

Burma: The Next Killing Fields?

By Alan Clements

Written December 1990

This book is dedicated to the thousands of Burmese who have been imprisoned, tortured or executed because they've dared to speak the truth and to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize for 1991, as she continues her courageous "Revolution of the Spirit. "

Foreword by His Holiness The Dalai Lama

Recent changes in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union have provided ample grounds for optimism. Our century has seen a contest between force and regimentation on the one hand, and pluralism, individual rights and democracy on the other. The results of this great conflict are now clear. While no system of government can be perfect, democracy is closest to humanity's essential nature.

In contrast, events in Burma have been cause for great sorrow. Plainly, the greatest source of violence in our world is the existence of large military establishments. The very presence of a powerful military force in a country risks destroying the happiness of its people.

In their elections and the demonstrations that followed, the Burmese people simply expressed their human need for freedom, truth and democracy. The shocking subsequent and continuing brutal suppression of these simple aspirations will ultimately prove counterproductive. Those who practice deception and the use of force may gain considerable success in the short term, but eventually they will be overthrown.

In the past, oppressed people have always resorted to violence in their struggle to be free. In Burma, following in the footsteps of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has led a peaceful and nonviolent campaign for democracy. The practice of nonviolence requires determination, which Suu Kyi and her supporters have shown in full measure.

By its nature, nonviolent protest also depends on patience. In this regard, I pray that those who are struggling for democracy in Burma, despite the brutality of their suppression and the struggle they have before them, always remain peaceful.

Their success will depend on strong international support. Signs of late that this is already having some effect should encourage further efforts in the United Nations and similar bodies to influence Burma's military rulers. In rallying such support, increasing awareness is crucial. To this end, the work of the Burma Project USA and the publication of Alan Clements' book *Burma: The Next Killing Fields?*, are most valuable.

I offer my prayers, that conflict, killing and oppression will cease and that genuine peace will come to prevail throughout the troubled regions of Southeast Asia.

The Dalai Lama

Acknowledgments

Prior to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's arrest, she described courage as "grace under pressure, grace renewed repeatedly in the face of harsh, unremitting pressure." It is with deep gratitude that I acknowledge my numerous friends within Burma who, at the risk of their lives, repeatedly demonstrated this noble quality while describing to me the truth about their country's crisis.

Among my American friends, I extend my deepest gratitude to the Burma Project's assistant director, Leslie McKim, for believing so profoundly in Burma's struggle for freedom. Her many hours of research made this book possible, and her dedication to bringing this crisis to light is a great expression of compassionate activism.

Another significant force behind the final stages of this book was the Burma Project's administrative assistant, Sally Knight, who selflessly dedicated six weeks of full-time work to typing, editing, writing and researching the manuscript.

In addition, I thank my friends Deborah Anthony, Sharon LaCoix, Julia Zarudzka, Tom Kimball, Louise Lamontagne, Jerry Rosser, Marcia Jacobs, Mitch Davidowitz, Geraldine Devas, Sue Cliff and Bob Chartoff, who supported me throughout this project. And I'd like to thank Susan Garland, who so generously encouraged my last trip to Burma, along with a number of other friends who rallied the assistance needed to make the journey possible.

I'm also honored to acknowledge Catherine Ingram, for initially inspiring me to write this book, and for 25 years of unbroken friendship.

Chapter One

TERROR IN THE GOLDEN LAND

I'm lying, naked and cold, on a concrete floor. My back is a landscape of bruises. When I try to draw a deep breath, a piercing agony shoots through my chest, and I realize that my ribs are broken. Struggling to lift my head, I make out the walls of a dim and narrow brick room.

My eyes squint into focus and I can see, just in front of my face, a row of thick metal bars rising from the floor. Suddenly reality grips me by the throat. This is Insein Prison, Rangoon – the darkest hellhole in Burma.

From a nearby room, I hear dull groans – followed by the snap of thick leather cracking across flesh. A scream pierces the darkness, and the whip cracks again and again.

I hear the sound of steps approaching my own cell. "Thu-beh ma lay?" a man's voice demands in Burmese: "Where is he?" I clench my jaw. With a hoarse metallic creak, my cell door swings open, and black leather boots appear before my face. A dark figure leans down over me. He whispers, "Now it's your turn."

I leapt out of bed, throwing the sweat-soaked sheet to the floor. The summer night was silent, except for the pounding of blood in my ears. For a moment I was lost, trapped in the void between fantasy and reality. Then I heard the distant song of a dove, followed by the soft rumble of a passing plane, and remembered who and where I was.

It was mid-August 1988 and I was in my house near San Francisco. I'd awakened from a recurring nightmare – one of numerous terrifying dreams that had haunted me since my Burmese friend Ko's desperate phone call one week earlier.

Ko and I had been Buddhist monks together years ago when I had originally studied in Rangoon, Burma's capital. I had been thrilled to hear his voice – until I heard the unmistakable sound of gunfire in the background.

