

We should never forget Burma

I tried to phone her the other day. I still have a number she gave me, which I could call infrequently and exchange a few words. It was fruitless to try this time; the hurried click at the other end was an echo of her Kafkaesque oppression. The isolation of Aung San Suu Kyi is now complete, in the tenth year of her detention. The last time I got through, I asked her what was happening outside her house. “Oh, the road is blocked and there are soldiers all over the street... for my own security, of course!”

She thanked me for the books I had sent her, hand-carried through the underground that now struggles to maintain contact. “It has been a joy to read widely again,” she said. I had sent her a collection of her favourite T S Eliot, as well as Jonathan Coe’s political novel, *What a Carve Up!*, whose gentle irony must have seemed strange in jackbooted Rangoon. She told me she relished biographies of those who had also suffered through isolation: Mandela, Sakharov. Little has reached her since then, and it is not known if she still has her old Grundig shortwave radio. The regime has now removed her personal security guards from her compound beside Inya Lake. Having tortured and killed her closest allies, they must believe that, if the world looks the other way, they can do the same to her.

“For the media, Burma is seldom fashionable,” she told me. “But the important thing to remember about a struggle like ours is that it endures, whether or not the spotlight is on, and it can’t be turned back.” For one so alone, these are salutary words; I recommend them to those who lose heart when their participation in one demonstration fails to stop an invasion. Fortunately, Aung San Suu Kyi and the democracy movement she leads are supported by a tenacious solidarity network throughout the world; and I am indebted to John Jackson and Yvette Mahon of the Burma Campaign UK for never letting us forget that, if the often debased cry of democracy means anything, its true test is

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Burma. In the current issue of *Metta*, the campaign's journal, Desmond Tutu reminds us that Aung San Suu Kyi and her party, the National League for Democracy, won 82 per cent of the parliamentary seats in Burma's 1990 election, the signal for a military junta to hunt, imprison, torture and murder the victors, and enslave much of the nation. "Suu Kyi and the people of Burma," writes Tutu, "have not called for a military coalition to invade their country. They have simply asked for the maximum diplomatic and economic pressure against Burma's brutal dictators."

As the public's response to the tsunami and the invasion of Iraq has shown, the fastest-growing division in the world is between people and those in power claiming to act morally in their name. Burma exemplifies this. Take the European Union's disgusting policy. Clearly with an eye to its vast Asian market, the EU, promoter of "human rights" when the price is right, has shamelessly appeased the Burmese junta. Consider what happens in Burma today. Rape is used as a weapon of the state against ethnic woman and children. Forced labour is widespread, described by the UN's International Labour Organisation as a "crime against humanity". The junta holds more than 1,350 political prisoners, many of whom are routinely tortured. Up to a million people have been forced from their land. Half the national budget is spent on a brutal, peacock military whose only enemy is its own people, while next to nothing is spent on health; one in ten Burmese babies die in infancy. And the true leader, elected in a landslide, is incarcerated, rising at four o'clock every morning to meditate on such an epic injustice.

Meanwhile, the EU shores up the regime by increasing imports, worth around 4bn dollars between 1998 and 2002. Last October, the fifth summit of the 39-state Asia-Europe Meeting (Asem) was held in Hanoi and attended by representatives of the junta for the first time. Instead of announcing a boycott, the Europeans turned up and said nothing. Rather, France's president, Jacques Chirac, said he hoped stronger sanctions would not be necessary because they "will hurt the poorest people". For "poorest people" read Total Oil Company, part-owned by the French government, the largest foreign investor in Burma, where the oil companies' infrastructure of roads and railway access have long been the subject of allegations of forced labour. Total's euros allow the junta to re-equip its state of fear. "None of the EU officials I have met," says John Jackson, "denies that foreign investment and military spending in Burma are closely linked. In the week the regime received its first payment for gas due to be piped to Thailand from a gas field operated by Total Oil, it made a 130m dollar down-payment on ten

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MiG-29 jet fighters.”

Jackson points to the farce of present EU sanctions. After as many as 100 of Suu Kyi's supporters were publicly beaten to death by soldiers in 2003, the EU extended its visa ban to the junta and Germany froze no less than 86 euros of German-based Burmese assets. In contrast, and through direct action, the international campaign has chalked up major disinvestments, such as Premier Oil, Heineken, PepsiCo, British Home Stores. The current “dirty list” of investors includes the oil companies Total and Unocal, Rolls-Royce, Lloyd's of London and so-called prestige travel companies such as Bales, Road to Mandalay and Orient Express. The bestselling Lonely Planet guidebook is a fixture on the list. Lonely Planet has long made a fool of itself by claiming, in the words of one of its writers, that Burma is “better off” today, and that although the junta is “abominable”, “political imprisonment, torture” and “involuntary civilian service to the state” are not new and “have been around for centuries”.

Tell that to the people of Pagan, the ancient capital, which used to have a population of 4,000. Given a few weeks to leave, their homes were bulldozed and they were marched at gunpoint to a waterless stubble that is a dustbowl in the summer, and runs with mud in the winter. Their dispossession was to make way for foreign tourists. “I shall welcome tourists and investors,” said Aung San Suu Kyi, “when we are free.” There is an abundance of evidence that foreign tourism has benefited the regime, not the Burmese people, and that much of the tourist infrastructure was built with “involuntary civilian service” – an idiotic euphemism for bonded or outright slave labour.

Filming secretly in Burma nine years ago, I came upon what might have been a tableau from Dickensian England. Near the town of Tavoy, in the south, gangs of people were building a railway viaduct, guarded by soldiers. These were slave labourers, and many were children. I watched one small girl in a long blue dress struggle to wield a hoe taller than herself, falling back exhausted, in pain, holding her shoulder. “How old are you?” I asked her. “Eleven,” came the reply.

Just as we should not forget the people of Fallujah and Najaf and Baghdad, and Ramallah and Gaza, so we should not forget this little girl, and her people, and their leader, who ask for the most basic rights and deserve our support.

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