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Free all political prisoners, free Aung San Suu Kyi, free Burma.

news@irrawaddy.org - The Irrawaddy - Newsletter for January 22, 2010 - <www.irrawaddy.org>

Junta 'Worse' than Nargis

By ARKAR MOE

Friday, January 22, 2010 - <http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=17638>

The president of the human rights committee of the Inter Parliamentary Union (IPU) said on Thursday (21.01.2010) that human rights violations by the Burmese junta have caused more damaged than Cyclone Nargis and called for pro-democracy leader Aug San Suu Kyi and 13 opposition elected parliamentarians to be released from prison.



Senator Aquilino Pimentel, Jr. (right) presents the position of the Philippine senate against Burma for the 2006 chairmanship of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations during the meeting of the Asean+3 Group. (Source: www.senate.gov.ph)

Aquilino Pimentel, a Philippines senator and president of the IPU human rights committee, made his remarks during a meeting in Geneva, Switzerland.

The IPU, founded in 1889, is an international organization of parliaments that works for peace and for the establishment of representative democracy.

"In the year 2008, Burma was hit by a terrible catastrophe, by typhoon Nargis, and because there was so much devastation people thought that was the worst thing that could happen to Burma," said Pimentel. "But actually [it was] not. It was rather the deprivation of the rights of the people by the ruling junta."

Cyclone Nargis, which devastated the southwest of the country on May 2-3, 2008, left about 140,000 people dead in its wake. The cost of repairing the damage was estimated at more than US \$4 billion.

"Nothing much seems to be happening in terms of advancing the cause of democracy in Burma," he told journalists.

Aye Thar Aung, the secretary the Committee Representing People's Parliament (CRPP) in Burma, told The Irrawaddy on Friday, "Burmese parliamentarians are very important and vital for Burmese politics because they were elected by the people in the 1990 general election. They are legitimate, and they have the mandate to lead the country towards democracy."

The National League for Democracy (NLD) formed the CRPP on Sept. 16, 1998, after the Burmese military junta failed to respond to calls to recognize the results of the 1990 elections. The committee was supported by 251 elected parliament members, including members of parliament from other parties. The CRPP moved to annul all laws promulgated since Sept 18, 1998, and called for the release of all political prisoners.

Aye Thar Aung said, "The Burmese military regime does not negotiate or talk with members of the CRPP. The authorities should talk with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the CRPP about the 2010 election. Actually, they must recognize the results of 1990 general election."

The IPU Human Rights Committee, which has just ended a review of 273 cases of parliamentarians in 29 countries, is appealing to governments for clarification of their situation.

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FOR PEACE, FREEDOM, DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN BURMA

The committee resolution urged India, China and the Association of South East Asian Nations (Asean) to call for the release of the 13 elected Burmese parliamentarians held in prison.

green leaf <saffronmailletter@gmail.com>.[888peoplepower] Saffron Mail LetterDatum:Sat, 09. Jan 2010

Democratic Voice of Burma - <<http://english.dvb.no/news.php?id=3208>>

Death sentence for Burmese whistleblowers

1Jan 8, 2010 (DVB)—Two Burmese government officials accused of leaking sensitive information about secretive diplomatic trips to Russia and North Korea are to be executed, a Rangoon court has announced.

Another man, a civilian, was handed a 15-year prison sentence after a two-month trial in a closed court inside Rangoon's Insein prison.

The three are also accused of leaking details of the Burmese government's secret military tunnel project, which have been obtained by DVB.

Win Naing Kyaw, an ex-army major who had worked as a personal assistant for late junta secretary-2, General Tin Oo, was yesterday given the death sentence under Section 3 of the Emergency Provisions Act. He was also charged under the Electronics Act and the Official Secrets Act.

Thura Kyaw, also known as Aung Aung, a senior clerk from the Burmese foreign ministry's European desk, was also given the death sentence under the Emergency Provision Act, while Pyan Sein was sentenced to 15 years' in prison under the Electronics Act.

Intelligence documents leaked by the three men detailed two senior level governmental visits to North Korea and Russia, as well as North Korea's involvement in the tunnels project.

According to the documents, Burma's ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) has been developing the tunnels since 1996. During the visit to Russia in 2006, Burma's second-in-command, Maung Aye, discussed the procurement of a guided missile system with Moscow's deputy minister of defense, Yury Nikolayevich Baluyevsky.