"What's going on?," I'd shouted into the crackling static.

Though breathless from running, he described the situation. Several days ago, a general strike had paralyzed Rangoon. Massive street demonstrations were spreading rapidly throughout the whole country. Peasants, scholars, businessmen, monks, students, children – everyone, it seemed, had united in a common cause: democracy.

"And then like lightning, army units appeared. They fired right into the crowds, shooting anybody. It was insane. When unarmed demonstrators got on their knees to peacefully resist the rows of soldiers, they were shot dead. The pavement turned red," Ko said, his voice breaking into sobs.

Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people had been massacred since then, Ko reported. Soldiers had bayoneted children, shot Red Cross workers as they attempted to aid the wounded and opened fire in front of Rangoon General Hospital, killing doctors and nurses.

The gravely injured were left to die in the streets, while countless others were hauled off to Insein prison – or interrogation, beating and torture. In some instances soldiers threw the bodies of the dead and injured into trucks and took them to the cemetery, where the living and dead were cremated together.

Rangoon was clearly in a panic. My friend was in fear for his life and pleaded with me to get him out of the country.

That had been a week ago, and I still couldn't rid myself of the terrifying dream images that Ko's call had stirred. I dropped into a chair and shut my eyes, trying to decide whether to bless or curse the fate which had first drawn me to the distant land of Burma, 10,000 miles from my home.

As a pre-law student at the University of Virginia in the early 1970s, I experienced insecurity, fear, anger, loneliness and a deep sense of mortality. I saw a planet in flames – the Vietnam War, widespread hunger, pollution, torture, pain and suffering everywhere.

I felt I had played out what the world had to offer and that any resolution I might find had to come from within. The teachings of the Buddha, which I had studied some during the previous four years, appeared to be the only source of sanity in an otherwise insane world. So I decided to visit Asia.

When I first arrived in Burma in March 1977, I felt as if I'd come home. The elegance of the people, their generosity and grace, and their extraordinary devotion to Buddhism moved me deeply. I had no desire to leave, but at that time only seven-day visas were available.

Two years later, it became possible to obtain a "pilgrim's visa", provided one had made prior arrangements to study Buddhism in a monastery. In 1979, I was ordained by Mahasi Sayadaw, an elderly Burmese monk and renowned meditation master who was visiting New York. The day after my ordination, I flew to Burma, where I lived for much of the next eight years.

As a Buddhist monk, I plunged into the austere world of traditional monasticism. Following the rules of discipline I shaved my head, took no food after noon and became celibate. Our daily schedule was to wake at 3 a.m. and retire at 11 p.m. The days were spent primarily in silence, cultivating the ancient Buddhist practice of mindful self-inquiry, a practice aimed at developing insight into the essential nature of one's own mind.

The experience of life as a monk soon began to sparkle with beauty for me. Everything I needed – food, shelter, health care and a traditional robe – was provided with love and kindness. The teachings were shared in the same way.

After some years of living and studying in the monastery, a dignified man in his fifties was ordained as a monk and moved into the room next to mine. He turned out to be U Tin Oo, a former Burmese Army General and Defense Minister. (U is a title of respect for men.)

Burma's dictator, General Ne Win, had been terrified that Tin Oo might lead a coup and had placed his rival in prison for five years. Upon his release, Tin Oo had renounced politics and sought spiritual refuge in the monastery.

At one point during our year together as monks, Tin Oo led me to a secluded spot on the monastery grounds. "I am Burmese and you are American," he said. "But the Buddha's teachings go beyond nationality or language. I want to see the people of Burma live in a society built on the highest spiritual values, with human dignity and fairness for all. My belief is that love and compassion must be the guiding principles of our political system. I cherish the dream that, before I die, I'll see this vision come true."

Neither of us suspected that U Tin Oo would one day become a national leader in Burma's quest for democracy. But through his friendship, I realized that our peaceful monastery and the community of monks didn't exist in a vacuum. Beyond the temple walls, Burma was struggling to survive one of the most difficult periods in its history – a history that had begun with centuries of wealth and pride, but now placed the nation on the brink of economic ruin and social collapse.

European adventurers who first glimpsed Burma in the fifteenth century recognized the "Golden Land" of legend. They returned with fabulous tales of gem mines, vast forests of precious teak, and plains shimmering with thousands of pagodas. There was abundant agricultural land and many deep-water harbors.

When the Europeans returned to colonize Asia, Burma proved a vulnerable target. Despite its ancient Buddhist tradition, the country was riddled with internal strife. Monarchs hadn't been able to establish a stable bureaucracy or a pattern of succession; a king's death invited chaos in the court and bloodshed among aspiring princes.

Cultural differences also produced friction. Burmans, who made up most of the population, lived in the central river valley. (Burmans are an ethnic group, while the word Burmese refers to any inhabitant of Burma.)

