

Nobel Winner Suu Kyi Charged in Myanmar After American's Visit

By Ed Johnson & Daniel Ten Kate

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Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi was charged yesterday with breaching the conditions of her house arrest order, quashing hopes she may be released when her current period of detention expires in two weeks.

The 63-year-old Nobel Peace Prize winner, who has been detained for 13 of the past 20 years, may face as many as five more years in prison if found guilty, Nyan Win, a spokesman for her National League for Democracy political party, said by telephone from Yangon, the former capital. Suu Kyi is being held at Insein Prison, the site of yesterday's hearing, he said.

"This is a political issue, not a criminal case," Nyan Win said. "She did not do anything wrong."

The fresh charges against Suu Kyi may undermine Myanmar's ruling generals just as they've called for the U.S. and Europe to lift economic sanctions and provide debt relief. The country formerly known as Burma, one of Southeast Asia's richest countries in the early 1960s and now its poorest, has languished under military rule for nearly 47 years.

"I am deeply disturbed that Aung San Suu Kyi may be charged with breaching the terms of her detention," British Prime Minister Gordon Brown said in a statement. "The Burmese regime is clearly intent on finding any pretext, no matter how tenuous, to extend her unlawful detention."

The U.S., which has led calls for the release of Suu Kyi and about 2,100 other political prisoners in Myanmar, said it was seeking more information. Reports of the charges were "certainly troubling if true," the State Department said in a statement.

U.S. Citizen

The charge relates to a U.S. citizen who allegedly swam across a lake to visit Suu Kyi last week, violating a ban on her meeting anyone without permission. The man, John Yettlaw, was charged yesterday with breaching a security law, Nyan Win said.

"This was related to his reported entry into the residence of Aung San Suu Kyi," Ian Kelly, a State Department spokesman, told reporters in Washington yesterday. "The Burmese authorities did grant an embassy consular officer access to the courtroom to observe his hearing."

Suu Kyi was charged under Article 22 of the State Protection Law, Nyan Win said, adding her two maids also face trial. The regime routinely uses the law to imprison political dissidents, members of Suu Kyi's party said.

"We unequivocally condemn this attempt by the junta to cloak its continued detention of Suu Kyi in a veil of legitimacy," said Jared Genser, her U.S.-based legal counsel.

Calls for Release

Amnesty International in a statement yesterday urged the United Nations Security Council and neighboring countries to secure Suu Kyi's release. She is the only Nobel Peace Prize recipient in prison, House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Howard Berman, a California Democrat, and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen of Florida, the committee's senior Republican, said in a statement yesterday that called for her release.

Suu Kyi has been detained since May 2003 under a law that allows someone deemed a threat to national security to be held without charge, according to Genser, president of the U.S.-based Freedom Now group. The junta says it can detain her under the law for six years, or until May 27, and is now looking for another means to deny Suu Kyi her freedom, he added.

Suu Kyi's NLD won Myanmar's last elections in 1990, a result rejected by the military that has ruled the country since 1962. The junta plans elections in 2010 after passing a constitution last year that it said was backed by 92 percent of voters. The NLD and other groups have denounced the charter, which bars Suu Kyi from holding office.

'Crooked Method'

"It is a crooked method the military junta used to block Aung San Suu Kyi from Burma's politics," said Zin Linn, the information director for the exiled National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma. "They dare not allow Aung San Suu Kyi into public. She is still very popular in the country and people are very frustrated by her detention."

Yettaw was detained by police for allegedly breaching security at Suu Kyi's lakeside home and staying there for two days, according to state-run media. He was uninvited and Suu Kyi encouraged him to leave, Genser said.

Myanmar authorities have described Yettaw as a 53-year-old former soldier from Detroit. The state-run New Light of Myanmar newspaper said he arrived in Yangon on a tourist visa on May 2 and swam to Suu Kyi's compound the next night. He was arrested on May 6 while swimming back across the lake.

Authorities confiscated his passport, a black haversack, torch, folding pliers, a camera, two \$100 bills and some Myanmar currency, according to the newspaper. They are investigating his motives for entering Suu Kyi's home, it said.

The opposition leader suffered from dehydration, low blood pressure and a loss of appetite over the past few weeks, Nyan Win said. She underwent gynecological surgery in 2003, needed hospital treatment in 2006 and suffered low blood pressure and was unable to leave her bed in September.