The Case Against Myanmar Sanctions

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Were the trial of one of the world's most poignant embodiments of peaceful resistance not about to take place in a real Yangon courtroom, Aung San Suu Kyi's recent misfortunes could have sprung from the pages of a novel.

A diabetic Vietnam vet swims across a lake in the dead of night, eludes the guards watching over a nation's long-imprisoned leader and spends the night in her mansion, only to be plucked from the water in mid-escape the next evening and sent to prison along with "the Lady."

Ms. Suu Kyi's interminable house arrest over 13 of the last 19 years was supposed to expire at the end of May, in time for her 64th birthday. Instead, the democracy advocate – who was elected president of Myanmar (formerly Burma) in a landslide 1990 vote, but never permitted to take office by the ruling junta – stands charged with breaking the terms of her detention, in a trial that will resume on Friday, June 26, after being suspended in May.

Her sentence seems a foregone conclusion: another five years in jail.

Equally predictable, though, has been the international community's corresponding verdict: further isolation for Myanmar, a fate parallel to that suffered by its heroine. On Thursday, Britain's Foreign Office Minister Ivan Lewis called for further European Union sanctions to "increase pressure on the regime."

The U.S. has already extended its sanctions, after the Obama administration briefly contemplated adopting the kind of strategy of engagement that it has been advocating for Iran. Kurt Campbell, the incoming top US diplomat to East Asia, said last week that Ms. Suu Kyi's re-arrest "makes it very difficult to move forward" with that goal.

And Ms. Suu Kyi would be the first to ask him not to. She has led the call for sanctions, maintaining that engagement with Myanmar's generals can only strengthen them. Turn the screws of hardship tight enough, the argument goes, and eventually the oppressors will either back down or be overthrown by their victims.

With her integrity and sacrifice, she has won virtually every Western government, including Canada's, over to her logic. In April, Foreign Affairs Minister Maxime Bernier boasted of imposing "the toughest sanctions in the world" on Myanmar.

But something few people discuss in public is that the Nobel Peace Prize laureate's high-minded politics are increasingly out of touch with the more pragmatic approach of many relief workers in her country. Their view of sanctions has been tempered by experience over the two decades since Ms. Suu Kyi was first locked away.

Not only is the regime's grip on power as strong as ever, they say, but the net of sanctions meant to squeeze the junta has expanded to snare humanitarian aid as well, depriving innocent citizens of crucial assistance.

To the doctors caring for a burgeoning population of people with AIDS, or the development workers struggling to build schools in the country's numerous conflict zones, the most relevant statistic about Myanmar is not its rank as the second-most corrupt nation in the world, but the amount of foreign aid it receives – $3 a head, about a 20th the amount sent to Laos or Sudan.

Sanctions on any intransigent dictatorship are meant to be selective. Canada's foreign ministry explicitly notes "certain humanitarian exemptions" to the ban on goods and services moving between the two countries. If you want to send medical supplies or money via the Red Cross, for instance, you can – though you'll need a special permit.

Don't expect to get any logistical help from the Canadian embassy in Myanmar, because there isn't one. This reflects the government's own choice – legislated or otherwise – to avoid the moral labyrinth of delivering aid into tyranny.

A rare exception occurred after Cyclone Nargis decimated Myanmar's Irrawwaddy delta region last spring. As part of the global outpouring that followed, the Canadian International Development Agency sent a one-time, $26-million package of emergency relief. But despite desperate appeals from the UN and other agencies still working there, we've not sent a penny since.

We're even less likely to now, said Harn Yawnghwe, the executive director of the Euro-Burma office in Brussels, despairing that "anyone proposing more humanitarian aid will face strong political opposition."

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Peter Gillespie is the program manager for Inter Pares, a Canadian non-governmental organization (NGO) that has provided health care to refugees outside Myanmar's borders since 1991, despite Canadian bureaucratic obstacles that discourage NGOs from operating there, a practice he defends by pointing to the quarter-million patients Inter Pares reaches every year.

"Our work is having enormous impact," he said. But working within the country itself would be another matter.

"There are two fundamental questions," Mr. Gillespie said. "First, can aid be delivered into the country in an accountable way that does not strengthen the regime? And second, is it possible for NGOs to operate within the country without significant impediment from the junta? The answer to both these questions is no."

Yet in northeastern Kachin state, where a brisk heroin trade flourishes among the savage jade and gold mines of the Himalayan foothills, I met a foreign doctor who felt otherwise.

Hidden away in the mountains surrounding Myitkina, Kachin's verdant capital, are towns with HIV rates of 90 per cent; he described the "shooting galleries" he saw fuelling the epidemic there.

