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The Burmese Junta Still Fears Suu Kyi

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After spending 14 of the past 19 years under house arrest, Aung San Suu Kyi, Burma's ailing pro-democracy opposition leader, now sits in the military junta's Insein prison, notorious for its filth, disease and the mental and physical torture deployed against its prisoners. She faces a five-year prison sentence if convicted of breaching the terms of her house arrest because a stranger swam across a lake and broke into her dilapidated home.

The new charge is a sign of how seriously the junta takes the threat to its power posed by Ms. Suu Kyi's peaceful activism. Her detention without charge or trial for being a "threat to the sovereignty and security of the State" was scheduled to reach what the junta had described as its maximum length on May 27. But the junta needed a pretext to keep her under lock and key during next year's so-called elections, and bizarre events provided one.

So in her trial it won't matter that the junta has exclusive responsibility to provide security at her residence. Nor will it make a difference that she did not know or invite into her home

The Nobel-winning opposition leader faces a show trial.

American John Yettaw, described by people who know him as eccentric but peace-loving, who allegedly wanted to talk to Ms. Suu Kyi as part of his research on forgiveness and resilience.

That the detention she supposedly violated has been repeatedly recognized by the United Nations as unlawful under both international and Burmese law won't affect the outcome either. To compound the injustice, the junta has also charged the mother and daughter who live with Ms. Suu Kyi and her physi-

cian with various offenses that could land them in prison for years.

Ms. Suu Kyi's case matters, and not only because she is a Nobel Peace Prize winner. Her situation is representative of the suffering of the 47 million people of Burma under an authoritarian and inept junta. Few regimes are as illegitimate and cruel as Gen. Than Shwe's. When the world fails to stand up for Ms. Suu Kyi, it fails the oppressed Burmese people.

Since Ms. Suu Kyi was first detained before Burma's 1990 elections, more than 3,000 villages have been destroyed as the military has waged a campaign of killing, torture and rape against ethnic minorities, as reported by Human Rights Watch. One million refugees have fled to neighboring countries while hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons struggle to subsist in jungle conditions.

Rape is systematically employed as a weapon of war against ethnic minority women, according to groups such as the Shan Women's Ac-

tion Network. Last year when Burma was devastated by Cyclone Nargis, the international community had to beg the junta to allow it to save the government's own people.

Ms. Suu Kyi will stand trial today and given the junta's record to date, it is highly doubtful justice will be served. So the real question is how the world will react. Will it do more than simply condemn the junta's actions? Will U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon take decisive action by traveling to Burma and demanding to meet with Gen. Than Shwe? Will the Security Council do more than issue another meaningless statement and instead press for national reconciliation in Burma?

Ms. Suu Kyi once said, "Please use your liberty to promote ours." We outside Burma have not served her well to date, but she and her people need us now more than ever.

Mr. Genser and Ms. Barron, lawyers with Freedom Now in Washington, D.C., represent Ms. Suu Kyi.