Then in 2008, General Shwe Mann, joint chief of staff of the Burmese army, visited North Korea where he observed tunnel complexes dug deep into the side of mountains that can hold heavy armoury, including chemical weapons.

The information about the two trips was allegedly distributed via former government official Aung Linn Htut, who is now living in exile after authorities found the documents stored in his computer hard drive.

A number of other army officials were also been detained in connection with the case.

Reporting by Yee May Aung

The Irrawaddy -Newsletter for Wednesday, January 13, 2010 - news@irrawaddy.org - <http://www.irrawaddy.org>

The Irrawaddy - <http://www.irrawaddy.org/opinion_story.php?art_id=17575>

You've Got Mail, Than Shwe!

By AUNG ZAW Wednesday, January 13, 2010 - COMMENTARY

You may have heard we have a little problem with a former postal clerk in Burma. Before joining the army in the early 1950s the young man delivered letters and packages to people in central Burma. We should assume then that as a messenger of the state he learned to appreciate the importance most people put on communication and the social grace to respond in kind when someone corresponds with you.

Now head of Burma's military junta, Snr-Gen Than Shwe must receive a lot of mail: official transcripts, secret reports and dossiers, military analysis, international dispatches, petitions, even birthday cards from his relatives.

Detained Nobel Peace Prize winner and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi sent two letters to the military dictator in September and November last year. In those letters, we are told, she expressed her willingness to sit down and talk with him. As a further gesture, she indicated that she wanted to work with him to achieve national reconciliation and to discuss a strategy to encourage Western nations to lift sanctions on the country. (I understand that Suu Kyi cannot request the US and the EU to lift sanctions unless she is freed along with other political prisoners, and a meaningful political process is seen to be in progress.)

I believe the olive branch that The Lady offered to Than Shwe was an opportunity for him to open a dialogue with the opposition and a gift-wrapped invitation to help untangle Burma from its international isolation.

The former postal clerk did not respond to her letters.

Suu Kyi was gracious and did not give in. In her second letter, she repeatedly expressed her gratitude to Than Shwe (perhaps hoping that flattery would sooth his stubborn ego) in spite of her extended house arrest and the bogus trial he

subjected her to last year.

Like a spoilt child sent to his room, Than Shwe remained defiant by demonstrating a sullen silence.

Suu Kyi tried another tack—she asked the regime leader to allow her to meet with three senior leaders from her National League for Democracy (NLD) party. This time, her wish was granted and she was able to meet with and pay respect to the ailing veterans at a government guest house. However, she was not allowed to meet all the party's senior leaders.

I guess Than Shwe must be reading her letters, after all.

This is not the first time the junta strongman has been lost for words when dealing with Suu Kyi. Almost a year after her convoy was brutally ambushed in Depayin in May 2003, she sent a letter to Than Shwe stating that the NLD was ready to work with the government. But the former mail-boy refused to reply.

Suu Kyi's courage, selflessness and humanity contrasted starkly with Than Shwe's immaturity, pettiness and malice.

As if it were a noble gesture, Than Shwe this week magnanimously granted the detained opposition leader a meeting with her lawyers to discuss her upcoming appeal against the extension of her house arrest (as if the rule of law actually existed in Burma), and to address a petty objection by her estranged brother to her performing repairs on her lakeside home.

It is therefore clear that Than Shwe reads the letters he receives from the NLD leader. We can imagine him sweating with nerves as he opens the envelope, brooding over her words, his face turning dark with jealousy and fear when he realizes yet again that he is no match for her. He will ponder for days how he can respond to the Nobel Peace Prize laureate. Lost for words, he will sink into silence.

This year, Than Shwe will probably receive more letters from Aung San Suu Kyi. But we wonder whether the former mail-boy will ever get the message.

The Irrawaddy - Newsletter for Friday, January 22, 2010 - news@irrawaddy.org - www.irrawaddy.org

We Can't Dance Alone: US to Burma

By **LALIT K. JHA** / WASHINGTON - http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=17633

Friday, **January 22, 2010**

A top US official said engagement with Burma can't be a one-way process and indicated the US is not getting an adequate response from the Burmese military junta.

