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LETTER: Protecting human rights

To the Editor:

Did you send a fax today? Or surf the web? Make an overseas telephone call? Rent a video or DVD? Do you expect a knock on the door tonight to find a member of the country's security forces waiting to arrest you? Of course not! You live in Canada. But if you lived in Myanmar, formerly Burma, this scenario would be quite likely, with up to seven years imprisonment for activities not pre-authorized by the appropriate government officials.

In 1990 the citizens of Myanmar, in a democratic election, overwhelming elected members of the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi. The ruling military junta overturned the election results, imprisoned many leaders of the NLD and continued a despotic regime that still denies its citizens the basic human rights that we take as a given.

A group of Canadians in Stouffville and Markham have been working strenuously for nearly three years on behalf of one elected member of the NLD who has been imprisoned in inhuman conditions in Insein Prison, Yangon since 1997. These local citizens are members of Amnesty International, Group 54. They have sent hundreds of letters to government officials in Myanmar attempting to secure early release for this prisoner of conscience, or at least to improve the deplorable conditions under which she is forced to live. The prisoner is Daw May Win Myint, a trained doctor of medicine. Today she languishes in jail, suffering from multiple serious and potentially fatally maladies. She does not receive anything like adequate medical care.

Group 54 is part of a world-wide co-ordinated action, initiated by Amnesty International in London, England, aiming to encourage officials in Myanmar to review and modify the 'emergency' insurgency laws dating back to 1950, to prevent unfair trials and summary sentences from military tribunals, and to ensure that those who have finished long jail sentences for political dissent not be automatically re-arrested upon release.

The members of Group 54 have undertaken previous long-term commitments on behalf of other prisoners of conscience in South Korea, Sri Lanka and Egypt. This dedicated group, now in its 15th year, meets every three months to map out further letter writing actions and to discuss human rights issues around the world, including Canada. Between meetings the letters and e-mails fly overseas.

The work of Amnesty International and its members is predicated upon the articles of the 1948 United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, drafted mostly by Canadian diplomat and statesman John Humphrey. Through all its 30 articles it focuses on the belief that all human beings are born with equal and inalienable rights and fundamental freedoms.

If you are interested in the work of Amnesty International, check out www.Amnesty.ca or call 905-640-3840. Meanwhile, let's hope that editor Kate will not be subjected to the Myanmar 1962 Printers and Publishers Registration Act and Law No. 5/96 and end up with 20 years in the Stouffville Pen!

Roger Glazin
 Stouffville

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