

What more reason needed for sanctions against Burma?

By Denis Collins

Economic sanctions can harm both the citizens of repressive governments and multinational corporations. Such decisions need to be carefully made. How brutal must a dictatorship be, and how severe its violation of human and political rights, for the University of Wisconsin to refuse to purchase products from companies that do business with "oulaw" governments?

These issues are particularly salient now as the UW Board of Regents, which governs a \$222 million trust fund, and the State of Wisconsin Investment Board, which manages the \$39.7 billion Wisconsin Retirement System account, consider divesting from corporations such as Texaco, Unocal, Atlantic Richfield, Pepsi, Avis, ITT and Mitsubishi, which conduct business with Burma. Burma provides an excellent case for developing investment and purchasing criteria.

■ **Drugs:** Burma is one of the world's largest producers and exporters of opium and heroin, and responsible for 60 percent of the heroin seized on American streets.

■ **Political oppression:** In 1988, Burma's military massacred thousands of pro-democracy demonstrators. Anyone with a camera reporting the events was shot. Protesters were buried or cremated alive. Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the National League for Democracy and 1991 Nobel Peace Prize winner, was placed under house arrest for six years. When her political party won 82 percent of the popular vote in Burma's first free elections in more than three decades, the military junta refused to give up power. Democratically elected officials were killed, arrested, tortured or exiled. In September 1996, more than 500 pro-democracy activists were arrested.

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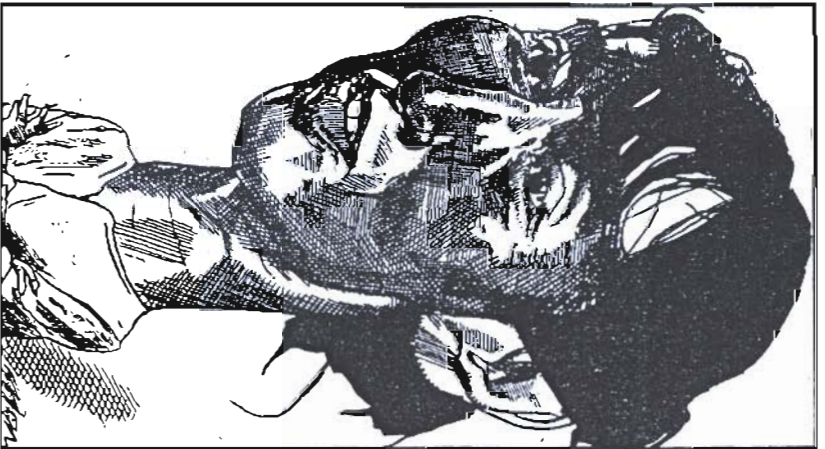
GUEST COLUMN

■ **Forced labor:** Thousands of citizens, many of them ethnic minorities, have been forced to relocate, with no compensation, to construct a gas pipeline. Those who refuse are executed and their homes burned. Men, women and children are forced to build and improve roads and railways for the pipeline and to make Burma attractive to tourists. Those too sick to work are beaten, tortured and forced to carry supplies. Laborers die of beatings, malnutrition, sickness, and starvation. In one city of 500,000 people, each family is required to provide free labor from dawn to late evening at least three days a month. Families that refuse are fined as much as an entire year's income.

■ **Other human rights violations:** Citizens are murdered, tortured and raped by the military regime. Homes and food supplies are confiscated. Minority girls are raped and killed by soldiers. Citizens must report overnight guests to local military officials or be imprisoned.

■ **Sanctions requested by national leader:** In July 1996, Aung San Suu Kyi called for the immediate and complete withdrawal of all foreign businesses from Burma. Sixty-five percent of the financial support for the military regime comes from oil companies doing business with Burma. She requested that tourists not visit Burma (renamed Myanmar by the military dictators) and that nations not provide consumer goods or financial aid. The military has used this money to purchase \$1.5 billion of weapons from China for further suppressing citizens. She concluded that economic sanctions will primarily hurt the political and industrial elites living in Burma, not the citizens they are oppressing.

■ **Federal, state and city sanctions and condemnations:** The U.S. has withdrawn its ambassador, suspended the AID program, denied trade preferences,



Aung San Suu Kyi

banned multilateral loans, and forbids visas to Burmese officials. In addition, the federal government refuses to grant licenses to export military equipment there. Burma has been denounced by the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Massachusetts, led by Republican Gov. William Weld, has passed legislation boycotting products of firms doing business with Burma, as have eight city councils including Madison, San Francisco, Berkeley and Ann Arbor.

■ **International condemnations:** Burma's military regime has been condemned by the United Nations. Many

nations have declared Burma an "outlaw" state and refuse to grant licenses to export military equipment. Bishop Desmond Tutu has urged international sanctions against Burma, because it is the only language tyrants understand.

■ **Corporate withdrawals:** Firms that have withdrawn from business activities in Burma include Liz Claiborne, Macy's, Eddie Bauer, Levi Strauss, Amoco, Helix, Carlsberg, Columbia Sportswear, Oshkosh B Gosh, Apple Computers, Labatt Ice Beer, Petro-Canada, Wente Vineyards, and Walt Disney.

■ **Pension fund divestments:** A leading Danish pension fund sold its \$10.45 million shares in the French firm Total because of its involvement with Burma's gas pipeline project.

■ **University protests:** Pepsi has lost contracts at Harvard, Stanford and Colgate universities. Stanford refused to permit Taco Bell, which is owned by Pepsi, from opening in its student union.

The U.S. Senate and House of Representatives have considered banning investments in Burma, but the skilled efforts of corporate lobbyists have temporarily derailed bipartisan support for the full and immediate sanctions outlined in the Burma Freedom and Democracy Act. U.S. Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, wrote President Clinton that "failure to impose sanctions at this point will clearly signal to the military junta that it can abuse its citizens without consequences from the United States."

The University of Wisconsin must act. A committee of students, faculty and administrators should be established to develop and monitor a socially responsible investment and procurement policy.

Just as there are fiscal standards, there must also be moral standards. We should not wait for the anguished cries of current and future Nobel Peace Prize winners.

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