

D Y I N G F O R DEMOCRACY



A. EVERARD/IMPACT

Myanmar, once known as a green and gentle land of golden pagodas, is now a country of blood and terror.

After gaining independence from Britain in 1948 Burma was a democracy until 1962, when General Ne Win embarked on "The Burmese Way to Socialism", a fiercely isolationist period that lasted through 26 years of brutal military dictatorship.

By 1988 the ageing General Ne Win presided over a country that had become one of the ten poorest nations in the world. The economy was collapsing; Burma was spending 40 per cent of its national budget on wars against its own people.

In the Spring of 1988 hundreds of thousands of Burmese people rose up against the military and Ne Win's one party rule. Day after day they poured onto the streets in peaceful marches to demand

a return to democracy and human rights. The government security forces violently suppressed the protests. Thousands of people were shot dead by the army; thousands more were arrested and often subjected to brutal interrogation and torture.

Ne Win resigned in July 1988. There was a short flowering of democracy and freedom of expression during a series of interim administrations, when martial law was lifted.

On 18 September 1988 the armed forces Chief of Staff, General Saw Maung, deposed the civilian administration. Demonstrations were violently put down. Thousands of people were arrested. Saw Maung's military junta, The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC)

is now in control of the country. They have renamed it Myanmar.

In May 1990 SLORC called Myanmar's first elections for 30 years. Ignoring the military, 80 per cent of the people voted to the National League for Democracy led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. By October, SLORC had not convened the National Assembly.

Molly Duncan was working in Burma from June 1988 and witnessed the unfolding of this extraordinary time. She describes what she saw and heard.

"I was based in a place called Methmakee. It is an area of mountains, with thick tropical jungle so dense that most travelling is by river. The people speak the two main Karen languages, plus

Burmese and English. My job was to work on a health programme providing three months of very basic "barefoot doctor" training to Karen nurses.

When Burma was colonised by the British in the 1870s, and ruled as part of India, many Karen were converted to Christianity, either 7th Day Adventists or Baptists, whilst most Burmese remained Buddhists. Karen Christians were educated by the British and tended to take the best jobs. After the war, in negotiations over the independence of Burma, Britain had agreed with the Karen that there would be an independent State called Kawthooleh. But on independence the Burmese reply to the Karen regarding this promise was "if you want a state - fight for it". They have fought ever since.

The border shifts continually across a 20-mile-wide corridor. In the rainy season we travelled down into Burma to see people in distant villages that were then under Karen jurisdiction. In the dry season the Burmese military move into these villages to "protect" them. The Burmese move forward and try to burn and destroy these villages, clear out the people, establish a free fire zone and set land mines. The Karen National Army try and ambush the soldiers from trenches.

I was told many stories of these bamboo houses being set alight by Burmese soldiers with families inside them and of children being thrown into the flames. I met a man whose three children had been killed in this way at the end of 1988 while he was being held by soldiers. His seven-year-old son ran towards him from the hut and was shot down.

The people whom I met in the course of my teaching often told me what used to happen when Burmese troops (Tatmadaw) arrived in a Karen village in a disputed area. The soldiers would torture Karen villagers to find out where any food supplies were, or to try and discover movements of rebels. I heard of people being bayoneted, and saw some of the wounded. There were stories of rape by soldiers of women in the villages.

All stored food would be destroyed by the soldiers in case it fell into rebel hands. The rice crops would be burned, and the betel nut and coconut trees cut down



Opposite page: Soldier in Yangon (Rangoon), August 1988, at the scene of demos protesting the one-party, military rule of the BSPP;

This page Top: Soldiers attacking demonstrators in Yangon, August 1988; Above: Aung San Suu Kyi and Ba Thaw

destroying one of the main sources of trade for the Karen. Anything edible, animals, everything is stolen.

The Karen people also used to earn a living by selling teak cheaply to the Thais. The rainforests of Burma have the largest remaining teak supplies in the world. At the beginning of 1989 the Burmese Government signed an agreement with the Thai Government. I saw Thai soldiers 20 miles inside Burma guarding the Thai logging companies. The remaining forest is being lost rapidly now the loggers are moving in. Roads are being built at great speed.

The people I met were hungry. I saw evidence of malnutrition. The Karen people run away from these villages back into the Free State to the east.

I was told many stories about villagers being pressganged to work as porters for the Burmese Army as human mine detectors to walk ahead of the Burmese military patrols, risking ambush, and being caught in crossfire. Students and other young people in the disputed areas were liable to be caught and sent to be porters. If they got too sick or too weak they were liable to be shot. It happened a lot.

I was in Kowsooleh during the Karen celebrations of 40 years of their struggle for independence. The students put on various plays dressed as Burmese soldiers, reenacting the scenes they had left behind in the cities, - the fighting, and the torture.

They showed how their peaceful democracy protests during the summer of 1988 had been met with gunfire, brutal torture and death."

Action on Myanmar

What you can do:

PACK

Order a Myanmar Action Pack
Price £3.50 including postage
The Action Pack will contain:

- The Amnesty International Briefing on Myanmar
- Three-colour Amnesty Myanmar poster
- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in English and Burmese
- Letter writing guide to the Myanmar authorities
- Myanmar Chain Letter

LETTER

Write a courteous letter to the Myanmar Ambassador

His Excellency U Tin Hlaing
Ambassador Extraordinary and
Plenipotentiary
Embassy of Myanmar
19a Charles Street
Berkeley Square
LONDON W1X 8ER

- Express your concern about the many reports of torture in Myanmar by the security forces. Remind him that torture is prohibited under international law.
- Appeal on behalf of all the prisoners of conscience of Myanmar, asking that all prisoners who are detained solely for the peaceful expression of their opinions should be immediately released. Amnesty International knows of at least 250 PoCs in Myanmar and believes that there are many more.
- Urge that all death sentences are commuted and that legal steps are taken to abolish capital punishment in Myanmar. Point out that, under international law, anyone sentenced to death shall have the right of appeal.
- Stress your concern about reports of thousands of extrajudicial executions committed by the security forces, especially during the summer of 1988. Urge full investigations of the events, and ask that those responsible be brought to justice.

