

Burma: The Next Killing Fields?
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Chapter Two

THE NEXT KILLING FIELDS?

It was 7 o'clock in the morning on December 4th, 1990. I sat slumped in the back seat of a taxi, hot and exhausted, having just arrived in Bangkok on the overnight flight from Sydney. I told the driver to take me straight to the Burmese Embassy, a decaying, two-story house within minutes of the most opulent hotels in Thailand.

The embassy building had been the scene of random bombings and recent protests by University students and Thai monks. There were iron bars on every window and armed guards kept a watchful eye on one's every move.

I told an embassy official that I had called twice from Sydney, just a few days before, and was here to apply for a short-term tourist visa. I'd been told that such a visa could be granted, if I had the necessary papers.

"No," the official stated, "Impossible."

"But your visa officer told me it was a simple procedure. He said you were allowing foreigners back into the country," I said politely.

"Leave," he responded, pointing at the door. The armed guard looked at me, unblinking, and I understood that the situation was non-negotiable.

Well, at least I'd learned one thing – Burma was no longer the hospitable place I remembered. Even the embassy in Bangkok, hundreds of miles from Rangoon, reflected the fear that had descended upon the Land of 10,000 Pagodas. I could only imagine what life was like within the country itself. Nevertheless, I desperately wanted to return. There had to be a way.

From a hotel near the embassy, I called an underground Burmese contact. His name had been given to me by a dissident Burmese expatriate at one of my lectures in Australia, only days earlier. At the time, I'd thought little of it. Now, my entire journey depended on this sketchy connection. I was enormously relieved when he picked up the phone and agreed to help me.

Late that night, my contact and I stopped our car in front of a large walled residence on the outskirts of the city. My escort rang the buzzer, whispered his name and pushed the door open.

Lying on mats on the pavement of the compound, illuminated by bars of light filtering in through the windows, were the bodies of half a dozen young men. I caught glimpses of their faces: all seemed fatigued and sickly. "These students all have malaria," said my escort as we walked slowly past them. "They've just come in from the jungle."

We found the man I wished to see in a brightly lit interior room. To my astonishment – and his as well – we knew each other. He was an older man; we'd shared a circle of close friends years ago in Rangoon. Showing me a place to sit, he asked what had brought me to this house. I explained what had happened at the Burmese Embassy and told him of my interest of returning to Rangoon.

"I know your love of our country and the family-like ties you have with your Buddhist

friends," he said, smiling cautiously. "But Burma's become a land of horror. It's a real risk to enter the country right now. Even if I could get you a visa, it might get you no further than Rangoon airport; after you arrive, they may not let you enter the country. The airport is the junta's chokehold on Burma; they control everything that enters or leaves. But if you still want to risk it, I think we can manage to get you a visa."

Five days later, I picked up my visa from a white-haired old Burmese man at an office near the center of Bangkok. As I turned to leave, the man reached out and held my arm. He reminded me that Burma was still in the viselike grip of SLORC, the junta's State Law and Order Restoration Council. To the Burmese, this sinister acronym represented what SS had to the Jews. "Remember," the man said, "there's only one law in Burma today – SLORC law. It's a synonym for terror and torture. Be careful!"

The flight from Bangkok to Rangoon is only 350 miles, but it's a passage between worlds. I'd left the cosmopolitan, highly industrialized "Los Angeles of the East" and within 45 minutes would arrive in what was fast becoming the most impoverished country in Asia. I stared out the window at the lapis curve of the Andaman Sea, and thought about the bitter origins of Burma's present crisis.

When Ne Win took over in 1962, he abolished the constitution and courts, banning all political parties save his own, the newly formed Burmese Socialist Program Party (BSPP). Under the BSPP, all farms and businesses were nationalized. Civil service jobs were taken over by military personnel and profits from private industry were siphoned into the hands of the ruling junta.

Ne Win also attempted to isolate Burma from foreign influences and investment. His severe economic "reforms" and trade restrictions had a devastating effect on Burma's immigrant community, forcing nearly a quarter million Indians and Pakistanis to leave the country without their assets.

Western journalists were soon barred from Burma and replaced by state-controlled media. Tourists were restricted to 24-hour visas (extended to seven days in the 1970s) and confined to a small portion of the country. The Burmese were forbidden to travel to insurgent areas within their own land, and outspoken critics of the regime were imprisoned.

The results were disastrous. By the late 1980s, due to unfettered greed and gross mismanagement of the economy, the Golden Land had become one of the poorest nations in the world. Its once affluent rice industry could no longer meet even local demand, and the government had no means of purchasing foreign-made medicines.

Runaway inflation, coupled with shortages of basic necessities, led to widespread hunger and disease. In 1987, faced with a staggering foreign debt, Burma was forced to apply for Least Developed Country status under the United Nations.