"I saw a place where men lined up outside a hut, and inside was a plastic sheet with a hole cut through the middle," said the doctor (who asked not to be named, to protect his work). "You'd go in, stick your arm through the hole, and a man on the other side would inject you with heroin. He used the same needle all day."

The doctor began a needle exchange program that went through 160,000 needles in a month. All this in a part of Myanmar that foreigners are officially banned from visiting.

"Everything here is done unofficially," he told me. "The authorities tend to see us as the enemy, and so local administrators are afraid to give us permission for anything. They often sympathize with us, but they know it could cost them their job to help us. So we try to just do things without asking, and usually this works – if you don't ask permission, no one stops you."

But can humanitarian aid go beyond saving lives to help effect the kind of change that sanctions have failed to produce? Absolutely, said David Tegenfeldt, a senior adviser to the Vancouver-based Hope International Development Agency. His personal history is closely tied to Myanmar's.

Mr. Tegenfeldt was born in Yangon – then Rangoon – to missionary parents who developed close ties with the Kachin ethnic minority, who are mainly Christian. In 1966, the military regime kicked all missionaries out of the country and Mr. Tegenfeldt's family returned to America; he moved back to Myanmar in 1994 at the urging of Kachin leaders who had just signed a ceasefire with the junta and wanted his help in rehabilitating their war-torn communities.

"When I arrived, there were just four registered NGOs in the entire country," Mr. Tegenfeldt recalled. "There has been a huge proliferation since then, to the point where there's almost no part of Myanmar that NGOs don't operate."

What these groups can do, he argued, is help to lay the groundwork by encouraging social networks amongst communities with a history of conflict – something Myanmar has in abundance.

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Such an opportunity came in the wake of the worst storm in Myanmar's history. On May 2, 2008, 200 kilometre-an-hour winds tore across the Irrawaddy Delta region in Myanmar's southwest corner, whipping up a four-meter storm surge that pulsed through the entire river system and drowned 140,000 people; another million had everything but the clothes on their back washed into the Andaman Sea.

Cyclone Nargis brought Myanmar to the world's attention, not least due to the junta's initial refusal to accept international help.

Planes laden with food and medicine languished at the Bangkok airport for weeks; many supplies that did make it through were pilfered by the military and sold in the markets for profit.

But something else happened too: Private citizens and NGOs already inside the country, local and foreign, responded to the crisis with a spectacular effort that kept the imperilled survivors alive. Among them was the Metta Foundation, a local group working in Myanmar's post-conflict zones since 1994.

"We were lucky to have a presence in the Delta already," Seng Raw, its executive director, told me. A serene and soft spoken woman in her sixties, Ms. Raw explained that Metta had established relations with 231 Delta villages following the 2004 tsunami, which killed some 60 people there.

“This meant we knew exactly where to deliver supplies and who to give them to. The government did not try to stop us – we’ve been doing this throughout the country for fifteen years, and we know how to get things done.”

A year later, her organization is busy building schools and homes, replanting mangrove forests and countless other projects whose costs and achievements are accounted for in Metta’s annual report down to each mosquito net.

Critically, this work is being delivered through local leaders drawn together from the delta’s patchwork of ethnic communities. “People who never before cooperated now see it as a matter of survival.”

By fostering these relationships, organizations such as Metta breathe life into civil society. But of course, it isn’t the junta that pays their way. When I asked if Metta Foundation relied on foreign donors, she smiled as though I’d asked if the sky was blue. “How else could we survive?”

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The week before I met David Tegenfeldt in Yangon, he’d been in Washington to plead with congressional and administrative representatives for an increase in strategic aid. He was tentatively promised one, from $3-million to $21-million a year.

What’s more, he urged his audience to open dialogue with the junta.

“History teaches us that isolating a country has never been an effective tactic,” he told me, repeating his pitch to Congress.

South Africa, he noted, was the only country in the world where sanctions could be said to have led to regime change, “and even there they were just one tool in a big toolbox that included all kinds of diplomatic engagement. You should never sacrifice your principles or stop criticizing, but criticism is only one part of the conversation.

“There are also constructive things to talk about. We are concerned with the environment – so is Myanmar. We are concerned about narcotics – so is Myanmar. Surely there is a common thread here that we could find a way to work together on.”

For now, however, Ms. Suu Kyi's renewed detention has dashed any such hopes. In Canada, the lobby group Canadian Friends of Burma is urging that the junta's diplomats be expelled if the deposed leader isn't released.

On the question of aid, its executive director Tin Maung Htoo conceded by phone from Ottawa that "we should not let people die while we wait for a political solution." But, he said, "the problem is that any business you do in Burma, you have to deal with the Burmese junta."

Should our refusal to do so persist, Ms. Suu Kyi's chronicle of a verdict foretold will all too likely lead to Myanmar's 100 years of solitude.