



Inter Pares

BULLETIN

VOLUME 30, NUMBER 3, SEPTEMBER 2008

Bearing Witness: The Struggle for Democracy in Burma

When floodlights from armoured cars blinded sixteen-year-old Tin Maung Htoo and the hundreds of other demonstrators, they sat down in unison still singing protest songs. Tin heard automatic rifle fire and closed his eyes, "because I knew we were going to die."

It was the evening of August 8th, 1988, and the democracy demonstrators were exhausted from fourteen hours of marching through the city of Rangoon. When they realized that the guns were being fired in the air, they stood again. They rose despite the fact that soldiers were now poised, guns aimed, knees bent. The demonstrators sang: *we want full democracy, that's what we want!*

Suddenly Tin saw people collapse in front of him, and everything blurred with confusion and panic.

Unlike the recent events in September of 2007, most of the world remained unaware as thousands took to the streets of Burma in 1988 to demand democracy. No one knows how many people were killed that August twenty years ago; conservative estimates start at three thousand. Since 1988, the power and control of Burma's military regime has tightened, with a steady increase in the systematic abuse of human rights throughout the country.

Tin Maung Htoo remained in Rangoon for two months after the August crackdown but he became frustrated. "I felt like we couldn't do anything from inside the country, I wanted to leave to campaign internationally for change." Like thousands of other pro-democracy activists, he fled to the border with Thailand, travelling at night by foot and boat for eleven days through mountains and jungle. For several years, he lived in border communities where activists forged alliances with ethnic resistance movements.

In 1993, Tin took a course in Bangkok on non-violent action for change. He learned about the construction of a gas pipeline in southern Burma and several proposed dams. It was clear that these projects would generate substantial revenue for the regime, while massive forced labour and displacement and other human rights violations were already being reported. Thai authorities raided the training session and all participants were arrested. Tin was held in a Bangkok prison under the Thai National Security Act for three years. He was eventually released on condition that he seek asylum in Canada.

Tin completed high school in London, Ontario and earned a double degree in political science and economics from the University of Western Ontario. He remained active



Tin Maung Htoo in front of flag used in democratic uprising.

within the Burmese community, and in 2005 became the Executive Director of the Canadian Friends of Burma (CFOB).

CFOB, with which Inter Pares has worked since its foundation in 1991, brings together people and organizations from across the country who believe Canada can play a constructive role in the struggle for democracy in Burma. When Tin joined CFOB, Parliament had just passed a motion identifying ways to promote democracy in Burma. Implementation of the motion is now the central focus of CFOB's work.

In 2006, CFOB was instrumental in founding the Parliamentary Friends of Burma (PFOB), a large multi-party group of Members of Parliament and Senators. PFOB raises awareness in the House of Commons and Senate and promotes Canadian action to support democracy in Burma. In 2007, CFOB launched an online campaign to bestow honorary Canadian citizenship to Burma's democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi. The campaign generated public support and was quickly adopted by PFOB. The federal government announced honorary citizenship for Aung San Suu Kyi in its October 2007 Speech from the Throne. Less than three months later, Canada imposed targeted economic sanctions against the regime.

This past March, Tin Maung Htoo returned to Thailand for the first time since his release from prison. Hosted by Inter Pares, he travelled to Thailand's border with Burma to see firsthand how resources from Canada support the work of refugees, human rights documenters, health service providers, women's rights organizations and local media groups. For Tin Maung Htoo, the journey that began in 1988 had come full circle. ❧

Inter Pares and Burma

In efforts to address their own needs, displaced people from Burma have created organizations to deliver assistance programs and to represent the interests of their communities. It is these organizations that Inter Pares supports.

Our work with civil society organizations includes humanitarian services, health programs, women's rights education and advocacy, human rights documentation and protection, and the development of independent media. Based in neighbouring countries, these organizations work independently of the regime's control with communities in Burma and with those who have fled across borders. At home, we work with solidarity organizations to inform Canadians and to promote a role for Canada in restoring peace, human rights and democracy in Burma. With donations from thousands of Canadians, Inter Pares has been working with many of these organizations since 1992. We are also grateful for the support of the Canadian International Development Agency.

