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Prisoner in Myanmar ■ Jared Genser and Meghan Barron

The Lady and the junta

WASHINGTON

Halfway around the world, a 61-year-old woman sits alone in her home, as she has for years. The telephone is forever silent, because the line is disconnected. The doorbell never rings, because visitors are forbidden. There is no mail, there is no news.

For Aung San Suu Kyi, the democratically elected leader of Myanmar and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, there is almost complete isolation.

For more than 11 of the past 17 years, the military dictatorship that rules Myanmar, also known as Burma, has held Suu Kyi under house arrest. The generals initially claimed the seclusion was for her own protection.

Now they assert that this pacifist and devout Buddhist is a "threat to national peace and tranquility." When her band requested entry to Myanmar to see her one last time, even that request was denied.

"Please use your liberty to promote ours," Suu Kyi has said. The international community has responded with a litany of goodwill gestures, reaffirmed in a fourth judgment by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention that she is being detained in violation of international law. But so far, everything has failed to produce results.

As she has done each year since 2003, the leader of the ruling junta, General Than Shwe, again recently extended her sentence for an additional one-year

term.

Much more is at stake than the fate of one woman — "The Lady" — as she is affectionately referred to by her people. While Suu Kyi spends day after day trapped in her home, the junta ravages her country and brutalizes her people.

More than 3,000 villages have been destroyed since 1996 as the military wages a relentless campaign of killing, torture and rape against ethnic minorities. A million refugees have fled the country and 600,000 internally displaced people struggle to subsist in primitive jungle conditions. More than 800,000 people are used as forced labor and the country has over 70,000 child soldiers.

As Myanmar disintegrates, its decay seeps into neighboring countries, threatening regional security.

Myanmar is currently the world's second largest exporter of heroin and opiates as well as a major producer of methamphetamines. The junta's failure to address its burgeoning HIV/AIDS crisis has led to the spread of the disease along the drug routes into neighboring countries.

The need for international action has never been more pressing. The first step towards saving Myanmar is saving its elected leader, Suu Kyi, whose political party, the National League for Democracy and its allies won over 80 percent of the seats in the 1990 parliamentary election.

The UN General Assembly and the former Com-

mission on Human Rights have adopted 29 consecutive resolutions on Myanmar, many calling for Suu Kyi's release. The former and current secretaries general, Kofi Annan and Ban Ki Moon, and the European Union have urged her release.

Even the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, which had been reluctant to pressure one of its members, has called for her release.

Earlier this month, former Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik of Norway and 58 other former presidents and prime ministers, including such prominent figures as Bill Clinton, George H. W. Bush, Jimmy Carter, Vaclav Havel, Lech Walesa, Kim Dae Jung, Corazon Aquino, Megawati Sukarnoputri and Margaret Thatcher, called for Suu Kyi's release.

This courageous woman still strikes fear in the heart of the Burmese junta. The international clamor for her release was ignored.

The stakes are too high for the international community to relent. "The struggle for democracy and human rights in Burma is a struggle for life and dignity. It is a struggle that encompasses our political, social, and economic aspirations," Suu Kyi has said.

Although the international community has so far failed Myanmar, we must persist. The injustice of the Lady's ongoing detention and the suffering of her people remains a stain on our collective conscience.

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