



Committee On Finance

Max Baucus, Ranking Member

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Floor Statement of Senator Max Baucus On Consideration of the Resolution Renewing Burma Import Sanctions June 24, 2004

(WASHINGTON, D.C.) U.S. Senator Max Baucus issued the following floor statement yesterday regarding resolution to renew Burma import sanctions. In the floor statement, Baucus raised concerns with the effectiveness of import sanctions in Burma and Cuba. The complete floor statement follows:

“Mr. President, I rise today to speak about Burma and U.S. sanctions policy. Last year, thugs working for the illegitimate Burmese government attacked opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and her supporters with clubs and sharpened sticks, killing as many as 70 pro-democracy activists. The government then held Suu Kyi in what it cynically called ‘protective custody.’ Those events prompted international outrage and led the United States to pass the Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act of 2003.

That Act banned all imports to the United States from Burma. Chairman Grassley and I worked hard to ensure that these sanctions would be effective – and that Congress would continue to play a key role in their implementation. I did not want Congress to impose trade sanctions on Burma without any opportunity to review the policy and revise it if it wasn’t working. So the Act requires that Congress debate and vote on whether to renew the import ban every year. That’s why we’re here today.

What has the import ban accomplished? In 2002, the last full year without a ban, Burma exported \$356 million to the United States, mainly in garments and apparel products. Since the U.S. blocked all imports from Burma, more than 100 garment and apparel factories have closed, throwing fifty to sixty thousand people, mainly young women, out of work. And according to the State Department, many of these young women, lacking jobs and opportunities are, in desperation, quote, ‘turning to work in the sex industry or being forced or duped into prostitution by traffickers.’

On the other hand, Burma’s military rulers are doing just fine. The State Department notes that ‘the military leaders’ personal power and wealth have little connection to the well-being of the country. The country’s economic and military elite derives its greatest earning power from the trade of natural resources with neighboring states and countries in the region.’

I have long been critical of unilateral sanctions. They almost never work. They may be an effective expression of our rage, but as a rule, they do not destabilize oppressive regimes, and they often hurt the unfortunate people they are intended to help.

The ban on imports from Burma is no exception to this rule. Multilateral sanctions can be effective. That's why I insisted that the Act require the Administration to work toward making the sanctions multilateral. But to date, no country in the world has joined the United States in banning imports from Burma – not one.

Now, let me emphasize that Burma's government is despicable by any measure. Security forces commit murder, use rape as a weapon of war against ethnic minorities, and utilize forced labor. Democracy activists are arrested and dissent punished. Conscription of child soldiers is widespread. There is no dispute that Burma's actions require a response. The question is whether unilateral trade sanctions are the proper response.

This is not an easy question. I hope that my colleagues have thought hard about the consequences. I hope they have made an honest assessment of the merits of maintaining the import ban. We cannot forget that the votes we cast have real consequences. Those thousands of young women being forced into prostitution should serve as a harsh reminder.

After struggling with the issue for some time, I decided to support renewing the import ban for another year. On balance, I believe we should allow the Administration more time to try to convince other countries to join in sanctioning the outlaw regime in Burma. But I would urge the Administration to make this more of a priority. Their efforts so far have produced little result.

Cuba Sanctions

If I am to find any consolation in this state of affairs, it comes from the fact that Congress has a say in whether the trade sanctions on Burma continue. We have retained our Constitutional authority over international commerce. This is consolation to me because it is hard to evaluate any unilateral sanctions program without looking back on our failed sanctions against Cuba.

Since 1960, when the Cuban embargo was first put in place, the United States has pursued a unilateral policy of driving the Castro regime out of power. Even as the rest of the Soviet bloc collapsed, the Castro regime has retained its control on the Cuban island. The U.S. embargo has failed. In fact, it is obvious to me that the embargo actually shelters Castro, and has directly contributed to the strength of his regime.

But the unilateral embargo has remained in place for more than forty years. Had Congress originally required an annual vote on the Cuban embargo, as we have now done with the Burma sanctions, the embargo would have been eliminated long ago. Instead, the Cuban sanctions were created without any end in sight, without any exit strategy, without any plan for its removal. So, here we are, thirteen years beyond the fall of the Soviet Union, with the last vestige of the Cold War alive and well 90 miles from our shores.

That's why Senators Roberts, Enzi and I have introduced legislation to give Congress a voice on Cuba sanctions. This legislation mirrors the legislation on Burma that we are discussing today. It would allow sanctions against Cuba to continue – but would require both Houses of Congress to vote annually to renew the sanctions. Absent such a vote, the sanctions would end.

This is a reasonable approach to Cuba and to sanctions more generally. Of course, that's also why this legislation won't pass this year. The Administration and Congressional leadership are well aware that Cuba sanctions would not survive a Senate vote. In fact, last year, overwhelming majorities in the Senate and House voted to suspend enforcement of the travel ban. Everyone here remembers that those votes were ignored by the leadership in both chambers, and the travel ban remained in place. I hope that Congress can learn from the mistakes we have made – and are still making – in Cuba. I hope that Congress will work toward a more responsible sanctions regime. I stand ready to work with my colleagues to make that happen.

Let me close by thanking Senators McConnell, Feinstein, and Grassley for their work on the Burma legislation. Senators McConnell and Feinstein have been tireless advocates for democracy in Burma. They deserve to be commended. I would also like to acknowledge some of the staff who have worked hard on this issue – Paul Grove, Michael Schiffer, Everett Eissenstat, and Stephen Schaeffer.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.”

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