned and the talks fizzled, both because the regime has no desire to engage in talks and it feels no pressure to make real concessions.

The junta is taking every advantage of the cyclone to tighten its grip on power.

While the UN secretary general, the Burmese regime, and allies of the junta have urged that the question of humanitarian aid not be "politicized," the regime itself is taking every advantage of the cyclone to make permanent its grip on power to the exclusion of helping its own people. As is often the case, distraction and delay in discussing the fundamental issues in Myanmar only serve the interests of the regime.

The extension of Suu Kyi's house arrest is just one

example. In the days following the cyclone, the junta saw no need to delay its sham constitutional referendum. Postponing the vote only in the two areas hit hardest by the storm, the results obviated the need for those in the cyclone-ravaged regions to also cast ballots. Nevertheless, the junta rescheduled the vote in those areas for last Saturday. The junta has now made the extraordinary claim that 98.1 percent of the population had turned out to vote, with 92.48 percent endorsing the junta's proposal.

It is deeply regrettable that Ban Ki Moon played right into the junta's hand by declining to raise the fraudulent election result or Suu Kyi's expiring house arrest in his meeting with Than Shwe, both of which occurred after Cyclone Nargis hit the country. In so doing, he sent a clear signal to the junta that as long as they held their own people hostage, they could press ahead with their campaign to consolidate power and be assured the United Nations would relax any pressure for political reform.

The secretary general's fundamental error was to focus exclusively on the suffering of the Burmese victims of Cyclone Nargis and to fail to recognize the political situation is equally unconscionable.

How long is the world willing to wait for the release of Suu Kyi and other political prisoners in Myanmar and for a real, time-limited process of national reconciliation? Until the international community unites to press for this outcome, any relief provided will be only temporary.

Jared Genser and Meghan Barron are lawyers with Freedom Now in Washington who represent Aung San Suu Kyi.