



Honoring Daw Aung San Suu Kyi on the occasion of her 64th birthday

June 18, 2009

Room B340, Rayburn House Office Building, Washington, DC

**Remarks given by
Ken Wollack, president
National Democratic Institute for International Affairs**

On behalf of NDI and my chairman, Madeleine Albright, I would like to thank the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma and Prime Minister Sein Win, the U.S. Campaign for Burma and the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for inviting me to say a few words on this bittersweet occasion.

I first met Aung San Suu Kyi 14 years ago in Rangoon it was an extraordinary, life-changing experience. As we all know, she possesses remarkable determination, intelligence and courage. But perhaps one of her lesser known qualities is her sense of humor in the face of severe and almost unimaginable hardship. During my visit, her only request was that I send her books on political humor. “If you lose your sense of humor,” she said, “you lose everything.”

I could never have imagined at that time that 14 years later, she would still be held captive in her own country. We celebrate today because, despite her treatment and health, she has survived another year. But all of us remain outraged that we have to deliver messages in this way to the legitimately elected leader of Burma.

It has been 19 years since Daw Suu led the National League for Democracy to victory, and Burma continues to stand out as the only country in the world whose democratically elected leader has never been allowed to assume office. She is also the only Nobel Peace Prize recipient currently in detention.

But being robbed of that electoral victory has never deprived Daw Suu of her dignity and determination.

As she and other courageous democrats continue to confront one of the world’s most brutal military dictatorships, it is apparent that no other country on earth calls out for international attention and collective action more than Burma. This is far more apparent today, at this moment when she is standing trial for breaching the terms of her house arrest.

This trial is a thinly veiled attempt by the regime to extend her house arrest as it prepares for so-called elections next year. The trial highlights once again the thousands of political detainees held with Burma's prisons and the great need for their release. The junta's refusal to release these prisoners and open space for participation of all political parties precludes any attempt for a credible election in 2010. The junta will not make the same mistake it did in 1990. It has learned well.

Despite the hardship of the last month that Daw Suu has endured, she has exhibited courage and grace. She has inspired anew the Burmese people and the international community to continue in the larger struggle for a free and democratic Burma. We support Aung San Suu Kyi for as long as it takes to restore freedom and democracy to the Burmese people.

Thank You.