

Dear friends,

This week is the one year anniversary of the Saffron Revolution, the monk led popular uprising in Burma. As you all remember hundreds of thousands of brave monks, nuns, human rights activists, students, youths and ordinary citizens courageously took to the streets to bring about social, economic and political change in the country. On September 26, the whole world witnessed the brutal, repressive and undemocratic nature of the Burmese military regime (the SPDC), as the army opened fire into the protesting crowds. Despite the worldwide attention created by the Saffron revolution, the protesters' demands are still far from being met! Rather, the political oppression in the country seems worse than ever.

More Arrests and Increased Surveillance

In preparation for the Saffron anniversary the SPDC has intensified its hunt down on all pro-democratic forces in the country. In August at least 39 activists were arrested, and this month seems to become just as bad. Only during the first 10 days of September at least 18 NLD members in Magwe Division and 3 monks, 4 youths and 1 journalist in Rangoon were arrested. Two of the youths, Kyaw Oo (aka) Tin Myo Htut and Saw Maung, are members of the Generation Wave, an activists group which emerged from the September movement. On the Generation Wave website www.generationwave.co.cc the group urges for the release of all its detained members.

On September 10, Nilar Thein, a prominent leader of the '88 Generation Students group, who has been in hiding from the authorities since August 2007, was arrested. Several groups, including Amnesty International and Women's League of Burma, have raised their concern over her wellbeing knowing the risks of torture and ill-treatment. Nilar's husband, Kyaw Min Yu (aka) Jimmy, another prominent leader of the '88 Generation Students, has been imprisoned since last August.

As the Saffron anniversary is approaching, the security has tightened in the cities and towns where protests took place last September. Suspicious eyes of security forces including members of USDA are everywhere monitoring the people's movement. Citizens are stopped and searched even on the buses. Monks and monasteries are also kept under firm surveillance. According to the Assistant Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP), the Malayone monastery, located in Rangoon's Thanlin Township, was raided early in the morning of September 5. This day was the one year anniversary of the beating of monks in Pakokku, an incident that sparked the monks to take to the streets in the Saffron Revolution.

To further control the situation in these anniversary times, the SPDC also appears to be trying to block the information flow in and out of the country. Last week several exile Burmese media websites, including The Irrawaddy, Democratic Voice of Burma and New Era, came under cyber attacks. As Aung Zaw from the Irrawaddy puts it; "I am not alone in believing that the junta is behind the attack, just as it was behind the shutdown of internet access in Burma during last year's uprising." The internet connection inside Burma has also been running slow, most likely for the same reason.

Prison Conditions and Court Trials

Meanwhile, court hearings have begun for the group of activists who initiated last years demonstrations by silently marching in protest against the hike in fuel prices on August 19. The group consists of 35 leaders from the '88 generation students and affiliated activists detained in Insein prison, including Min Ko Naing, Htay Kywe, Min Zeya, and Ko Ko Gyi. The hearings started on August 28 and have continued every Tuesday, Thursday and Friday. The detainees are on trial for between 6 and 9 charges, including "crimes" such as contact with illegal organizations, illegal printing, illegal use of electronic device, and for criticizing the national convention. The 88 generation students are also accused of committing depredation of foreign governments at peace with Burma, a charge which relates to their open criticism to China and Russia for using veto power against the Burma resolution in the UN Security Council.

Despite almost one year of detention in the notorious Insein Prison, the activists seem to stay strong and unbound. They have made three demands: 1) not to be handcuffed when taken to the court hearing, 2) for media to be allowed in the court room and 3) for the hearings to be open to the public. So far the demands have not been met and only family members and lawyers can be present for the hearings. One lawyer was recently barred from entering the hearing room due to being outspoken in representing the detainees. The hearings are scheduled for earlier but usually begin at late afternoons and 'public prosecutors (or) government attorneys are provided all luxury facilities including transport while the detainees' lawyers have to stand and wait outside until the hearings begin. According to some information, more than 100 witnesses will be brought to testify in these hearings why the trials will likely go on for many months.

Also the prominent monk U Gambira has been taken out to Ah-lon township court. He demanded for a trial in accordance with religious conducts/rules in which he would be allowed to wear the robe and stand trial before monk judges before he is taken to a laymen court. His demands have not yet been met.

Several other detainees have already received long prison sentences for taking part in last year's protests. Recently a prison court in Thayet in central Burma sentenced 11 men, including NLD members, to 2-9 years in jail. Charges included inciting public disturbances, discrediting the government, and participating in public demonstrations.

Since the Saffron revolution the number of political prisoners has increased from approximately 1,150 to nearly the double, more than 2,100. We have strong reasons to be concerned about their physical and mental well being, as we recently received reports of severe torture. Many detainees have been tortured several times and rounds during interrogations. The immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners, including of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, must be the first priority for the UN and the international community in their efforts to resolve the crisis in Burma.

Small Scale Defiance in the Country and Support Actions around the World

Despite heavy oppression and surveillance, pro-democracy activists and supporters inside Burma continue to express their discontent with the regime by carrying out small-scale anti-regime activities. Last week people witnessed leaflets being spread over the roads in some public areas in Rangoon. The activist group Generation Wave has also pasted A4 paper size posters with General Than Shwe's picture and the text "Dictator General Than Shwe wanted by the new generation youths for being responsible for the deteriorating economic, social, health, and education conditions in people's life." (Photo attached.)

The same group carried out the "red paint campaign" last month to commemorate the 20th anniversary of 8888. The 8888 anniversary was also marked by many young people wearing black or red colors in some university campuses in Rangoon.

In Sittwe, Arakan State, anti-regime flyers have been spread during the last two months, and monks have attempted several protests which had to be cancelled as authorities found out about the plans. On September 9, security forces stormed Sittwe University as several Arakanese students commemorated the historical monk U Ottama's contribution to Burma's independence movement by wearing T-shirts with his image.

Around the globe expatriate Burmese communities and supporters are preparing to commemorate the Saffron anniversary by organizing various events and actions. In Belgium and Bangladesh, activists and supporters have already held demonstrations while a number of activities including protests, vigils and public seminars will be held during this week in many other countries including Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand, USA, Australia, UK, Germany, and many European countries.

One year after the Saffron revolution the movement for democracy in Burma is still vivid, not only inside Burma but in all continents across the globe. The people's longing for democracy, peace and justice in Burma must be taken seriously by the UN and the world's leaders. The people of Burma deserve more than words of support from the international community. Strong and firm action is needed now more than ever!

It took 27 years for South Africa to end Apartheid regime. Our struggle for democracy in Burma is 20 years now. It is true that it is long. But we are prepared for as long as it takes to bring about truth and justice to our people. There must be a light at the end of the tunnel and the resilience of the people of Burma will pay off!!

In Partnership and Solidarity,

Khin Ohmar

Coordinator, Burma Partnership