Burma: The Next Killing Fields?
By Alan Clements
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Chapter Three

IN RANGOON, CITY OF FEAR

From the moment I stepped off the plane in Rangoon, it was evident that the character of this beautiful land had changed. On the airport roof, a group of tense SLORC soldiers manned a machine-gun post. I walked across the runway tarmac, preparing my story for the immigration authorities.

Inside the airport terminal, the tension mounted. Our planeload of mostly young Burmese officers and their families, along with an official tour group of five European businessmen, was greeted with silence by several members of Burma's secret police.

Their presence was intimidating: stiff legs placed shoulders' width apart, arms firmly crossed and fists clenched. All wore dark sunglasses. They scrutinized the passengers' every step.

This was my first encounter with SLORC troops – Burma's killing machine. I knew that most of SLORC's 280,000 foot soldiers were poor, simple rural boys, many just teenagers, who desperately needed money for their families. With inflation running nearly 70 percent and the entire economy in shambles, SLORC had little problem recruiting these young men or programming them to believe they were upholding justice.

As our group waited to pass through immigration, an officer broke the silence. "Mr. Alan Clements, come forward," he commanded.

I had been warned this would happen. Although my name appeared on the flight's official passenger list, it didn't tally up with the list of approved arrivals. This was not a moment to panic. Trying to look calm, I walked forward and was escorted by several uniformed officials to a back room of the airport.

Inside the small, smoke-filled room, the SLORC official conducted a grueling, two-hour courtroom-like examination of my motives for re-entering Burma. Having spent many years there as a monk, I stated my desire to revisit sacred sites and monasteries. He eyed me suspiciously, but finally relented – after I paid a sizable "donation" to be given, he claimed, to a nearby monastery.

"You can stay for two days only. And you're not to leave Rangoon," the cigar-smoking officer concluded, stamping my passport with a snide chuckle.

Relieved but by no means relaxed, I made my way outside. I'd been cautioned in Bangkok, by an underground Burmese official, to "be careful of how they play you at the airport. If authorities have the least bit of suspicion about you, they may pretend to go along with your story – let you in – hoping to kill many birds with one stone. They might gamble that it's to their advantage to allow you entry, then have the police follow you, locate your contacts and grab them after you leave."

Had I been tricked or was I free? One thing was certain – I had now entered a city of fear. Once out of the airport, I was utterly on my own.

With only two days in Rangoon, I hadn’t a moment to waste. Leaving the airport, I hired a taxi. "Where are you going?" the driver asked, eyeing me in the rearview mirror.

"Downtown." As we drove into the city, I stared reflectively out the open window and

remembered the land and people that had touched me more than any other culture in the world.

Rangoon had never looked cleaner. Many roads were newly paved and walls freshly painted. Flowering shrubs had been planted along roadsides. There were more parks and bridges, and many new buildings. But something was off. What was missing was Rangoon's unique ambiance; the sense of entering an extended village or community.

SLORC had launched a "beautification" campaign soon after they'd taken power, trying to demonstrate the benefits of restoring law and order. They'd demanded that all Rangoon's residents paint their homes by the end of the year or face utility cutoffs. These municipal improvements were a veneer of respectability, I realized, engineered to distract from the suffering that lay just below the surface.

As we drove on, modern Burma's true face revealed itself. At almost every major intersection there were large red-and-white lettered propaganda billboards erected by SLORC. They read, in Burmese and English: Love and Cherish the Motherland, Only Through Discipline Will Democracy Be Won and The Military is Here To Protect the People From All Riotous and Destructive Elements.

When I reached my hotel I telephoned the US Embassy and told the officer on duty my name, passport number, hotel and flight departure information. I explained that I was most likely under surveillance, and that if I wasn't on my scheduled flight in two days, the embassy should assume the worst and try to find me.

From this point on, I took no chances. Anything I said or did had to be done with impeccable discretion, for fear of endangering those with whom I'd be in contact. SLORC had filled Burma's prisons with thousands of innocent men, women and children on the slightest suspicion of dissent towards its policies.

As I walked around the city that afternoon it was clear that people were avoiding me. Their faces appeared strained and weary as they moved quickly along. Others had their heads lowered, unwilling to meet my eyes. This was so different from my memory of the Burmese people.

