

Burma, Iraq, and the Need for an Effective UN

By [Sherwood Ross](#)

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Besides wrecking Iraq and killing a million people, President Bush's illegal invasion has given a boost to military dictators around the world.

"The idea, popular in the nineteen-nineties, that the world may intervene in countries whose governments show no regard for human life is now seen as reflecting Western arrogance," writes George Packer in The New Yorker magazine. Packer refers specifically to Burma but militarists globally have followed the U.S. assault on Iraq closely. Many dictators consider George Bush to be a man after their own heart—and he proves it by showering them with weapons.

According to Rachel Stohl, a senior analyst at the Center for Defense Information(CDI), "the U.S. is sending unprecedented levels of military assistance to countries that it simultaneously criticizes for lack of respect for human rights and, in some cases, for questionable democratic processes."

"The occupation of Iraq has been a boon to the Burmese generals," Packer writes. It has deprived the U.S. of any moral authority it once had. And neighbors China and India—motivated by selfish economic concerns—look the other way at the Burmese junta's horrendous human rights abuses. China's approach, Packer says, "has become the standard." Chinese businessmen are plowing investment funds into Burma and China's dictators are selling arms to their Burmese counterparts. China and India are also competing for contracts to explore offshore oil and gas and to build a gas pipeline across Burma, Packer writes.

China even tried to prevent the United Nations Security Council from discussing Burma and when a U.N. envoy said he planned to discuss the prospect of talks between the junta and opposition political leader Aung San Suu Kyi, under house arrest, at a meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the Burmese Prime Minister threatened to walk out. The U.N. envoy's talk was cancelled.

The despotism in Burma, like Bush's criminal war against Iraq, is a textbook study in human folly that cries out for international solution. Both reflect how calloused militaries ravage innocent civilian populations because there is no real "law and order" on much of planet Earth.

Since seizing control in 1962, military officers have installed themselves in most of Burma's top government posts, operating with absolute contempt for the well-being of the nation's 50-millions. Arbitrary arrests, torture, the use of child labor, and total suppression of political freedom are the norm. Starvation is common. The junta's failure to aid the survivors of last May's cyclone that killed 130,000 people or to allow Western aid into the country makes the

Bush response to hurricane-struck New Orleans appear positively benevolent.

“American policy toward Burma has been to isolate the regime through sanctions,” Packer writes. “This policy has been pursued as a moral response to a deplorable government, without much regard for its effectiveness.” And he adds, “the alternative policy—economic engagement along the lines of Burma’s neighbors—has also failed. Every year, the junta grows stronger while the country sinks deeper into poverty.”

“Sanctions are a joke,” one Western diplomat stationed in Rangoon told Packer. “They’re just a pressure release. The generals don’t care what the rest of the world thinks about them, because they don’t think about the rest of the world. What they care about is their financial and physical security.” FYI, Transparency International ranks Burma as the second most corrupt regime in the world, after Somalia.

The only bright spot for U.S. policy in Burma is the State Department’s American Center in Rangoon, crowded with Burmese reading Western literature. Packer credits two State Department officials, Thomas Pierce and Kim Penland, for expanding the Center’s library, plus starting a political discussion class, a training workshop for journalists, a literature book club, and a debate club. “In a country where the law forbids unauthorized meetings of more than five people, none of this could have happened anywhere outside the gates of the Center,” Packer writes.

The lesson of Burma is the UN needs a standing army to step into a country and guarantee honest elections, and, when necessary, even to depose a junta. The lesson of Iraq is that the UN needs a mechanism to prevent jingoists like Bush from making a war in behalf of financial interests, in this case the western oil firms and the U.S. military-industrial complex. Diplomat Heraldo Munoz, Chile’s permanent representative to the United Nations, is quoted in the November 15th New York Times as writing in his book “A Solitary War” that “Americans do not recognize the value of the United Nations in assuring the United States’ central role in the world.”

As psychologist Michael McCullough writes in his book “Beyond Revenge”(Jossey-Bass), “By acting as the world’s policeman, the United Nations was supposed to be the strong supranational government that could prevent warfare between nations. However, the UN’s ability to stop nations from attacking each other has been hamstrung by the fact that any member of the UN Security Council (which includes the most militarily powerful nations in the world) can veto any proposed UN military action that it views as a threat to itself or one of its allies.”

“Until the UN becomes strong enough to stop violence between nations before it gets out of hand, or until some stronger form of supranational governance comes along, violence between nations, spawned and nurtured by feelings of vengeance, will likely continue to be a fact of life,” McCullough adds.

Sherwood Ross is a Miami-based public relations consultant who has written for major dailies and wire services. Reach him at sherwoodr1@yahoo.com

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