

**Background from May 9 Guest Discussant
Gary Hallemeier, retired Paralegal, Seattle resident**

Note: Gary thought the following thoughts -- the first an email from him to me, the second, an unpublished letter from him to the U.S. Department of State – would provide additional helpful background for our discussion of the situation in Myanmar/Burma. - ldf

My wife and I went to Burma for the first time in 1996. We knew Burma was politically toxic, but we did our best to educate ourselves in terms of where we would spend our money.

Upon arriving at the airport in Rangoon, foreigners were expected to pay some kind of entry fee. We knew there was no documentation whether or not the fee was paid; therefore we skipped that entry procedure. It was legalized baksheesh.

On our first full day in Rangoon, we went to see Aung San Sui Kyi speak at the gates of her home. She will still under house arrest, but she was allowed to speak. While on the bus to her home, we knew we could get off the bus at any stop we wanted, but the good peoples of Burma might get in trouble if they got off at the bus stop for Sui Kyi's home. The bus ride made me think of Rosa Parks, and how in Burma, it was not where you could sit on the bus, but where you could and couldn't get off the bus.

Anyway, Sui Kyi spoke in Burmese and near the end of her talk; she briefly translated her talk into English. There were a few of us foreigners there, so she asked if any of us had questions. My wife happened to be sitting next to some people who personally knew Sui Kyi. They kind of pushed my wife up to talk and Sui Kyi allowed her to ask a question. My wife briefly referenced our dilemma in coming to Burma, but now that we are in Burma, what can we do. Sui Kyi indicated she would have preferred we not come, but since we did, we should keep our eyes open and share with the peoples of our home countries what we see.

We saw chain gangs working at an Air Force base, [we were]detained at an Air Force base, [we witnessed] child labor, we were followed, [we were] kicked off buses [and] over charged on transportation, etc. While in Mandalay, we went to a hillside overlooking a prison. A monk came up to us and said, "There are some really smart people down there and some very dumb people." We interpreted this to mean, the smart people were political prisoners.

Even though people were kind of reluctant to openly talk with us, we did have people, in spite of Sui Kyi's request to not be there, tell us they were glad we are there, because the more foreigners are there, the less the government can abuse them.

We eventually returned home and consequent to Sui Kyi's request, we shared our experiences with friends and family, eventually becoming actively involved in the Burma Democracy Movement.

My involvement has included: Liaise with educational, medical and social welfare programs along Burma's borders; Participate in community education, refugee resettlement and fund raising matters; Negotiate with government officials and non-governmental advocacy entities

to establish strategies, policies and programs; and, Volunteer in social, recreational and educational programming

I believe, in many ways, what is happening in Burma is happening though out the world. In preparing for our discussion, please think how these issues may relate to us in America, as well as peoples around the world, including Burma.

If you believe, as I do, that life is becoming more and more commoditized, is it inevitable that economic class will replace race and ethnicity as a source of societal conflict? If so, might economically disadvantaged peoples be more prone to fight to maintain their ethnic identity?

Who is more willing to fight, and how might the fight be different between those people who are afraid of losing influence and those people who feel they have been denied a rightful influence?

How are peoples' priorities influenced by the extent to which they can take survival for granted?

There was a lot of debate within the Burma Democracy Movement as to whether Aung San Sui Kyi should have participated in the 2012 elections. She chose to do so. What was to be gained and what was to be lost by her decision? As some Burmese say, she is in a golden cage, but it is still a cage.

It is a dilemma, but is it enabling governmental dysfunction or societal norms, to rely upon NGOs [non-government organizations], Community Based Organizations, etc. to provide services that a more functional government might provide? How might this be of benefit to the peoples of Burma while they patiently wait for a government more concerned with a civil society?

Should the criteria, as specified by the doctrine of "responsibility to protect" be expanded or at least better clarified? *[Note: we will be discussing the concept of "responsibility to protect," or R2P, later in this discussion series, on May 30.]*

Despite some peoples' resistance, we humans are becoming more and more world citizens. It is my belief this necessitates a commitment to being global citizens. Should we view this necessary commitment as an obligation or an opportunity? I mention this, because I sense from my compatriots with a Western perspective, we see it more as an obligation, whereas my Burmese compatriots see it more as an opportunity.