Showing signs of frustration, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell told senators at a Congressional briefing on Thursday: "We are attempting to take that first step...but I do want to underscore that one can't dance on the dance floor alone."

In his testimony, Campbell said the US is in the first phase of a strategy to begin direct discussions with Burmese officials.

"It's too early to give a report card on that effort, but we recognize that this is a critical period, 2010, with the intention of the government to hold elections at some point later this year," he said. "There is also a desire, when it comes to global or regional issues of democratization and human rights, to raise these matters, not just in a bilateral setting but to raise them in regional fora," he said.

"So, for instance, Secretary Clinton raised issues of concern, particularly in Burma but not just in Burma in a regional context, and to our satisfaction we have seen a number of other countries like Indonesia [and] the Philippines increasingly talk about values and shared interests in a way that we think is very reinforcing. Of course, those general tenets and beliefs are the foundation of our strong and deep partnerships with countries like Japan and South Korea, Australia, the Philippines, Thailand and others," he said.

"The truth is, unlike some countries, at best Burma is ambivalent about the United States," Campbell said. "I think there are some very substantial concerns about how its leadership views the people, the quality of life of the people, issues associated with ethnic minorities, the treatment of legitimate politically elected groups, and on top of that attitudes towards the United States and concerns about proliferation."

Campbell also said the administration's formal review of US policy towards Burma reaffirmed its fundamental goals: a democratic government that respects the rights of its people and is at peace with its neighbors.

"A policy of pragmatic engagement with the Burmese authorities holds the best hope for advancing our goals. Under this approach, US sanctions will remain in place until Burmese authorities demonstrate that they are prepared to make meaningful progress on US core concerns," he said. "The leaders of Burma's democratic opposition have confirmed to

us their support for this approach. The policy review also confirmed that we need additional tools to augment those that we have been using in pursuit of our objectives.

"A central element of this approach is a direct, senior-level dialogue with representatives of the Burmese leadership. I visited Burma Nov. 3 and 4 for meetings with Burmese officials, including Prime Minister Thein Sein, leaders of the democracy movement, including Aung San Suu Kyi, and representatives of the largest ethnic minorities. In my meetings, I stressed the importance of all stakeholders engaging in a dialogue on reform and emphasized that the release of political prisoners is essential if the elections planned for 2010 are to have any credibility," Campbell said.

THE BURMANET NEWS - January 9 - 11, 2010, Issue #3873 - "Editor" <editor@burmanet.org> www.burmanet.org

Voice of America - 08 January 2010 <<http://www.voanews.com/uspolicy/2010-01-08-voa2.cfm>>

Burma Elections Must Be Credible



State Department Spokesman
Ian Kelly (File)

The military regime in Burma has not taken any meaningful steps that would lend credibility to general elections proposed for later in 2010. U.S. State Department spokesman Ian Kelly said that "much of the opposition remains in prison, there is no space for political dissent or debate and no freedom of the press."

Mr. Kelly called for Burma to engage pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi and ethnic leaders "in a comprehensive dialogue on democratic reform. This," he said, "would be a first step towards inclusive elections."

The U.S., said spokesman Kelly, "will continue to take a measured approach to the 2010 elections until we can assess the electoral conditions and know whether opposition and ethnic groups will participate."

These elections would be Burma's first since 1990. Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party won the last election by a landslide, but was never allowed to take office. Instead, Nobel Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi has spent

most of the past twenty years under house arrest, along with National League for Democracy Vice-Chairman U Tin Oo.

In a break with past policies, the Barack Obama administration has attempted to engage with Burma's military rulers, along with maintaining continued pressure on the regime through economic sanctions. In meetings with representatives of Burma's military leaders in 2009, U.S. officials, said Mr. Kelly, reaffirmed "unwavering support for an independent, peaceful, and prosperous and democratic Burma." The U.S. remains ready to improve bilateral relations based on reciprocal and meaningful efforts by the Burmese government to fulfill the Burmese peoples' democratic aspirations.

The United States looks forward to a day when Burmese citizens can freely exercise their universal human rights. "We hope," said Mr. Kelly, "that day will come soon."