In the midst of this national tragedy – acting on the advice of his numerologist—Ne Win declared that bank notes of 25, 35 and 75 kyats were to be abolished without compensation, and replaced by denominations of 45 and 90, the dictator's lucky numbers. It was an attempt to control inflation and profiteering by smugglers, but its most dramatic impact was the immediate destruction of many citizens' life savings.

By early 1988, the Burmese were desperate. Students began organizing demonstrations, demanding the resignation of the BSPP government, a new economic system, full democracy and guaranteed human rights.

Ne Win responded by closing down the universities for several months. But in July, after demonstrations had again picked up steam, he convened an emergency BSPP congress and

announced his resignation as party chairman.

The Burmese were not deceived. They knew that Ne Win would manipulate his successor from behind the scenes. Students continued their protests. On August 8, they engineered a huge strike and demonstration that ended in a bloodbath and placed usually obscure Burma in headlines around the world.

According to ABC's Nightline, "authorities [later] announced that 500 people had been killed. Foreign diplomats and others on the scene said the number was closer to 10,000." My friend Ko had telephoned me from the center of that storm.

But the movement for democracy had not ended with the massacre. Protesters called for a second nationwide strike on August 22nd. Workers refused to return to their jobs until a new, interim government had been formed. Incredibly, in late August, the government's brutal repression began to subside. A cautious optimism flowered. Could it be that the tactic was working? Were the military leaders relenting at last?

Organizers who'd been underground surfaced and removed the handkerchiefs that had concealed their faces. Independent newspapers seemed to spring up everywhere. Throughout the country, people resigned their membership in the BSPP.

On September 18, as the strike was about to enter its second month, radio programming was interrupted to announce another "coup." Burma, a male voice reported, was now under the control of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), headed by General Saw Maung. (SLORC is pronounced as one word – slork – in both Burmese and English.) Its stated purpose was to restore order while the country prepared for "democratic multiparty elections."

SLORC soon spelled out what restoring order would involve. There was to be a curfew from 4 p.m. to 8 a.m., restrictions on giving speeches or chanting slogans, a ban on gatherings of five or more people, and searches for weapons hidden in private homes and monasteries. There was also new, intensified surveillance of all potential dissidents. (The organizers who'd bared their faces the week before discovered that the government now had lists and photographs with which to identify the opposition.)

Within 24 hours, army units raided strike centers throughout Burma. Any dissent, any association with those critical of the regime, meant imprisonment, disappearance or death.

Thousands of students who had supported democracy now had no choice but to face SLORC's terror or flee for their lives. Those who fled were often chased by soldiers for weeks through the mountains near the border. Those who were lucky enough to escape the soldiers tried to make a refuge of sorts in the jungle. There they remain, in one of the most malaria-infested parts of the world – aspiring engineers, doctors, poets, musicians and artists, living under constant threat of attack.

Then, in February 1989, when it seemed that things could get no worse, SLORC announced that the promised "free and fair" elections would actually take place in the spring of 1990. It was as if a dam had broken. Three months after the announcement, 234 opposition parties had registered with the SLORC election committee, announcing over 2300 candidates.

Of all the parties, the National League for Democracy (NLD), formed the previous September, gained the widest following. Its objective – to achieve a democratic government – was simple and appealing. But its greatest attraction was one of its founders, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. (Daw is a title of respect for women. The rest of her name is pronounced awng sahn soo CHEE, but she's normally referred to in English simply as Suu Kyi – soo CHEE.)

Suu Kyi is the daughter of Burma's revered national hero, Aung San, the man who would have been Burma's first prime minister if he hadn't been assassinated in 1947, when Suu Kyi was

two, shortly before he was to take office.

In 1960, her mother was appointed Burma's ambassador to India and Suu Kyi, then fifteen, went with her. She went to school in India and then at Oxford.

In 1972, she married an Englishman, Michael Aris, and worked for the United Nations in New York. They lived for several years in Bhutan, where their two sons were raised.

Suu Kyi retained her Burmese citizenship and continued to visit her mother in Rangoon. In early 1988, her mother suffered a severe stroke, and Suu Kyi went back to Burma to care for her.

At first, Suu Kyi watched the demonstrations from her mother's bedside. But after the August 8th uprising, she could no longer keep silent. She wrote to the government, asking it to form a committee to address the protestors' demands. Then, on August 25, she made her first public speech, at the famous Shwedagon pagoda. She told a cheering crowd of several hundred thousand people that "I could not, as my father's daughter, remain indifferent to all that was going on."

The crowds saw her as Burma's last ray of hope for overcoming 26 years of oppression. As she began traveling around Burma for the NLD, she captivated ever-larger audiences with her "Revolution of the Spirit" campaign. She advocated discipline, sacrifice, unity of purpose, multiparty democracy and nonviolent civil disobedience.

