

Acceptance speech for Madeleine K. Albright Award

By Thin Thin Aung, Women's League of Burma
At NDI Democracy Luncheon, Washington, D.C., 2008

On behalf of the Women's League of Burma, thank you. It is a great honor to receive the Madeleine K. Albright Grant from NDI. We see this award as international recognition of our work to empower women to participate in political decision-making. It affirms the importance of our efforts for the restoration of democracy in Burma. Your support has rekindled our strength to continue the struggle. We are deeply honored to share this occasion with Archbishop Desmond M. Tutu who serves as a source of inspiration to our democracy movement.

Secretary Albright and NDI have long supported the democratization process in Burma. The people of Burma greatly appreciate Secretary Albright's outspoken calls for change in Burma and her advocacy to those who are indifferent to Burma's problems. These acts of solidarity strengthen our resolve.

It is my understanding that recipients of this award often share inspiring and even hopeful stories at these luncheons. How much I wish I could do so. Unfortunately, every aspect of life for the people of Burma continues to deteriorate. As the reaction to the Saffron Revolution and the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis showed, we are afflicted with a military government that will do anything to hold onto power. It is inherently fearful and violent; above all, it fears accounting for its deeds.

Under the military regime, practicing democracy and participating in political activities have been classified as "crimes." Political activists have been severely punished. Just last month, more than 200 hundred activists were imprisoned for up to 68 years and sent to jails far away from their homes. One prominent female activist, Nilar Thien and her husband Jimmy, were both sentenced to 65 years imprisonment. They had to leave their four-month old daughter, who will be growing up without her parents.

This is but one story, and there are thousands like it in Burma today. Yet despite these harsh consequences, I am proud to say that women activists still dare to speak out against injustice. The women of Burma still have the courage to resist unjust laws and repressive rules.

There now are more than 2,000 political prisoners in Burma, including our democratic leader and Nobel Peace Laureate, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been under house arrest for 13 of the last 19 years.

Not only has the Burmese military regime been crushing all political resistance, but it is using force to stay in power at any cost. During last year's Saffron Revolution, the regime killed and tortured Buddhist monks. Last May, they heartlessly blocked emergency aid for cyclone victims for weeks. Before the eyes of the world, day after day, the regime showed that it would prefer that its people starve and remain homeless, rather than admit that its corruption had made the

disaster worse. 100,000 people died? One million died? Both are credible estimates for one of the worst storms in history. We simply do not know, and the regime does not care.

And away from the eyes of the world, where cameras were barred, the regime did nothing, except proceed with a sham referendum on May the 10th, forcing people to endorse their constitution and election in 2010. While aid piled up in the capital, the regime rounded up storm victims and forced them to vote.

Meanwhile, the regime's armed forces and authorities continue to commit crimes against humanity. Sexual violence against women is used deliberately and systematically. In Burma, it is a matter of state policy. Women and girls are assaulted with impunity throughout Burma, particularly in the ethnic states, where international media cannot reach. There is a mountain of testimony that these sexual crimes are not individual acts of violence, but part of a systematic campaign conducted by the regime as a weapon of war against women in ethnic states.

These atrocities do not take place in a vacuum. The inability of the international community to apply leverage or persuasion to the military regime causes the situation to fester. Worse, the policies of certain governments that trade for Burma's resources abet the cruelty and repression. They have focused on business, they have protected their interests, they have remained silent, they even have endorsed the regime's so-called "roadmap to democracy." This has allowed the regime to ignore international pressure for political change and national reconciliation, starting with the release of all political prisoners.

We believe that the U.S. government has a great role to play in this regard. I hope that the new administration will maintain pressure, including targeted sanctions, against the Burmese military regime. I urge the United States to convince Burma's neighboring countries, particularly China, India, and the Association of Southeast Asian nations, to review their policies towards the Burmese military regime; and to support our calls for a binding resolution from the UN Security Council to bring the regime to the dialogue table which includes ethnic nationalities and other stakeholders.

I once again would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to NDI and its board members for choosing the Women's League of Burma for this award. Once the most developed economy in Southeast Asia, Burma is a shadow of what it once was and could be again. We aspire to a Burma that is democratic, free, and prosperous. We will use the award money to increase women's participation in social and political change in Burma. The women of Burma will play an essential role in the future of our nation, and that future will begin with their contribution to political change now.

Thank you very much.