

Turning the Spotlight on Burma

Julie Morgan MP, Cardiff North

Today marks the birthday of a remarkable woman and I hope that on this day, we will all take a moment to celebrate it.

Aung San Suu Kyi, the Nobel Peace Prize winner, is 63 today.

Yet again, however, she will be spending her birthday alone and under house arrest in Burma. She will not be able to open any cards, talk to anybody on the phone or see any family or friends. Now in her 13th year of detention, this confinement and isolation is something that she is probably all too used to.

Her plight is one that touches many people and has done for many years. I remember that when I was first elected as MP for Cardiff North in 1997, one of the very first constituents who came to see me asked me to do all I possibly could to help free Aung San Suu Kyi. She may be thousands of miles away, but her struggle is very close to many people's hearts, both in Wales and the rest of the UK.

She has not committed a crime. All that she has done is to campaign peacefully for freedom and democracy in Burma and it is for this that she is being punished by the brutal military dictatorship. In fact, at the end of May, the ruling junta extended her house arrest for a further year, despite great pressure from the international community to free her.

We need to keep the pressure up. And we need to do as Aung San Suu Kyi has requested: "Please use your liberty," she asks, "to promote ours."

Of course, the Burmese people are not just struggling for freedom and democracy. After the devastating cyclone of last month, they are also struggling for their lives. Cyclone Nargis has left an estimated 130,000 people dead and over 2 million in dire need of aid, including thousands of orphaned children. And, of course, the situation has been made worse by the Burmese regime's handling of the efforts to get foreign aid into the country to help the cyclone victims.

The scale of the suffering caused by both natural events and human action in Burma is overwhelming.

But there is something that you can do.

If you would like to show your solidarity with Aung San Suu Kyi and the pro-democracy movement and your support for the cyclone victims, then I hope that you will consider taking one of the recommended actions on The Burma Campaign's website. These range from sending an email to the regime, joining a demonstration, donating to an aid agency or leaving Aung San Suu Kyi a birthday message on Facebook.

Or, if you are in Cardiff this Sunday afternoon, June 22nd, I hope that you will consider coming along to Spotlight on Burma, an event I am holding in the Wales Millennium Centre from 4-6 p.m..

This will be a real mix of art, politics and aid.

Not only will there be a script-in-hand performance of *The Lady of Burma*, an extraordinary one-act play about Aung San Suu Kyi performed by the Cardiff-based actorsworkshop, but there will also be updates from Amnesty International and The Burma Campaign and from Save the Children. There will also be a bucket collection for charities working in Burma. This is a non party-political event and is sponsored by Community and Amnesty International Wales. We are all coming together to raise awareness and to raise some money.

Of course, as an MP, I am very much focused on issues in my constituency and in Wales and in the UK, but as MPs, we also have responsibilities in the areas of foreign policy and international development.

And from what I've seen, most people do think globally nowadays and feel connected to others in the wider world. I know I do. Most people would now agree, I think, that there's no reason why a human life in Burma should be seen as any less valuable than a human life in Wales.

Modern communications have made the rest of the world very alive to us. Who could not have been moved, for example, by the images of the protests led by Buddhist monks in Burma last autumn? We will not soon forget the pictures of dignified, peaceful protesters and the violence inflicted upon them.

We should not forget what we have seen.

And so on this day in particular, the very least we can do is to remember the urgency of both the human rights situation and the humanitarian crisis in Burma and resolve to do something to help.

Let's make Aung San Suu Kyi's birthday just a little bit happier.

Spotlight on Burma is this Sunday, June 22nd at 4 p.m. in the Weston Studio in the Wales Millennium Centre – book on 08700 40 2000 or at www.wmc.org.uk Tickets are on sale now or on the door (check with box office for availability on the day).