If the opportunity for free elections seemed too good to be true, that's because it was – and SLORC's real purpose soon became clear. Rather than force the democratic parties underground, where they might create an effective opposition, SLORC gave them the opportunity to expose themselves. It dangled a carrot, then dealt swiftly and mercilessly with those who took the bait.

SLORC first placed draconian campaign restrictions upon the parties. Public campaigning was already limited because of SLORC's anti-assembly law. But now all speeches, writings and publications had to be pre-approved by local township authorities. They confiscated any derogatory material; those found guilty could receive prison terms of up to three years.

The restrictions were a success; only the most outspoken opposition voices and their intimate supporters appeared in public. But Suu Kyi and the NLD refused to be intimidated. They defied laws forbidding public meetings and continued to print political manifestos despite SLORC's orders. Suu Kyi wrote:

The behavior of the Chairman of SLORC is not that of a gaung saung [leader], but that of a gaung shaung [evader of responsibility]. To resolve problems...we must meet face to face. Why do you [Saw Maung] not have the courage? Why do you still hold the gun?... [If the leaders of SLORC aren't] willing to engage in dialogue, they are not fit to run a government, not fit to administer the nation....Solving enigmas by using lethal weapons on unarmed civilians is a fascist method.

In a letter to her husband in January 1989, Suu Kyi described the oppressive tactics SLORC used against her:

We started our journey...by boat. All the way the people in both villages and towns had been told not to go out of their houses, not to wave...and gunshots had been fired to frighten them. Yesterday we sailed into Bassein accompanied by two boatloads of armed marines, and the whole harbor was full of troops, most of the streets blocked, sandbagged and barbed, and hundreds of soldiers posted all over the town. Also, they arrested a number of our men.

On another occasion, Suu Kyi was campaigning in the southern delta region. As she walked toward a group of soldiers, a SLORC army captain ordered his soldiers to aim their rifles

at her. Suu Kyi asked her followers to move aside and continued down the center of the street. Before the troops opened fire, an army major intervened and ordered them not to shoot.

Whenever she spoke, thousands of citizens gathered, risking imprisonment by defying the anti-assembly laws. Later SLORC arrested, tortured and murdered her most visible supporters. And yet, despite the continued intimidation, Suu Kyi vowed that her people would continue their Gandhian-style civil disobedience campaign.

Young dissidents were asked not to make defamatory statements against the armed forces, for Suu Kyi believed that "there is a difference between the armed forces and those who abuse the power of the armed forces."

Her influence also extended beyond the NLD; she was not only able to check violent confrontations and control her less disciplined supporters, but also to inspire nonviolent approaches in other political groups.

Repressing political campaigns was just one of SLORC's tactics. Soon after announcing the elections, it began another, far more aggressive effort to thwart its opposition: forced relocation. This term refers to moving entire neighborhoods out of Burma's population centers into rural backwaters, where they could not follow or participate in the democratic movement.

Here's how the New York Times described the forced relocations:

At least 500,000 Burmese are being forced to move from cities to new, ill-prepared outlying towns where malaria and hepatitis are rampant. Diplomats described seeing Burmese families sitting along the roadsides by their demolished houses with all their belongings, waiting for up to three weeks for army trucks to take them to relocation sites. The diplomats, who were interviewed by telephone or in Bangkok, said the relocations have been taking place in most major cities. B.U.R.M.A. – the Burma Rights Movement for Action – reported that in these so-called "new towns," people live in ten-foot square thatched huts, perched over flooded, mosquito-ridden swamps. Families are sometimes forced to sell their clothes in order to buy enough rice to feed themselves every other day.

In the midst of the ongoing relocations, Suu Kyi was to lead a huge rally on July 19, 1989, to celebrate Martyrs' Day, a national holiday honoring her father's assassination forty-two years earlier. An estimated 10,000 SLORC troops flooded Rangoon in anticipation of the rally.

According to the New Yorker, a government edict had been released the day before, giving SLORC officers the authority to arrest any participants and mete out one of three punishments—three years hard labor, life in prison or execution. Suu Kyi called off the rally. She said her party "had no intention of leading our people straight into a killing field."

The day after Martyrs' Day, SLORC stationed eleven truckloads of armed troops outside Suu Kyi's home in Rangoon. When she tried to leave to pay a private visit to her father's grave, she was placed under house arrest for "endangering the state."

SLORC also arrested her immediate staff and imprisoned almost all other members of the NLD's executive committee. Its 64-year-old chairman, U Tin Oo – the man I'd come to know during my days as a monk – was sentenced to three years' hard labor. (Seven more years was added to that in February 1992.)

After Suu Kyi was arrested, she "demanded a transfer to Rangoon's Insein Prison and asked to be kept under the same conditions as her supporters who were arrested as part of the crackdown on her party." SLORC ignored her request.

