

About Moe Aye

Moe Aye was born in Mandalay in 1964 and was a student at the Rangoon Institute of Technology throughout the 1988 pro-democracy uprising. During the uprising he joined the All Burma Federation of Student Union (ABFSU). He later joined the youth wing of the National League for Democracy (NLD), becoming in-charge of information in Botahtaung Township. On the morning of August 9, 1988, the army shot at him while he was demonstrating nears the Shwe Dagon Pagoda in Rangoon.

He was arrested by Military Intelligence on November 7, 1990. Moe Aye was charged under Section 5(j) of the 1050 Emergency Provision Act and was sentenced to seven years imprisonment with hard labour. At the time of his arrest, he was working for the ABFSU and was also carrying out duties for the NLD youth.

While in Insein Special Prison Moe Aye met Mr. James Leander Nichols and learned how the honorary consul to four Scandinavian countries was being questioned and beaten by November 22, 1996, and due to the harsh condition in prison he had to seek intensive medical treatment. Some six months later Moe Aye left for Thailand and is now living there. He is a regular correspondent for Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), a radio station based in Oslo, and has articles regularly published in The Nation, a daily newspaper in Thailand.

Introduction

After gaining independence from British colonial rule in 1947, Burma experienced 15 years of democracy. In 1962 the military staged a coup, and the country has been under military rule ever since. From 1974 to 1988 the military ruled through the mechanism of the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), the only political party allowed to exist. In 1988 the junta responded to mass calls for democracy by shooting protesters; an estimated 10,000 people were killed. In 1990 the regime bowed to international pressure and held a general election. The opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) won an overwhelming victory. The junta refused to recognize the result of Burma have had to endure a harsh crackdown by the military, involving the arrest and detention of thousands of supporters of democracy, denial of freedoms of speech, assembly and association, and violence-particularly targeting ethnic minorities. Member of the NLD and other opposition parties are put under tremendous pressure; many have been forced to resign.

On June 24, 1998 some 3000 people gathered outside an apartment block in Rangoon and braved heavy rain in the hope of finding news of a relative who died ten years ago. Rumors had spread like wildfire that the ghost of someone killed in the 1988 pro-democracy uprising was terrorizing the apartment block. It was at this apartment block in June 1988 where demonstrating students were brutally gunned down by riot police. All those who had come to see the ghost had lost a family member in 1988. Although nobody is sure whether or not the ghost was real, the incident greatly worried the ruling military junta, which has attempted to bury the events of 1988. The incident also stirred the parents whose sons and daughters were killed ten years ago.

A woman whose son was killed at midnight on August 3, 1988 said, "I always wonder whether or not the soul of my son is still on the streets, and I always pray that he may someday reach heaven. Although they (the military) can forget about it, I will never forget my son. Every August 8, I go and walk along the street in front of the City Hall where my son was killed," she said. "The worst thing is that although I know my son was killed there, I never saw his body."

There are many parents with similar stories, and many who don't know for sure whether their sons and daughters are still alive. Some believe their loved ones are in the jungle fighting for democracy, while others think their children may have resettled in third country.

If people are actually reincarnated after they die, then those in Burma who were killed during the 1988 popular uprising would now be ten years old. They would be surprised to see the number of large hotels, apartment blocks, nightclubs and fashion shows in Burma, as well as air-con buses and pubs. Perhaps one of the most interesting things for them would be the change in traditional values over the past decade and the sight of young girls selling cigarettes on the streets, in teashops and in bars.

If one of the reincarnated were a student, he would be sad to know that there have been only three years of academic study in the past ten. He would probably ask his friends who survived the 1988 uprising, "What improvements have there been in education these ten years?" After hearing that many students are in prison, he would probably say, "If there were such a thing as Asian values, for Burmese students it would be 'paying the price for democracy'."

If one of the reincarnated were a monk, he would be very angry to discover that many venerable monks were arrested and imprisoned for their strike in September 1990. What would also amaze him are the many televisions and video recorders in each monastery. He would conclude, "Perhaps televisions and video recorders are used as bribes to keep monks away from politics, because before 1988 the regime prohibited monks even watching football."

If one of the reincarnated were a businessman, he would at first welcome the 'open market economy'. But he would later be disappointed to understand that the open market is not for everyone but is restricted to an elite few. Then he would say, "I support the investment sanctions and blame those countries that allowed Burma to enter ASEAN for supporting the junta."

Although they took place over ten years ago, for the people of Burma the events of 1988 seem to have happened only yesterday. The relatives of the 10,000 people killed nationwide in the uprising are still suffering. They have the right to know who gave the order to shoot unarmed, peaceful demonstrators, and the right to know where the bodies are buried. The problem is that according to the junta, only 15 protesters were killed during the uprising. It is interesting to see that in Thailand the relatives of those killed in the May 1992 demonstrations now have the right to sue the authorities.

It is true that over these ten years many things have changed in the world. The Cold War finished, apartheid came to an end in South Africa, Suharto resigned in Indonesia and in Cambodia elections have been held for a second time. Even in Nigeria, elections have been held and political prisoners freed.

Unfortunately for Burma, nothing has improved over the past ten years. In fact things are now worse than in 1988. There are hundreds of thousands of refugees from Burma who have fled to neighboring countries. Human rights abuses have constantly risen over the years, including massive forced labor and forced relocation of villagers across the country.

Opium production is at a record high, as is inflation, and corruption is rampant. There is no proper medical system or social welfare, and the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Burma is now threatening whole communities. The education system is virtually destroyed with the junta closing schools and universities without warning for long periods whenever they fear social or political tensions are rising.

The 1990 May election result, which the NLD won by a landslide, is consistently ignored and the junta refuses to have a dialogue with the NLD. At the same time, there are up to 2000 political prisoners in the country's jails. In this dire situation, all the military leaders have done is change the name of the junta.

In the closed society imposed by the regime, nobody can openly discuss their opinions or feelings-even the NLD. As a result, the international community has difficulty obtaining any credible information about what is really happening inside Burma. With restrictions over media flow, the world relies on the opposition groups in exile and on the border areas. Information about the situation in the prisons is still far away and many questions remain obscure.

It is against this background that I have published this book, in an effort to fill some of the information gaps. Torture, inhumane imprisonment conditions, and deaths of political prisoners are not often discussed from a personal perspective. Articles in the book also address the atrocious education system in Burma, issue facing illegal immigrants and general political questions. This is only a small part of the story occurring inside Burma. I will be glad if it can be of some use in shedding light on the human tragedy-taking place in 'The Golden Land'.

Moe Aye
March 1999

My Guiding Star

When I was young and growing up in Mandalay my mother always reminded me of the Buddha's Five Precepts-not to lie, drink alcohol, steal, have lustful thoughts or to kill. I still remember her words and, in particular, what she said to me one day.

“Never violate the Five Precepts”, she told me. “As soon as you break the rules, you will sooner or later face many problems. You may even go to prison where there are thieves, murderers, rapists, liars and drug-addicts. If that happens you will be an outcast from society.”

As I grew up, my mother's teachings remained the same and in my last year of high school she would stress the importance of education. “You have to try hard in your studies in order to live your life to a high standard. As you know, the only thing I can give you is education. Although I never had the right to learn, I have decided that you must be well educated. So if you want to show your gratitude to me you can just try to study hard.”

I studied hard and tried my best to follow the Five Precepts. Then I was accepted into Rangon Institute of Technology (RIT) and I started studying engineering. My mother was extremely proud and constantly boasted to her neighbours. “My son will be an engineer soon,” She would say, “and my wishes will be fulfilled.” I could feel her strong desire for me to be an engineer.

Every time I returned home during the holidays, she used to say, “Keep holding on to the Five Precepts and studying hard.”

At that time my father's pension from the government was only 300 kyats and my monthly fees for study added up to nearly 350 kyats. Every time I asked my mother how she was paying for me she would reply, “Don't think about it. The only thing you have to concentrate on is your learning.”

During one holiday in Mandalay I was involved in a fight with some thugs and I suffered a minor injury. I asked my mother to forgive me as I tried to avoid getting involved.

“I already know how it happened. It is not your fault,” She said with a smile. “Fighting and quarrelling is not good, but sometimes it's inevitable, especially when someone tries to bully another.”

She paused and then continued, “As far as you can, you need to be patient and tolerate. You must not be the first to do wrong, and it also must not be your fault. If you think you have done someone wrong, never be reluctant to apologize for your mistake. If someone is being bullied, never think it's not your business. But you need to have the ability to judge who is wrong and to stand up for the right side.”

It was 1987 and I was in my fifth year at RIT, the second last year of my Engineering Degree. Although my father's pension remained at 300 kyats a month, inflation was

high and everyday goods were very expensive. My mother had to try very hard for her to survive and to also pay for my education fees.

“I think I should take this academic year off,” I suggested, “with things so difficult at the moment.”

“Never suggest such a thing!” my mother shouted. “Your father's pension and my backyard farm are enough for us to survive. Before I die, all I want is for me to see you at your graduation ceremony. That's all!”

I had never seen my mum so angry before. After her outburst she calmed down and mumbled, “I don't understand why the government didn't give you a scholarship.”

Five months later came the day I shall never forget, which happened to be during my final examinations for fifth year. On September 6, 1987, the then ruling BSPP cancelled the 75, 35, and 25 kyat notes without offering any replacement.

Just the day before, my mother had given me 350 kyats in 25 kyats notes. All the money was now worthless. Holding money in my hand, I was dumbfounded and could only envisage my mother. Although it was only 350 kyats, or about US\$4, it was a lot of money for my family and my mother made a lot of sacrifices for it.

When I looked around, there many angry students on the campus. All the canteens were closed. I went with a group of students to see one of the senior lecturers and asked what we could do. He asked us to calm down and said that he sympathized with us very much but he also had a lot of money that was now worthless.

One of lecturers complained, “If we had a democratic government it would not have the right to cancel its currency without compensation.”

This was the first time that I had heard the words ‘democratic government’ from a fellow Burmese. Before then I had only heard it on the Voice of America (VOA) and the British Broad casting Corporation (BBC).

When the school authorities refused to say whether or not the government would exchange the now worthless notes, students poured out their anger by burning cars and breaking windows. This was the first time I participated in a demonstration and it was my first confrontation with security police. Followed the protests, schools were closed and some students were secretly dismissed from their schools.

When I arrived back home, my mother asked me whether I participated in the riots. I had never lied to her and so I answered with fear that I had she stared at me for a while and said slowly, “You are right. There are many ordinary people like me who have suffered from the cancellation of the notes. I wonder why they keep their emotions under control. Under this government, there are many times that notes have been cancelled but this one is the worst.”

Then she showed me nearly 3000 kyat, but it was all in 25 kyat notes. She said with deep sadness that she had saved it for my final year.

A week later, I received a letter from the registrar of RIT stating that I didn't have the right to continue with my exams because of my involvement in the riots. I showed the letter to my mother.

“They forget the government has robbed its own people”, she calmly said. “There's no need to be disappointed. To be frank, I want you to be an engineer, but there may be little similarity between the dream and reality. You can't predict the future. The most important thing is to do your best.”

My neighbours sympathized with my mother and me. I tried to stay away from my mother because every time I talked with her my heart ached. I wanted was feeling the same. During those days I asked her to take a rest and relax, and I took over her daily work. My neighbours also successfully persuaded her to go to and visit a temple for a couple of days outside Mankalay.

In February 1988, I received a letter from the registrar of RIT stating that I could submit a letter of appeal to the Education Minister if I wanted to continue my studies. I happily showed the letter to my mother and I thought that she would be very happy. However, after hearing the news she was silent for a while.

“In my opinion, your registrar's view is partial”, She said clearly. “First, the government should apologize to the people. It should say why it cancelled the bank notes and say it has failed to explain about the cancellation. After that, you should submit a letter to the Minister and you should explain to him why you became involved in the riots. I think this is the right thing to do.”

She continued, “For your future, you need to continue your study. But you have to know in reality that may not be possible. I am 65 years old,” she said, “and until now I've never been robbed. Under the Japanese and the British I was even able to save money, but not this government.”

After that, I had to get character references from the Township Socialist Programme Party unit and the local police. But in order to get them quickly I had to pay 25 kyat for each reference. Then I went down to Rangoon and submitted the documents to the registrar of RIT and to the Department of Education. Although that is now over ten years ago, I've still not received a response.

I arrived back home in Mandalay and heard that an RIT student had died from stab wounds after a fight with some thugs. My mother was shocked “It's not easy to turn a young boy into a university student. A lot of time and money goes into it and this young man's death is a loss for both his family and his country. I sympathize with his parents very much. I don't know why clever men, instead of thugs, die early. When Bogyoke Aung San was assassinated he was only 32 years old.”

After that another tragic event happened at my university. On March 13, 1988, the security police shot dead a student. My mother was inconsolable at the news, describing the actions of the police as unjust and verging on anarchism.

During those days, I noticed that my mother spent her time handling the prayer beads and mediating in front of the Buddha. At night, she listened to the BBC without saying anything to me.

On March 16, 1988, many students demonstrated peacefully at Rangoon University campus, demanding students' rights and an inquiry into the student's death. The military answered by launching a crackdown and arresting many students. Many were injured in the crackdown and soldiers also raped some female students.

After listening to the BBC, my mother whispered. "Why are the police so bloodthirsty? If this continues I think the country will be ruined. When the government fails to abide by the Ten Precepts for rulers, it is usual for a nation to suffer and its people come to great harm."

From my own viewpoint, I wanted justice and I felt a sense of freedom. The tragic news from Rangoon University had fanned my flames of anger.

Later I discovered that my mother's predication of the country going to ruin was true. There were many riots and looting in Rangoon after the tragedy of March 16. I got a letter from the family of one of my friends living in Rangoon. They wrote that their son was in Insein Prison but they were not allowed to have contact with him.

I showed the letter to my mother and asked her for some advice. She thought a while and asked, "What do you want to do and how do you feel? Let me know first."

"I want to go and see my friend's parents and give them some encouragement," I replied honestly.

"You should first go and see the family whose son was killed by the police," she sighed. "After that you should go to the family of your friend in jail."

After looking up at the sky, my mother said softly, "I think you have been dismissed from your class." One of your friends has been killed and another is detained without reason.

During that time I was familiar with the terms 'human rights', 'democracy' and 'dictator' as a result of listening to the VOA and the BBC. My mother's favorite person on radio was Christopher Gannet, a BBC reporter. She seemed to forget about her ambitions for me becoming an engineer and I also began to look for books on human rights and democracy. I wanted to know more about the 1962 military coup of Ne Win, the student demonstrations that followed, U Thant's funeral riot in 1974, and many other acts of defiance against the military.

On the first of June one of my friends was released from prison. According to Buddhism, everyone who is released from prison has to be ordained as a monk in order to absolve him of his sins. My friend invited me to attend his religious ceremony and I also wanted to ask him about his prison life. I attended my friend's ceremony and also asked him about his two months in prison, not knowing that I would spend over six years in jail myself.

During my visit to Rangoon, I managed to collect some books on politics and I noticed that many students were interested in the subject. Previously we would spend our time discussing girls, films, love poems and novels at a teashop. Now we discussed our political opinions, especially student rights and the student unions. Before I returned to Mandalay in June the government re-opened all the universities.

As soon as the schools were re-opened, most students concentrated on forming a student union and criticizing the government's abuses of power. Soon after the re-opening, a peaceful student demonstration occurred on Rangoon University campus. Many students made fiery speeches and demanded the government release those detained in March and hold an inquiry into those students who were killed and raped.

On 21 June students demonstrated in the streets again and two were shot dead by the military, while many more were injured. After that I returned to Mandalay and told my mother my experiences in Rangoon University. My mother forgot that I still hadn't heard from the registrar. She only remembered after her neighbours asked whether or not I was allowed to continue my classes. I noticed she looked a little sad every time someone asked about my education.

I remember at the end of June we read that Ne Win was calling an emergency party conference.

"It's strange that Ne Win would call such a conference," My mother said.
"I think he will probably apologize for his wrongdoing. I hope that this conference will also declare my worthless 25 kyat notes valuable once again."

A few days later we listened to Ne Win's speech on the radio in which he resigned but also threatened to kill demonstrators.

"What rubbish!" my mother shouted angrily. "That's not a speech of a state leader!" She went out and told her neighbours at once. She was especially enraged at Ne Win's threat that if people persisted with demonstration, the army would not shoot over their heads. However, my neighbours were mainly worried about their money, which was still worthless. That night my mother showed me her worthless 3000 kyat again.

By the first week of August I wanted to get back to Rangoon to join the protests against the government, but I didn't know how my mother would react. So I asked her if I could go to Rangoon to help my friend in his business so I could have some more money. She seemed to know I was hiding something.

"In reality I don't want you go anywhere," She said, "but you have to do something since you can't study. How long it will take? I don't want you to be away too long."
"Only two months," I replied.

I left for Rangoon the next day having decided to join the anti-government movement. On the way to Rangoon, I thought about my mother and asked for her forgiveness.

After stay in one friend's house after another in Rangoon, I participated in the uprising on August 8, 1998. For the next two months I went with a group of students around the country to organize student unions and promote democracy.

However, I never went to Mandalay during this period and I didn't have any contact with my mother.

Then on November 7, 1990 I was arrested in Rangoon by the MIS for my involvement in the ABSFU and the youth wing of the NLD. I was sentenced to seven years imprisonment in Insein Prison.

I didn't want my mother to know that I was in prison. I didn't want to be a burden on her because it would cost such a lot of money for her to come to Rangoon and she would be allowed only ten minutes with me. The thing I worried most about was whether or not the prison authorities would mistreat her. Moreover, she had no relatives to stay with in Rangoon, so I asked my fellow inmates not to tell their families that I was in prison.

To tell you the truth, I was afraid to face her. But at the same time, I wanted to know if she was all right. Sometimes I wondered whether or not my mother was still alive.

