



Burma: MEPs demand Aung San Suu Kyi release

MEPs discussed Burma and its long-suffering people in Parliament on 11 February. With the first elections in 20 years due this year and the country wracked by internal conflict, many MEPs want more pressure on the ruling military to release opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Held under house arrest almost continuously since 1989, the Nobel Peace Prize winner has become the iconic symbol of Burma's struggle against military rule.

"Solemn duty to denounce savagery"

Speaking in Thursday's debate, Finnish MEP Eija-Riitta Korhola of the centre right European People's Party said: "Burma is one of the most fragile countries in the world as far as human rights are concerned. The situation doesn't seem to get any better."

British Conservative Charles Tannock agreed: "The generals may simply ignore our pleas, but that does not render them any less valuable because, as democrats, we have a solemn duty to denounce such savagery wherever we confront it in the world."

Ahead of elections scheduled later this year there were calls for the Junta to relax its iron grip on the country and return to democratic rule. French MEP Marie-Christine Vergiat for the leftist GUE/NGL group told fellow MEPs that "the last democratically elected MPs were in 1990. They were all arrested or forced to resign. It is reported that there are more than 2,000 political prisoners".

Many fear that elections are merely a facade for the military regime to legitimise its rule in the eyes of the outside world. "If elections are held in accordance with a constitution drafted by the army, they would merely legitimise five decades of military rule and give the military 25% of the seats in Parliament" said Belgian Socialist Véronique De Keyser.

Internal fighting creates refugee crisis

In Burma itself it is not just the pro-democracy groups that face persecution but ethnic minorities within the country - particularly ethnic Karen. Fighting between the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) and the Burmese army in 2009 displaced an estimated 10,000 people.

These include well in excess of 3,000 ethnic Karen refugees who fled to Thailand and whom Burma would like to see forcibly repatriated - a request Bangkok has refused. This stand drew praise from Ms Korhola who said, "we thank Thailand which rejected the request to return Karen refugees to Burma".

MEPs against aid cuts for 140,000 refugees on border

Following the debate MEPs voted on a resolution which was unanimously adopted. It called for the immediate release of Aung San Suu Kyi and for the bar on her taking part in 2010 parliamentary elections to be lifted. It also called for the freeing of all political prisoners and the rights to free assembly.

It also demands that the military Junta guarantee the protection of civilians in internal fighting with the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army and other opposition groups.

MEPs also want the European Commission's Humanitarian Aid office (ECHO) to reconsider its decision to further cut support to refugees on the Thai-Burma border. At present there are an estimated 140,000 refugees in camps along the frontier.

Burma: A painful history

- 1948: Independence (led by Military after 1962)
- 1989: Aung San Suu Kyi put under house arrest
- 1990: National League for Democracy (Aung San Suu Kyi's party) win first elections in 30 years. Result annulled
- 2006: International Labour Organisation launches case at International Criminal Court against regime for 800,000 forced labourers
- 2007: Anti-government protests led by Monks crushed
- May 2008: Cyclone Nargis leaves 200,000 dead or missing
- 2010: Elections scheduled