



2nd GENEVA SUMMIT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, TOLERANCE AND DEMOCRACY

March 8-9, 2010

Session: Authoritarianism and Dissent: 21st Century Horizons

Speech of Mr. BO KYI, Burmese Dissident

Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to speak at the 2nd Geneva Summit for Human Rights, Tolerance and Democracy.

This meeting comes at a critical time in my country's history.

In Burma, as the election looms, still unannounced, more than 2,200 political activists and journalists remain in prison, the Constitution on which the election will be held is fundamentally flawed, the military regime continues to torture its people and deny them their basic human rights - not only their civil and political rights but also the right to food, education and housing. Ethnic minorities along the border continue to face systematic discrimination and grave human rights abuses, amounting to Crimes Against Humanity. In Burma, a culture of impunity prevails.

Now more than ever, we must shine the spotlight on Burma, its brutal regime and its brave people.

One such brave man, is my dear friend Min Ko Naing, a famous leader of the pro democracy movement. While I speak to you here today, Min Ko Naing is still in prison. He has spent the better part of the past 18 years in Burma's prisons.

My story is his story. It is the story of the more than 10,000 former political prisoners and the more than 2000 still languishing in prison today. I tell it for him. I tell it for them and, for that reason, I am here to tell it to you today.

My Story

I was arrested in March 1990, when I was a college student. I was arrested for participating in a peaceful protest. I was one of the executive committee members of Burma's national student union. During the protest, we demanded the release of all students who were in prison and the legalization of our student union.

I ultimately spent seven years and three months in prison for my political activism. During the 1988 General Strike, thousands of people participated – men, women and students - and during the demonstration some died before me. I could not forget their faces. They



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sacrificed themselves for democracy and human rights. It was their faces that lit a flame inside me. It was their faces I held onto for 7 seven years.

The first time, I was arrested, I was eating lunch with my family. I was handcuffed, hooded, and taken away in a car. I was ordered to lie down so that no one could see me. When I was finally allowed out of the car someone kicked me in the back. My forehead slammed against the wall, I collapsed.

When I finally removed my hood I saw I was in a tiny cell. I looked around me - on the wall, I saw blood splatters from the prisoners who came before me. People had carved their names on the wall. Some of those names were the names of my friends.

I remember asking myself, *“Where are you now?” Are you in prison? Are you tortured? Are you dead ?*

I began to grow worried and realized that the torture had already started: denial of food and water, blindfolding, beatings and solitary confinement.

I was sentenced to 3 years imprisonment with hard labour, by a martial court. I asked the officers to tell my family, but they did not.

In prison, I faced starvation. I slept on a thin mat on a concrete floor. We did not receive medical treatment. The prison was filthy and sanitation was very poor.

I was released from prison on the 21st January 1993.

After this, the military asked me to become an informer. I said that I would for the sake of my people, under two conditions: the release of all political prisoners and for the regime to enter into a political dialogue with Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD. They denied my request, and of course, I refused theirs.

For denying the regime, I was arrested again. This time they had no mercy whatsoever. Twice I was beaten until I passed out. I was held for one year without trial, and sent to Insein prison.

During the interrogation I was forced to lie on the ground while interrogators jumped on me and whipped me with a rubber cord. When I didn't scream they told me that I was stubborn, so they beat me harder, and when I screamed, they told me I was the filth of our country.



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On one occasion, after being hit more than 150 times, I lost consciousness. When I woke up, I was taken in chains to a solitary confinement cell. For 12 days, I was kept in chains with a metal bar between my legs. I was forced to perform the same position for hours at a time and “*hop like a frog*”.

I spent more than 3 years in solitary confinement.

Inspiration and Education

I was not allowed to read or write or study. But when the guards were far away, I could hear the other prisoners. And I learned English from them. Throughout my time in prison, I was determined to not let the Burmese junta to dull my mind. I had an English dictionary smuggled in. I ate the pages as I learnt them.

I managed to read an article about Nelson Mandela. Mr. Mandela’s refusal to give up his principles, during more than 27 years in jail, was an inspiration to me and all the other political prisoners. “Nelson Mandela is the black power from South Africa, he can overcome 27 years of darkness,” went a song we used to sing to keep our spirits up.

Finally, in 1998, I was released. Soon after, I fled to Thailand. I decided then to speak out for those still in prison. I helped found AAPP to work on behalf of political prisoners and their families, to provide them with support and medical care, monitor prison conditions, and advocate for the release of all political prisoners.

My experience in prison is still a reality for thousands of people in Burma.

We know that things are getting worse in Burma. In the past couple of years, the number of political prisoners has doubled. If the regime cannot find the person they are hunting for, they take a family member instead.

It is important to understand that the suffering doesn’t end once you are out of the prison gates.

The physical and psychological scars of torture, ill-treatment, and the denial of healthcare in prison, last long after you are released.

On a daily basis you face restricted movement, severe harassment and the threat of re-arrest for holding on to your political beliefs. You are denied education and employment opportunities.



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After release, ex-political prisoners and their families are constantly under watch by Military Intelligence and their network of informers and spies.

After my release from prison I often felt that I, along with other former political prisoners, were still behind bars. "Freedom" is not easily regained.

Until the regime stops punishing those that dare to speak out, until it frees all political prisoners - there will be no peace and democracy, in Burma.

Freedom in Burma

As this year has been announced as the year for national elections, freedom of opinion and expression, and assembly and association, are more important than ever.

These freedoms are *essential* for the functioning of a democratic society, *critical* for the organization of meaningful and credible elections, *necessary* for reflecting the diversity of a multi-ethnic society.

They are exercised through the existence of an independent media, vibrant civil society and the free flow of information. In Burma there is *no* independent media, *no* vibrant civil society and *no* free flow of information.

Burma is continually ranked one of the most censored countries in the world. Dissenting voices are not allowed. All publications are subject to censorship by the Ministry of Information. Journalists exercise a high level of self-censorship, in order to survive, and those who don't are imprisoned.

In December, video journalists Hla Hla Win and Myint Naing were sentenced to 26 years in prison for attempting to smuggle footage on Burma out of the country.

They are not alone. There are currently 43 journalists and bloggers in prison. The number of journalists in prison increased dramatically after the 2007 'Saffron Revolution'.

During the mass demonstrations, authorities were surprised and threatened by the new and sophisticated types of media that allowed evidence of human rights violations to be broadcast internationally.



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One of the best examples of this are the Burma VJs. In 2007, Burma became headline news across the globe when Buddhist monks led peaceful protest. More than 100,000 people took to the streets protesting a cruel dictatorship that had held the country hostage for more than 40 years.

Foreign news crews were banned, the Internet was shut down, and Burma was closed to the outside world. But the Burma VJs, armed with pocket-sized video cameras, faced down the military to expose the repressive regime controlling their country and via satellite these images were beamed across the world.

Since the crackdown internet users or anyone holding a camera is regarded as a potential enemy of the state and punished under the Electronics Act, which prohibits sending information, including photos and videos, deemed damaging to the state's image.

To fulfill their potential, people must be free to share and access information, they must be free to choose their leaders; to shape the laws that govern them, to speak, criticize, and debate. They must be free to pursue the dignity that comes with self-improvement, free to build their minds and the minds of their children. In Burma, my people are not free.

Sooner or later, though, Burma will change. History tells us that brutal regimes do not last, and Burma is no different. For the Burmese people, the long walk toward a free society is not finished, but we are walking in the right direction, and we will arrive one day.