However, I felt so sad every time the other prisoners had visits from their families, which were every two weeks. Hearing about their experiences during visiting times made me sad and home sick, and made me want to run out of my cell to talk with my mother once again. But I didn't get to see her for more than a year, and when I did it was totally unexpected.

One day, a warder called my name and asked me for my mother's name and her address. After checking the details on a sheet of paper, he said my mother was at the prison gate to see me and warned me not to talk to her about anything except personal matters. I was then pulled out of my cell and a hood was placed over my head. While walking to the main prison office other prisoners told me to have a nice prison-visit and I felt very anxious and wanted to run to get there as quickly as possible.

As soon as I arrived there, the hood was removed from my head and I had to check my mother's name and address again. Then the prison officer gave me a letter of permission and ordered me to take it. I read it quickly and saw it contained my name and prison number, and my mother's name and address.

I noticed my hands were shivering and my heart was racing. I then walked with a warder towards the main gate where I would meet my mother. When we arrived, I saw there was a large wall with a three0foot square opening covered with wire mesh. There was nothing to sit on. I went up to the window, held the iron bars that were in front of the wire, and waited my mother.

I saw her come into the other room holding a plastic bag. "Hello!" I said. "How are you?" I didn't know what else to say.

Without saying a word, she stared at me and cried. I was worried that she was not going to be able to cope with the situation. A prison officer then warned her that she

only had ten minutes. She suddenly stopped crying. She turned to him and said, "I know. Mind your own business, I can do what I like."

Then she told me, "Take care of your again. "I know you haven't violated the Buddha's Five Precepts. I know." She stopped crying and continued by forgiving me. "I know I'm lucky compared to those whose sons and daughters were killed on the streets."

Then the officer intervened. "The time is up. Stop talking."

"Take care of your health," my mother continued. "Don't worry about me." After wiping her tears and saying goodbye, she left. That was my first prison visit. I had wanted to ask her many questions, but I wasn't able to.

Although she said she would try to see me once every three months, it was extremely difficult for her to do so and she could only manage to see me once every six months. Counting back, we saw each other only 13 times while I was in prison. The total time we had together in those six years was only two hours and ten minutes. But each visit made me stronger both mentally and physically.

During one visit my mother asked whether there were any prisoners who didn't have anyone to come and see them. When I told her there were some prisoners she was so sympathetic and told me to share my food with them and to give them her regards.

Every time I asked her how she was surviving and how she was managing to come and see me, she would reply, "You need to understand the situation. Whether or not I have problems you can do nothing about them because you are in prison."

"You're not an ordinary prisoner and a criminal," She continued, "you're a political prisoner. You're here not because of your own interests but because of the interests of the people. I've already told you the saying look before you leap. I believe you have leapt only after looking ahead carefully. Worry for the people, not only for me."

When I was released from prison in 1996, she would proudly say to her neighbours that I had come back from the 'Life institute and Prison University' after six years of learning. When one of her neighbours said accidentally to her that was the same time it takes to get an engineering degree from RIT, I noticed she felt rather uncomfortable.

Later I found out that my father's pension had been cut in 1992 because of my detention. My mother never told about it when I was in prison. She also said that they cut the pension and she was also forced to 'donate' money to government organizations, to so-called infrastructure construction, and to the local township authorities.

Although I wanted to do something to help, I couldn't because my health had deteriorated so much in prison. Far from helping, my health actually made the situation worse. Although one injection cost 25 kyat before my arrest in 1990, it cost 200 kyat after I was released in 1996. I will certainly never forget my friends who took care of my mother during my prison years and helped me with my medical care after my release.

One day after my release my mother noticed that I was hesitating about spending money on medicines. "Just take care of your health," she said, "so you can regain your strength. There is nothing more valuable than your health. You should relax and take regular medication."

Then I had a heart attack and began to have trouble breathing. My doctor advised me that I should go to hospital. That was December 1996, and while I was in hospital students in Rangoon and Mandalay took to the streets and demonstrated against the military.

At the same time, we heard the news that a bomb had exploded at the Ka-Bar-Aye Temple in Rangoon.

"I condemn whoever is responsible for this" my mother said angrily. "This is unforgivable. Temples and religious ceremonies should not be used on the political battlefield." She cleared her throat and continued, "I wonder how a bomb got through the heavy security there. In my opinion, the government may be responsible."

One day three MIS officers came to see me in hospital. Although they asked many questions about the student demonstrations and the bomb explosion, they didn't ask me about my health. They wanted to know who led the demonstrations and they showed me photos of some students.

They also asked me what I thought of the bomb at the Ka-Bar-Aye Temple. However, I was still too ill to respond and my mother intervened. "My son has already been released from prison and he is now having medical treatment due to your harassment of him in prison. Do you come here to enquire about my son's health, or to interrogate him?"

"We're not here of our own accord, but are under orders. We would like to ask you to tell your son not to become involved in politics."

After they left, my mother told me that she was worried about my health and my security. Two months after I arrived back home, there was a fight between some Buddhist monks and Muslims in Mandalay. The conflict spread and later turned from a religious conflict into a political conflict. As usual, the military regime accused the NLD and other democrats of trying to foment unrest before the ASEAN meeting in which Burma's membership of the regional group was to be considered.

Later, two MIS officers came to my home and asked me some questions.

"What do you think of the situation with the monks and the Muslims, and who do you blame for it?" They also asked, "Have you had any discussions about politics after your release from prison?"

I understood that the MIS suspected me of something and that they were trying to create some story for the international community. Therefore I didn't reply, and my mother complained to them that I was not in good health.

“Do you suspect my son?” she openly questioned them. “He has been with me every second since his release from prison.”

I still remember how angry she was when they arrived and began asking questions. “You should understand our privacy,” she argued, “especially my son's situation. He needs to rest and relax. You have never asked him about his health and you never think how much we have suffered.”

“Don't you know that my son being in prison for more than six years is not only bad for him but for our whole family?” she said angrily.

After the MIS officers left, I asked her, “What do you think all that was about? I think they want to send me to prison again although I'm not involved in the movement.”

My mother said nothing in reply.

A few days later there was another bomb explosion, this time at Lieutenant-General Tin Oo's house in which his daughter was killed. My mother was deeply shocked. “What happened?” she said. “How could it happen where there is such tight security? I think whoever sent the parcel containing the bomb may be in the government. It's not easy for dissidents to do something like this.”

Shortly afterwards, officers from the township Military Intelligence came to see me again. “What do you think of the two bomb explosions?” they asked. They then handed me a blank sheet of paper and told me to write down my opinions.

My mother turned to them and said, “Isn't my son released from prison yet? If you want to know everyone's opinion regarding this bomb you should hold an election just like in May 1990. My son's sole opinion is not enough; he's not a great philosopher or fortune-teller.”

As usual, one of them said that they had to ask me some questions because of orders from their commander. Before they left they said that that was their last visit. That night my mother said to me that she too thought that was their last visit and that next time they would put me in prison.

“If there are more bomb or demonstrations,” she said, “I think they will take you to prison. Tell me the truth. What do you think of the situation? What do you think you should do?”

I honestly didn't know how to answer her.

“In my opinion,” she said, “I think you'll be arrested again even though you aren't involved in politics. You aren't allowed to continue your study and you have nothing to do. Even though you want to start a business, I think you will be harassed and possibly face trumped up charges under the Business Act. So what will you do here?”

That night mother sat in a chair in the living room for the whole night. Although I asked her to go to bed and not to worry, I didn't succeed. The next morning, I

explained to her that I wanted to continue with both my education and my involvement in politics. I told her how I sympathized with my friends in prison and of promises I made to them about fighting for human rights and democracy.

“I understand,” she replied with great sorrow. “This is something that I myself have suffered while you were in prison. I constantly worried about your situation and although I wanted to visit you regularly, I wasn't able to. However, whenever people would ask me about you, I would feel greatly encourage and heartened by their concern. But in order to do this you must be very committed to the task and have some money, or else you can't do anything.”

Finally I asked her the question that had been on my mind for some time. “How would you feel if I went somewhere else?” She was very surprised at the question but said nothing.

One week later, She asked me if I knew about the students in the jungle and those abroad. “You don't have the right to continue your study,” she continued, “and you can be at any time. There is certainly no future for you here, but I suspect that maybe there are many things you can do elsewhere.

“To tell you the truth, I don't want to see you in prison again. I understand you have your future and your promises that you gave to your friends. I realize that here you can't do what you want to. You may know where you want to go better than I do, but let me about it a little more.”

A few days later, she asked me again, “If you out of the country, do you think you can do what you want to? “It's certain that you can't be detained by the military if you leave the country,” she continued. “But you shouldn't go for that reason alone.”

Then we heard that the MIS had questioned some of my friends who had come to see me. “They're trying to isolate you. I don't understand why the MIS treat you and your friends like this.”

Early next morning, my mother woke me up and spoke to me. “I am 65 years old now but I believe I can live more years. I can still stand by myself and I strongly believe that within the next five years many changes will occur. If you think you can achieve many things for the people and for your future, you should go somewhere else immediately. Don't worry about me. I am already familiar with living alone since you went to Rangoon in 1988 and while you were in prison,” she slowly said.

I felt very surprised at what she was saying and said nothing to her. She then said that I should prepare to leave within the few days. A week later, in late July 1997, I left Mandalay and Burma. Before I left I paid my respects to my mother.

She said softly to me. “I hope we will meet here again within five years under a new government. Take care of your health, uphold the Five Precepts, keep your and work towards your future. I want you to promise me this. And don't forget that you're not leaving the country for a holiday. I will be waiting for news from you and for your return.”

It is now more than a year since I arrived in Thailand, and I constantly think about what my mother said to me. I always try to follow the promises I gave to her, my friends and to the people of Burma. I want my guiding star and my friends to know I am following my promises.

Dialogue with the Devil

This appeared in the ABSDF publication 'Tortured Voices: Personal Accounts of Burma's Interrogating Centres'(July 1988)

On November 7, 1990, I went over to Myint Thu's apartment on 38th Street, Kyauktada Township, Rangoon, to sleep the night. Myint Thu was my classmate at the Rangoon Institute of Technology and finished his engineering degree. He had set up his own television and radio repair shop and he would sometimes help me with food, clothing and a place to stay. When I arrived at Myint Thu's apartment, there was an elderly woman and a girl about 16 years old from up-country staying there.

"I think I should sleep outside tonight," I told Myint Thu. "I can see you have other guests here."

"Don't worry," he replied, "they're my aunt and niece. They've never been to Rangoon and they want to see me. They'll sleep in the attic."

I took a shower and lay in my friend's bed reading the book Thebaik Hmauk Kyaing Tha, 'The Student Boycotts', written by Thein Pe Myint. Myint Thu came into the room around 10pm and we discussed the current political situation. We were still talking at midnight when we heard someone knocking on the front door. **"We want to check the guest list!" someone shouted.**

Both of us looked at each other. We instantly knew it was the notorious MIS at the front door and I sensed that the time that I had always dreaded had finally come. Suddenly, I turned to Myint Thu. "You only know me as an ordinary classmate," I said. "You don't know anything else about me."

I was really worried about my friend who, even though he had his own business, also helped people like me and therefore faced the possibility of being arrested by MIS. Myint Thu stared at me for few seconds and went to the front door. His aunt and niece were also woken up by the noise and we all watched Myint Thu as he moved toward the door. When he opened the door a man wearing a blue jacket and a blue Arakanese sarong pointed a pistol at Myint Thu, while a military corporal in uniform entered the apartment armed with a rifle.

"Where is Moe Aye?" the man in the blue jacket asked Myint Thu. "I want to see him."

"What's going on here?" Myint Thu replied.

The man in the blue jacket shouted back, "Tell me what I asked you!" More people then entered the room. Two military intelligence officers in plain clothes and three in uniform came in holding G4 assault rifles.

"It's me, I'm Moe Aye," I interrupted.

"Handcuff this mother fucker!" I asked. "I haven't committed any crime."

"Shut up! Do you want to die?" shouted one of the plain-clothed officers.

Two soldiers holding G4 assault rifles then came over to me and one of them twisted my arms behind my back and handcuffed me. I heard low sobbing coming from the attic and then some noises in the bedroom that sounded as though the soldiers had found something incriminating. I turned and looked at my friend Myint Thu. I could clearly see sorrow and bitterness in his eyes. One of the plain-clothed men seemed to be the leader of the group and I later discovered that he was Captain Kyaw Zin Thet from Military Intelligence Unit 7. He sat down in a chair in the living room.

"Put a hood over his head," the captain ordered the three soldiers still in the room.

A soldier holding a rifle then placed a military green-coloured hood over my head. I could still hear their voices but I couldn't see anything. I could also hear the noise of military boots going up to the attic and Myint Thu's aunt crying. I was hoping that my friend Myint Thu wouldn't be arrested. If he were arrested, his aunt and niece, who had never been to Rangoon before, would be in trouble. Then I heard Myint Thu's aunt weeping louder and louder.

"Please don't do anything to my friend," I pleaded. "He's an ordinary businessman. He's not a political activist."

"Shut up," said an MIS officer. Whack! My cheek was smashed with a rifle butt.

Myint Thu's aunt was crying and pleading with the officer, "Please sir! My nephew is just a businessman. If he's guilty of something please tells me."

I was then pushed out of the apartment by one of the soldiers and put into the back of a truck. I noticed that someone was sitting beside me in the vehicle. After that I heard some noises, which sounded like someone, was being forced into the truck and I thought it was my friend Myint Thu. Then we drove off and I didn't want to think how much Myint Thu's aunt and niece would be suffering.

"Myint Thu, are you also in the truck?" I asked.

"You son of the bitch! Shut your fucking mouth!" someone shouted.

After driving for about 15 minutes the vehicle stopped. Someone ordered me to stand up in the truck and bow my head. They grabbed my shoulders and I was slowly pushed along. After taking five steps I was pushed out of the truck and felt my heart

miss a beat as I fell on the hard ground. Someone pulled me up by my shoulders and shouted “Stand up!” They then pushed me in the back to make me start walking. I walked for about ten minutes, turning left and right many times, and was forced to bow my head again. I stopped when I hit a wall and my handcuffs were then removed, but I still had the hood over my head.

“Stand against the wall and hold your hands up!” came the order.

The officers searched my clothes and my body. My sarong was also taken off. When they were satisfied with their search, I got my sarong back. One of them then twisted my hand and then told me to walk slowly. I had to bow my head many times and I walked like a blind man. The hood had been on my head for a few hours now and I felt like I could hardly breathe. I told them I was suffocating but they didn’t answer. Instead they hit me violently across the head. After a few minutes walk I was taken into a room.

“When you hear someone knocking on the door,” I was told by an MIS guard, “put the hood on your head. If you want to go to the toilet, knock on the door three times.”

The door to my cell then slammed shut. I kept quiet for a while and gave my hands a shake now that they were free of the handcuffs. I then took off the hood. The cell was about six feet by eight feet and the ceiling was quite high. There was one four-foot neon light on the ceiling and a two-foot neon light on the wall next to the door. There was also a big five-foot-long mirror beside the door, a small table and an ugly ten-inch-high wooden bed. I was sure this was one of the notorious MIS Interrogation Centers that I had been hearing about for such a long time. I sat on the bed and looked into the mirror while combing my hair back with my hand. Suddenly, I heard a voice from the mirror. “Moe Aye what are you doing?”

I then realized that this was probably a one-way mirror. I didn’t reply to the question, but instead sat down on the bed and tried to gather my thoughts. I wondered what kind of questions they could ask me and how I could best answer them in terms of the safety of my friend Myint Thu. A guard then knocked on the door four or five times. I didn’t move and I tried to calm myself down. The khaki hood was lying beside me on the bed. Then I heard an angry voice. “Don’t you know to put the hood over your head when you hear knocking on the door?”

I didn’t move.

“Can you hear me mother fucker?”

Finally, two MIS soldiers in plain clothes and military boots opened the door and ran to me. They covered my head with the khaki hood and kicked me six or seven times in terms of the safety of my friend Myint Thu. A guard then knocked on the door four or five times. I didn’t move and I tried to calm myself down. The khaki hood was lying beside me on the bed. Then I heard an angry voice. “Don’t you know to put the hood over your head when you hear knocking on the door?”

I didn’t move.

“Can you hear me mother fucker?”

Finally, two MIS soldiers in plain clothes and military boots opened the door and ran to me. They covered my head with the khaki hood and kicked me six or seven times in my abdomen and on my shins. “Remember mother fucker, next time I’ll beat you more than that,” One of them said.

I was dragged out of the cell between two soldiers. We walked for two minutes turning left and right many times and then we stopped. The two soldiers had stepped away from me, for I could feel that both my hands were free. When I tried to step forward something like a wooden stick pressed into my stomach, and so I stepped back again. I couldn’t hear anything. Everything was very quiet. I thought I was in big room and sensed that the MIS soldiers were watching me. I felt downhearted and angry, but more courageous than before. My shin, which had been kicked five minutes ago, suddenly became very painful. I tried to bend down to massage my shin when suddenly I heard a very loud voice that seemed to come through a microphone.

“Hey you!” I didn’t know where the voice was coming from. My whole body was bathed in sweat, I felt suffocated, my leg was in pain and I was feeling very dizzy, as though my upper body was circling like a fan. “SALUTE!!” someone bellowed, and I heard the sound of soldiers standing to attention with their guns.

I guessed that one of the MIS officers had entered the room. Then I heard some footsteps and the sound of tables and chairs being moved. However, I wasn’t able to judge whether they were in front of me or behind me. My palate became dry and my whole body was chilled from sweating too much. Ten minutes later, the MIS officer spoke in a slow and heavy voice.

“Rangoon is a big city with many people. Do you know why we have selected you, you mother fucker Moe Aye?” while he was speaking I heard a few people move closer to me and I realized that the interrogation had begun. I told myself not to panic and I simply replied, “yes, I know.”

“Okay then, if you know, you should answer our questions correctly. If you try to tell lies, you will not get out of here. That’s what you need to understand.”