Gone were the days when even a casual passerby would stop and ask a western visitor to have tea and talk about international politics or Buddhist thought. Gone were the days when one would be openly invited into a Burmese family's home to have dinner and meet the elders of the household. I felt that I was witnessing the death of the most elegant culture I'd known.

Some time later, taking circuitous back roads to be certain I wasn't followed, I arrived at the compound of an old friend's house. She was a well-known Burmese filmmaker, now nearly 80 years old. Her family had become my adopted relatives during my tenure as a monk, and we rejoiced at seeing each other after so many years apart.

Taking my hand, she led me into a small room near the back of the house. She locked the door behind us and peered out the window, "Secret police are everywhere," she said, closing the blinds. "Every store, every corner – SLORC's evil eyes are everywhere, throughout the whole country. You can't trust anyone anymore. You can't even have an overnight guest in the house, unless you report it to SLORC authorities the same day. They can give you up to seven years in prison."

"Does that just apply to foreign guests?"

She shrugged. "It doesn't matter who. It could be your own brother. Anyway, I'm too old for prison," she said with the wry humor I remembered. She'd always been a feisty woman who'd stood up for her beliefs. "But I'm glad to see you again," she said energetically. "Let's talk."

Among the many stories she shared about living in a "SLORC-induced state of terror,"

the most compelling was her eyewitness account of a recent murder. "Just a few weeks ago," she said with a slight shudder, "I saw SLORC secret police fire at a group of children who had gathered on a street corner and were chanting anti-SLORC slogans. Out of nowhere, undercover agents appeared. The children started running and screaming as the police pulled out their guns. They shot a ten-year-old boy right in the head. It was horrible. The police just stood there, remorseless and proud, as if they had saved the country."

I could tell that my friend had found it emotionally exhausting to recount these tragedies. But as I was about to leave, she gripped my hand. "Never before have we experienced a darker period than this," she said bitterly. "Not even during the Japanese barbarities we had to suffer during World War II. It's like waking up to the most unimaginable nightmare, day after day. Sometimes you forget; you see the trees, the flowers. But then you hear screams in the night, and you know that another person has been taken away."

I took a taxi back to my hotel, ate quickly and then telephoned an old friend who'd been a judge during the democratic years in Burma. He was glad to hear from me and agreed to meet at my hotel – but only after dark.

While waiting, I turned on the hotel's television. It provided yet another lesson in SLORC-controlled "Big Brother" politics.

National news consists of short video clips of SLORC events, thinly disguised as legitimate news stories. I'd heard that the clips usually propagated SLORC's self-proclaimed "magnanimous intentions," celebrating the "noble" qualities of General Saw Maung and the head of military intelligence, Major General Khin Nyunt (kin NYUHNT). They were often shown in public dedicating yet another park or flower garden, restoring yet another pagoda, paving yet another city street or bestowing donations on another monastery.

The two generals now appeared on the screen, walking between long lines of carefully placed citizens who bowed to them as they passed by. Some tossed flowers at the generals' feet. All the while the two despots smiled, waved and shook hands with the minions as a soundtrack of ebullient cheering was heard in the background. Looking more closely, however, I noticed that the people in the crowd were neither smiling nor cheering. They appeared stiff and frightened.

There was a knock at the door. I stood up and turned off the television.

"Who is it?," I demanded.

"It's U Gyi," said a quiet Burmese voice. I quickly let him in.

"Uncle!," I said enthusiastically. "It's great to see you! You weren't followed…?"

"That's impossible to know." He settled himself in a chair. His frail shoulders hunched forward and he squinted at me intently through thick glasses. "No place is safe anymore," he said, accepting a cup of tea. "Not even within the monasteries. SLORC has secret police disguised as monks and nuns. There are unseen eyes everywhere.

"No one speaks about politics. Many people have begun to distrust their closest friends." He shrugged and ran a thin hand through his white hair. "After a while, when so many people end up mysteriously disappearing, you gradually shut up. You live in constant fear of accusations from informers – then imprisonment and torture. Fear governs what you say and what you do.

"When people get arrested, who knows where they're taken? They're never heard from again. That's the tactic SLORC is so masterful at using. The more individuals missing, the more terror there is. The more terror, the less unity. And without unity, there's no opposition."