"Tin Win Akbar" <mtinwin@pc5.so-net.ne.jp> - [8888peoplepower] US presses on Burma [1 Attachment]

Reuters - WASHINGTON Tue Jan 19, 2010 4:29pm EST <<http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE60I5D720100119>>

U.S. to press Myanmar on reform: report

WASHINGTON (Reuters) – The United States plans to meet officials from Myanmar soon and will seek more evidence it is ready to enact political reforms in return for broader dialogue with Washington, a senior U.S. official said on Tuesday.

Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell, who in November led a U.S. team to Yangon for the highest level talks in 14 years, said Washington had seen a "mixed bag" of results from overtures to the military junta in Myanmar, formerly known as Burma.

"We have had some follow-on direct interactions with (the) Burmese authorities, and I think we're going to be looking at a subsequent set of discussions in the near future," Campbell told a news briefing.

Washington last year said it would pursue deeper engagement with Myanmar's military rulers to try to spur democratic reform but would not ease economic sanctions for now.

Campbell noted some progress, including higher level contacts between the government and Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, the opposition leader who has been in various forms of detention for 14 of the last 20 years.

But he said there were also problems, including Myanmar's treatment of ethnic minority groups and other issues, and that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and her team would be "looking for greater clarity in the coming weeks."

"We went into this ... with a very clear understanding of the challenges," Campbell told a news briefing. "But it is also the

case that we're not unendingly patient. We will need some clear steps in due course."

The State Department has already voiced concern over Myanmar's plan to hold general elections this year -- the first since 1990, when the junta ignored the results and instead jailed more than 2,000 activists and political opponents, many for minor offenses.

Myanmar's leaders have as yet given no schedule for the vote, which activists say could simply entrench more than five decades of military rule by yielding a legislature dominated by the military and its civilian allies.

(Reporting by Andrew Quinn; editing by Vicki Allen)

THE BURMANET NEWS - January 15, 2010, Issue #3877 - "Editor" <editor@burmanet.org> - www.burmanet.org

The Washington Post - <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/01/15/AR2010011500905.html>>

Myanmar democracy leader Suu Kyi meets official

The Associated Press - Friday, January 15, 2010

YANGON, Myanmar -- Detained Myanmar pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi on Friday held her first meeting this year with the Cabinet official responsible for contact with her, as her party makes preparations for possible participation in elections.

Officials said Suu Kyi was taken from her home to meet for about 20 minutes with Relations Minister Aung Kyi. The officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they are not authorized to release information, did not know the contents of their talk.

Myanmar's military government has set elections, the first since 1990, for an unspecified date this year. Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party, which has not yet declared whether it will take part, this week expanded its central executive committee by nine members to 20.

Last year, party colleagues agreed to Suu Kyi's suggestion that the committee be reorganized. Most of its members are elderly.

Suu Kyi's last meeting with Aung Kyi was on Dec. 9, when he informed her that her request to be allowed to meet with the party elders was granted. She met them on Dec. 16.

Suu Kyi has also requested a meeting with junta chief Senior Gen. Than Shwe to explain how she would cooperate in tasks "beneficial to the country," but is not yet known to have received any response.

The constitution adopted in 2008 that set up this year's polls was considered undemocratic by her party. It has clauses that would ensure that the military remains the controlling power in government, and would bar Suu Kyi from holding office.

Politics in Myanmar have been deadlocked since Suu Kyi's party overwhelmingly won the 1990 elections. The military refused to allow it to take power and clamped down on the pro-democracy movement, causing the United States and another Western nations to impose economic and political sanctions in an attempt to isolate the junta.

However, the Obama administration has said the sanctions failed to foster reforms and is seeking to engage the junta through high-level talks.

THE BURMANET NEWS - Thu, January 14, 2010, Issue #3876 - editor@burmanet.org - www.burmanet.org

EarthTimes - <<http://www.earthtimes.org/articles/show/303713,myanmar-opposition-party-gets-new-blood-on-executive-committee.html>>

Myanmar opposition party gets new blood on executive committee - By : dpa - Posted : Thu, 14 Jan 2010

Yangon - Myanmar's National League for Democracy (NLD) opposition party on Thursday announced an expansion of its central executive committee, weeks after Aung San Suu Kyi called for reforms.

The NLD has added nine new members to the existing 11-man central executive committee, which has led the party for two decades and includes several octogenarians.