“I have been brought here because I spoke the truth,” I told him. “I have no lies to tell.”

“Mother fucker, we brought you here because you disturbed and destroyed the stability of the state. Hands up!”

Suddenly a soldier came behind me and pulled up my hands. “Spread your legs,” the soldier ordered. Both my hands were raised and both my legs were spread. Two bamboo or wooden sticks were then placed between my feet so my legs would stay apart. I could feel the sticks touching my ankles. The MIS officer who had spoken before continued. “What did you do in 1988?” He was obviously referring to what I did during the 1988 pro-democracy uprising.

“Nothing strange, I did what the people did.”

“ No! I am asking you which organization you joined at the time and what you did in pushing the country into an abyss!”

“ We never pushed the country into an abyss,” I replied. “ We did the right thing for the country.”

“Do you guys understand politics? You students are exploited by opportunist politicians, don't you know that? Tell me which organization you joined in 1988.”

“Throughout our history, students have always been at the forefront of politics. Nobody coaxed me into politics. I joined the All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABSFSU) and is serving a 20-year jail term. “But for the others,” I continued, “I can't remember their names because I haven't seen them since I joined the National League for Democracy which was a year ago.”

Both of my arms had been up in the air for a long time and were getting very tired. I tried to lower my arms a few inches but a soldier beat my left arm three or four times.

“Keep your hands up!” one of the soldiers said.

The officer continued, “Did you know that Min Ko Naing has been manipulated by the Communist Party of Burma?”

“I know the mass of the students stand behind him,” I said, taking a risk.

“This guy seems to be stubborn,” said the officer slowly and heavily.

Just then both my ankles were stabbed with something sharp and the room became very quiet. I felt as if I were alone in the room. I tried to spread my legs a bit more to shake the stick between my feet and I heard the sound of something like a wooden stick drop onto the concrete floor. Then I heard footsteps coming towards me and someone hit me across the head. They continued to hit me about the head and I lost count of how many times I was struck. The stick was once again placed between my legs and someone told me not to move.

I was thirsty, my lips were dry, my legs were in pain and my arms, which had been up for a long time, were very tired. I can't explain how much I was suffering at that moment. I shivered and shook, and I wondered what had happened to my friend Myint Thu. They asked me about my personal details. I couldn't remember how many questions they asked nor how many hours passed. My mouth had become so dry I could hardly speak any more. “I can't be patient,” I shouted. “I want to drink some water. I want to sit down.”

I heard my interrogators laughing. “Democracy is expensive, isn't it?” said the officer whose voice was slow and heavy. “Give him some water,” he ordered. “Give him some water,” he ordered.

Then I heard a sound like someone saluting him and I thought the officer had probably left the room. Someone took away the stick from between my feet and the

soldiers allowed me to lower both my arms. My khaki hood was then lifted to my nose and a cup was brought to my lips. I held the cup with both hands and began drinking crazily. But the cup was empty. I felt so angry and humiliated, but I couldn't speak or move. "You must go back to your room," one of the officers said.

I was carried by two soldier's back to my cell and the door was slammed shut. Everything was quiet again. I stood in front of the mirror and looked at myself. My face looked haggard and sunken like I hadn't slept for a week. My lips were completely dry and my nose was stained with blood. My head was also pounding like a huge hammer. I noticed that my left arm was painful and the skin on both my ankles was flayed and bleeding. "Moe Aye, if you want a drink there's some water on the table," said a voice from outside.

I turned and looked at the table and there was an old Seven-up can. I picked up the can but it was only one-third full of water. I drank it all in a second, and didn't check whether the water was clean or not. Although it wasn't much to drink, I felt mildly satisfied and lay down on the wooden bed. However the bed was extremely uncomfortable. The wooden base was terribly rough and uneven, and the bed was too short for me and both of my legs dangled over the end and touched the concrete floor.

So I sat down on the bed and leaned against the wall. I didn't know what time it was. It was very quiet, I couldn't hear anything. Sometimes I could faintly hear telephones ringing and the sound of someone taking a shower. At the same time I didn't dare think about my friend Myint Thu and what may have happened to him. I fell asleep for a while and woke up when I heard someone knocking on the door. I immediately put the khaki hood over my head and sat waiting in silence. Two MIS soldiers came in and pushed me out of my cell. I was frightened because I knew what I would have to face. I was frightened because I knew what I would have to face. I felt like someone who had lost all hope. My whole body was numb.

I was forced to face a wall and my khaki hood was taken off. Initially I couldn't see anything except the colour blue, and a few minutes later I realized that a soldier in military uniform was shining an electric light directly in my face. Beside me, I saw two large men in blue sports suits. Another man was in military pants but his upper body was naked and he was aiming a camera at me.

"Comb his hair a bit," ordered the man with the camera.

When I lifted my hand to comb my hair, one of the two men in blue suits reached over and roughly brushed my hair. The room was quite big and the four walls were covered with blue curtains. There was no furniture. They took two photos of me, put the hood over my head again and took me back to my cell. On the way I gathered my thoughts. 'I am on the side of truth,' I told myself, 'I don't need to worry about anything.'

The door to my cell was slammed shut and once again I was able to take off my hood. That was always the most pleasant time for me and I will never forget that feeling of temporary freedom. "Moe Aye," said a voice from behind the mirror, "if you want some food there's meal on the table."

I looked at the table and I saw some rice on an aluminum plate, some soup in a small aluminum cup and water in an old seven-up can. These must have been put in my cell while they were taking photos of me. That was my first meal since I was arrested, but I didn't know whether it was breakfast, lunch or dinner. "What time is it?" I asked the mirror.

There was no answer. They did that on purpose. I then checked the meal carefully. There was some fried watercress on the rice, the soup had little pieces of gourd and the old seven-up can was half full of water. I tasted the watercress. 'Oh, shit!' it was extremely salty. I tasted the soup and it was completely tasteless, just like boiled water. I drank all the water and then I felt like a smoke.

"Hey, I want a smoke."

"You're not allowed to smoke, the commander has ordered it," said a guard behind the mirror. That guard should be commended for being so bloody obedient! I became more confident of myself and I asked again, "I want to piss." Again there was no answer. That's when I remembered what they told me when I was first arrived here. I knocked three times on the door.

"What do you want?" the guard asked.

"I want to piss."

"Put the hood on."

A few seconds later I was out of my cell and we walked turning left and right as before. Then I was stopped and asked a question by someone who seemed to be standing in front of me. "Moe Aye, didn't you go to Myadaung Monastery in Mandalay at the end of last month and in the first week of this month?"

"Let me piss first," I said.

"It won't take more than three minutes to answer," he replied, "if you answer me correctly you can go and piss."

Suddenly I was really angry, but I told myself to calm down. "Yes", I replied.

"Why did you go there? Which monks did you meet?"

"How could I have met the monks? So many of your soldiers guard the area and I have no business to meet with any monks. My responsibility was to the information department and to collect news, that's all."

"Have you ever met with a monk called Yewata?"² the officer asked.

"Never."

“Did you write a report about what's been happening in Mandalay and send it to someone?” he continued. I didn't want to answer this question, and I knew that I had to be careful in what I said. “I really want to piss,” I replied.

“After this question you can, alright?”

“I never wrote any report for anyone, except for my NLD township office, to deliver this report in Rangoon?”

“Did you ask students from the All Burma Basic Education Students' Union to deliver this report in Rangoon?”

“Look, I really want to piss, shall I piss here?” I said angrily.

Someone spoke behind me, “Let him go and piss.” Then I was forced to walk as before, turning left and right many times. “Step up slowly,” someone said. I stepped up two steps. “Okay, turn left,” one of them ordered. “Make sure you piss directly into the pit, if not, you'll be beaten.” I didn't care what might happen to me and I pissed. I had nearly finished when a guard shouted, “Mother fucker! You're pissing everywhere!”

The guard then copped his hand down on the back of my neck. I was so angry I tried to take the hood off and hit back at him. Then I heard footsteps. “What's going on here?” someone asked. They then hit me in the stomach and I noticed that my sarong was wet with my urine. Now every time I piss, I remember that beating. I was then forced to walk back again and I was taken to a room.

“Hands up!” came the order.

I put both my hands in the air and my legs were spread wide apart. Like before, a wooden stick was placed between my feet and my ankles were in great pain.

“You asked students from the ABBESU to deliver this report, didn't you?” my interrogator asked me again.

“No, that's not true.” if I had said yes they would obviously ask me for the names of the students.

“Tell me truth, who did you ask to deliver this report?”

“I didn't ask anyone. When I was out of my office, I think the ABBESU students found the report themselves, made some photocopies and distributed it.”

There was silence for a few minutes. “You're a student, why did you join a political party instead of joining a student union?” asked someone whom I hadn't heard before.

I felt a little angry at the question. “But even students who have only demanded student rights have been arrested. Where is Min Ko Naing? He's in prison,” I said. “The election was held five months ago but the winning party which was voted in by the people has been denied power. That's why I joined a political party.”

I suddenly felt light-hearted, even though my back had been kicked and beaten I couldn't remember how many times. The wooden stick between my legs was removed and I was taken to another room. When we got there I heard something rolling over my head.

“Sit down,” they ordered, “and stretch out your legs.”

I felt a bit afraid. I was worried about what they would do to my legs. I sat on the concrete floor for quite a long time. My blood ran cold when I remembered what I had been told about the MIS Interrogation Centres, that one form of torture was to roll a piece of rounded wood over a person's shins. I told myself not to be too scared, but I was afraid of the torture. Then one of my legs was pulled up, and I felt terrified. Both my legs were placed on a piece of hard wood, and I then felt something like another piece of wood being placed on top and I heard the sound of iron chains. Suddenly I realized that I had been put in stocks. I tried to move my legs but I couldn't. Then some hairs on my shin were plucked out. It was extremely painful and I cried out loud.

“This is very painful, but you guys say you want to save the country so you must be brave,” they mocked.

I was grateful to them because their comment encouraged me to proud and not to give in or be afraid of anything. I decided that whatever they did to me, I would never show them that I was scared. It might be because of this decision that I ended up being in the Interrogation Centre for two months and three days. I was placed in stocks and sometimes I wasn't interrogated for days. I didn't know whether it was night or day and I only had the opportunity to shower twice. I was fed twice a day and the food was always the same tasteless soup and fried salty vegetables, though sometimes I found tiny pieces of fish on my rice. Sometimes I heard the sounds of people being interrogated like me.

One day, I was taken from my stocks to different place. I was asked questions while I was forced to stand and sometimes I was beaten.

“What do you think of the SLORC?” I was asked.

“It allowed elections to be held, but it hasn't yet transferred power to the winning party.”

“Do you think we should transfer power to the NLD?”

“You have already asked that of the people of Burma in the election,” I replied.

“Do you agree with the idea that a country can only be developed when the army is strong?”

“I don't think there's any country without an army.”

I was also asked about Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein. "What do you know of Saddam Hussein?"

"He's the military dictator who invaded Kuwait."

"Do you know why Saddam is able to challenge the United States and its allies?"

"He must be a fool or he's not afraid," I replied.

"Don't you support Saddam?"

"I'm not able to comment on the problems faced by other countries. I can only talk about my own country's problems." I actually wanted to say that I didn't support Saddam, but I was too weak to argue and I feared what would happen if I disagreed.

"Saddam is supported by the people of Iraq. His army is very strong and that's why he can challenge the United States and its allies. Our top army leaders are also trying to build up a strong army in Burma, but not for the oppression of the people. Do you understand?"

"At the moment, I'm not even allowed to see the faces of my interrogators."

I was also asked a lot of questions about the National League for Democracy and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

"Between Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and U Nu, who do you like best?"

"I support the NLD."

"What do you think of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi?"

"Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is Daw Aung San Suu Kyi," I replied.

"Do you know her history?"

"I don't think I need to know about it."

"Why do you support her?"

"She hasn't done any harm to the country."

"Her husband is English. The English colonized our country."

"But Michael Aris didn't colonize Burma," I replied.

"Do you know that NLD Members of Parliament have bad moral character?"

"The people elected them."

I was asked many negative questions regarding Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD, and many positive ones about Saddam Hussein. The main target of the questions and the accusations against me were that I was actively involved in the August 1988 uprising and the supposed 'disintegration' of the country. I was forced to confess to burning a car in front of the Rangoon Institute of Technology and breaking into a barbershop at Hledun junction during the 1987 demonitization demonstration. In addition, I had to confess to sending, and encouraging students to deliver anti-government letters and pamphlets. I was also forced to confess being involved in the Buddhist monk pro-democracy movement in Mandalay.

During my time at the Interrogation Centre, I experienced a strange event three weeks before I was transferred to Insein Prison. One day when I was in the stocks I heard many voices not far from where I was. Someone was speaking slowly in English.

"You arrange a bed here for him, don't feed him the food from here, buty fried noodles or something from outside."

I recognised the voice as that of one of the MIS officers who interrogated me the first time. "Wan Phu Wai, what would you like to eat?" someone asked him slowly in English.

"Nothing," came the faded reply.

Over the next few days, an interpreter and Wan Phu Wai were speaking to each other in Chinese, so I thought this person must be from China or a Chinese student. I heard the MIS officer give instructions to the interpreter.

"Tell him to eat something. We have to wait and see if he will be repatriated back to China. We are waiting for orders from General Saw Maung and General Khin Nyut."

I heard people seaking in Chinese and Burmaese. "Major, he said that if you guarantee not to send him back to China, he will eat," said the interpreter. "Otherwise he wants to be sent to the United States or Taiwan."

I thought that the major might be Major Hla Than who interrogated me when I first arried here. "Tell him I was ordered by my boss to wait for two or three days, but that he should eat something," the major said.

Then I heard more talking in Chinese. The interpreter told the major, "He said he wants a guarantee from you not to send him back to China. To get this guarantee from you, he wants to meet someone from the United States Embassy or the British Embassy."

"Okay, tell him to eat something today. I'll get a reply tomorrow. If he doesn't eat, put the food on his table." I later heard the sound of a car starting and soldiers standing to attention with their guns.

I guessed that Wan Phu Wai was about 20 years old. The next day it sounded like he was being taken somewhere, for I heard him refusing something. "No,no,no," he was

saying. I also heard someone shout in English, “Who is Wan Phu Wai? What is he?” but I didn't catch what they were talking about.

Later in Insein Prison, I asked some Chinese prisoners about Wan Phu Wai. They said that Chinese who are charged with illegal entry into Burma are interrogated by local police officers and then sentenced and sent to prison. After their release, the Chinese Embassy comes and picks them up and sends them to the China-Burma border or inside China. However, they are never sent to MIS Interrogation Centres. I therefore guessed that Wan Phu Wai must have been one of the students involved in the Tainnamen Square movement, or involved in political activities in China.

When I was placed in the stocks it was impossible for me to sit comfortably. The stocks were about two feet off the ground, making it difficult for me to sit with my feet up so high. The distance between the stocks and the wall was only four feet, which was not enough for my legs to stretch out. I therefore had to bend my knees all the time. When I wanted to lean against the wall I had to put my hands behind me on the floor. However, I wasn't able to lean comfortably back against the wall, as only my head was able to reach the wall. In addition, whenever I bent forward I got tired very quickly, and my legs were in such tight holes in the stocks that I couldn't move them even a little bit.

The worst problem for me was that where I was sitting was also the path to the toilet for the other people who were being interrogated at the Centre. Whenever their heads also were covered with hoods, so I could only hear them coming. Whenever they passed they would accidentally hit me with their knees or their feet because they couldn't see where they were going. When they came back from the toilet I noticed that where I was sitting would become wet with either water or urine.

After being in the stocks for one week without being interrogated, both my legs felt extremely painful. Sometimes the soldiers would pull hairs from my shins, but I couldn't feel anything. When I wanted to go to the toilet, I had to call the soldiers four or five times because I didn't know where they were and I couldn't see them with the hood still over my head.

Whenever I go up to go to the toilet, I felt agonizing pain in my legs. When the soldiers unlocked the stocks, I would try to stand up but my legs wouldn't move properly. They felt numb and every time I stood up I had to massage my legs with both my hands. I wasn't able to walk immediately because it took a few moments for my blood to circulate properly. I was always beaten whenever I wanted to go to the toilet because the soldiers thought that I was pretending to be weak. I therefore tried to control myself as much as I could, and I tried to drink less water so I wouldn't urinate as much. Sometimes the soldiers would force me to drink more water than I was able to. Later in Insein Prison I found out from others who were interrogated at MI-7 at the same time as me that I was forced to drink a lot when other political prisoners didn't have enough water to drink. It was worst when I was forced to drink a lot of water before my meals, as this meant that I was unable to eat all the food.

One day I was taken from my stocks and walked around, and someone started asking me questions. “Moe Aye, your friend Myint Thu told us that you had contact with Shwe Htee.

“I don't know Shwe Htee. This is the first time I've ever heard this name.”

The officer continued, “Why are you telling us lies? Your friend has already confessed.”

“I really don't know this person,” I replied. “If you don't believe me, bring Myint Thu here and ask me in front of him.”

Someone interrupted and threatened, “Tell us the truth or your life will be ruined. It's better for you to tell us before we get angry.”

I realised that they would torture me further if I didn't co-operate, and I was really afraid. The second officer who interrupted said, “Two young men who were sent by Shwe Htee contacted you at your NLD township office, isn't that right?”

My situation was not looking good. It was true that these two young men came to my office but Shwe Htee had not sent them. They were from upper Burma and we only discussed legitimate political activities. If I told them the true story, they would surely ask me who these two were and where they were from. These two young men would then be arrested. So I had to be very cautious with my answers.

“I don't know Shwe Htee and no young men came to see me,” I answered.

“Moe Aye, don't try to lie. We have already arrested these Two young men.

What did you discuss?”

I knew the MIS were trying to trap me, but the fact was that I didn't know Shwe Htee. There was a moment of silence and I tried again, “I don't know anything and I have had no connection with these two young men.”