Rebuilding Communities in the Midst of War



Dr. Cynthia Maung

In 1988, when the military regime began killing and imprisoning democracy activists, Dr. Cynthia Maung joined the thousands of people fleeing to safety in Thailand. After just a few months, she and four other activists founded the Mae Tao Clinic (MTC) on the Thai border with Burma, in order to provide emergency health care for people escaping the crackdown.

Twenty years later, the MTC has expanded considerably. Services provided to displaced people from Burma include clinical care for adults and children, surgery, reproductive health care, primary eye care, prosthetics and rehabilitation for landmine victims, a laboratory and blood bank, and a dental clinic. In 2007, the clinic treated over 80,000 cases and delivered 2,117 babies. At least half the patients have travelled to the clinic from deep inside Burma.

Dr. Cynthia's work is rooted in principles of public and community health. This means focusing on preventing conditions that could put health at risk, early detection of health problems, as well as changing individual and community attitudes and practices regarding lifestyle choices. MTC offers health worker training, counselling services, delivery certificates, housing for long-term patients, funeral services, migrant outreach health services, cross-border primary health care, and school health programs.

Dr. Cynthia is more than a physician. She knows that the military regime's ongoing war against their own people is the root cause of these problems. She knows that the junta aims to destroy the social bonds that create community, and that her task as a healer must include maintaining and nourishing those bonds, rebuilding social cohesion in the midst of war. Inter Pares first began working with Dr. Cynthia and the Mae Tao Clinic in 1992, and we are proud to continue collaborating with such extraordinary community builders. ☞

Supporting Internally Displaced People

The ruthless nature of Burma's junta has been evident for many years, from its repression of the country's democracy movement, its war against ethnic peoples, to its callously slow and restrictive response to the cyclone of last May. The regime is routinely condemned in U.N. human rights reports for arbitrary arrest and imprisonment, summary executions, forced labour, rape, torture, denial of the freedom of assembly, forcible displacement of civilians,

and the inhumane treatment of prisoners. Over the last decade, several million people have been forcibly displaced throughout the country.

In eastern Burma, an estimated 3,200 villages have been destroyed since 1996 due to military operations against ethnic peoples. At least a half million people are currently internally displaced in the eastern regions, including more than 78,000 people who were forcibly dislocated in 2007.

Many of these people flee into isolated mountain areas to avoid contact with the army. In these remote regions they are vulnerable to malaria, malnutrition and infectious diseases. Maternal and child mortality rates are appallingly high.

In response to this situation, several of Inter Pares' counterparts are delivering humanitarian services to displaced people, supplied and coordinated from bordering countries. The Thailand-Burma Border Consortium sends teams into these remote regions to deliver basic necessities such as food. In 2007, the program reached 102,000 internally displaced people.

Similarly, in 2007 the Backpack Health Worker Teams provided health assistance to a population of 156,000

internally displaced people in Burma. The program trains displaced people to become community health volunteers who then work to ensure safe water and sanitation facilities and to implement disease reduction strategies. The program has upgraded the skills of more than 700 traditional birth attendants to improve maternal and infant survival rates. The teams are achieving remarkable results, with a 40 percent reduction in malaria in areas where they work.

These activities demonstrate how, in the face of repression and conflict, the lives of displaced people can be made more secure through the courageous efforts of local civil society groups. ☞

COUNTRY NAME: Burma – used by the democracy movement • Myanmar – used by the military regime
POPULATION: 48 – 58 million (note: statistical data from state sources is notoriously unreliable)
ETHNICITY: Burman 68%, Shan 9%, Karen 7%, Mon 4%, Rakhine 3%, Chin 3%, Kachin 2%, Karenni 1%, other 2%
RELIGION: Buddhist 89%, Muslim 5%, Christian 4%, other 2%
GOVERNMENT SPENDING: Military – 40% • Health and education – 1.4%



POLITICAL HISTORY

- 1948 Independence from Britain
- 1962 Military coup led by General Ne Win
- 1988 Massive pro-democracy demonstrations; army crackdown with more than 3,000 people killed. General Ne Win resigns and is replaced by a new military junta.
- 1989 Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the National League for Democracy, is placed under house arrest.
- 1990 Junta calls a snap election. The National League for Democracy wins 81% of seats but is denied power. Many elected members of parliament are arrested and jailed.
- 1991 Aung San Suu Kyi, still under house arrest, is awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.
- 1994-95 More than 100,000 refugees flee to Thailand, escaping army offensives in the eastern states.
- 2007 Demonstrators peacefully protest conditions in the country. Army violently suppresses and thousands are arrested and jailed; an unknown number are killed.