The new party executives are Than Nyein, Ohn Kyaing, Win Myint, Tun Tun Hein, Win Naing, Nyan Win, Han Tha Myint, Thein Nyunt and May Win Myint, a relatively younger lot of elected members of parliament.

Political observers said the move was a transitional step paving the way for the older NLD leaders to resign.

Aung San Suu Kyi, the NLD's imprisoned general secretary, was permitted to meet with three senior NLD executives on December 16 to discuss party reforms.

Authorities escorted her from her Yangon house-cum-prison to a government guesthouse where she was allowed to meet with NLD central executive committee members Lun Tin, 88; U Lwin, 86; and Aung Shwe, 91.

The threesome are known locally as "the world's oldest active political party leaders."

"Daw [Madame] Aung San Suu Kyi asked for permission to reform the NLD central executive committee, and the three top leaders agreed with her," U Lwin said after the meeting.

The leadership of Myanmar's 2-decade-old opposition party has been widely criticized for showing a lack of initiative and unity during the past six years as Suu Kyi was kept under detention in near-isolation from her party.

Suu Kyi, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 for her leadership of Myanmar's pro-democracy movement, remains the only well-known NLD leader outside the country, a reflection of the lacklustre nature of the party's central committee.

It was still unclear whether the NLD would contest a general election planned this year by Myanmar's ruling military junta.

Western governments have said the election would lack credibility if Suu Kyi and the NLD are not permitted to participate.

It was unlikely that Suu Kyi would be freed before the polls. Suu Kyi has spent 14 of the past 20 years under house arrest and in August was sentenced to an additional 18 month of home detention.

She was under house arrest when Myanmar held its last election in 1990, but if anything, her detention then helped the NLD romp to a landslide victory.

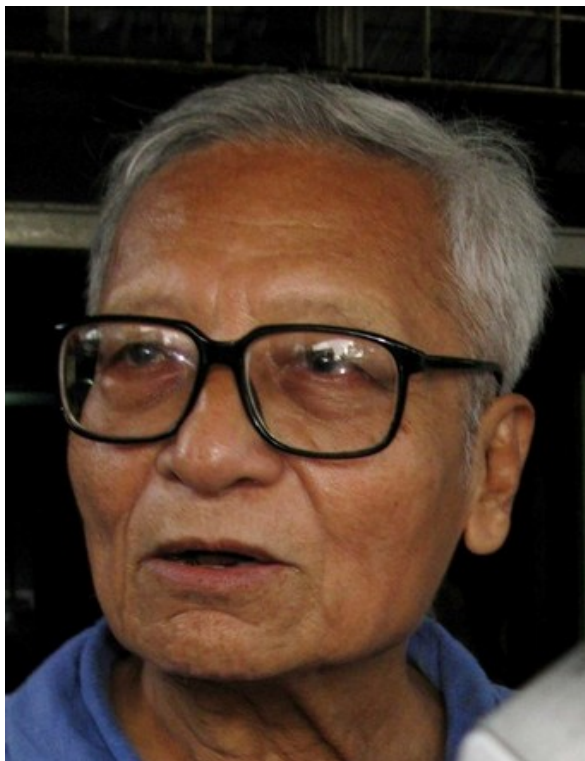
The success surprised the military, who blocked the NLD from taking power on the pretext that the country was not yet ready for civilian rule and needed a new constitution, which took 19 years to write.

Myanmar has been under military rule since 1962.

The BurmaNet News, January 20, 2010, Issue #3879 - "Editor" <editor@burmanet.org> - <www.burmanet.org>

The Mizzia - Wednesday, 20 January 2010 - INTERVIEW <<http://www.mizzima.com/edop/interview/3405-a-conversation-with-u-win-tin.html>>

A conversation with U Win Tin - Elke Kuijper



U Win Tin

Mizzima News - *In 1989 he was sentenced to prison, without any proof of having committed a crime. He was released almost 20 years later, in September 2008, though he does not see it that way himself. He did not want to be released out of pity for his old age, but only on the basis of the charges against him. This is one of the reasons why he still wears his blue prison shirt. He may be outside the prison walls, but he still is not free to do as he wants in his country.*

U Win Tin is one of Burma's most well-known journalists, an opposition leader and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's right hand man. Famous both inside and outside of Burma, many people campaigned for his release. He is known as Burma's longest serving political prisoner, though he says, "There are many young people who spend more than twenty years in jail and who are hardly known by the people."