“If they were not sent by Shwe Htee, which organization were they from?” the officer asked me again.

Suddenly, a guard kicked me behind my knee. I collapsed on the floor on my knees. When I tried to stand up, I was forced to lie on my stomach and both of my hands were pulled behind my back and I was handcuffed. The hood was still over my head and I was lying face down on the floor. Suddenly, my sarong was taken off. I wasn't wearing any underwear and my lower body was completely naked.

“You have thirty minutes to consider whether or not you are telling lies, and to think about your life,” one of the officers said.

There was nothing but silence.

I don't want to describe what followed because I don't even want to think about it. However, I know it's important the world knows what I experienced and what is happening in MIS Interrogation Centres in Burma.

A voice broke the silence. "Moe Aye, think carefully and tell us the truth. If you don't we will make you a homosexual."

Someone then sat on top of me. Another took off my handcuffs, pulled both of my hands forward and handcuffed me again. I was about to be raped by another man. I was absolutely terrified as I expect anyone would be in such a situation.

"You're so cruel! How can I remember these two men among all the people who came to my office at that time!" I pleaded.

"Why didn't you tell us this before!" the officer shouted. "I knew you were fucking stalling all the time! Who came into your office? What are their names?"

"Let me put my sarong on first, then I will tell you everyone I met in my office."

"Tell me now," he replied, "I have no time."

I told the MIS several names, some of which were not real. I explained that I didn't know where some of the people were staying, and for the others I told them the wrong townships. I explained that we only discussed the monks' boycott in Mandalay and the NLD's Gandhi Declarations. However, they weren't satisfied with my answers and seemed a little confused.

"Didn't you discuss urban terrorist activities?"

I guessed the MIS had calculated that two young men who were sent by Shwe Htee had discussed urban terrorism with me. Otherwise they wanted to know whether I had contact with Shwe Htee. The other possible reason was that the MIS just wanted further information about me. I was sure that if the MIS thought that I had some kind of connection with urban terrorism, they would use it as propaganda against the NLD. That's why I replied that I had no connection with armed resistance groups in the jungle and never discussed urban terrorism.

The man who was sitting on top of me then got up. I was given back my sarong and allowed to get up. "Take him back to his room," an officer ordered, "I'll call him again later." He then turned to me and threatened, "We'll know whether your answers are correct or not within a couple of days. If they aren't, prepare yourself to become a homosexual instead of a politician."

I was put back in the stocks and felt nervous and afraid of the threat. If the two young men were arrested, both they and I would be in trouble. The best I could do was to give the MIS evasive answers.

During my days in the stocks, the MIS tortured me psychologically. One day, when I wanted to smoke after my meal, I asked the guard for a cheroot. The guard agreed and told me to wait a minute until he returned. A few minutes later he came back with a short cheroot and handed it to me saying, "Here you are, but you'll have to light it yourself." He then walked away.

I hoped that there were other soldiers around me but I couldn't see with the hood still over my head. "Excuse me!" I asked a number of times, "Does anyone have a light?" Finally, I lifted the hood up to my nose and sucked on the short cheroot even though I didn't have a light.

Another day, two soldiers came up to me. "Hey! Moe Aye," one said, "Do you know U Maung Ko from your NLD party? He died in an Interrogation Centre. You should think carefully and answer the questions correctly. Then you will be sent home."

I didn't reply, however later when I was transferred to Insein Prison I found out that U Maung Ko had actually died in an Interrogation Centre.

One day I was taken out of the stocks and led to a different place. I was ordered to sit on a wooden chair with both my hands handcuffed together and to the chair. A voice in front of me began the interrogation. "Moe Aye, we know that you asked the ABBESU students from Kyauktada Township to deliver copies of a propaganda letter in town. Who wrote the letter? Who funded you? And where were these letters printed?"

I didn't expect this. I thought they would ask me about She Htee and the two young men, but they caught me off guard with the question about the letters and I didn't know how to answer. Because I didn't answer immediately the soldiers started hitting me over the head. They then read out the letter we distributed in town and asked me who helped me with the letter.

"I wrote the letter myself and I used my own money."

"That's impossible. You couldn't do it all yourself," the officer replied. "Do you know how to write on wax paper for a gestetner? And where did you photocopy the letter?"

"I wrote on the wax-paper myself and I also did the copies myself which I printed by hand using a fluorescent light as a roller and gestetner ink."

"Okay, take him to a room and let him write on some wax paper and make photocopies the way he just said," the officer ordered.

This was now a huge problem for me. Although I know how to make photocopies with a fluorescent light and gestetner ink, I actually can't write on gestetner wax paper. It was a friend of mine who did the writing for the letter. I was taken to another room and left standing for several minutes. After that I heard at least two people come into the room and move the table and chair.

"Everything is on the table for your wax writing and photocopies," someone said. "When you've finished, knock on the door and cover your head with the hood, understand?"

I heard the door slam shut. Although I had the chance to take off my hood, I was shaken by the thought that I had to do something that I had never attempted before. I took off the hood and looked around the room. All I knew was that someone who was

not an expert in wax writing could easily tear the wax paper if they attempted to write on it.

I started to panic and tried to calm myself, but I couldn't. Finally I decided to face whatever would happen to me. I covered my head with the hood and knocked on the door.

"Have you finished?" a soldier asked.

"I have something to tell you," I replied as I heard the door open and at least two people come in.

"What's the matter?" one of them said.

"You didn't write anything on the wax paper!" shouted another.

"Okay, don't worry," one of them said. "We won't do anything to you, just tell us who wrote on the wax paper for you."

"I paid one of the shops on Pansodan Road to do it and they wrote it for me."

"There are so many fucking shops on Pansodan Road!" a soldier shouted angrily. "tell me which one!"

"I can't remember the name of the shop, I was very busy at the time."

"Mother fucker! Why didn't you tell us that before? Take him back to the captain," one of them ordered.

After walking just a short distance one of them said, "Captain, this guy is being evasive."

"Moe Aye, if you want to get out of here as soon as possible, tell us the truth," said the captain, whose voice was familiar. He was Captain Kyaw Zin Thet who arrested me in Myint Thu's apartment. "We have full authority here and we can do anything to you."

"I really can't remember the name of the shop. Captain you know about the shops in Pansodan Road. There are so many of them and they're always crowded. Many people were doing wax writing and typing on the pavement for money. I was telling lies to you because I couldn't remember the location of the shop or its name, that's why."

"You didn't only lie to us about the two young men, but also about who wrote on the wax paper," the captain replied. "It sounds like you want to find out about the water room. Send him to the water room."

I had no idea what the water room was, but also about who wrote on the wax paper," the captain replied. "It sounds like you want to find out about the water room. Send him to the water room."

I had no idea what the water room was, but I was sure it was a brutal place. I was taken to another room in the Centre and put in a chair. The chair was not an ordinary wooden one, but felt as though it was made of bricks and cement. It was very quiet in the room. I then heard some voices and it sounded as if someone was being interrogated in the next room.

“It isn't” I heard a soldier shout. “Draw a correct map!”

“It's true, I drew a correct map,” someone was pleading.

There were a few seconds of silence and suddenly I heard someone scream, “Ahhh!!...I'm suffocating!!...I'm dying!!”

I was petrified. I didn't know how they were torturing him but I heard his screams of agony for nearly 30 minutes. Then I heard the soldier take him out of the room. I had been badly shaken by the screams. It was silent again and I started to feel cool, as if the room was air-conditioned. I felt some drops of water slowly dripping on my head, which was still covered by the hood. A few seconds later the drops quickened and then slowed again. I tried to move from the chair.

“Sit down and don't move, mother fucker!” someone shouted. At the same time I heard someone running over to me and I was suddenly hit in the abdomen four or five times. Before I was arrested I had been told about a type of water torture and I was now terrified of what was to come. Sometimes water would pour quickly over my head, and sometimes it would slow to droplets. This however, was different to the torture I had been told about, and my hood was now soaked through. I began to suffocate and felt like I was drowning. I then started to scream like the person I'd heard not long ago.

It was worse than drowning because I couldn't move. My hands were still handcuffed and a soldier, who was also being held still. They were asking me questions at the same time, but the more they tortured me, the more I suffocated and the more I screamed. I can't remember how or if I answered their questions. One thing I was sure about, I cried and pissed in my sarong.

When they took off my hood, I noticed that I was in the same room where they took the pictures of me. My clothes were soaking wet. An officer in plain clothes combed my hair with his hand, while another in military uniform told me not to move. He then photographed me. I noticed that they had taken off my handcuffs. After that they didn't use the hood again and my eyes were instead covered with a thick khaki-coloured cloth which was shaped like a pair of glasses. I was then sent back to the stocks with my wet clothes on.

When I was back in the stocks I started to shiver from my wet clothes. I didn't know what I had told them during the water torture when I lost control, and consequently I didn't know what to say when they questioned me next time. “Moe Aye, it'd be better if your shirt and squeeze the water out,” someone said in soft voice. “How many days have you been here?”

“I don't know how many days.” I took my shirt off and squeezed it out.

“Do you think its day or night?” the officer continued.

“I don't know what the time is.”

He laughed in victorious tone. ‘I think you must be very cold, would you like some hot water?’

“Yes, if possible,” I answered.

The officer left and came back about three minutes late. “Here you are,” he said as he held my hands and gave me a cup.

I immediately realized the cup was very cold and that it contained only cold water. I held the cup feeling sad and upset and then heard the footsteps of two or three people coming towards me.

“Drink it mother fucker, drink it!” one of them shouted. “Why would we give hot water to someone like you who pushed the country into an abyss? Someone who relies on the support of foreigners rather than Burmese!”

One of them grabbed the cup from my hands and poured the ice-cold water over my head. My whole body felt very cold but I wasn't able to protest, as I knew what would happen to me if I did. I wanted to sort out what I should tell them if asked me questions again, but I was unable to do so. The MIS were constantly making threats to me and gloating about the death of U Maung Ko and how they tortured him.

After the water torture, they started asking me the same questions over and over again regarding my personal details. Different officers would come and ask me the same questions while I was in the stocks, and I could hardly bear it any longer. Sometime I was beaten while they were questioning me.

I guessed that it had been several hours since I'd been back from the water room and I hadn't been fed yet. Although I hadn't eaten, I wasn't hungry and I guessed that my fear must have been suppressing my appetite. I was however, thirsty all the time. Whenever I asked for some water, the guards would ignore me. However after five or six requests for some water I was finally given a drink. Later, when I wasn't thirsty, they would swear at me and force me to drink up to five cups of water. When my clothes finally dried out through my body heat, I started to feel sick and sneezed a lot.

“Can I have some medicine?” I asked the guard who brought me some food. “I feel sick.”

“This is not a clinic,” he replied. “It's no loss if someone like you dies here. Are you scared you're going to die?”

When we were talking I could see the concrete floor and the guard's knees and feet through a gap at the bottom of the blindfold. I wasn't allowed to take the blindfold off when I ate my meal, so it was very difficult for me to eat.

“Moe Aye, here's your rice and curry, but be careful,” the guard said, “the fish is full of tiny bones.”

While I was eating, other prisoners passed me on their way to the toilet and I got tired of having to constantly move out of the way. Sometimes the soldiers would come up to me and say, “Get ready Moe Aye, you will be interrogated soon.” Whenever I heard that, I would get very nervous and my body would shiver. However, most of the time they were just threatening me, and they didn't take me from the stocks. My clothes were filthy and I wasn't allowed to wash my face. I showered twice during my interrogation. I was allowed to take off my blindfold in the bathroom, but I couldn't see out anywhere because the bathroom was completely shut off.

One day I was taken out of the stocks and was being led somewhere when a MIS officer, who sounded like Captain Kyaw Zin Thet, started speaking to me. “Moe Aye, we didn't find those two young men where you said they'd be. Tell me their real names and where they're staying.” At the time I had expected a question about the wax writing and photocopies of the letter. I didn't want to answer his question and they knew that I was hesitating.

“Hands up! Spread your legs!” the captain ordered. I did what he said. “I only know what they told me,” I replied. “How can I know where they're staying? They didn't give me their address.”

“Well, you should try to guess where they're staying and give me their real names,” Captain Kyaw Zin Thet said. By the way I've bought a new motorbike for you. You can ride it and search for them in Rangoon. If you don't find them there, you can go on to Pegu and Mandalay.” He then ordered one of the soldiers. “Teach him how to ride a motorbike and search for these young men. After that, report back to me.”

Although this was a new torture for me, I had heard about it a long time ago. “This bike is brand new,” the soldier was saying, “that's why it's powerful and sounds very loud.” He then imitated the sound of a motorbike. “But you have to obey the rules and regulations of the road. When a traffic light turns red you must stop but you don't need to turn off the engine. That's when the bike makes a sound like this,” and he made the sound of an idling engine. “When a traffic light turns green your bike increases speed. “Bend your knees,” another soldier said, “and your hands must be this position,” he continued as he grabbed my hands and held them out as if they were holding onto the bike's handles. “Okay, start the engine,” he ordered. “You don't need to change gears as this is an automatic. Head downtown from your NLD Kyauktada office and search for the two men.”

Suddenly I was beaten across the buttocks with a cane stick. “I've already told you,” I said, “I don't know anything about them.”

“Find them first. Come on! Go! Go!”

I made the sound of a motorbike and when a soldier said I was at a red traffic light and that I had to stop I made an idling sound. The soldiers then ordered me to either stop or go as they pleased. Sometime when I couldn't respond quickly enough, I

would be beaten with the cane stick. Finally, my knees got so tired squatting in the motorbike position that I fell on the floor out of pain and exhaustion. I was so exhausted that I couldn't make the motorbike sounds any more and I couldn't stand up.

“Have you found them?” one of them asked.

I didn't reply. I only wanted to lie on the floor. I was thirsty and asked for some water, but I didn't get any. I was then taken back to the stocks. Several minutes later I was asked, “Moe Aye, do you think you can writ down your signature without removing the blindfold?”

“What for? It would be better if you allowed me to take it off.”

“Whatever you say, but you must sign these papers,” the guard continued. “Take him into the room.”

Another guard interrupted, “You can have some water after you sign these papers.”

I stood up and walked slowly into the room. The soldiers closed the door and left me alone in the room. “Take off your blindfold.” someone ordered from outside. “All the papers are on the table. Read them and sign each page. If you refuse to sign, you will be here for long time, and die here also.”

I took off the blindfold and realized that I was in the room where I first stayed. I checked the papers on the table. There were seven pages and all were photocopies. The first page was my biography and my photo was attached. The second page said that I took part in ‘the 1988 riots’, and that after the coup by the SLORC I distributed anti-SLORC leaflets and that after the coup by the SLORC leaflets and defamed the regime. The papers also said that I took a position in the Information Department of the NLD's Kyauktada Township office, and at the same time had contact with illegal and underground organizations during the May 1990 election. The papers also accused me of exploiting young ABBESU students by urging them to join armed jungle groups, and that I had had confessed in writing to these matters.

I had to sign all of these pages. The last paragraph meant that I confessed to all of the above mentioned facts and that no one threatened or pressured me into signing the papers. I didn't know what other people had done in the same situation. I had two options-sign or stay in the Interrogation Centre. But quite frankly, my resistance had all but run out. However, I could protect the two young men, as well as my friend who wrote on the wax paper and made the photocopies for me. When I finally signed the papers, I felt very sad. I lay on the small wooden bed in the cell, thirsty and tired from pretending to ride the motorbike.

“Moe Aye, cover your eyes.” Two or three soldiers came in to the room and I was taken back to the stocks. One of then put a can of water in my hands. After I signed the paper, I wasn't interrogated for several days. However, I was psychologically tortured. The worst thing for me was going to the toilet. Pissing was not a big problem, but whenever I went to toilet I wasn't allowed to take off the blindfold. I was always taken to the toilet by guards, and I knew that the toilet door was always open. If my excrement didn't go directly into the pit I would be beaten again and again.

Sometimes when I took too much time, the soldiers would shout, "Hey! I know you're thinking how to escape from here! Hurry up, mother fucker!" It's for these reasons that I had great difficulty in going to the toilet, and I was able to shit only five times during the two months I spent in the Interrogation Centre. Another difficulty was trying to clean myself with water after I went to the toilet. I firstly couldn't see anything with the blindfold on, and sometimes there wasn't swear at me, "All of you mother fuckers never clean the toilet properly," and I would be hit across the head three or four times. Later I became constipated and suffered as a result.

One day when I was in the stocks a political prisoner was taken in to a room behind me. I then heard the prisoner being questioned and beaten for several hours. I thought the man was probably a newcomer. After the interrogation, someone ordered, "Get Toe Toe Htun out of the room." I was worried about him, but I couldn't do anything. A couple of days later Toe Toe Htun was moved somewhere else.

Once one of the political prisoners hit me as he was on his way to the toilet. Although I tried to bend forward as much as I could to let him pass, we were both blindfolded and couldn't see each other. A guard then beat me for not making room for the prisoner, and the prisoner was also beaten for not knowing I was there. The day after that I heard the sounds of an interrogation in the room behind me.

"What is your name?" someone was asking.

"Thein Lwin," the man answered.

"Which organization do you belong to?"

Thein Lwin replied, "The National League for Democracy. I'm in charge of organizers in Pegu Division."

"What! A fucking organizer?" the soldiers said. They then beat and tortured him and I felt nervous as I was in the same situation.

One day when I was still in the stocks, an officer came up and asked me my name and I answered him. "When did you get here?" he continued.

"November the seventh."

He asked me if I was able to guess when it was day and when it was night.

"If it's colder, then that's night time."

He then spoke to a guard in a compassionate, "Take him to an available room, it is too tiring for him to stay in the stocks." I was then moved into a room. One of the guards later said, "Moe Aye, feel free to sleep or do whatever you like. By the way do you want a smoke?"

