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Now we must all stand with the Lady

More than ever, Aung San Suu Kyi needs international support against the junta

Jared Genser



She hasn't been able to talk to her supporters in more than seven years. But two days ago, they gathered at the iron gates surrounding the decaying home that has been her prison for 15 of the past 21 years. As they cheered and cried, she said to them, "Thank you for welcoming me like this. We haven't seen each other for so long. I have so much to tell you."

Aung San Suu Kyi has been the face and heart of the democracy movement in Burma since the 1988 pro-democracy uprisings were brutally crushed by the military junta. "The Lady", as she is affectionately known, has suffered in her home while the junta has so cruelly isolated her from the world. It has been her Buddhist faith, her almost supernatural inner strength and her commitment to restore democracy to Burma that has carried her forward. To see her set free felt like the world was witnessing history: a moment of extraordinary joy and hope for the Burmese people and for people everywhere whose lives are held hostage by dictatorial regimes. But it's only a moment. Today the real work begins. The international community must not think naively that democracy will now come to Burma. Ms Suu Kyi has been released from her illegal detentions before. And the junta only tightened its grip on power. Now Ms Suu Kyi's work of freeing her own people must begin anew. And the international community must redouble its efforts to support her and them. There are still some 2,200 other political prisoners in Burma. And beyond them, the junta has

systematically and thoroughly repressed the fundamental human rights of the more than 50 million Burmese people. Freedom of expression and freedom of association are tightly controlled. The regime uses tens of thousands of child soldiers. Hundreds of thousands of people are regularly conscripted to perform forced labour. But most shocking is the junta's brutal repression of its ethnic minority peoples. The junta has destroyed more than 3,500 villages in a relentless scorched-earth campaign of killing, torture and rape.

Perhaps contrary to the inclinations of those watching Burma from afar, the international community must now increase pressure on the Burmese junta, not reduce it. The world should celebrate Ms Suu Kyi's release. But her release did not happen because of a change of heart on the part of the junta leader Than Shwe. Instead, it is a sign of how confident he feels that his sham

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elections, held a week ago, have made her irrelevant to the future of the country. Make no mistake. This regime has been uncompromising and relentless in its drive to consolidate and make permanent its grip on power. Ms Suu Kyi's release is anything but a sign of flexibility.

What is required in Burma is national reconciliation between the junta, Ms Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy party, and ethnic leaders. Empowered by the Security Council, the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon should immediately travel to Burma to initiate such a process. It must be the Secretary-General himself because there have been more than 40 visits by lower-level UN envoys to Burma in



In Burma, they said it with T-shirts. Those in free nations could do more

the past two decades that have not achieved any significant concession from the regime. Ms Suu Kyi's last release in 2002 was, in part, a result of the UN-led initiative to persuade the junta to participate in such a dialogue. Than Shwe, however, later refused to participate. For any process to work, it must therefore have benchmarks, deadlines, and consequences for those parties who obstruct progress.

To get the junta to the negotiating table, the international community must impose legal, political and economic pressure on the military junta. The UN must follow the recommendation of its own Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Burma and establish a commission of inquiry into the junta's perpetration of war crimes and crimes against humanity against the people of Burma. The United Kingdom, United States and a dozen other countries have embraced this call to action. Ultimately, it will be for the Burmese people to decide how they wish to

achieve justice and accountability. But initiating such a process will send a clear message to the ranks of the military that if they do not resolve the situation through negotiation, accountability may be imposed externally.

Furthermore, the current regime of economic sanctions against the junta is toothless and so poorly implemented that it is little more than symbolic. Not only should sanctions name the junta's bankers in Singapore and Dubai and deny them access to global markets, but the UN Security Council should be urged to enact a global arms embargo to deny the regime the weapons it uses to repress its own people.

Harbour no illusions about the difficulty of implementing such a challenging agenda. But now, more than ever, the international community must rally around Ms Suu Kyi and her people. Although she is finally free from her house arrest, the people of Burma are not free so long as the military junta remains in power. We must take to heart what Ms Suu Kyi has so powerfully pleaded: "Please use your liberty to promote ours."

Aung San Suu Kyi has so much to share with her people. And her people have so much to tell her. I can only hope that the world's leaders have just as much to tell the junta.

Jared Genser is president of Freedom Now, a campaign group that advocates the release of political prisoners, and served for four years as international lawyer to Aung San Suu Kyi, as retained by a member of her family. The views expressed here are his own