He spent almost twenty years in one of Burma's most notorious prisons, Insein in Rangoon. For long periods of time he was kept in isolation and even in former dog cells. He kept himself sane by writing poetry and solving mathematical problems. He is now 80 years old and his health is starting to fail. Because of a lack of medical care during his incarceration, existing medical conditions worsened. He suffers badly from asthma, underwent a heart operation last August, suffers from spondylitis of his spine and has failing eyesight. But from the moment he was released he resumed his old duties for the opposition party NLD (National League for Democracy). In his own words: "I am not bedridden so I can walk.

But anyhow, I work everyday and I meet people and I talk with the media. Sometimes I am tired. But I continue.”

A brave man with a vision and a dream of a free Burma; a comparison with South Africa's anti-apartheid hero and former president Nelson Mandela comes to mind. U Win Tin's struggle is purely non-violent. He believes this is also a part of the character of the Burmese people. I asked him whether he thinks that maybe at some point, violence will be necessary to create change in Burma.

U Win Tin: I do not think it is necessary to use violence because people in Burma are really – because of their religion – mild and very docile. Their will, their desire, is not to use a violent way. Even to use a violent word is frowned upon in Burmese society. The people like to be very polite and very quiet and they do not express their will in a violent way.

I think the nonviolent way is possible, though there might be some violence, or a violent phase in our struggle. Of course the ruling power in the country is too big. There is a very strong army and they have modernized and spent a lot of money on the military. They have built up their military power over the years. One army regiment is like 1,000 people or something like that. They are very modernized, live in big houses, own plantations and inside their compounds there might even be some factories. So they are very strong, you see, among the people. Of course the soldiers themselves are suffering too. But they are suffering much less than the ordinary people. They earn more money and they have more facilities.

We are nonviolent all the time. We go out on the streets but we never use violence. I just think it is not in the Burmese people's will to use violence. It is not their style of expressing their will, political thinking and opinions. People are very nonviolent now. But maybe tomorrow, I don't know.

He then elaborated on the violent suppression of the 2007 Saffron Revolution.

U Win Tin: The military is very strong and suddenly they will shoot, even the monks. All the people are giving homage to the monks, but they shoot them. In 2007, monks were shot for no reason. Even in the time of colonial rule there was political movement by the monks, political demonstrations and so on. But nowadays, say for instance in 2007, the monks are nonviolently and nonpolitically rallying against the government by just reciting the metta sutra, which is about loving kindness. And still they were shot. They are still unsure how many monks were killed. People believe more than 100 were killed. People are shocked by this and do not like it.

When I do get hold of him – I am referred to a different number a few times, as he has no permanent place of residence due to the junta repossessing his house during his detention and pressure placed on landlords not to rent to him – I am surprised by his eloquent and energetic sounding voice. He is witty and sharp and talks a lot. He has no fear that conversations like ours might cause him danger.

U Win Tin: You see, if you speak like this in Burma, some action or something you have done cannot bring danger for you at the present time, but it might be dangerous for you at a later time. They keep a record of your actions, and then when you are sent for trial these things will become evidence of you being guilty.

But I do not mind. I am always talking to the media: VOA, BBC, DVB, Irrawaddy. I am very outspoken and I have no restraints about my opinions. Recently, I was telling everybody that Burma at this moment is like a jail, like a prison. The whole country is a prison and people are suffering. We talk about human rights violations and about the 2,000 political prisoners in jail now, but all people are prisoners. They are prisoners in their own country, in their own towns and homes. Whenever I go to my office or to a friend's house or even to a funeral, you see, there are some two or three motorcycles following me. It is almost impossible to see a free man in Burma at this moment.

When asked about his opinion on the recently announced alms boycott and whether he thinks it is effective, his answer is long and passionate, it is obvious he admires the monks and is a devout Buddhist.

U Win Tin: This pattanikkujjana (alms boycott) is very effective. For a Buddhist, when you are under a pattanikkujjana you are no longer a Buddhist. For the government it is very effective. They are Buddhist – nominally of course – and the pattanikkujjana has a very bad effect on them. As Buddhists, they play the religion card. They assume they are the guardians of the religion. They are the promoters of the religion. They put up big pagodas and give support to the monasteries.