I said I did and a guard opened the door and put a cheroot in my hand. I took off the blindfold and checked it, as I was wary from what happened the last that I asked for a smoke. This time it was a real new cheroot, its brand name was Joe Thein and it was

already alight. I smoked the cheroot right down to its filter. I then lay down on the rough bed and stretched out my legs. I could hear the low murmur of a television. I then fell asleep.

I didn't know how many hours I had slept when I was suddenly woken by someone shaking me and shouting at me to get up. My eyes were already covered by a blindfold. "Mother fucker! You're going to die now that we know you lied to us", the soldiers were shouting.

I was gripped by a wave of fear. The soldiers grabbed me and took me somewhere. "You asked for some medicine from a guard, didn't you?" an officer asked.

"Yes, but I'm okay now."

"I want to tell you that no prisoner has any right to medical treatment here. That's all, okay take him back to his room."

I was initially very scared, but then I felt very angry. However, I wasn't sent back to my room, but back to the stocks. "Excuse me, your officer had already allowed me to stay in the room."

I heard them laughing. "You're here to be interrogated, not to sleep."

I noticed a strong smell of whisky, so I didn't complain anymore. I fell asleep again even though I was in the stocks. I was awoken when someone hit me in the back and I thought it was a prisoner going to the toilet so I bent forward. However, a guard was unlocking the stocks.

"I think this guy will die here," he mumbled to himself. I was then taken somewhere else and ordered to sit down on the floor with both of my legs stretched out.

"Moe Aye, there is still some confusion," an officer said in a soft tone. "We want to ask you some questions again, and for you to answer correctly and tell us as much as you can remember."

My sarong was then lifted to my knees and a rounded stick was placed on both my shins. I was really afraid. I thought they wanted to know more about the two young men and the wax writing.

"Moe Aye," the officer continued, "do you know John Htin Aung?" I was surprised by the question and didn't expect it. I had no time to prepare an answer.

"Yes, I met him one or two times, but we don't know each other that well," I answered. That was actually the truth. John Htin Aung was working in the United States Embassy in Rangoon but I only met him on a couple of occasions.

"How did you meet him?"

"I met him in Rangoon General Hospital the day after the army gunned down pro-democracy demonstrators in 1988."

“Moe Aye, do you know what's on your sins?” the officer threatened. “How many times did you meet with him and where did you meet? Think carefully and tell me the truth.”

It was difficult for me to remember the exact details, however I believed that the MIS wanted to level more accusations at me. When I tried to think what would be the best answer, I suddenly felt terrible pain from my shins. Because of the excruciating pain, tears rolled down my cheeks, though I wasn't crying.

“I met John Htin Aung once at Mr.Martin's residence,” I answered. Mr.Martin also worked at the United States Embassy and had a position in the Economics Section.

“Think carefully. You met at other places, didn't you?” The stick on my shins was pressed down harder.

Apart from the hospital, I had actually only met him once at Mr.Martin's place. But my interrogators didn't believe me. “It's true! I'm ont lying!” I pleaded.

But they ignored me and I felt more pain as they pressed down on my shins again. When I screamed, the officer asked why I was crying out so loud and again pressed the stick down on my shins. Then when I tried to control my screaming, the officer said that I had good resistance and pressed down more and more. I didn't know how to deal with this officer and I felt desperate.

“I really only met him once,” I mumbled. Suddenly everything was quiet. The stick was still on my shins and someone was still holding it. The longer the silence, the more I felt scared. ‘What are they going to ask me now?’ I was thinking to myself. ‘And how can I answer them?’ I heard someone moving gently about the room. My legs had been stretched out for a long time and they were getting tired. When I couldn't hear the footsteps anymore I tried to raise my knees a little. I then felt the stick roll freely down my shins, and I spread both my legs out and waited to see what would happen next. There was still silence. I wasn't sure if anyone was still in the room, but I gradually bent and stretched my legs four or five times with the stick down at my ankles. I stretched out my legs again and I was suddenly hit across the shoulder.

“Hey you! Do you think we don't know what you're doing?” the officer shouted. ‘We're watching you all the time. You guys take too much advantage of every little opportunity. The next time you move your legs, you will be sorry for the rest of your life!’

I once again felt very scared and the room grew silent a second time. I didn't dare to move my legs although I noticed the stick had been removed from my shins. What felt like a few hours later, my handcuffs were taken off and I was given some food.

“Today's dish is fried bean curd and green sprouts,” the guard said. He then asked, “We've fed you every meal, haven't we?”

I actually couldn't remember how many times I'd been fed. The problem was I didn't know whether it was day or night. Sometimes they fed me two meals in a short period of time, and sometimes they interrogated me for several hours without feeding me. At other times I felt beyond hunger due to the torture and interrogation. They also sometimes forced me to drink a lot of water before I ate. If I explained all this to the guard I was sure I would be beaten. That's why I avoided directly answering the question and just said, "I haven't been able to eat much because I've been very tired."

The guard then started shouting at me, "I want to know from you whether or not we've fed you every meal."

"No, you've never missed a meal," I replied with despair.

"What about drinking water?" the guard continued.

"You always give me drinking water as well."

"Mother fucker!" the guard shouted. "All you guys say 'Yes, fine' when you're here, but you say different things behind our backs!"

He then hit me twice in the chest. I was always beaten whatever I said, whether they liked the answer or not. After I ate I wasn't given any water, but I was taken somewhere else to answer more questions.

"Moe Aye, what did you discuss with Martin at his house?" I was asked by someone I thought was Captain Kyaw Zin Thet.

"Nothing much, he asked me whether the students were united."

The captain continued, "Didn't you ask for some help?"

"I didn't ask him for help and he didn't ask me any other questions and money. Isn't that true?"

"Jphn Htin Aung told me that you asked Martin to provide weapons and money. Isn't that true?"

"I have already confessed that I met with Mr. Martin, but I didn't ask him for any help."

They were not satisfied with my answers and one of them asked, "Are you left or right-handed?"

I wasn't sure why they were asking me this. "I'm right-handed."

"Take his handcuffs off," someone ordered.

They took off the handcuffs and the whole room became quiet again. Whenever there was silence I became very scared. To calm myself, I massaged my free wrists. My body felt hot and cold and someone's voice suddenly broke the silence.

“What do you think of the United States Government?”

I couldn't say what I really wanted to say, as I was sure I would be beaten. “I don't know too much about the United States,” I replied. “I just know it's a large democratic country. I haven't really studied it.”

“Why did you meet with Martin without knowing anything about the United States?” one of them said loudly. “You admire the United States don't you? You guys always look for help from the West rather than working together with us.” The officer then spoke for several minutes about how bad the United States Government is.

It was very difficult listening to what he was saying and, at the same time, waiting to see what may happen to my right hand. I then noticed that my right wrist was getting hotter and hotter and I tried to shake my hand.

“What's the problem?” someone said in front of me. “Don't move your hand.”

“Please take it off! It's very hot!” I pleaded.

I heard them laughing at me. “Tell me everything you know about Martin, then I'll take it off,” said the officer.

I felt hopeless. They were forcing me to tell them something I didn't know. “I'm not telling lies, I met him only once. As I told you, John Htin Aung contacted me through a friend of mine after the army gunned down people in front of Rangoon General Hospital. When I met him he just asked about my student life and the current situation of the students.”

My wrist was now extremely hot. They asked me the same questions again and again and I gave them the same answers. Finally the officer said, “Okay, I'll take it off your wrist. But you must sign a document regarding Martin. What do you say?”

I had lost all resistance. I nodded after a few seconds and they took the thing off my wrist. I was then taken back to the stocks. I checked my wrist through the small gap in the blindfold and my skin was flayed and burnt in an area about an inch square. I didn't understand how they had done this to my wrist.

I was then fed and taken to a small room. “Take your blindfold off after we leave the room,” I was ordered. “Then read the papers on the table and sign them. We know you want to go home.”

When they left the room I took the blindfold off and checked my wrist. The skin was burnt and blistered. Then I started to read the papers. The MIS had written that Mr. Martin had asked John Htin Aung to arrange a meeting with me to discuss the student movement. The document said we met and talked for four hours and that Mr. Martin asked me how he could help on behalf of the United States Government. The document stated that before Mr. Martin left he gave me ten thousand kyat and his telephone number so we could be in regular contact. The last paragraph said that in the second meeting Mr. Martin urged that the students and the NLD youth join forces with the Buddhist monks in Mandalay who had been boycotting the SLORC. It was

written that Mr.Martin then gave me a further five thousand kyat, sent me to Mandalay and also provided me with money to distribute anti-government leaflets in town. The MIS had, as usual, written at the bottom of the page that I confessed to all of the above mentioned facts and that no one had threatened or pressured me into signing. I signed the papers, covered my eyes with the blindfold and sat waiting.

A few minutes later someone asked if I signed the paper and two or three soldiers came into the room. I was then taken back to the stocks. After that I wasn't interrogated anymore, but the MIS kept up their psychological torture. They seemed to be very proud of the actions of the SLORC and the current political situation.

One day I was taken from my stocks and put up against a wall. My whole body was then searched.

“Moe Aye, you have to move to another place where there are many people like you,” one of the guards said in an angry voice. “Tell them that in the era of the SLORC anyone who wants to be involved in politics and decided to take up arms in the jungle.”

Another guard then said, “Moe Aye, we never tortured you, did we? If you ever say that we tortured you, you'd better not be around.”

Thirty minutes later, I was sent to Insein Special Prison where I had to stay for the next six years.

Endnotes

1. A list of all the people living in a house, including any guests who may be staying the night. The authorities must be informed of any guests by 9p.m., and carry out random checks to ensure households comply.
2. This question is very rude, as the speaker does not use a title before the monk's name to show respect.
3. A duplicating machine.

The defendant as a deaf mute

It was early morning, around 6.30 am, on 14 June 1991, when a warden shouted to all the prisoners- “Keep your cell clean and put your prison dress on neat and tidy. Sit in the prison and keep silent.” We all understood that a VIP would visit the prison.

Although we sat in our cells for nearly four hours, no one arrived at the prison and we were all very hungry. We tried to ask a warder when the VIP would arrive, but he knew nothing and said, "I'm also very hungry."

It was nearly 12.00 when we heard a noisy whistle and the sound of warders at the main gate. Many warders ran there shouting to us, "Sit in prison position and shut your mouths." We knew that the VIP had arrived at the main gate. Fifteen minutes later the VIP, escorted by many prison officers and warders, passed through our cellblock. Ten minutes later, a number of warders shouted to us that we could sit easy this meant the VIP had left the prison. We didn't know why he had visited. We knew only that we had had to sit in the prison position for long hours and felt happy because we would have breakfast.

While we were lying on our mats waiting for breakfast a warder asked who Moe Aye was. He ordered me to get out of the cell. My cellmates looked at me and I gave them a smile. We understood that if someone was taken out of his cell at noon or night, it meant a trial or re-interrogation. As soon as I stepped out a white hood was pulled over my head. Then I had to follow him like a blind man.

When I arrived in the main gate, someone asked about my background for a few minutes. Then I was handcuffed and forced and get into a car. I didn't know what kind of car and who was in there with me. After driving for nearly five minutes the car stopped and realized that I would be sent to the military court, as it was located in front of the Central Prison, inside the same compound as the Central Prison and my prison. Insein Special Jail. The hood was removed from my head and I could see it was as I had thought - I was in front of the notorious military court. One military intelligence officer in plain clothes ordered me to get out of the car. Two policemen lead me to a small room covered with wire mesh. I saw that there were three other small rooms and a big hall nearby. I could see the old, dirty wall of Insein Central prison from my room.

At this stage I had been in prison for six months, after two months at the MIS interrogation centre. It was not unusual for prisoners to wait this long before they were tried. Some had to wait for years, such as Min Ko Naing, the Chairman of the ABFSU, who was arrested in 1989 in but not tried until 1992. During my six months in prison before the trial, I was never even sure what I had been charged with. Above the cell doors in formation about each prisoner was posted by the authorities, stating the prisoner's name, number and the section of the Act that the prisoner was charged under. However the information about the charges was constantly changed for the political prisoners. Sometimes I would leave to take my shower believing that I was being charged under section 5(j) of the Emergency Provision Act, but when I returned this had been changed to another Act. At times these changes happened on a daily basis. For some prisoner ever the nature of the allegations changed completely, so that one day they would believe they were charged with stealing and the next day this had changed to another charge, such as using drugs or even just being homeless.

I believe that the authorities had two objectives in mind by doing this Firstly it was a psychological tactic to make the prisoners confused. Secondly it was designed to make the warders lose respect for the political prisoners, by suggesting they had

committed criminal acts. In Burmese culture it would be acceptable for the warders to then treat the warders with much less respect.

A few minutes after I had been taken to the room a plain-clothes MIS officer, a police officer and two armed soldiers entered the room and asked me about my background for a while. The MIS officer said. "Your will be sent to the military court soon. Please keep in mind that you have no right to complain or make any reply to the military court. If you do, your prison sentence will be doubled. Now our commander, from MIS unit 7, has already decided to give you five years imprisonment, but if you complain or reply with angry words to the court, you will be sentenced to 10 years imprisonment."

The police officer also said. "You should keep quiet in the court for the sake of your future." Then they lead me to the court. After walking for two minutes, we arrived at a large room and I saw that there were seven soldiers and five policemen, all armed, standing near the doors in the hall. I was surprised that there were so many people present just for my trial. There was a low stage at the top of the hall, above which hung the Burmese flag, and on either side of it large photographs of General Aung San and the dictator Ne Win. There were many chairs, nearly 30 or 40, on which some men in plain clothes were sitting. There were many ceiling fans and the hall was silent except for the noise of the fans.

Then I was forced to sit on the chair nearest the stage. A police officer requested me to stand to pay respect while the members of the military court were on the stage. Ten minutes later, three high-ranking military officers emerged from a small room near the stage and stepped onto the stage. At that time a police officer shouted for all to stand and pay respect. After they time a police officer shouted for all to be seated. He walked near the stage and passed some papers to one of the members of the court. I knew that the court was made up of three military officers - an army full colonel, a navy lieutenant colonel and an air force lieutenant colonel. The officer from the army was presiding, and read aloud, "This is military court number three and it will hear the trial of Moe Aye. The court will be in session twice-to hear the case and to give judgment." Then he looked at the police officer and gave a nod.

The police officer stood and loudly read my case. I was accused of many things, notably trying to assassinate the military leader of the SLORC, trying to kidnap the families of high-ranking military officers, trying to smuggle in arms from the borders and trying to persuade young students to go to the jungle. I was also said to have contacted many groups, most, of which I had never heard of and didn't think even existed. The police officer concluded by reading, "Therefore I would like to respectfully request the military court to give Moe Aye a heavy punishment for his anti-government activities." I remember thinking that the crimes I was accused of sounded serious enough to deserve the death penalty. After hearing from the police officer, the presiding officer of the military court said that they would think and decide on my punishment soon. Nobody asked me whether any of the charges were true, or if I had anything to say. No witnesses were called and no evidence was presented. The court members returned to the room they had come from.

I looked around the hall. Soldiers and policemen were standing alertly and some police officers looked at the ceiling. Some MIS officers sitting behind me looked outside. One army officer was walking near the entrance. Then I looked at General Aung San and thought about him. I wondered what he would say if he knew about this trial. A few minutes later I saw a MIS officer in plain clothes entering the room where the military court members had gone. Five minutes later he came out again and came over to sit behind me. I realized then that he was Captain Kyaw Zin Thet who had arrested me in November 1990. I understood at this point that the military court had adjourned to wait for him, as he was the MIS officer in charge of my case. Every aspect of the country is controlled by the MIS, including the courts. Even though Kyaw Zin Thet was just a captain, it was his role to direct the tribunal members, consisting of a full colonel and two lieutenant colonels, what to convict me of and how many years to sentence me to. No doubt that was what he had just done. While I was trying to look back at him, a police officer shouted for all to stand to pay respect to the court. The military court members took their seats again.

The army officer said slowly, "After hearing these accusations, the military court believes that Moe Aye has violated the laws and it is clear that he tried to promote the anti-government movement. After the 1988 anarchy, the military had to step in and was only just able to save the country from falling into an abyss. Moe Aye never thought well of the military and had a negative attitude towards it. He tried to incite the people by claiming that the military will never transfer power. He is trying to destroy the integrity of the military and bring about further anarchy like that in 1988. Therefore, according to the Emergency Provision Act, section 5(j), the military court sentences him to seven years imprisonment with hard labour," The court members stood and walked back into the room.

I was really surprised about the trial, in which I had not been asked anything. I had thought they would at least ask me whether I was guilty or not guilty. When I tried to look at Kyaw Zin Thet, he went out of the hall. Two police officers came over to me and said, "Thanks for your peaceful cooperation, allowing us to finish the trial." I was surprised again and didn't reply.

Finally I was sent back to Insein Special Jail gate in the car. In the car as usual the hood was pulled over my handcuffs, which I had worn throughout the trial, removed. When I arrived back in my cell my cellmates jokingly asked me how many years I had contracted with the junta to hire my room for. I replied "It's a seven year contract." I still remember that I had to have my breakfast while my cellmates had their dinner on that day.

My prison university student life

As a young boy who had to grow up for my whole life under the Burmese Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), which pulled Burma down to the lowest developed country. I have to confess to everybody that I knew nothing about democracy and democracy education. What I knew was that I must be a medical doctor or an engineer in order to have a good salary and opportunities for my family. What's more, I must know whom was the most important person who would help me obtain a job with a government office.

Before the 1988 popular uprising, all parents wanted their loved ones to be doctors or engineer, and all students, even though they were interested in other subjects, wanted the same. Why?

At that time, and now also, only medicine and engineering could guarantee a job for one's life.

Under the BSPP, every high school student studying science had to learn about physics and chemistry at ninth grade. They had to be familiar with Newton and Einstein. Although they were no laboratories. There was no practical room to show that hydrogen plus oxygen makes water ($H_2+O_2=H_2O$) and so on.