Encountering the Spirit of Hope

On a recent visit to Thailand, Inter Pares staff member Peter Gillespie met with a group of nuns and monks from Burma. The following is an excerpt from his report.

It is raining as I find my way to a Buddhist retreat centre on the outskirts of Bangkok, Thailand. I am met on the main road by Harn, the coordinator of Alternative Education for Social Engagement, an organization supported by Inter Pares. He leads me down a narrow pathway to the retreat building where a group of Buddhist monks and nuns from Burma are waiting. The monks are in saffron robes, the nuns in pink with brown sashes. They are all sitting cross-legged on the floor.

Harn introduces me to the group and explains that the monks and nuns are here for a three-month exposure to education and development approaches in Thailand. Buddhist temples play a vital role in the villages of rural Burma. They are more than spiritual centres, operating schools and vocational training activities in their local communities. Monks and nuns assist people in many ways – as teachers, advisers, counselors, educators and doctors.

But monks and nuns from rural Burma have been isolated and have little knowledge of development experiences in other countries. “What we are trying to do,” Harn tells me, “is show them how educational and development activities have evolved here so they can see alternatives. We want to show them how temples can become centres of social action and social justice.”

As the rain pours down outside, we begin a lively discussion about what the monks and nuns have experienced so far in Thailand. They have visited different types of schools in Thailand – from Montessori to more conventional approaches – and they are impressed. “What we have seen,” one of the senior monks says, “is that education here is more holistic, and learning is enjoyable and fun. Schools here encourage children to get involved in their education, rather than simply being passive and learning by rote. For us, this is very interesting.”

The monks say that in Burma many parents cannot afford to send their children to government schools and that the quality of education is low. Hardly any teachers have training and there are few learning resources or books. The military regime spends less than a dollar per student per year on education. Only some children manage to pass high school and even fewer graduate from university. An entire generation of young people is bereft of an education.

As the discussion continues, we turn to the “Saffron Revolution” of last September when thousands of monks and nuns marched in the streets of Burma’s largest city to protest poverty and misery throughout the country. The army was sent into the streets to violently crush the peaceful protests. One of the monks tells me that he, along with thousands of others, was arrested and sent to the notorious Insein prison.



A monk's robes hanging in a temple window.

REBECA WOLSAK

He was not tortured, but was humiliated daily. “We were not allowed to look at our jailors,” he says, “we had to keep our eyes on the ground.” He was released after a month, but other monks remained.

Many temples were closed and the monks sent back to their home villages. Some monks were forcibly defrocked. Some were tied to lampposts and beaten. Many monks remain unaccounted for, and are feared to be among those who have “disappeared.”

As our meeting draws to a close, one of the nuns says that peace and harmony will someday prevail in Burma, and all will be well. As I say goodbye, I am struck by the quiet conviction of these men and women who have dedicated their lives to the service of their people. They may have met with violence on the streets of Rangoon, but they remain undefeated in their struggle for peaceful change.

 Inter Pares

ISSN 0715-4267

221 Laurier Avenue East, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1N 6P1
Phone (1-613) 563-4801 or (1-866) 563-4801 (toll free)
Fax (1-613) 594-4704 www.interpares.ca

With the support of thousands of Canadians, Inter Pares works in Canada and around the world with social change organizations who share the analysis that poverty and injustice are caused by inequities within and among nations, and who are working to promote peace, and social and economic justice in their communities and societies.

Charitable registration number (BN) 11897 1100 RR000 1.
Financial support for the *Bulletin* is provided by the Canadian International Development Agency.

DESIGN: DAVID BERMAN.COM