But, although it is effective, in order to have a pronounced change more is needed. The monks, according to Buddhist teachings, do not act as politicians. Burmese monks are always out of politics because they are the religious people, so they are not concerned with voting. Anyhow, they have a very strong tradition of political activity and leadership, even as far back as the colonial days.

Although the government promotes religion so that people will regard them as the guardians of the religion, they try too hard. So you see, this pattanikkujjana action happened and they were very shocked. In a situation like this, the monks could make a movement if they were a political party, but they are not. They are not a political party, so they have to wait and just provide people with information and tell people that this government really has no authority and that the monks are suppressed.

Things have not changed for the better since the peaceful demonstrations by the monks were violently stopped in 2007.

U Win Tin: Every week we hear news about monks being arrested and taken from their monasteries. Even, for instance, if I want to ask a monk to give some offering at my house, his monastery will be asked not to go to my house. The government's suppression of religious people will not go unnoticed, because in the foreign press and media people are reporting these incidents. So, although there is not so much activity by the monks as a political force, they are still there. The force is going on everyday and they work everyday.

Because they have to collect their meals, they go around and talk to the people. They are in contact with the people. In that way they are more political than us, because we do not go to people's houses everyday. They have to go out and collect their meals early in the morning or in the daytime. They are in close contact with the people and can exchange ideas and opinions. Their influence on the people is very high, because they are their friends. And in those talks there might be some political matters or talk about suffering.

We talk about the United States' recent policy of dealing with the Burmese junta: engagement coupled with sanctions. How does U Win Tin feel about this new approach? According to him, a lot of the sanctions are not very effective, but he feels engagement with the military regime will not be very effective either.

U Win Tin: It has been proven that sanctions are not effective and they know that. But they will keep them as long as there is no improvement in the current situation. Engagement is not effective either, as it has already been tried by other countries such as Russia. Nowadays the US government uses this engagement and sanctions approach together. They are attacking with one gun that is not very effective and now they are using another gun that is also not very effective. Whether they have one gun or two guns it does not matter.

Although I do not think this American action of engagement and sanctions will be very effective, we are still hopeful. At least now there are two weapons and they are engaging in Burma, so people in political parties and political forces are encouraged and we are rather hoping for something.

He switches to the subject of the upcoming elections in 2010.

U Win Tin: Without political dialogue the upcoming elections will be nothing. They will be a sham. This election is built upon the framework of the 2008 constitution, which will be enacted after this election. This constitution will prolong military rule for many years. There are no peoples' rights, no democratic rights, nothing at all. For instance, according to this constitution (article 6), the military is the leader of politics. I cannot agree with that.

Another difficulty is that there is no political will on the part of the junta. They have no idea of the country's problems and are only thinking of their own will, which is to prolong their rule. They have no plans at all to make any contact, to make any dialogue, with political forces or ethnic nationalities. So, we use this American initiative as a tool to move and go through the election. The election is a sham without the participation of the ethnic nationalities and opposition parties. We need to have political dialogue before the election; with nationalities, with ourselves and with opposition forces. That will be the only way.

One of the demands of the United States government and also one of the conditions for the NLD to partake in the upcoming elections is the release of all political prisoners. Amnesty International estimates there are currently more than 2,000 political prisoners languishing in Burma's prisons. Many of them were involved in the 1988 uprising and the 2007 Saffron Revolution. Nearly 200 monks and nuns are believed imprisoned. U Win Tin feels the US might have some influence on the release of these prisoners.

U Win Tin: If the US shows some positive thinking and initiative, the military will know how to react to this. One of these reactions can be the release of political prisoners. As a sign of goodwill they might release some students but they will not release all political prisoners. They will keep some as hostages. They want to show the world that they are not that bad, by releasing prisoners. When I was released in September 2008, they released many prisoners, most of whom were criminals and not political prisoners.

U Win Tin believes the junta is not interested in the political process. A person with ties to a foreign country cannot participate in the election. This was invented to prevent Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, whose husband was British and sons live abroad, from playing a legitimate role in politics.

