

Asia - Burma

What we owe the



By Fred Hiatt

Tell China it can have its Olympics or its regime in Burma, not both

AN upheaval like the pro-democracy uprising taking place in Burma over the past month tends to shake up certainties that had seemed self-evident. Certainties such as the primacy of justice. Or the sanctity of the Olympic Games.

Despite an academic industry devoted to the subject, no one can predict when an oppressed people will find that precise combination of hopelessness and hope, impatience and solidarity, and recklessness and anger that leads it to rebel. Nor can anyone answer the most important

question facing Burma now: When will the boys and men who prop up a corrupt regime with their guns and prison cells decide that they have had enough - that they no longer want to shoot unarmed Buddhist monks or round up young girls for possession of

that obligation. Over the past decade, human rights advocates have united behind the notion of accountability for dictators and war criminals. They persuaded most of the world's nations to sign on to the International Criminal Court.

Nor can anyone answer the most important question facing Burma now: When will the boys and men who prop up a corrupt regime with their guns and prison cells decide that they have had enough — that they no longer want to shoot unarmed Buddhist monks or round up young girls for possession of cellphones with cameras?

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But this much is sure: The first process is rare and precious enough, and the second so difficult to initiate, that those on the outside must do whatever they can to support and encourage both. We're a long way from having fulfilled

The theory is no mercy, no compromise, no temporising.

No one deserves trial more than Burma's Gen Than Shwe and his cronies. They have looted their country's natural wealth and turned its army into a monster that rapes and press-gangs its

compatriots. More than 1.5 million people have been routed from their villages, often with bayonets having been thrust through their rice pots to ensure that they go hungry. Now the regime is rounding up nonviolent protesters in the most violent way, and - if past practice is any indicator - torturing many of them in some of the world's bleakest prisons.

Yet if amnesty for these despicable men could buy release for their country - if we could trade their safe passage to China and a guarantee of undisturbed retirement for a chance to free 2,000 or more political prisoners, unshackle democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi and help Burma's 50 million people onto a path to self-governance, would we reject such a deal? If we could split the regime by promising leniency to the generals who refuse to take part in the crackdown, would we be too pure to do so?

I know the arguments against such compromises, and they are powerful: the difficulty of achieving national reconciliation without national justice; the value of warning future dictators that they will pay for future crimes; the gall of monsters going free. And still,

Burmese

given the unbearable alternative of watching a people be crushed for the second time in two decades, I would do anything to guide those monsters to pleasant seaside villas.

And here's something else I would do: Tell China that, as far as the United

only get their backs up. The Games themselves offer a chance to enhance international understanding; if we let world affairs interfere, there will always - every two years - be some cause. The athletes have trained for years; they deserve their chance.

chance to succeed.

Whether they do depends mostly on decisions made inside Burma. But people and countries outside can have some effect. Burma's neighbours in Southeast Asia could do more. The world's largest democracy, India, could do far more. China could do most of all.

China's Communist rulers have reasons not to help Burma's democrats. They enjoy privileged access to Burma's timber and other resources, for one. Even more fundamentally, dictators will shudder when they see another illegitimate regime threatened by people power.

What could push them the other way? Their desire to be seen as responsible players, maybe. Their desire to have their one-party rule recognised as more sophisticated and legitimate than the paranoid generals of Burma, maybe. And, maybe, their deep desire to host a successful Olympics next summer.

If a threat to those Games - delivered privately, if that would be most effective, with no loss of face - could help tip the balance, then let the Games not begin. Some things matter more.

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States is concerned, it can have its Olympic Games or it can have its regime in Burma. It can't have both.

Here, too, I understand the arguments against: China's rulers are gradually becoming more responsible in the world; to threaten their Games would

And yet: Hundreds of thousands of Burmese have risked everything - their homes, their families, their lives - to be free. They have done so with nothing on their side but courage, faith and the hope that the world might stand with them. And they still have a