



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on August 19, 2009

## Senator Webb's Visit to Myanmar (Burma)

Speaking at a press conference in Hanoi, Vietnam, on August 19, U.S. Senator Jim Webb (D-Va.) commented on his recent visit to Myanmar, the Southeast Asian nation formerly called Burma.

"When I returned to Bangkok from Myanmar I raised my view at that time, with respect to the issues in Myanmar, that the Chinese government should step forward and show leadership in assisting in solving that situation, and they have not done that yet," said Webb.

Webb, who chairs the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on East Asia, was on a five-nation Southeast Asian tour that included — in addition to Myanmar and Vietnam — Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia.

The senator also noted that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has visited Asia twice this year, showing "how we want to reinvigorate, from the United States' perspective, our relations in this region."

A commentary on August 18 in the government-owned *The New Light of Myanmar* newspaper, published by the Ministry of Information, described Webb's visit as "the first step towards marching to a 1,000 mile destination."

While in Myanmar, Webb emulated former president and elder Democrat Bill Clinton's recent role in securing the release of two American journalists from North Korea by arranging for the release from jail of U.S. citizen John Yettaw. Yettaw had been sentenced the previous week to seven years hard labor for making an unauthorized visit to the lakeside home of Burmese political opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Yettaw had swum across a lake to meet with Suu Kyi, who was under house arrest and not permitted to have unauthorized visitors. Suu Kyi was also punished for the unauthorized visit: the court extended Yi's house arrest for 18 months, beyond the date of this year's election, in which the opposition leader is expected to be a candidate. The extension effectively bars Suu Kyi — who has been detained for 14 of the last 20 years — from campaigning.

During his visit, Webb became the first U.S. official to speak with the regime's leader, Than Shwe.

AP reported that Webb is not optimistic that Suu Kyi will soon be freed, but quoted him as stating he is "hopeful that, over time, the government of Myanmar will understand that with the scrutiny of the outside world, judging their government very largely on how they are treating Aung San Suu Kyi, that it is to their advantage to allow her to participate in the political process."

An AFP news report observed that China has long propped up the Myanmar regime through trade, arms sales, and by protecting it from UN sanctions levied against the repressive government's rights abuses. China, as a permanent member of the Security Council, possesses veto power of council actions.

The report notes that while the European Union, United States, and other nations have imposed





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economic sanctions and travel bans against Myanmar, those measures have largely failed to seriously impact the military regime, owing to support from China and some other nations.

Webb has been a critic of sanctions imposed by Congress because, he asserts, they have allowed Beijing to increase “dramatically” its influence in Myanmar. “The sanctions of the past several years have increased Myanmar’s isolation from Western governments and culture,” he told reporters. “These are major impediments in allowing the Burmese people the kind of access to the outside world that is essential to their economic and political growth.”

Meanwhile, Reuters news reports, senior officials from the 10-member Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) met on August 18 in Jakarta, Indonesia, to debate whether to call on Myanmar to release Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest. The leaders planned to hold more talks the next day, possibly continuing to August 21, to discuss sending a letter to Myanmar’s leaders. “They will seek to ask Myanmar to give amnesty but that’s in principle only. I don’t know exactly how it will be reflected in the letter,” Reuters quoted foreign ministry spokesman Teuku Faizasyah by telephone. Faizasyah added that he was unsure whether the letter would also call for amnesty for other political prisoners: “I suspect it will be Suu Kyi. I don’t know if it will touch on all political prisoners.”

Suu Kyi was elected as Myanmar’s prime minister in the 1990 general election as the candidate of the National League for Democracy Party, which received 59 percent of the vote and 394 of 492 seats in parliament. However, she never assumed office because the military junta nullified the results, refused to hand over power, and detained her. During her arrest, Suu Kyi was awarded the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought in 1990, and the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991.

Myanmar has been ruled since 1992 by Than Shwe, who was a postman before embarking on a lengthy military career. In an article in *Parade* magazine last March entitled “The World’s 10 Worst Dictators,” Than Shwe had the dubious distinction of being ranked number four. The reason? When Cyclone Nargis devastated Myanmar on May 2, 2008, leaving 146,000 dead or missing and more than 2 million homeless, the junta delayed access to stricken areas by aid groups while it was busy staging a rigged election to approve a new constitution.

A BBC online report published on May 9, 2008 headlined “Burma shuns foreign aid workers” noted:

Burma’s military junta says the country is not ready to accept foreign aid workers, amid mounting criticism of its response to the devastating cyclone.

The foreign ministry said Burma was happy to accept aid, but insisted it would control the distribution itself....

The World Food Programme’s Paul Riskey said the delays were “unprecedented in modern humanitarian relief efforts.”

Burma is one of countless examples of what happens to a people burdened by too much totalitarian government. The presence of total government is always a humanitarian disaster.



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