

Ignoring Burma

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The conflict and human rights crisis in Burma (also known as Myanmar) has suddenly exploded, and, very belatedly, the discredited United Nations human rights mechanisms and the army of associated nongovernmental organizations (NGO) are calling for international action. But a large part of this Burma tragedy results from the fact that, as in the case of the mass killings in Darfur, members of the self-proclaimed international human rights network have devoted very few of their resources to the junta's abuses.

The military regime, which seized power in 1988, turned Burma into one of the most isolated and repressive nations in the world, with frequent violent attacks and murder of opponents and critics.

However, the record shows that powerful groups such as Human Rights Watch (with an annual budget of over \$40 million) and Amnesty International (whose budget exceeds \$200 million) have issued only a handful press releases and letters focusing on Burma. For more than two years (since June 2005), no serious reports have been published by Human Rights Watch regarding Burma, and no press conferences have been held to highlight the human rights abuses. In Human Rights Watch's annual report (www.hrw.org/wr2k7/wr2007master.pdf), the section on Burma is slightly over four pages long, out of a total of 568, or less than 1 percent.

Instead, these NGOs, like the U.N. Human Rights Council, have devoted an absurdly disproportionate portion of their resources to attacking democracies, where the level of human rights is incomparably better than in Burma, Saudi Arabia and Sudan, for example. In the Human Rights Watch annual report, more than 20 pages are devoted to an essay claiming to document attacks on free speech in the wake of the September 11 terror attacks. Such reports are poorly documented and contain false and unverified allegations couched in pseudo-legal jargon, but many journalists and diplomats enthralled by the "halo effect" repeat the claims without question.

In particular, this network has become a major part of the obsessive political war on Israel, joining and aiding the well financed Arab and Islamic lobby in implementing the Durban strategy (http://www.ngo-monitor.org/data/images/File/Steinberg_Soft_Powers_Play_Hardball_1006.pdf). In early September 2007, Human Rights Watch issued two more massive reports (totaling more than 400 pages, and with the same holes in their evidence) revisiting the 2006 conflict between Israel and Hezbollah, in addition to more than 30 previous statements, reports, op-eds, etc. published during the six-week war (far more than the few statements on Burma during the entire year).

Human Rights Watch leader Ken Roth came to Jerusalem to condemn Israel yet again and exonerate Hezbollah for use of human shields (although the quality of evidence, or rather lack of such, had not changed since the war). Similarly, on International Human Rights Day in 2006, Amnesty International's leader, Irene Khan, made a highly publicized pilgrimage to the Israeli security barrier to issue yet another politically correct condemnation against Israel's legitimate anti-terror measures.

Had these resources been devoted to the areas of real human rights abuses in the world, including Burma, Sudan, North Korea, Iran, Libya and Syria, for example, this might have made a difference. Concerted campaigns by the NGOs with an alternative agenda that did not focus on false allegations against Israel and the U.S. might have embarrassed the U.N. officials, including Human Rights Commissioner Louise Arbour into taking their moral obligations seriously, instead of simply exploiting the rhetoric. Tepid NGO criticism of the UN came far too late, and was disingenuous — the record of bias and double standards in the activities of HRW, Amnesty and other groups set the example for the international bodies.

Before they blame others and issue more pious statements on Burma, Darfur and elsewhere, NGO and U.N. officials would do well to examine their own contribution to the disastrous state of human rights in the world. Had they fulfilled their obligations, the heads of HRW, Amnesty, and the hundreds of other groups that raise money and claim to act under the banner of promoting universal human rights would have been able to warn the Burmese military that their repression was unacceptable. Had the international human rights watchdogs done their duty in Burma and Darfur, they might also have been able to prevent violence and save lives.

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