From unpublished letter to the Department of State, 2010

In considering the viable effectiveness of the Obama Administration's strategy of pragmatic engagement with the Burmese Junta, **success must not be based upon whether non-consumers (the educated public) support the moral ad campaign (free all political prisoners), but whether the desired consumers (Burmese Junta, Burma's neighbors) are offered, what they consider, negotiable options.**

From my perspective, for too long now, the **Burma Democracy Movement has been unable or unwilling to make the distinction between destinations (goals, demands), and the necessity to establish a negotiable path to achieve the destinations.** Of course all political prisoners should be released. Of course the Junta's war with the ethnic peoples must be stopped. Of course there must be a legitimate constitution before transparent elections. **It makes no sense though, to continue leapfrogging from destination to destination, without negotiable options, and without the Junta and it's neighbors being viably engaged at the trailhead.**

Unfortunately, the world community, in its monologue of confrontation, continues, at least in the protracted short term, to deny the Junta and unfortunately, it's neighbors, view the aforementioned destinations as zero sum, non-negotiable issues. It is not in India's self-interest to criticize fraudulent elections, if they perceive it might interfere with their access to Burma's resources. It is not in China's self interest to advocate for the rights of Burmese citizens, when China is unwilling to grant those same freedoms to its citizens.

What have we done or offered, in an attempt to establish a negotiable trailhead with the Junta and it's neighbors? It is time for action to replace rhetoric. **Isn't it more constructive to have dialog based upon mutual self-interest, then have overlapping monologues based upon non-productive confrontation?** In the spirit of constructive engagement, it is disingenuous, when non-negotiable options are constantly pursued, without an attempt to pursue a legitimate dialog of mutual self-interest.

The situation in Burma, particularly the public health sector, continues to deteriorate to such a critical and urgent degree; an alternative, non-zero sum approach to negotiation, must be contemplated. There must be no linkage with political or economic considerations.

Millions of people within Burma and along its borders are drowning in neglect, and can no longer wait for a political solution. Survival requires a life jacket, not continued opining on democracy.

Consequently, our public health engagement strategy must be based upon the realities as advocated by the on the ground aid workers. Particular emphasis should be given to the non-political community-based organizations providing public health support. Eventually, it will be these "in country" organizations that will be providing the interlinked and expanded safety net until a responsive government based infrastructure can be established. When change comes to Burma, the change will occur from the inside, therefore, it is important to support these community-based organizations.

It remains to be seen the degree to which on ground assistance can, outside the controlling parameters of the junta and its affiliated organizations, meaningfully and independently respond to the spread of infectious diseases.

According to the July 2007 publication "The Gathering Storm, Infectious Diseases and Human Rights in Burma," **Burma's neglected health care system is incapable of responding to the country's most serious endemic and infectious diseases and must be supplemented with foreign assistance.**

Without intervention, Burma's neighbors know Burma's national crisis will eventually become their international crisis. We live in a world where firewalls are more effective at stopping the spread of computer viruses than sovereign borders are at stopping the spread of infectious diseases. Fidelity to the public good is not adultery to the sanctity of borders.

No matter how threatening the public health crisis, the WHO's International Health Regulation 2005 does not allow intervention in a country without the consent of its government.

Even the UN approved doctrine of 'Responsibility to Protect' pertains only to genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.

The world community can no longer accept nebulous and immeasurable definitions as criteria to authorize cross border intervention. It is too subjective. The pejorative insinuation of the accusation (i.e. crimes against humanity), no matter how substantiated, permissions governments to resist based upon the political interpretation of the definition.

The issue of international public health, because of its measurable objectivity and borderless impacts, can be axial in repositioning the paradigm to emphasize responsibility to protect.

The world community needs to find a common denominator, a non-zero sum trailhead with the Junta, so organizations and aid workers can begin, with neighboring support, to more effectively address this health crisis of potentially exponential proportions. To a large extent, the success of these local health-provider organizations will be determined by the willingness of the affected neighboring governments to intervene with the junta.

It is no longer a matter of telling countries what to do (impose sanctions), but rather it is neighboring countries, advocating for their self-interest, by working preemptively and cooperatively to facilitate addressing Burma's public health crisis.

It is not unrealistic or detrimental to segregate the needs of the neglected, with the conviction, that effort can be a means to building trust, formulating a path, in a parallel manner, to eventually address the causative nature of the problems.

The people who are pursuing the political/economic approach must know the extent to which they adopt the public health component as a reason for governmental change, may well detrimentally undermine the effect of those providing support for on ground assistance.

Despite the totally fraudulent nature of Burma's most recent election, it is still more likely the junta will be weaned rather than guillotined from power. **Maybe the issues of public health and infectious diseases can be, as an aspect of President Obama's Public Health Initiative, the axial trailhead for achieving pragmatic engagement with the Junta.**