

EURO-BURMA OFFICE
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The EU's Common Position on Burma:

HOW CAN THIS BEST BE USED TO BRING ABOUT CHANGE IN BURMA?

On 23 April 2007, the European Union (EU) renewed its joint sanctions against the Burmese State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) military dictatorship. Many are asking what real impact and relevance this position will have on Burma since the regime seems impervious to international pressure and is determined to hang on to power.

It is well-known that EU and US sanctions alone will not bring about change in Burma as long as its neighbours do not respect the sanctions. But the EU enacted the sanctions to show the Burmese regime that its behaviour is not acceptable - ignoring the will of the people as expressed in the 1990 elections, and abusing the rights of its citizens. Thus, in light of the ongoing atrocities committed by the SPDC against the people of Burma especially the ethnic nationalities in the Karen area, the continued imprisonment of over 1300 political prisoners, and the detention of democratically elected leaders like Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and Hkun Htun Oo, the EU has no option but to keep its sanctions. To suspend them would have been morally and ethically reprehensible.

However, targeted sanctions cannot be the only strategy for political and democratic reform in Burma. A holistic approach is needed which includes humanitarian aid, building civil society, political engagement with the military and sanctions.

The EU's renewal of sanctions to Burma gives the EU another opportunity to put Burma at the top of its common foreign affairs agenda and to start putting words into action. It should herald an invigorated EU commitment to democracy and human rights in Burma.

EU sanctions were also designed to show support for the people of Burma because only the people of Burma can actually bring about change in Burma. The EU is now providing desperately needed humanitarian aid for the people of Burma, particularly in the health and education sectors. This is a welcome development, but this aid must be implemented and delivered in new, flexible and innovative ways to ensure that it reaches the most vulnerable and that it is not diverted or manipulated by the military.

The EU should also dedicate more resources to help build up the disenfranchised Burmese democracy and human rights networks, and civil society particularly at the grass roots level and within the seven ethnic states during the implementation of the new European Initiative for Human Rights and Democracy regulation (2007-2013).

The recent UN Security Council debate showed that while there was disagreement over the suitability of the forum, there was general agreement that the situation in Burma is unacceptable and must be addressed. As the world's largest common mass of countries, the EU plays a crucial role in the international political scene. It must, therefore, use its full political weight to work towards a common international strategy to help bring about change in Burma, whether through the good offices of the UN Secretary-General or an international mechanism like in North Korea that includes ASEAN, China, India, Bangladesh, Russia, Japan, the USA and the EU. The EU Common Position also allows the EU to engage in a political dialogue with the SPDC. The EU-ASEAN meeting and Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) are entry points. All such opportunities and others for political dialogue towards reforms in Burma should be explored and increased.

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