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Myanmar: Whom Do Sanctions Hurt?

By Stanley A. Weiss

Watching President Barack Obama's inauguration from my hotel room in Yangon, in Myanmar, I doubted whether his promise of change was meant for Myanmar as well.

U.S. relations with this country have stagnated for years, as Washington strives to sanction the country's brutal leadership into submission. Meanwhile, the misery of Myanmar's 54 million people deepens by the day.

Yet, the ice may be cracking. This week, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared that Washington "is looking at steps that might influence the current Burmese government" and "ways that we could more effectively help the Burmese people."

Meanwhile, Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy, issued a statement of willingness to begin dialogue with the regime without preconditions.

But it is time to admit that the regime's full acquiescence to U.S. demands is not a requirement for improving people's lives. That does not mean the United States should cease supporting the democratic aspirations of Myanmar's people, or that Washington should embrace a regime that has driven a resource-rich country into poverty, used violence to stifle dissent, jailed more than 2,000 political prisoners, deprived its citizens of education and health care, and conscripted children into military service.

But the U.S. policy of isolation is only making the junta more recalcitrant. A member of a foreign intelligence service told me of speaking with a top general, who said, "We are not scared of Western sanctions; we will survive as long as we have rice, salt and ngapi (fermented fish paste)."

Myanmar has endured colonial rule, foreign invasion, civil war and armed insurgency; its intensely nationalistic leaders are paranoid and proud in equal measure. Besides, the junta can count on more than fish paste to see them through: Myanmar has significant natural gas reserves and neighbors happy to trade and invest.

Proponents of sanctions counter that the policy needs more time; that critical loopholes have only recently been tightened; that the answer isn't to lift the sanctions but to bring more countries - especially China - on board. Yet there is no reason to think Beijing would be susceptible to U.S. pressure on Myanmar.

Meanwhile, as Brahma Chellaney, one of India's top strategic thinkers told me, the United States "doesn't have to live with the consequences of its actions," but neighboring countries "will not escape the effects of an unstable Myanmar."

Sanctioning Myanmar may make Americans feel good, but feeling good and doing good are not the same. If the U.S. intent is to improve people's lives in Myanmar, it must find a new way forward.

First, to succeed in Myanmar, U.S. officials must think like the Burmese. Not only have punitive sanctions and relentless public condemnation failed to moderate the regime's behavior, they have pushed the junta further away from the West and into Chinese arms.

Too close a relationship between Myanmar and China is in neither the generals' nor Washington's interests, but the United States has offered only the back of its hand. The U.S. won't even call Myanmar by its name, even though "Myanmar" is the Burmese word for their country, while "Burma" was the name imposed by British colonizers.

As a former Asian diplomat with deep knowledge of Myanmar told me, the people at large "see the West's persistence in calling the country 'Burma' not only as childish and petulant but also as a disrespect to the country and its people." Using "Myanmar" in recognition of the country's difficult history and independence struggle is a gesture that might alleviate some of the junta's suspicion of the outside world.

Second, the United States should increase humanitarian assistance, channeled via the United Nations and NGOs. Myanmar's people endure grinding poverty; their leaders spend only 0.3 percent of GDP on public health, as many as 6 million people lack access to food, and UNICEF reports that 50 percent of infant deaths are from preventable causes. Yet the country receives less than \$3 of official development assistance per capita - as compared to \$38 for Cambodia and \$49 for Laos.

A range of Western donors are already working successfully in Myanmar. In less than two years, the Three Diseases Fund has reached over 93,000 people with HIV prevention activities, provided antiretroviral treatment to 5,500 people living with HIV, supplied over 800,000 people with bed nets, and supported drug distribution to 123,000 tuberculosis patients.

As British Ambassador Mark Canning told me, humanitarian assistance "not only helps people in need, but acts as a medium through which to engage the more constructive elements in government, exposes thousands of young people to the way the foreign relief community works, and reminds them that the international community is out there and there is the promise some day of a more normal relationship." It offers both moral and material solidarity with Myanmar's people.

And they want our help. In my quiet conversations with taxi drivers, shopkeepers and tour guides in Yangon, no one spoke to me of politics. Instead I was asked, "How can I go to your schools? Will America help us get medical treatment?" Ma Thanegi, a former aide to Aung San Suu Kyi who now advocates against sanctions, told me there were only two functioning radiotherapy machines in this Texas-sized country.

Last year, the major headline out of Myanmar was a deadly cyclone. This year, let's hope it will be the winds of change.