U Gyi leaned back, removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. " We also feel that SLORC takes a perverse joy in making people suffer. Especially that Khin Nyunt. He's the mastermind

behind the cruelty; he's turned torture into an industry.

This I know for a fact," he said. "My two nephews and my niece – they were students at the university during the '88 uprisings – were all arrested. We still don't know the boys' whereabouts; we think they may be dead." His voice was calm, but his hands shook slightly. "My niece is with us at home. She was repeatedly raped and beaten in prison. She wakes us up, screaming, in the middle of the night."

U Gyi finished his tea and carefully set the cup down. "I must be going now," he said. As we walked toward the door, I knew this might be the last time we'd see each other. He turned away and walked slowly down the long corridor. I stood in the hallway and watched, completely at a loss for words. When he reached the end of the hallway, U Gyi stopped, turned and regarded me with a judicious eye.

"Never mind!," he called out to me. "Be on your way! You've got work to do."

After a restless night, I woke early and decided to visit a small village not far from central Rangoon where I'd often walked as a monk, collecting my alms food each morning. The village held many memories and was the home of numerous friends, both young and old.

Village life centered around a small temple. Since I'd known the caretakers of the temple – an elderly blind man and his wife – quite well, I wanted to see how they had fared over the past years. But as I approached the area I stopped short. The village and temple were gone. In their place was a vacant, bulldozed lot.

I recalled the times I'd walked through this exquisite and ancient village, savoring the early morning smells of my favorite Burmese foods cooking on open coal stoves. Children had prepared for school, villagers clad in colorful sarongs had bathed around the outdoor wells. I was often greeted by small groups of children, kites trailing behind them as they raced down the road.

Their delight was a great source of inspiration for me after the monastic silence and long periods of isolated study. Many of the children I had watched growing up over the years had visited the monastery during their long summer breaks and had been ordained as novice monks. Now they were gone, moved to "new towns" along with thousands of others SLORC had labeled "undesirable." They were probably starving, diseased, maybe even dead.

Other contacts I met that day told similar stories. A recently dismissed university professor, now working as a taxi driver, described SLORC's control of information and the economy as he drove me back to my hotel.

"SLORC is trying to hide what it's doing from the world," he said. "The only news we get is Voice of America and the BBC. If you don't have a radio, or if it's a blackout day, you don't know what's happening."

He swerved to avoid an oxcart loaded with watermelons. "If there's an article about Burma in Time or Newsweek, it's blacked out in the magazine. And what we get from the local, SLORC – controlled papers is worthless – lies and propaganda."

As we entered a back alley near my hotel, my professor-turned-taxi-driver discussed his own fate. SLORC had closed Burma's high schools and colleges after the 1988 uprising, since the students had been the main voice of the prodemocracy movement. Thousands of teachers and professors were fired and forced to join the students as they fled to the malaria-infested jungles along the Thai-Burmese border.

"An entire generation of educated Burmese is being destroyed. "The driver shook his head in disgust. "We're no more than animals under this military junta."

After a brief rest back at my hotel I ventured out again. The sun was setting. As I walked up a back road to the Shwedagon pagoda, the gentle sound of temple gongs reverberated in the

quiet evening. Looming ahead, the 2300-year-old Buddhist shrine rose 300 feet into a bright orange sky.

The western face of the pagoda's huge golden dome was radiant, reflecting the setting sun. Here, for a moment, I was able to recapture the feeling that had pulled Burma so deeply into my heart.

As I walked up the long staircase to the upper portal of the pagoda, I passed familiar bookstalls containing ancient Buddhist texts and temple bells of every size and shape. Small flower shops exuded the exotic fragrance of jasmine. Everywhere were statues of the Buddha. The Burmese are famous for their artistry, and the guilded sculptures are among the most beautiful one can find anywhere.

I found a shopkeeper I'd known well over the years, and inquired about a monk friend I wanted to meet. Leaving his stall unattended, the merchant led me through lantern-lit alleys until we arrived at an unfamiliar house. Fifteen minutes after my monk friend entered, accompanied by a second monk.