For me at that time, I wanted to be a great physicist like Einstein. Although most of the students, including me, wanted to know more about Newton and Einstein than was in the curriculum, another problem was that there was no school library. Surprisingly, our teachers who taught physics and chemistry could not explain more than the curriculum. Finally, some students who were very eager to know about this tried to go and see some older people who had read a lot. However the big problem was that our parents and teachers warned us not to meet with these people, because according to them (our parents and teachers), they were old politicians-most of them in this way we learned about physics and chemistry without practical lessons. Worse, we were taught in Burmese for all subjects. All we knew about Time and Newsweek magazines was that they were useful for covering our textbooks and writing books. We used to compete with each other for whose cover was better. Because of the lack of public libraries and of general knowledge, we didn't know the value of books and magazines. A few families would push their loved ones to read books and magazines not concerned with the school curriculum in order to know general knowledge. Most of the students, however, used to try to read only love stories and love novels written in Burmese in order to write and speak to their sweethearts.

When I was in tenth grade (the last standard of high school), my relatives warned me to study hard so I could attend the medical institute or Rangoon Institute of Technology. My parents also warned me that if my examination marks were too low to attend those institutions, they would not send me to another university or college. At that time (and still now), all graduates except those from medical and engineering institutes could not get government jobs unless they had a good relationship with government officer.

Whatever the students' interests were, they had to try only to attend medical and engineering institutes for a guaranteed future job. Tenth grade examination marks would determine a student's future life. If a student did not do well in the examination, there were no other opportunities in the future to try again. Nobody could choose the

subjects they wanted to study. For example, although a student may want to be an electronic engineer, if he didn't get sufficiently high examination marks in the tenth grade he could not attend a engineering institute. He would never be an engineer for his whole life as long as he lived in Burma. Because the entry qualifications are so rigid, students cannot pursue their interests. A student interested in history may be required to study mathematics, While a student who wants to study mathematics may have to study history.

Although I reached the Rangoon Institute of Technology (RIT) after passing tenth grade, I knew nothing about engineering. In reality, I was interested only in physics but I dared not study it because there was no guarantee for my future and because of my parents' refusal to support me studying physics. On the surface, there were many engineering textbooks and reference books in English rather than Burmese at the RIT library. Every one overestimated those students attending the Medical Institute and RIT. In fact, most of those students could not study themselves because they had poor English. At last, most of those who could afford it had to attend private tuition given by the same teachers who were teaching the RIT Engineering course. During the university classes the teachers would not explain things clearly and would speak softly. Many students did not attend these classes. The private tuition was much more crowded, and the teachers would give clear explanations using microphones. To pass the course it was virtually essential to attend the private tuition, but not the official classes. This did not happen just at RIT but at all universities and high schools. The teachers needed to do this to supplement their salaries, which were inadequate, as students paid to attend the private tuition. I did not have enough money to attend the tuition, but I was still able to attend RIT. Other students could not afford even to pay the university, hostel and other fees and had to leave RIT.

Then, the 1988 popular uprising occurred in Burma. All students actively joined the uprising that could change everyone's situation in Burma. The then ruling party realized that it must change its strategy to hold power. The military was convinced that they must become involved in the situation in order to protect the ruling party leaders who had helped them get their high positions in the military. For old politicians, it was a great chance to change the country from a dictatorship to a democracy. The students understood that they must read books and study in English as much as they could.

From my experience in the uprising, some students chose me to explain to one foreign reporter about our movement. They thought I could explain to him because I was an RIT student and older than them. In reality, I could not explain to the reporter in English. I felt too shy. Another experience was that although one officer from an embassy in Rangoon asked me about our situation I could not tell him in detail what I wanted to. Worse, he showed me an article written about Martin Luther King and asked my opinion, but I was too poor in English to understand to article. After that I realized I would have to study English very hard.

After the bloody military coup in September 1988, I tried to study English very hard while I was involved in politics. I still remember that at that time I emphasized only politics and studying English. While my study was progressing fast, I was arrested by the military intelligence service in November 1990 and given seven years imprisonment.

At that time I felt so sad about my life, not because of my imprisonment but because of having to stop my study. As everybody knows, there are no rights for political prisoners, whose situation is worse than criminals. Since my arrival in a small and dirty cell in Insein Special jail, I had been thinking how I could study English as much as possible. For the first six months I could do nothing under the tight security of the warders. At that time I had to live together with another four political prisoners, including one MP from the NLD. I learned some vocabulary from the MP, who patiently explained words and usage as much as he could. At night he taught us to speak in English. We had nothing to write with or make notes; we just tried to remember it.

After six months, we had no teacher to teach us because the MP was transferred to another prison. I was also transferred to another cell along with two political prisoners. At that time, we discovered a way to write on plastic bags with a small sharp stick broken off from our sleeping mats. We collected the plastic bags when our families sent us food. Plastic bags were the only way that food was allowed to be sent to us, because they could be easily checked. We would keep the plastic bags and clean them when we washed ourselves. We would try to dry the plastic bags on our sarongs so that we could scratch words onto them later with the sticks. We had to hide the plastic bags from the prison authorities because they would have confiscated them, so we hid them under our sleeping mats, in our clothing or in our mouths. By writing on the plastic bags we could study English and also communicate with other prisoners when the bags were passed to them. The plastic bags were a means of taking notes, because we would be beaten if we wrote on the walls. In 1994 two prisoners, San Myaing and Aung Myo kyaw wrote English vocabulary on the walls with broken bricks. They were beaten and put into solitary confinement for two weeks, and then transferred to another prison far from Rangoon.

We also knew how to approach warders who sympathized with us. Most of the low ranking warders had applied for their jobs because they needed to survive. Previously, all political prisoners had tried to demand the authorities to allow us to read and study in prison, but had never succeeded. All were brutally beaten and put into solitary confinement. So we had to choose another way. Finally we decided to choose a warder who sympathized with us and needed some money for his family's survival. Before doing so, we had to discuss with each other for many hours in our cell whether using the warder was fair or not. If the warder were caught bringing us study materials he would be sentenced to seven years imprisonment. We also discussed whether our method would encourage corruption.

Finally, we discussed with the warder about how he could help our strong desire to study English. He said, "I understand your wish to study, as students. If someone knows or finds out that I have helped to smuggle any books into prison for you, I will be not only be fired from my prisoners. But I will try my best to smuggle in any paper written in English. Is that OK?"

I said hopefully, "At the moment we can not pay you money because, as you know, we have on right to have money in here. We have nothing. But your kind help is much appreciated and will be recorded in our history. We will never forget it."

The next day, he came to the front of the cell and looked around. Then, he approached nearer the cell and took a piece of folded paper out of his underpants and threw it into our cell. He went away telling us to destroy it after reading it.

We were very anxious to read it and I could not explain how happy I felt. I pretended to be going to the toilet at the corner of the cell and unfolded it. I still remember that it was three pages from an old English novel. When I carefully checked, I saw that it was from the book "Exodus." The problem was that we did not have a dictionary and the pages were not the beginning or the end of the story. There was a lot of new vocabulary for us but we tried to understand it as much as we could. The next day the warder requested us to give a promise that if some officer found it in the cell we would never say who smuggled it in. We firmly gave the promise he wanted.

At that time an MP from one of the ethnic groups was put into the next cell and he was good at English. When no warder was around, we tried to softly ask him about some words we didn't understand. At the same time we had to be careful about security because in prison the authorities always carried out special searches of the cells two times a week. While we were studying, we worried about the searches. Sometimes their searches took place at midnight but usually they were in the early morning and evening. So we had to be alert the whole day. I took responsibility for destroying the paper by eating it or explaining to the authorities if I did not have enough time to destroy it. Over the years I do not remember how many times I had to swallow paper and how many pages were in my stomach. (One month after I arrived in Thailand, I was hospitalized and had an operation on my appendix in Chiang Mai hospital. I don't know if it was concerned with the pages in my stomach. Here I'd like to give my great thanks to "Burma Information Group," Christina (US), Lyndel and Brenda (Inimages Asia), and Leslie B.Kean (US) who helped me morally and financially during my time in hospital).

After two years in prison, we had improved our study system and organized some warders who would help us. An understanding was reached between us and the warders who would help us. If a warder was found by the officers with any papers, he would not say who they were for. If we were found with any papers we would not say who had brought them.

According to the prison rules, our families had the right to send us milk powder made in China to use in case we were sick. At that time one packet of milk powder cost nearly 200 Kyats, a price most of our families could not afford. We requested our families to bring it every time they visited us, which was once every two weeks. As we understood the situation of our families, we asked them to substitute milk powder for some of the food they were giving us. Why did we need milk powder so badly?

In prison, the easiest way to buy and sell things was milk powder, sugar and coffee powder. As political prisoners, we did not have the right to have boiling water, so the coffee powder and milk powder were useless to us. However, there were many prisoners who had rights and privileges. They could pay bribe money to the authorities, so they could drink coffee and tea, read books and even inject drugs. They always needed to buy it from outside. The warders were not supposed to leave the prison while they were on duty, so it was difficult for them to obtain milk powder. After they discovered that we also needed to sell it, warders always bought it from us

without going out. I still don't know if we did the right thing or not. We were supporting criminals and allowing privileged prisoners to live better than other prisoners. But we had to do it for our future. The junta thought that putting us in prison would help to deafen our ears, to blind our eyes, to kill our knowledge. We needed to show the junta that its wish would never be fulfilled. Although it wanted prison to be hell for us, we tried to make prison our university.

From our experiences, we realize that we had to have a good dictionary to know about words exactly, and Times and Newsweek magazines to catch up with the world. The problem was that any good dictionary, even a pocket dictionary, was too big to smuggle in and difficult to store and destroy. Outside, a pocket dictionary cost nearly 300 Kyats and Times and Newsweek magazines cost nearly 150 Kyats each. Plus we needed to pay the warders some money for travel expenses and pocket money. The final cost for a pocket dictionary would be nearly 500 Kyats, and for the magazines 300 Kyats. There fore we organized a secret committee to collect sugar, snacks and milk powder. Although some were not interested in studying they donated towards it as much as they could. Here also, I'd like to express my great thanks and appreciation to Ko Phone Mying Tun (now living in Japan) who actively donated for and encouraged others' study.

After successfully collecting, we had to think about how to bring in and keep the dictionary. Firstly, we advised the warders to tear pages from the dictionary sequentially and to smuggle them in little by little. Then we distributed them to other cells in turn, so that each cell had three or four days to study the pages, and would then exchange them for pages from another cell. The committee had to plan the distribution and advised all cells that if something went wrong, they should not say anything about the committee and should solve the problem themselves without hurting anybody else-and especially without stopping the system. Another problem was that some prisoners wanted to read articles in Time or News week after they had been translated into Burmese in order to know what was happening in the world. It meant that we needed paper and a pen or pencil.

After three years in prison, I could translate more than before. I took responsibility for it and tried to distribute the translations to those who wanted to read in Burmese. Before we could try to smuggle pen and paper into prison, we had to collect used plastic in order to write articles in Burmese. We wrote on the bags with a sharp mat stick. We had to do all this under great pressure. We were always worried about security. On one hand we were trying to study, on the another we were trying to prepare to face the possible dangers. If we were found with a pen or pencil or any paper, we would be punished by being put into solitary confinement with iron shackles for at least 45 days-including the cancellation of our family's prison visits. In 1992 this happened to two prisoners -Thet Tun and Bo Bo (ABFSU)-when pencils were found in their cells. Thet Tun's legs were crippled, and under the prison rules this should have exempted him from having to wear shackles, but the authorities insisted that he still wear them.

As a result of the stress, most of the student political prisoners suffered from heart disease. With the lack of food and medicine, their situation got worse. Gradually, our study improved even under the tight situation Everyone's complaint in prison was that if they had the right to study openly, the4ir learning would increase very swiftly. It

made us all more hurt and angry towards the junta. Sometime we felt so sad for our families, because although they thought we ate and drank the milk powder, sugar and snacks they sent, we had no chance to eat or drink them as we had to use them to buy the books we needed. We lied to our families that we used them.

We decided to speak in English to each other but we were not sure whether our pronunciation was right or wrong. We also decided to choose English novels and English books that would be useful for our movement and the future, such as politics, business, sociology and technology books. However the problem was how to store a large number of books, if we could smuggle them in. So we had to think about the best way for keeping the books.

Until 7 July 1996, above our cellblock there was a hall where Thai prisoners lived. Some of the Thai prisoners were used as domestic labourers in the prison. They had to work in the horticulture area that surrounded the cellblock, as well as deliver some meals and water to prisoners and massage warders.

We chose two places to store the books-in the horticulture field and also in our cells. With help from the Thai prisoners and the warders, we arranged for secret holes to be dug in the field next to the side wall of our cell. The warders who were helping us passed a message to the Thai prisoners to dig the holes, and then passed the pages of the books to them to be buried. We had to make sure that the rain would not ruin the pages so we wrapped them in plastic bags before they were buried. To do this we had to ask the Warders to bring us new plastic, as old plastic bags could leak. We also managed to label them so that we could request that specific pages be dug up for us later.

In the horticulture field the Thais prisoners actively helped us to hide our books. In relation to hiding books in our cells, however, we had to try very hard to obtain help from the warders. The most difficult thing was to choose the right warder, because if he refused to help us after hearing our request it would be dangerous for us. Finally the warder we chose helped to smuggle in two small instruments to make a small hole on the floor and side wall to the cell. For the whole day we tried to make a small hole. AT that time the warder who had helped us patrolled outside our cell, and if someone passed through he informed us in advance and we had to stop for a while. The cell wall was three bricks in thickness. We managed to remove one of the bricks, forming a cavity where we could store our pages. We covered the cavity with a thin piece of brick and some mortar to make it look realistic.

In that way we successfully kept our materials and studied regularly, but under conditions of high stress and worry. If the search group found the cavity we would be severely punished and our prison terms would be extended for another seven years, because according to the prison rules any hole made in the cell is deemed to be a jailbreak.

We informed other cellblocks, even Insein main jail, of our method with the help of some warders. However hiding anything in the cells had to stop in November 1995 because the authorities found the cavities in cellblocks 3 and 4 in the main jail. As soon as we found out about this we had to block the hole in our cell urgently. We managed to get the papers out through a warder, who also brought us cement and

small stones to fill the whole. The brick was not the same colour as the rest of the wall, so we had to use lime to colour it. Three days later the special searching group came to our cellblock but saw nothing in the cell. I still remember that at time we were all worried and could not sleep or eat well.

Many political prisoners in cellblocks 3 and 4, including U Win Tin, were given another seven years imprisonment because of this. After that we didn't hide the books in the cells, but could still rely on the books from outside our cellblock until 7 July 1996. Prior to this the authorities in some way, but they did not know how. A warder had also been found with seven pages in his possession, and was sentenced to seven years imprisonment. He had not revealed who he was helping.

On 7 July the cell was opened early and we were told to take showers. The same thing was done with the Thai prisoners. We all went to the shower area but there was hardly any water. The area was very crowded, and some prisoners provoked a fight between the Thais and the political prisoners. We later learned that the authorities had arranged for a few Thai prisoners to start the fight. The fight became a brawl, but some of the Thai and political prisoners realized that this should not happen and tried to stop it. At this stage the brawl changed, so that it was between Thai prisoners and warders.

Then the warders beat all prisoners in the jail. The Thai prisoners were told to explain how they had been helping the political prisoners. The ones who had been helping us refused to say anything, but some others who knew what was going on the authorities about the horticulture field. All the Thai prisoners were transferred to the main prison, and 200 warders from other prisons were brought in to search the horticulture field. Two of the warders who had helped us managed to escape before they were caught.

The prison was declared to be under martial law, which meant that there could be not talking at all between prisoners had to be blindfolded when leaving their cells, and guns were trained on prisoners 24 hours a day. We also had to sit our in front of us for three hours, however, and the authorities dared not extend the sentences of all 200 political prisoners. In the end they began to transfer prisoners to other prisons around the country, so that we could not communicate as a group.

All of this happened on 7 July, which is also a very important day in Burmese history. On 7 July 1962 the military junta demolished the Student Union building by blowing it up. On 7 July 1996 the prison authorities burned all our books and study materials. After six years of collecting books, it took the authorities the whole night the burn the collection. Finally the Prison University of Insein Special Jail was closed forever.

In Burma there is a saying that as long as there is no free market, the black market will exist. Similarly, as long as the prison authorities forbid students from studying and reading, they will find ways to do so.

Endnotes

I for a report of the trial of the 22 political prisoners from cellblocks 3 and 4 concerned, see Pleading Not Guilty in Insein, published by ABSDF (February 1997).

Meeting with U Win Tin

“You may call it a storm in a tea cup,” said U Win Tin, prominent journalist and political prisoner in Burma, “but I will fight for democracy wherever I am put.”

I was familiar with the name of “Win Tin” since before the 1988 popular uprising because he was an elderly bachelor and the editor of “Hanthawaddy” newspaper based in my home town (Mandalay) that was banned by the BSPP in 1978. But I had never seen him. During the 1988 uprising, I noticed that his involvement in demonstrations was a favorite thing among students. Many students went and saw him and got much advice from him even though I had not had a chance to meet with him at that time.

After the 1988 military coup, I was glad to know that he was one of the secretaries of the executive committee of the NLD and our Lady (Daw Aung San Suu Kyi) had much respect for him. We students also believed that he along with our Lady would solve the problem of our country. We strongly believed in his great honesty and commitment of democracy.

As far as we know, his role in the NLD was so important and influential because of his bright ideas. We later learnt that this characteristic made his life very difficult, because the military junta feared his bright and excellent ideas and his dignity. Soon after that, the military junta arrested him without any basis. What was most sorrowful was the junta accused him of being a communist in order for the international community to doubt his credentials.

I still remember what he said just before he was arrested. “The junta want to say that once a communist, always a communist. If so, surely once a military dictator always a military a military dictator, also. Why should we believe those who held the coup in Burma? What has Ne Win done to his own people after he staged the coup in 1962.”

