

THE SHAME THAT IS BURMA



Shyamon Jayasinghe



At the time of writing this piece, all evidence is that the uprising in Burma (now Myanmar) has been crushed by the military junta as mercilessly as it did to the previous mass protest in the year 1988. People in Burma are fighting for their freedom from a dictatorship that has strangled the country over the last forty five years. Tens of thousands of Theravada Buddhist monks were seen pouring over the streets of the capital selflessly and peacefully giving leadership to the mass revolt. Monks are deeply venerated by Burma's 55 million population and it was both gorgeous and inspiring to watch them march along chanting pith, with their begging bowls held in inverted fashion to show in symbolic mode that they will not accept alms from the militia. In Burma, unlike in Sri Lanka, monks go on pindapatha and a refusal of alms from anybody is perceived as a great insult.

Reports from foreign journalists and exiles living in the Thai border indicate that hundreds of monks had been massacred and thrown into the jungles. "This is full scale genocide" said Sylvester Stallone who is currently filming in the Burmese-Thai border. Aung San Suu Kyi, Burma's icon of the freedom struggle and Nobel Prize winner for peace, who managed to come out of her residence where she has been incarcerated for the last 12 years. She greeted the protestors in tears but has been since missing.

If anybody wants to know what a fascist dictatorship is about



"This is full scale genocide" Sylvester Stallone

read Burma. Some more to come: The junta has rounded up ordinary people putting them in trucks to attend "mass meetings" "held to support the crushing of the conspiracy". Burma's foreign minister accused "political opportunists" of trying to create a showdown in his country with foreign help. That is the rhetoric of fascists. Lots of pictures of the protesters came streaming into the Internet to reach the world. Many of these pictures had been taken by mobile cameras and clandestinely forwarded through laptops. But now the junta has shut up even the Internet.

The situation in Burma is tragic, to say the least. At independence in 1947, this country was one of the richest in South East Asia and it was under a functioning democracy until 1962 when General Ne Win took control, brought in his brand of socialism that was successful in turning the resource rich nation into one of the poorest. Since then, an army of 400,000 has been built up to suppress all dissent. Little investment has taken place despite the deployment of slave labour. At the polls in 1998, Aung Sang Suu Kyi led the National League for Democracy (NLD) to victory.

However, instead of passing over power to the NLD the junta decided that it must rule. The resultant protest led to the massacre of over 3000 people and the imprisonment of Suu Kyi.

The economy of Burma is largely limited to trading with China, Russia, Singapore, and India. Big business in these countries are working hand in glove with the junta ripping away Burma's vast resources. For example, China is busy building a gas pipeline to the country in order to exploit its vast gas reserves. Together with Russia, China is selling weapons to Burma. Burma is the second largest heroin producer in the world and this produce floods China.

International economic pressures compelled the junta to remove subsidies for fuel and essentials. This step led to a severe jack up in prices that had been the immediate spark off of the recent revolt. Economic sanctions imposed by the West have only gone to worsen the plight of the country's population rather than curtail the junta.

When will this country be delivered from its misery? The answer to this question would depend very much on an international leverage that alone can make that happen. This is a wonderful opportunity for George Bush to extend his so-called fight to install democracies in the world. Myanmar, unlike with Iraq, would be a cakewalk for American soldiers since popular support will be there for Bush's troops. Then why is Bush doing little other than imposing sanctions and issuing "condemnations". These are the same condemnations that America has been doling out against the LTTE in Sri Lanka. Condolisa Rice is also "deeply concerned" about the ineffectiveness of the UN Security Council. She forgets that in the case of Iraq, America got over the "ineffective Security Council" by going to war with the assistance of a coalition of allies. Britain and the rest of the Western World have also issued condemnations. The UN special envoy, Ibrahim Gambari, who visited Burma has been snubbed.

Regional leaders who really matter to Burma can make a difference but the latter are so tied down by economic deals with the ruling junta, that one would not expect anything from that quarter. Russia's Putin has already gone on record stating that this is an internal problem for Burma. In addition to the interests in Burmese gas and oil, China is also shipping arms to Burma. Next to China, India can exert a decisive influence on the junta but, alas, that country is not doing that. India, the land of great spiritual leaders and the land of Gandhi and Nehru, also ships arms to Burma. "India is concerned by and is closely monitoring the Myanmar situation" said its External Affairs spokesman, Sarna. "It is our hope that all sides will resolve their issues peacefully through dialogue," he said.

It is unfortunate that in this day and age a few tyrants can get hold of a country and crush its citizenry while world leaders look aside. As in the case of Darfur and Zimbabwe, the case of Burma will add to the long historical evidence that in the matter of external relations individual governments will be governed by interests and not (ethical) principles. George Bush's "fight to install democracies" did carry the rhetoric of hope that at least the world's real super power is willing to intervene in the cause of global justice. Unfortunately, it is now evident that Bush's fight will not go beyond Iraq or the oil rich Middle east. The world at large would continue to look away when oppression and widespread civil rights abuses by the state takes place across countries. The movement for global justice has achieved a lot since Nuremberg (1946). However, it will take a long time more before it can reach the next groundbreaking stage of intervening in the affairs of other states to redeem a terrorised citizenry.





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