She immediately began a hunger strike that lasted for twelve days, breaking it only when

she "received solemn assurances from the authorities that her supporters were not being subjected to inhuman interrogation and that their cases would be dealt with by due process of law."

When the elections finally took place in May 1990, only 93 of the original 234 political parties fielded candidates. In a stunning and humiliating upset for the junta, Suu Kyi's NLD party won 392 of the 485 seats up for election in the National Assembly (81%), while the military only won 10 seats.

But SLORC did not transfer power to the new National Assembly. The obvious reason, of course, was a desire to retain power. But Philippine Foreign Secretary Raul Manglapus, after meeting with SLORC leaders in December 1991, suggested another motive. SLORC leaders, he said, were afraid they'd face "Nuremberg-type trials" if they relinquished control to the opposition.

In the end, the only concrete result of the "free and fair" elections was that there were now as many as 30,000 political prisoners, including many of the winning candidates.

The fate of these prisoners has been described by Amnesty International, which identified nineteen interrogation and detention centers throughout the country. All employ torture on a routine basis. Prisoners are severely beaten with thick leather straps, given electric shocks to the genitals, stuck with needles in their finger tips and burned on sensitive body parts. Some dissidents, including young students no more than fifteen years old, are placed in solitary confinement for up to six months.

Those who have escaped or been released from prison have described other barbaric methods, which are now so institutionalized that the torturers refer to them by name. The "iron road" is when an iron bar is rolled up and down your shins until the skin is rubbed off. "Walking the seashore" is being forced to crawl on broken glass while being beaten and kicked. The "wet submarine" is being submerged naked in a tank of water until nearly suffocated. The "helicopter" is being hung from an electric fan and then spun around and whipped or beaten with a stick. The "ice treatment" is being stripped naked and tied to a large block of ice. The torture continues until the prisoner gives SLORC the information it wants.

"Coffee, sir?"

The singsong voice of the stewardess jolted me out of my grisly reverie. In the distance I could see the Burmese coast; it wouldn't be long now.

As I sipped from the plastic cup, I tried to fit the jagged pieces of information together in my mind. The scenario in Burma seemed somehow familiar. It reminded me of something, and by the time we began our descent toward Rangoon, I'd figured out what.

A few years before, I had attended a dinner party at the home of John Bryson, a well-respected photojournalist who for years had been a Life magazine correspondent and photo editor.

Sitting in John's living room, I'd browsed through his portfolio and come upon an old copy of Life. The cover photograph drew me in. It showed a group of brutalized Cambodian children, huddled closely together, expressions of horror on their faces.

"What are you looking at?" John had asked, breaking my concentration.

"Life's cover story on the Cambodian genocide. Did you shoot this article?"

"Yes," he said, shaking his head. "My God, what a trip that was. I and a few other journalists were to be the first western press allowed back into Cambodia since its fall, four years before. We knew we'd be in for some gruesome scenes, but what we saw went beyond anything we could have imagined."

Bryson reached for the magazine. "Here, turn the page," he said. "That photo up in the corner is the one that shook me up the most. We walked into a large open field, which was full of human skulls—just like the photograph shows. Not just hundreds, but thousands upon thousands of white, dried skulls."

"To get the shot we walked out through them. When we looked closer, we realized that almost every one of the skulls had been broken, cracked or had huge holes in it. Some still had bandanas over the eye sockets, where the victims had been blindfolded."

"Unbelievable," I said. "It sounds like an absolute nightmare."

"It took a while to fully comprehend what we were seeing. Each skull represented a human life. Each had once belonged to a human being with skin, blood, a family – and they all had been bludgeoned, or hacked with huge machetes, or clubbed to death."

"We stopped there in the middle of this sea of skulls and just stood there in disbelief. These were the killing fields. And there were many of them, not just one. It was almost impossible to comprehend the reality of it all. We all asked ourselves the same question: Didn't anyone know?"

As I recalled that conversation now, an awful question arose in my mind: Would the next killing fields be in Burma? The more I thought about it, the more parallels I saw between the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia and SLORC in Burma.

Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge had systematically destroyed scores of Cambodian villages and launched mass relocation campaigns. The terror was especially aimed at those whose education could be a threat to the regime. City dwellers were driven to the countryside and then purged of "bourgeois elements" – including those who simply wore glasses or spoke a foreign language. Refugees fled Cambodia by the thousands – if they were lucky enough to escape. Pol Pot even changed the name of his country to Kampuchea.

In Burma, SLORC has also destroyed villages and set up relocation camps. Many thousands of Burmese have been intimidated into submission, imprisoned, tortured and executed, and SLORC's fury has been particularly focused on students and other educated people. Refugees are streaming to the mountainous border regions and into Thailand weekly. Ne Win also changed the name of his country, to Myanmar.

But there's one way in which things have the potential to become much worse in Burma than in Cambodia – it has six times as many people.

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

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