“From 1960 to 1988, the BSPP did not allow anyone to study anything about democracy or human rights. They could only study socialism, although study of communism was unofficially allowed. There are many books in Burma that are only about socialism and communism, because the junta believed that it was unsafe to let people read about other things. Now that don't let the people read anything except their newspapers.

“I believe even many old communists may change their in Russia and communist countries,” he said.

Later we knew that his prediction was true. In 1991, while I was in prison most communist countries including Russia changed many things.

He also said that loving and earning for democracy is not communism. He said, “I enjoy working as an editor because I love freedom of expression and I can promote the youth to write what they think in their minds. So, Ne Win banned my newspaper. But I wonder why the junta wants to accuse me of communism.”

When the military junta was convinced that the whole Burmese people supported the NLD, they started cracking down on it. First, the junta chose the mastermind of the NLD. Undoubtedly, U Win Tin was the first target of the junta and he was arrested and sentenced to three years imprisonment in 1989. His offence was said to be encouraging a girl in the NLD youth wing to have an abortion. U Win Tin knew nothing about what was said to have happened.

It was clear that the junta never wanted him to be released. When his sentence was about to end, the junta extended it by another 11 years without any reasonable charges. He was accused of being a communist, and the evidence was that in his home library there were books about communism.

When I heard the news about his first trial, I thought I would not ever have a chance to meet with him, because then we all believed that he would be sentenced to more than three years.

when I was arrested in November 1990, I hoped that I could have a chance to meet him in prison. Until 1995, I could not fulfill my wish because we were put in separate prisons. I was very glad to learn about his stand against the system. Even the prison authorities feared his fiery words and his strong commitment to democracy.

One prison officer told us that although he had met with many political prisoners, he admired U Win Tin most. He explained that U Win Tin never accepted special privileges in prison. "He always demands to us that the authorities must accept there are more than just a few political prisoners. He says if we do not afford special privileges to all political prisoners, he will never accept our offer."

The officer continued, "In 1989, there was a strike in prison by the political prisoners against poun-san that U Win Tin led. I still remember what he said to all the political prisoners in ward-number one. U Win Tin said, 'We should not follow the prison manual rules because we are not criminals. We all arrived here because of our yearning for democracy. So we have to refuse to follow poun-san.'

When the prison authorities cracked down on the strike, U Win Tin said, "I am responsible for the strike. You do not need to take any action against others, just me. I will never care what you do to me because I am a man who always stands with the truth."

A number of political prisoners were beaten and transferred to other prisons. U Win Tin spoke up about this to the authorities. "Stop beating my colleagues. There is no need to beat them, because I am responsible. If you must beat someone, then you should beat me."

The warders did not want to beat such a well-known figure. He told them, "If you are reluctant to beat me, I will beat myself." Saying this, he took hold of a baton and began hitting himself with it. The warders reacted to this by grabbing him and placing him in solitary confinement.

In March 1995, we heard the news about a hunger strike occurring in the cells of the main prison. This was the prison, in which U Win Tin had always been held, away from the majority of the political prisoners, who were in the Special Prison nearby. Later we learned the leader of strike was U Win Tin.

The strike occurred because another political prisoner in the same cell as U Win Tin had been found with 300 kyats, which is a violation of prison rules. He was placed in shackles by the authorities. U Win Tin told the prison officers that the man had had the money so that he could give it to his warder to supply him with medicine for his fever. U Win Tin told the officers that if the prison had provided proper medical care, the man would not have needed to have the money, so it was really the fault of the prison.

U Win Tin consulted the other political prisoners who were in his cell. He told them that in his opinion this was not fair or just. He wanted to do something about it, and asked, "What do you think we should do?" the political prisoners supported him and suggested a hunger strike.

U Win Tin asked the officers to remove the shackles. When they refused, he said, "If you do not agree with our request, we will have to stage a strike. This will be at least a hunger strike. This is not political action, but humanitarian action."

The strike took only two days until the prison authorities agreed with the demands.

Although I wanted to meet him in prison, I did not succeed until 1995. In the middle of 1995, I was sent to the prison hospital for my stomach ache and heart by two criminals at the out patient clinic, I was sent into a room where the political prisoners were kept.

I could not look around carefully in the room for my bad pain and I lay down on the floor. After closing my eyes, I had to try very hard to take a breath. Although I knew that there were more than two people around me, I could not open my eyes or say anything. I knew someone tried to inject my arm but I could not move anything. Meanwhile, I heard someone shouting "Hey! Stop it." Then, I heard many arguments near me but I did not know exactly what was happening.

I didn't know how many hours I was unconscious or asleep. When I was conscious, I noticed that someone held my left hand and my right arm was set up in a drip-set. Then, I heard someone who clutched my hand ask softly whether I felt better or not. When I slowly opened my eyes, I saw a man with spectacles and white hair. He stared down at me and said, "Don't worry. Try to calm down."

After trying to speak for a while, I managed to reply to him, "Thank you very much."

He asked me with a smile, "Do you know me?"

Only then I looked at him for a while and I replied in amazement "Uncle U Win Tin!"

When I tried to sit, he softly told me not to do so and to take it easy. I remember that my suffering seemed to suddenly disappear and my strong desire was to talk with

him. Although I wanted to talk with all my energy, my physical situation did not allow me. I asked him with great respect and gentleness, “Why have you arrived here? What's wrong?”

He slowly replied, “No need to worry about me. Take care of yourself and try to calm down. “After I knew that U Win Tin was beside me, I felt much better than before and I seemed to forget that I was hospitalized.

We wanted to talk, but we knew there was not much time, as the prison authorities would separate us if they knew we were talking. U Win Tin asked whether I was ready to listen to him or not. Then he explained about his situation and how he arrived at the prison. He said that he had had to argue with some criminals who tried to inject me while I was unconscious. He also explained that the deadly HIV virus was now spreading in prison because of needles and syringes. Then he told me why he was hospitalized.

He had suffered a hernia before he was arrested and his suffering got worse in prison. Although he complained to the prison authorities about his suffering, they told him that he must submit a letter to MIS before the to medical treatment as a weapon to make us give up our beliefs. They seem to believe that we are involved in politics for our own happiness and opportunity.

“When MIS receives a letter from a prisoner asking for medical attention, they visit the prisoner and try to persuade the prisoner to sign an agreement giving up political activity. In return, the prisoner is promised good medical treatment and a possible early release.

“They think prisons and interrogation centers can aid their wicked wishes to oppress their own people. They never consider that their prisons and interrogation centers could fail to make us keep silent.”

While he was explaining, the warden in charge of the prison hospital arrived and warned me not to listen to his words. He also threatened that if I continued to listen to U Win Tin I would be sent to my cell without any medical treatment. After his warning U Win Tin shouted at him, “You should say this to me, not tell him. He is listening to me and only I am speaking. He is also a patient at the moment. Why do you try to bully a weak man?”

The warden said, “I mean that you have the right to talk with each other but you should not talk about politics. If the MIS knew about it I would be in danger. Understand me please.”

U Win Tin replied to him, “tell them that we arrived here because of our involvement in politics. So we have nothing to talk about but politics. If you dare not say this, send me there, right now.”

The warden seemed to be confused and went out without saying anything. Then U Win Tin said to me that he thought the authorities would send either he or I back soon. He also said, “The junta thought I would submit a letter to them to allow me to get proper medical treatment. When I didn't do so, they ordered the prison authorities

not to give me any medical treatment. Finally, I was unconscious in my own cell because of my pain. When I gained consciousness I was on a bed in Rangoon General Hospital and noticed the doctors had already operated on my hernia.”

A doctor explained to him that if he had arrived there 15 minutes later he would have died. The doctor also asked him why he was sent there so late.

U Win Tin said with deep feeling, “It will be so sad for them that I am still alive. Although they tried to end my life death does not seem to want me to visit him.” He told me about his experiences in Rangoon General Hospital. He stayed there for only relate his experiences over two days.

“At first, the doctors and nurses didn't know who I was. After they learned who I was, they took more than enough care of me. I requested them that if any political prisoners and criminals arrive, please take care of them and treat them as patients,” he said.

“When the MIS found out that the hospital authorities and many patients were trying to meet with me and provide medicine and food for me, I was sent back to the prison hospital before my stitches were removed,” he continued. Then he showed me his stitches.

It was crystal clear that the junta dared not allow U Win Tin to meet others. I asked him what he thought of his life in prison and the future of Burma. He replied, “Some believe that prison is not a political field. At the same time they should not forget that under any dictator, prison is for those who love the truth. Some prisoners adopt a strategy of doing anything to get out of prison and back into the resistance. However, I believe that resolution and commitment play important roles as well. In my resolution, when I leave prison it will be walking, not crawling on my knees. It is not just being stubborn, you know. It is my resolution.”

Early the next morning, two warders shouted at me to sit in poun-san. I was very surprised at their angry command and told them I was too weak to sit. At that time U Win Tin interrupted our quarrel and asked them, “Don't you know we are patients?”

One of them answered, “We don't mean you, just that guy.”

U Win Tin angrily shouted at them, “We are the same. If I am allowed, you must also allow him.” then he told me to tell the warders that would not follow their unfair command.

After the warders angrily went out, he advised me not to forget that I was a patient and a political prisoner. A couple of hours later some officers arrived and a warder read out the rules of the prison hospital must sit in poun-san and clean the room.

As soon as we had finished listening to their rules, U Win Tin replied calmly, “I will not sit in poun-san position and clean our room because I arrived here to get medical treatment. You can take any action you want.”

Then he asked whether I would follow the prison rules. At that moment a prison doctor arrived and said to U Win Tin, “If had refused to approve to send you to

Rangoon General Hospital you would have died, you know. We have saved your life and this time you should understand us.”

U Win Tin replied with a smile, “The responsibility of a doctor is to save his patients and make them happy, especially mentally. Why do you want us to be disappointed? I would like to ask you prisoners, send us to our cells right now. If you think that we are your patients, please stop saying anything except about our medical treatment and mental encouragement.”

They seemed to be angry but they could not reply. Then one of them ordered his warders to send me back my cell. Suddenly, U Win Tin picked up his possessions and said to the authorities that if they sent me back, he would also go back to his cell. He angrily said, “You should change the name of this place from Insein prison hospital to Insein butchery.”

He looked at me and said, “Don't wait for them to send you back. We'll go back ourselves, right now. Do you agree with me? You have the right to choose what you wish.”

That is what the most regarding his character. He never forces anybody to follow his decisions. I also picked up my possessions and replied to him that I was ready to go back to my cell.

Laughing loudly, he gestured with his arms and said, “We may die here but our minds and resolutions will never die, right? History will know and the new generation will keep our history and resolution.” He looked at the authorities and said slowly, “You can send us to our cells right now.”

Without waiting for them to enter the room, we went out to them. Before we left each other he asked me to give his greetings and respects to everybody. Finally, he said with a meaningful smile, “Some may call it a storm in a tea cup, but we should not forget that without having the courage to make a storm in a cup of tea nobody would dare to make a storm anywhere.”

Endnotes

Poun-san is sitting position used by the authorities for inspection of prisoner, counting prison numbers, or for punishment. Prisoner must sit cross-legged on the floor with his hands on his knees, back straight and head bowed.

U Sein Hla Oo

.....Whose term of imprisonment in the notorious Insein prison has been extended for a second time.

U sein Hla Oo studied at Rangoon University and then in the United States where he received a Bachelor of Arts degree and a Diploma of Journalism. While he was student in Rangoon he participated in the July 1962 demonstrations. After he finished his study he worked as the editor of the Botahtaung newspaper and was a film critic under the pen name of Maung Ngwe Oo. He was forced to retire as editor of the Botahtaung for his participation in the 1988 uprising.

He is an MP and a Central Executive Committee member of the NLD. To date he has been arrested by the SLORC twice; the first time in November 1990 and again in August 1994. Many people lovingly refer to U Sein Hla Oo as 'U Pyaun Gyi' which means 'Uncle Bald' in English. U Sein Hla Oo is a Former journalist and close friend of U Win Tin, one of the NLD's top leaders. During 1989, U Sein Hla Oo participated in the academic or intelligentsia group 'Htet Thi Pyinya Shin' with other prominent academics and journalists-such as U Win Tin, U Moe Thu, U Soe Thein (aka Maung Win Tha), U Khin Maung Swe and U Kyaw Min. The academic group was one of the founders of the NLD.

In the lead up to the 1990 General Election in Burma, U Sein Hla Oo was selected as a candidate for Insein Township and won the seat. In July 1990, the NLD held its first major party conference after the election at Gandhi Hall in Rangoon. Many SLORC troops were deployed to the area in anticipation of the establishment of a parallel government. U Sein Hla Oo was the first person interrogated by the MIS after the conference and he was detained and interrogated for over one week. After Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and U Tin Oo were arrested and detained by the military, U Kyi Muang and U Chit Khaing assumed the key leadership positions in the NLD. U Kyi Muang and U Chit Khaing were themselves arrested after the Gandhi Hall congress, along with U Sein Hla Oo, who was taken for a second term of interrogation. Other NLD members taken for investigation at the time included U Khin Maung Swe, U Chan Aye (aka Maung Suu San) and U Kyaw Min. At the time, U Sein Hla Oo came to realise that imprisonment was inevitable.

Sure enough in August 1990 U Sein Hla Oo was arrested by MIS officers along with U Khin Maung Swe, U Chan Aye, U Kyaw Min, U Soe Thein (aka Maung Win Tha), and Dr. Zaw Myint Maung. The MIS officers took him to the central interrogation center at 'Yeikyi Aie' where he was interrogated for one month before being transferred to Insein Prison. In Insein, he was detained in isolation Cellblock No.1. A great number of elected NLD MPs were detained in the same way including U Khin Maung Swe, U Soe Thein, U Hla Than (who has since passed away), U Saw Naing Naing, Sie Ohn Maung, U Saw Chit Than, former Lt.Col. U Soe Thein, U Khin Maung Htun, U Tin Aye, U Soe Nyunt, U Ba Paw, Dr Zaw Myint Maung, U Kyaw Min, U Chan Aye, and UR.P.Thoung.

During his term of interrogation MIS officers asked U Sein Hla Oo whether he was involved in the arrival of MP Dr. Sein Win to the liberated area along the Thai border; whether he or the NLD were involved in the “Sanhga” or Monks non co-operation campaign; and how he was involved in the NLD's three Strategies of political defiance, working within the current laws of Burma, and compromising with the military regime.

While U Sein Hla Oo was being interrogated, he heard U Maung Ko die under interrogation in the next room. Prominent NLD Youth Wing member, Yan Aung (aka Myint Soe) was also interrogated in a room near U Maung Ko's. While U Sein Hla Oo was also in Insein prison he met many monks, students and NLD MPs. Although there were many MPs, monks and students in prison, only four people were given heavy punishments-U Sein Hla Oo, U Khin Maung Swe (San Chaung), U Saw Nai Nai (pazundaung), and Ko Ko Gyi (NLD Youth Wing).

In the end of March 1991 MIS officers took U Sein Hla Oo to a military court in Insein Prison where he was sentenced to ten years imprisonment. In April 1992, SLORC issued a selected and conditional amnesty to some political prisoners, known as Order 11\92, under which U Sein Hla Oo was released on the condition he not involve himself in politics.

In August 1994 U Sein Hla Oo was again arrested by the MIS who accused him of attempting to translate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's book Freedom from Fear. He was sent to an Insein Prison isolation cell and given a seven year sentence with hard labour. U Sein Hla Oo was arrested with U Khin Maung Swe, Dr. Khin Zaq Win and two women, Tharrawaddi San San New and her daughter. Dr. Khin Zaw Win had studied in Singapore and had recently returned to Burma to complete a research thesis on Burmese politics. U Khin Maung Swe was sentenced to seven years in prison and Dr. Khin Zaw Win was sentenced to 12 years. Tharrawaddi San San New and her daughter were each sentenced to seven years.

A close comrade of U Sein Hla Oo's teased him by saying he returned to Insein Prison because he missed his friends so much, but U Sein Hla Oo replied that he had returned because his four year parliamentary term was over and that he was keen to undertake a second term!

I did not get a chance to talk with U Sein Hla Oo when he was in Insein the first time because we were in different rooms, but this time we were detained together in Cell Block No. 1 where we had plenty of time to share our thoughts and experiences. According to U Sein Hla Oo, MIS officers came to inquire after him regularly after he was released in 1992. They had attempted to lure him into doing business with them, while threatening him to quit politics. U Khin Maung Swe and U Sein Hla Oo were at the time working together in a company and attended many embassy functions. Each and every time they returned from an embassy function MIS officers took them for interrogation and threatened them. The authorities, additionally, did not like their connections with international organizations. Finally, the MIS could not tolerate their activities any longer and Deputy Director of the MIS, Col. Kyaw Win, took them to ‘Yeiki Aie’ interrogation centre and gave further threats and warnings. U Sein Hla Oo was taken to ‘Yeiki Aie’ with U Khin Maung Swe, Daw San San, U Thu Wai and U Hway Myint from the Democracy Party.

Before his second term of imprisonment, U Sein Hla Oo often visited Dr. Sein Win's wife and son and listened to Dr. Sein Win's interviews on the BBC World Service and the Voice of America (Radio Free Asia was not operating at the time that time). U Sein Hla Oo often told Dr. Sein Win's son that it was his father who was speaking on the radio and urged him to remember him and to listen carefully because when Dr. Sein Win left the country his wife was pregnant with their son. Later MIS officers warned U Sein Hla Oo not to visit Dr. Sein Win's wife any more. U Sein Hla Oo told them to arrest him if they so wanted, but he would continue to visit his friends as if it was not a political activity, but a social one. The MIS officers did not like his answer.