The surrounding mountains and the southern coasts were inhabited by ethnic minorities like the Karen, Karenni, Shan, Mon, Kachin, Chin and Arakanese, each with their own history, language and culture. Burmans or Shans usually controlled the throne and often enslaved other minorities for massive projects like warfare, canal construction and pagoda building.

The British capitalized on Burma's instability. It took three wars and over 60 years, but in 1886 they took the last Burmese king into captivity and added Burma to their empire. Burma was managed as a province of India, and much of what was authentically Burmese was eliminated.

The British replaced the traditional government with Indian civil servants trained in British methods and encouraged Indian and Chinese migrants to take over business and trade. This turned a profit for the crown and created a new elite of foreign Asians in most Burmese towns. By World War I, Rangoon was dominated by colonial architecture and alien religious shrines.

The ethnic minorities and Burmans, already on less than ideal terms, were further polarized. The British established a separate administration for the hill people and favored some,

especially the Karens, for military and government positions. Many Karens, Kachins and other animistic clans converted to Christianity, further dividing them from the Buddhist majority.

By the 1920s, however, students, intellectuals and monks – influenced by leftist ideas emanating from India and Britain – began to organize. In 1935, a young man named Aung San emerged as a potential leader of Burma's struggle for national independence. A law student at Rangoon University, he became a member of the executive committee of the politically vigorous Students' Union, and editor of its magazine. Spearheading student strikes and consolidating alliances, he increased his cadre of friends – and enemies.

In a boldly defiant gesture, Aung San and his closest friends gave themselves the title thakin, a Burmese word meaning "master" which was normally reserved for addressing the British. Calling themselves thakins underscored their conviction that Burma belonged to them, not to the occupying power.

When World War II erupted, Aung San saw the conflict as an opportunity to throw off the British yoke. After negotiating with the Japanese, he was ready to believe that Burma's salvation lay with them. In 1940, he and a group of like-minded young men known as the Thirty Comrades, traveled to Japan for military training. They formed the core of the Burmese Independent Army (BIA) and fought with the Japanese during their invasion of Burma in 1942.

It quickly became clear, however, that the Japanese had no intention of helping to create a free and independent Burma. They had used Aung San and his comrades as pawns. Realizing this, the BIA switched its allegiance to the Allied forces. Fighting with the British, they defeated the Japanese and expelled them from Burma in 1945.

After the war, the British agreed to grant Burma independence. An election was held in 1947 and Aung San's party won 248 of 255 seats and formed an interim government. The 32-year-old statesman traveled back and forth to London and all over Burma, meeting with ethnic minority leaders and pressing for national unity.

On July 19th, 1947, Aung San was meeting with his party's ministers and colleagues in the conference chamber of a government building in Rangoon. Suddenly the doors burst open; uniformed men carrying submachine guns leaped into the room and opened fire. Within seconds, Burma's new leaders lay dead.

The man responsible for this crime – a political rival of Aung San's – was seized the same day and hanged the next year. Another member of Aung San's party, U Nu, took over. At last, at 4:20 in the morning on January 4, 1948 – an hour and date deemed most favorable by an astrologer – Burma became an independent nation, with its own constitution.

But the honeymoon was brief, for Burma was continually embroiled in civil war. Karen, communist and other insurgent groups fought the new government from the hills; the Karens, Shans and Kachins never supported the constitution, believing it underrepresented their interests.

In 1958, U Nu was forced to relinquish power to a junta headed by General Ne Win, who had been one of Aung San's fellow thakins. He was born Shu Maung, but changed his name to Ne Win (pronounced nay-WIN, it means "the Sun of Glory").

Burma's constitution permitted minority states to secede after ten years, but Ne Win removed this possibility by "restoring law and order" with his Caretaker Government. He permitted U Nu to be re-elected prime minister in 1960, but seized power again in March 1962.

Superstitious and xenophobic, ruthless and maniacal, Ne Win assumed dictatorial control of Burma, beginning almost three decades of one of the most brutal and repressive governments in the world.

My friend Ko had telephoned me during the most massive demonstrations in 26 years of military dictatorship. Unable to ignore his pleas, I dedicated myself to arranging Ko's emigration from Burma. In the spring of 1989, I succeeded.

Even with Ko's safety assured, I could not forget the horrors that my other Burmese friends were facing on a daily basis. As my understanding of the crisis deepened, I was forced to confront an undeniable truth. Burma was not, could never be, just another country to me. Burma was my spiritual home. It was impossible to watch its death throes from a distance.

In November 1990, the overseas edition of Time magazine published a cover story which focused upon atrocities committed against hundreds of Burmese monks who supported the democracy movement. Troops had invaded monasteries, arresting, imprisoning and torturing the monks and nuns.

As accounts of these and other outrages mounted, something deep inside of me shifted. I knew that some of my closest friends were in mortal danger. Even though I was midway through an Australian lecture tour on Buddhist psychology, my priorities became clear. I would return to Burma at once. I was uncertain how I could help, but I needed to be there and witness, with my own eyes, what was happening to the country I loved.

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