

Maintaining the BBC Standard

An Interview with Tin Htar Swe

"The Irrawaddy", January 2005

The BBC's Burmese Service is the most popular, and generally regarded as the most reliable, of the Burmese-language shortwave broadcasters. The Irrawaddy spoke recently with Tin Htar Swe, head of the Burmese Service.

Question: What sort of news do you feed to your audience inside Burma?

Answer: Our aim is to provide ground breaking stories, whether global or regional. We have a highly sophisticated audience who are well informed about the world events. One would have imagined that-given the limited access to foreign newspapers, periodicals and journals-people would be deprived of information. On the contrary, we realized that most people are very much up to date with what is happening in the world. When we put out a story we have to make sure that we explain the story well and that all angles are covered. When it comes to news we do not draw a line between global and Burma news. There are some exceptions of course; because Burma is a closed society we also try to put out stories which can be too local for the international audience but definitely not for the Burmese people inside the country.

Q: How do you evaluate the role of the media in bringing democracy and freedom of expression to a military-ruled country, like Burma?

A: Our job is to give an accurate and balanced account so that people are better informed, enabling the listeners to form their own views. Our medium is not only to help keep people informed but also to give an opportunity for the listeners to express their views. This is important for people in a country where there is a lack of freedom of expression.

Q: What is your assessment of the Burmese media at home and abroad?

A: Obviously the control of the media by the Burmese military regime is restricting the potential for young talented people to enter the profession. However I have noticed that the market for newspapers and periodicals is thriving in Burma and together with this I also noticed there is a pool of talented new writers and journalists. Decades of censorship have deprived the country of strong debate on social, religious or political issues which are the foundation for a stable democratic society. On the other hand many young Burmese aspirants in exile are trying their best to fill the void by setting up electronic news sites on the web. These sites have become invaluable for many Burmese who want to keep themselves up to date with the

developments in Burma. I am a regular visitor to these sites and I am very much impressed by some of the articles and stories published. A number of notable Burmese writers are in exile but so far they have not taken any lead in publishing new works.

Q: How do you feel working as a journalist covering Burma from abroad?

A: I think it is fair to say that it can be very frustrating for journalists who cannot have direct access to the country that he or she is reporting on. An eye witness account from a journalist can often give a complete picture of the story and this is something that journalists covering the country from abroad cannot enjoy. Sadly, many stories about Burma are related to gross human rights violations committed by the people in power and, like most journalists, I often find myself under tremendous emotional pressure when I interview the victims.

Q: As a seasoned journalist covering Burma, what is your analysis of the country's current politics, especially the impasse between the government and the opposition?

A: The removal of prime minister and military intelligence chief General Khin Nyunt has put the army firmly in control of the state. The current impasse between the junta and the opposition will continue as long as the generals who do not believe in holding a dialogue with the opposition are in power. Undoubtedly, the junta's strategy is to dismantle the National League for Democracy party and to keep the party's key person, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, under strict house arrest. The junta, with some degree of success, has isolated her from the people. Senior General Than Shwe, who is obsessed with his legacy, is searching for a place in history and has so far managed to hide the tension between him and General Maung Aye. [When-354] the military acts as a government, [it-354] tends to undermine the military institutions and create factions between those who are being favored and those who are not. I think the emergence of these factions will fuel the rivalry between the two men.

Q: What will bring about democracy in Burma? Do you see any imminent changes?

A: There have been various attempts by the international community to pressure the junta to move towards democratic reforms in Burma [but-354] it hasn't been possible to convince the generals, who have acquired power forcibly, of the wisdom of peaceful change. Domestic dissent and international pressure have so far failed to persuade the junta to make reforms. The military tried to portray itself as a unified and cohesive force but the recent events highlighted the traditional rivalry between the combat wing

and intelligence wing. If these factions divide further into many fault lines, the divisions within the army will make it impossible for the junta to hold on to power. The change has to come within the regime itself but the international community including Asean and Japan also need to exert whatever influence they can muster to put pressure on the junta to reform.

Q: When the media uncovers wrongdoings by opposition groups, the groups often insist that it's not the right time to report about it because democracy is not established yet. They expect the media to take sides. What do you think of that?

A: Journalists are not in a position to judge whether or not it is the right time to give media attention to the opposition. It would be wrong to conceal wrongdoings by opposition groups on these grounds.

Q: While the regime is usually tightlipped, sometimes opposition groups are also unfriendly with the media. How do you deal with them in such situations?

A: Anybody has the right to refuse to appear in a program. Our job is to provide credible, unbiased, reliable, accurate and balanced reports. If the government or the political party or individual has refused to appear in a program, where appropriate, we might explain that they were invited and chose not to take part. We will not speculate about the reason for such [a-354] refusal. The government of the day will often be the primary source of news but we always try to air and challenge the opinions of opposition parties.

Q: Rangoon has described the BBC as the "sky full of lies." What is your response?

A: Such accusations are often made when opposition politicians, who have been silenced in their own country, are given an interview on the BBC. They complain of interference in their internal affairs. The BBC always tries to get both sides of the story and every time we interview the opposition we always try to get balancing comment from the junta. But often they are not willing to provide it. The Burmese regime regards journalists abroad as tools of foreign powers and [they-354] are treated as a state enemy.

Q: The BBC is generally regarded as the best of the Burmese-language radio stations abroad. How do you maintain that level of professionalism?

A: The BBC is committed to providing programs of great diversity which reflect the full range of audiences' interests, beliefs and perspectives. I think our success depends on the relationship with two key groups of people: those who listen to our programs-the audience-and those who make the programs. We know that the audience cares passionately about the BBC's attitude to them, its ability to connect them, to reflect their lives and

concerns. We make sure that when decisions are made about the subjects in news and factual programs, the needs and interests of our audience are taken into account.

We have very clear editorial guidelines and we maintain the quality of the broadcasts by strictly adhering to them. The output is closely monitored and regularly evaluated by a senior review group.

Q: There has been speculation that the BBC Burmese Service has internal problems among its staff, some of whom have been rumored to be close to the Burmese government. How does the BBC maintain its credibility in the face of such charges?

A: The BBC concerns itself with facts and not speculation. Everyone is entitled to have their own individual opinion and people of different opinions can work together to produce a perfectly objective news and analysis if they are true professionals. The BBC has clear editorial guidelines and everyone works to those guidelines.