"Ashin Paya!" I exclaimed, using the honorific greeting given to revered monks. "I'm happy to see you after all these years." We spoke for a few minutes, after which he introduced his friend, a younger monk named Aloka who had recently been arrested on suspicion of belonging to the All Burma Young Monks' Union (ABYMU). This activist organization had redefined the potential role of the clergy in Burmese society by calling for immediate transfer of power to the democratically elected government.

"I was arrested by the authorities back in October," Aloka began, "during a big SLORC crackdown on monasteries in Mandalay. They took me into detention and began to viciously interrogate me. When I saw a nearby room filled with monks' robes, I feared for my life. Still, I refused to admit I'd done anything wrong.

"Meanwhile, I heard screams from other rooms in the prison – incredible screams, like nothing I'd ever heard before. So many other monks had been arrested that I was sure it was one of my friends. As I sat there in terror they began slapping me across the face and shouting, ‘You're next, if you don't tell us who other members of the ABYMU are!’ But I offered them no answers and they beat me with a cane pole against my legs and shins."

He lifted his robe. His legs were so severely bruised they looked like they had been pounded with a baseball bat. "See here," he said. "This is how SLORC supports the religion of our people."

Aloka's injuries, he insisted, were minor compared to what many other monks have faced. He described how hundreds, maybe thousands of monks had been arrested; exact figures are impossible to get.

Most of those brought in were charged with possessing anti-SLORC literature, using heroin, being communists – even raping women. Three young monks were arrested solely for the poems they'd written in their journals.

"Many of the monks were given long prison sentences," Aloka told me. "Others were killed. Still others fled and are now in hiding. A number of the highest-ranking monks have been detained, some of them forcibly disrobed. Many are 'missing' and presumed dead."

The sangha, or community of monks, has always been a powerful influence in Burma, where 85% of the population is devoutly Buddhist. Monks are held in the highest esteem: they personify the spiritual aspirations of the people, sacrificing worldly pleasures in favor of strict adherence to the teachings of the Buddha.

So when the sangha began supporting the demonstrators, SLORC was hesitant to repress

them too harshly. But in August 1990, when the students peacefully demonstrated to commemorate the massacre in Rangoon two years earlier, troops viciously attacked the entire gathering – including thousands of monks who were also attending the event.

After much deliberation, the clergy responded with an unprecedented measure. They decided to boycott the Burmese military and their families. They refused to accept their alms or to administer Buddhist rituals for their weddings or funerals.

The implications of this spiritual banishment are profound to a Buddhist. It eliminates the opportunity to acquire spiritual merit and virtually assures a rebirth in the animal realm, or in hell.

SLORC retaliated by attacking all 133 monasteries in Mandalay, where they tortured, killed and forcibly disrobed many monks.

I asked my host about the program I'd just seen on SLORC-controlled TV, which showed Saw Maung and Khin Nyunt visiting monasteries and making large donations to senior monks.

"Pure SLORC propaganda," the monk replied. "After the raids on monasteries, some high ranking monks were replaced by puppets – monks controlled by SLORC. Sure, SLORC wants people to believe that they support Buddhism. But no one is fooled by such nonsense. SLORC leaders treat dogs better than they treat monks."

I walked back toward my hotel alone, shaken by the day's encounters. The streets were empty; there was a chill in the air. My final night in Rangoon was painfully long. I slept fitfully, anticipating my departure from Burma the next morning.

The taxi drive from my hotel to the airport took me down University Lane, directly past Aung San Suu Kyi's home, where she has languished under house arrest since July 1989. As we drove slowly past the heavily guarded compound I reflected on Suu Kyi's dramatic political rise in Burma.

Everything I'd read and heard about her inspired me: her dignity, her enormous courage, her uncompromising commitment to truth and her skillful integration of the principles of Gandhian nonviolence and political leadership. Her urgent call for reconciliation among the diverse peoples of her country stirred my own passions to join her "Revolution of the Spirit."

"It is not power that corrupts, but fear," Aung San Suu Kyi wrote in her book Freedom from Fear. "Fear of losing power corrupts those who wield it, and the fear of the scourge of power corrupts those who are subject to it."

I looked at her silent house, wondering if she would ever be allowed to lead her people into the future.

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To excerpt "Instinct for Freedom," interview the author, or for foreign rights contact:

Alan Clements
Telephone: 1-604-251-1781
www.everydayrevolution.org
Email: contact@worlddharma.com

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