U Win Tin: The government has no intention to give her a role to play in Burmese politics. She is a very good leader. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has many activities and much influence, but still she is restricted. She can do a lot and she can assert her experiences on the people. But, if she is not allowed to go outside of Rangoon or to meet the press or something, then it is almost impossible for her to play a very big role in politics.

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A Woman's Political Work is Never Done -

By **NAN KHIN HTWAY MYINT** - THE IRRAWADDY - GUEST COLUMN - FEBRUARY, 2010 - VOLUME 18 NO.2



NAN KHIN HTWAY MYINT

Taking their cue from Aung San Suu Kyi, many women in Burma remain firmly committed to the struggle for democracy

Even after more than 21 years of relentless repression—and with no end in sight—there are still many women in Burma who continue to actively support the country's pro-democracy movement.

For most, the source of their conviction is the example of Aung San Suu Kyi, who has inspired many women to join the National League for Democracy (NLD). Although we also have immense respect for our male leaders, Suu Kyi has done the most to nurture our political awareness. She is not just someone we admire, but a role model for all women who want to make a difference in Burma.

In 1990, I was elected as an NLD member of parliament. Out of 400 parliamentarians elected at that time, just 15 were women. But of course, none of us were allowed to serve our terms in office, because the regime refused to recognize the NLD's overwhelming electoral victory.

Twenty years later, the NLD continues to exist as a legally constituted political party. And yet, we are often forced to operate like an underground organization. Our offices have been shut, and we must keep a low profile. Even when we were permitted to work openly, we were under constant surveillance from the authorities.

This means that many women who work for democracy in Burma must do so without attracting attention to themselves. But even so, they face harassment from a regime that is intent on silencing dissent. For example, here in Karen State many are threatened with arrest because they have relatives who have illegally entered Thailand in search of work. In this way, the junta is able to put pressure on those who wish to engage in political work.

Perhaps a more daunting factor that stands in the way of women who want to participate in politics is the need to make a living. Economic survival is most people's number one priority in Burma, and for many women, especially those with children, the demands of everyday life often make it impossible for them to devote themselves to political activism.

Fortunately for me, I do not face such pressure in my life, although some have tried to persuade me to stay away from politics and focus instead on business. But even those who are relatively free of worries about their livelihood must bear in mind that they, too, can lose it all if they chose to openly oppose the regime.

Many doctors and lawyers have been stripped of their licenses for contributing their time and energy to the cause of Burmese democracy, and many businesses have been shut down because of their owners' political sympathies. Thousands have been dragged away from their families and imprisoned, and many have died in detention.

We must never forget the sacrifices of those who have paid a heavy price for their political convictions. At the same time, however, we should remember that no one is safe from such abuses in Burma, whether they are involved in politics or not.

Both men and women are routinely denied their most basic rights in this country. At one time, Burmese soldiers in Karen State only forced men to work as porters, but now women are also expected to perform this backbreaking, often deadly labor. Other forms of forced labor are also widespread, resulting in further economic hardship for the country's poor.

Against this grim backdrop, it is difficult to see any real prospect for political reform in Burma. Some see a glimmer of hope in the election that will take place sometime this year, but I personally don't believe it will make any difference. Only our own determination to continue with the struggle for democracy will prevent the country from succumbing to the darkness of continuing oppression.

Although I don't think the NLD should take part in this election unless the Constitution is thoroughly revised, I believe that it will attract more women than the 1990 election. This is because women have become more politically aware over the past two decades.

Unfortunately, however, a provision in the Constitution guaranteeing 25 percent of seats in Parliament to the military means that few women are likely to have a chance to serve their country as elected representatives. And a requirement that the president must be someone with military experience precludes the possibility of a woman ever assuming this high office.

But these constitutional barriers are only part of the problem. No one believes that this election will be free and fair. Candidates who are not backed by the junta will know that they face almost insurmountable odds.

Despite all these obstacles, however, I am confident that women will continue to lend their strength to the Burmese democracy movement.

Patience and a heartfelt desire to work for the betterment of our society are our greatest assets, and ultimately, these are the qualities that will prevail in this seemingly never-ending struggle.

Nan Khin Htway Myint is a member of the NLD and the MP-elect for the No. 3 constituency in Pa-an Township, Karen State.

Ten Years On

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