In July 1994, MIS officers accused U Sein Hla Oo of assisting in the preparation of anti-government documents and for arranging for Dr. Khin Zaw Win to meet some people before he left for Singapore. Dr. Khin Zaw Win was subsequently arrested at Rangoon airport just before he was due to leave for Singapore. He was carrying some documents, including a draft translation of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's book *Freedom From Fear*. During U Sein Hla Oo's second period of interrogation MIS officers asked him why he had translated Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's book and whether he accepted Suu Kyi as the leader of the NLD. He was also asked what he thought of the prizes that were conferred upon Suu Kyi and whether he thought these prizes were suitable for her. The MIS officers attempted to negotiate with U Sein Hla Oo saying that they would release him if he signed a document stating that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was no longer the leader of the NLD and that she was wholly unqualified to receive the prizes conferred upon her by the international community. He refused, point blank, to sign such a statement.

The MIS officers reminded him of how long he was sent to prison the first time he was arrested and asked him to think about the kindness of the state in releasing him under an amnesty. They told him that the years that he failed to serve in his first sentence could be added to a new sentence for his current political activities. During his court appearance in Insein Prison, a special judge stated that U Sein Hla Oo failed to understand and recognize the compassion of the government in releasing him from prison in 1992 and pronounced him guilty. He ruled that U Sein Hla Oo was to serve the remainder of his first sentence in addition to a second, current sentence, totaling a 16-year prison term.

During U Sein Hla Oo's long, second term of imprisonment, the prison authorities have not allowed him any visitors. U Sein Hla Oo was kept in Cell Block No.1, while U Khin Maung Swe was kept in Room No.3. Dr. Khin Zaw Win was detained in U Sein Hla Oo's former room, No.7. In June 1995, U Sein Hla Oo and Dr. Khin Zaw Win were transferred to the Special cells of the main prison after being accused of engaging in political discussions. In November 1997, he was being kept in isolation in Cell Block No.1. Room No.6. I don't know which room he is being kept in at the moment. He has now spent over four years in prison.

U Sein Hla Oo has not changed much mentally, but physically, he has changed a great deal. During November 1997, his health was in a critical condition and he suffered greatly from high blood pressure and stomach problems. In addition, whenever there are rumors of political movement or something similar inside the jail, the authorities

always suspend the visiting rights of key people such as U Sein Hla Oo. He is very often interrogated in prison on such matters.

There are many people who are languishing in Burma's prisons, and those who have sacrificed their lives for the greater good of the country. I pray that U Sein Hla Oo, who love very much, should not be on of them.

Too Late to learn

This appeared as an article in the Bangkok Post in 1998.

One may find it hard to believe that there is a country where a student is imprisoned for 14 years for writing the history of a student movement while murderers, rapists and drug traffickers are handed sentences as light as one to seven years. But such a country does exist. It's called Burma-a nation of despots run by the military, where human rights violations are at a record high.

Ko Aun Htun, a former Rangoon Institute of Technology student and Central Executive Committee member of the ABSFU was arrested in January and sentenced to 14 years for compiling The History of the Burmese Students Movement, his second time in prison under the junta. His act was described as 'terrorism' by the junta.

The first time he was taken into custody was in November 1990, when he was jailed for five years for his involvement in the ABFSU. In October 1991, he was transferred from Insein to Tharawaddi prison. He was kept in solitary confinement for a long period of time and as a result he now suffers from asthma. He was released in 1994.

There are many students such as Htun who are sent to prison for the second time. And there are many students, including Min Ko Naing for a long time. For over nine years Min Ko Naing has been living in a solitary confinement is that most political prisoners suffer from tuberculosis and asthma.

Just after the SPDC claimed that they would re-open all universities, colleges and institutes, they conducted a major crackdown on student activists. In a press conference on March 1, 1998, the junta accused them of involvement with terrorist activities and being communist underground cells.

In reality, some of them were arrested because of their assistance to Ko Aung Htun to compile the book. Ko Khun Sai (former medical student, prominent student leader of U Thant's funeral riot in 1974, and former political prisoner from 1989 to 1993), Soe Lwin (Central Executive Committee of ABBESU and a former political prisoner from 1990 to 1993), Dr. Maung Maung Kyaw (a lawyer and former political prisoner from 1989 to 1992), U Thar Bann (a lawyer and former political prisoner from 1991 to 1995), Ms. Su Su Win and Ms. Khin Moe Aye were imprisoned for from seven to ten years for helping Htun.

Some were arrested because they tried to send some documents to Un special envoy and to Mr. Kofi Annan. Why does the junta claim that compiling a book-The History of the Burmese Students Movement-is committing terrorism? Are those who love freedom of expression and hate dictatorships communists?

In the press conference, Col. Kyaw Thein said that Htun is a communist because he has been familiar with former communists. In saying so, the SPDC is the closest friend of Communist China in this Southeast Asian region.

In fact, the book documents the student movement on 7 July 1962, U Thant's funeral riot and the 1988 uprising with file photos and shames the Burmese military rulers. To get the true story, Htun had to go and meet the people who participated in the movements and ask what really happened. If U Ne Win and the former Generals agreed, Htun would go and ask them who really ordered the destruction of the Student Union Building on 7 July 1962. He would ask why they did not pay their respects to U Thant (former Secretary General of UN) and hold a State funeral for U Thant. Is Thant a communist too?

After the press conference, the authorities continued to oppress the students both in prison and outside. For the time being, the MIS are re-interrogating the students in prison, especially those who are close to finishing their prison terms. The questions the MIS are asking are:

- (1) What will you do after you are released from prison?
- (2) Will you continue to be involved in politics?
- (3) Will you try to go and meet with Daw Suu after being released?
- (4) Do you think Daw Suu could solve the country's problems?
- (5) What do you think of changing the name from SLORC to SPDC?

The MIS's re-interrogations have annoyed parents whose children are about to finish their prison terms because they could result in extensions to their sentences. If a political prisoner's answers are not acceptable to the MIS, the result may turn out badly for the prisoner instead of him or her being released. The prisoner could be sentenced for violating Prison Rules. He or she is in the junta's hands.

In November 1995, U Win Tin (NLD), Ko Yo Myein (the former head of information for Daw Suu) and other political prisoners were accused of violating Prison Rules. Although they were not guilty, they were all sentenced to seven years imprisonment in March 1996. At that time, Ko Myo Myint Nyein and some of the students needed only three weeks to finish their prison terms.

Sometimes the MIS re-interrogate prominent activists in prison by reasoning that the junta leaders want to know their opinions. In reality, the authorities want to test whether their beliefs are still strong or not. While being interrogated in prison in September 1994, one student who led the December 1991 demonstration in Rangoon University campus was threatened that he would be held in prison as long as the junta rule the country because he criticized U Ne Win and the SPDC leaders. Moreover, he firmly demanded to have the right to form a Student Union in order to protect students' rights.

The students were all transferred to different prisons. If a student's family lives in Rangoon, he will be transferred to prison far from there. The authorities deliberately send political prisoners to prisons far from their families. The MIS want the families to have difficulties in visiting their sons, daughters, wives and husbands in prison. Every times the families request whether it is possible to transfer their relative to a prison nearer their residence, the authorities always reply that this is the best way to pressure the families to tell their sons and daughters to keep quiet in prison and not to continue with politics after their release. This only hurts the families more.

At the same time, the township MIS is checking the list of students who will attend their classes when the universities are re-opened. The MIS is checking for students who are relatives of former political prisoners as well as students in prison and in exile. The township SPDC are also trying to get a guarantee from parents that their sons and daughters will not participate in any political movement.

It is sad that most former student political prisoners have not the right to continue their education. As well as university students, even the high and middle school students have no right to do so. In January 1990, three students from the high school of South Okkalapa Township, Rangoon, were arrested and sentenced to three years imprisonment for their involvement in the Student Union. At that time they were in only eighth standard and were 15 years old. Their parents appealed to the military tribunal to release their sons because of their age. As usual it was rejected. In 1993, they were released from prison and their parents requested to the authorities to allow their sons to continue the education. But their sons were banned from attending school forever.

They were not criminals or terrorists. Why was the punishment so harsh? Now they are over 23 years old. Do they have to stop learning at only eighth standard? There are many young students such as them. What is the meaning of re-opening or closing the universities for them? Their classmates before being arrested were close to having a degree.

On 10 December 1991 when Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, the students peacefully demonstrated in the Rangoon University campus and demanded her release from house arrest. Those students were sentenced to from ten to twenty years imprisonment in March 1992. They have been kept in prison for over six years. At that time, the youngest student was only 17 years and in ninth standard. If the junta does not exetenthe prions term, the youngest student will be release when he is over 26 years old. But his education had to stop at only ninth standard.

It is not only jailed Members of Parliament who are banned from running democracy eludes Burma, this cannot be said for Burmese students under the SPDC who are banned from attending their schools.

There is a saying that it is never too late to learn. However, as long as democracy eludes Burma, this cannot be said for Burmese students under the SPDC who are banned from attending their schools.

Could Mandela survive here?

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Whoever you are, leave it at the prison gate. There are no politicians, doctors, teachers, monks, nuns or students. You are all prisoners. You are all the same.

Those are the greeting words for every new political Jail (formerly called the Attached jail). Although it is a special jail, the only special privilege provided was “special solitary confinement.”

The chief prison doctor was Dr. Soe Kyi, and his assistants were Dr. Tun Tun and Dr. Aung Than Myint. During those days, Dr. Soe Kyi was the most powerful man in the prison because of his relationship with former Home Minister Lt-Gen Phone Myint.

Almost every Wednesday, the chief warden made his rounds and checks to see if the prisoners in I.S.J. had any complaints or requests. All officials in the prison, including prison medical officers had to accompany him on his rounds. It was the only time we had the right to see a prison doctor.

Apart from Wednesdays, we could only see a “medical worker” between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. Our “medical worker” was Corporal Khin Maung New who had little clinical knowledge or experience. If one wanted to see him, first one needed to inform the head of the Cell Block.

However, to see a doctor on Wednesday, a patient was made to humbly stand head down in his cell with his hands crossed over the groin area. Passing officials would peer into the cells, asking the sick what they had to say.

The doctor never gave actual examinations, but only asked us what was wrong. Then the doctor would tell Khin Maung New what type of pills to give the patient. But we were never told what type of medicine was prescribed to us.

Our blood pressure and heartbeat were never tested and we never saw a doctor with a stethoscope. Regardless of the affliction, all patients were treated with the same medicines, usually a weak pain killer like Burspro or an antacid called Antacin. All the prisoners began calling Khin Maung New “Mr.Burspro!”

It's strange, isn't it? We were given the same treatment even though we suffered from different ailments.

Not surprisingly, U Tin Maung Win (NLD-MP) and U Sein Win died in Insein prison in January 1991. U Tin Maung Win was suffering from anaemic dysentery but he never received any proper medication. Only when he fell unconscious did the jail authorities finally send him to the prison hospital. He died shortly after. The authorities claimed he died of leukaemia.

After hearing of U Tin Maung Win's premature death, we requested that Er. Soe Kyin provides proper medicine for us. He replied, "You're lucky that we are even kind enough to prescribe Burspro and Sodamint. If MIS knew about that, we (doctors and medics) would be fired. We were told not to give any treatment to those who are awaiting trial or currently being tried."

Occasionally, when we were very fortunate, we were given Tetracycline, Ampicillin and Paracetamol. Although prisoners are not doctors we are familiar with antibiotics. One cycle of antibiotics is 16 capsules for 4 days but we never received enough capsules. At most, we received 4 capsules. If we complained, the doctors and medics would say, "Why do you think you're special? There are many other patients here. If you received 16 capsules, how could we provide for the others?"

Finally we realized that assuming the humiliating official posture in our cells to request treatment was not worth it-we never received treatment except for Burspro and Sodamint.

In February 1991, a Rangoon Institute of Technology (RIT) student in prison suffering from a bad toothache met Dr. Soe Kyi. The doctor asked him where it hurt.

The student replied "My lower left jaw."

Dr. Soe Kyi smiled and said, "Okay, use your right side (to eat food)."

The student became angry and screamed "You are not a doctor!"

"No. I'm not a dentist," Dr. Soe Kyi said coyly and went away.

Until the beginning of 1995 there was no dentist in the prison hospital.

In late February 1991, Toe Toe Tun, from the Democratic Party for a New Society, suffered from dysentery and asked Dr. Soe Kyi to authorize special meals of porridge and boiled water. Not unexpectedly, Dr. Soe Kyi said, "It is impossible to provide boiled water. We don't even have boiled water to clean the needles at our hospital."

In March 1991, Moe Zaw Oo (NLD-Youth) developed a large boil on his hip. Khin Maung New said a doctor would't give him any treatment, even if he were allowed to see one. Khin Maung New offered to remove the boil himself.

Moe Zaw Oo already had a high temperature due to the infection and there was an insufficient amount of post-treatment antibiotics available so he refused the offer, insisting to see a doctor.

Finally, Dr. Soe Kyin came and said, "Your boil needs to be operated on. But if you continue to complain, I'll send you to the hospital," he threatened, "and you'd better not be concerned about HIV positive Thai patients there."

"Never forget the fact that this is a prison," was Dr. Soe Kyi's only reply. Then he left, telling Khin Maung New to treat Moe Zaw Oo as he saw fit.

Khin Maung New told us prisoners that the prison would not provide new blades, bandages, alcohol or Ampicillin. We asked him to buy medical supplies for the operation from outside, but he said he could not afford to buy supplies, and asked the prisoners for money. In addition, he could be thrown in jail if he were caught providing medical supplies, as it is a violation of the Jail Manual and MIS rules.

We were upset and angry. “You are not a real medical worker! You are not a real medical worker! You are not even a human being!”

Khin Maung New disagreed. He explained that if he weren't a human being and didn't understand medical ethics, he would leave Moe Zaw Oo's operation to the hospital. Then it would be done with assistance from medical workers who didn't care whether they used unhygienic needles and equipment.

Indeed, there would be a high risk of contracting HIV disease if we let Moe Zaw Oo be operated on at the prison hospital. The medical workers, who also treat the Thai AIDS patients, have little idea about the deadly virus and neglect cleaning needles and syringes. We later found out that some ‘medical workers’ are drug addicts and are infected by HIV. Finally, we cut a deal with Khin Maung New. A political prisoner gave him his fancy T-shirt, worth 800 kyats, in exchange for Moe Zaw Oo’s treatment.

I admire Nelson Mandela who spent 27 years in a South Africa prison, but I wonder whether Mandela could have survived in Insein prison.

About Leo Nichols

James Leader Nichols was born in Burma in 1931. A long-time resident of Burma, he operated a shipping company from 1945 until 1962, the year when private firms were nationalized, and was the godfather and year when private firms were nationalized, and was the godfather and close friend of Nobel Peace Prize laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

Leo Nichols was appointed the Norwegian Honorary Consul to Burma in 1968, and in 1978 he was appointed consul for Denmark. In 1993, the State Law and Order Restoration council (SLORC) withdrew permission for him to serve as a consul, and he subsequently continued to act as de facto honorary consul for Norway, Denmark, Finland and Switzerland.

He was arrested on April 5, 1996 and charged with operating a fax machine and phone line without official permission. It is widely understood he was arrested for his close association with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. On May 20, 1996, he was sentenced to three years jail and fined US\$5,000. A month later on June 22 he died in prison while waiting for an appeal.

The SLORC initially claimed Mr. Nichols died of a stroke in Rangoon General Hospital, while Foreign Minister Ohn Gyaw later said he died from eating food 'he should not have taken.' Leo Nichols was hastily buried in a cemetery in Rangoon the day after his death. No autopsy was conducted and due to the haste of the burial none of his family were able to be present at the funeral.

Leo Nichols is survived by his wife, Felicity Nichols, and five children.

The last days of Mr. Leo Nichols

This appeared in the ABSDF publication 'Tortured Voices: Personal Accounts of Burma's Interrogation Centres' (July 1998)

It was in May 1996 when I saw Mr. Nichols in Insein Prison. I was serving my final year of a seven year prison sentence, and the Burmese military junta was campaigning hard to attract foreign visitors to the country. They had christened it 'Visit Myanmar Year.' Even so, I remember that the military leaders imprisoned many foreigners that year. Most of these foreigners were from China, Singapore, Malaysia and Taiwan and the majority had come to Burma for business reasons. There were also more than 400 Thai fishermen, who were arrested, but they are frequently detained.

Among the many imprisoned foreigners I encountered. I can recall two with Burmese connections. One of them was Dr. Shum, also known as Yunuk and Saw Yan Naing, who was a Burmese with Malaysian citizenship. He was a businessman, an artist and a songwriter. The other was Mr. Leo Nichols. I didn't know if he was Burmese. All that I knew then was that he was the honorary consul general to Denmark and was said to be very close to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Dr. Shum and Mr. Nichols were sent to Insein Special Prison where political prisoners are held. It was a well-known fact in Insein at the time that the Burmese military regime held a grudge against these two, more so than any other prisoners did in Insein.

In an evening in May 1996, when I was outside emptying the chamber pot with other prisoners, we saw a man in yellow sports shirt and a white prison sarong. He was sitting in the back of a truck among rice pots and a blue hood was pulled over his head. The truck was used to carry rice and curry pots from the main Insein Jail to our Special Jail. "A new prisoner," I thought to myself.

Out of sheer curiosity, we hung around for a while to see if we could find out who the new prisoner was. I thought he could be someone I knew

a fellow student perhaps. We saw a warder lead him down from the truck before the rice pots were unloaded. He was then taken into the main jail office. He was tall and white, and was handcuffed behind his back.

Soon after, two warders took him towards the cells of Hall-I where we were housed. By that time the handcuffs had been taken off and the hood removed. The man didn't look Burmese but resembled a white foreigner. He was wearing spectacles and appeared uncomfortable in his prison sarong, which was designed for Burmese prisoners. The sarong barely covered his knees. We saw him untying and retying the sarong while he was walking along as if it was not properly fastened.

When he arrived at his cell we noticed he had a large forehead and thin hair. It was clear that he was both shocked and frightened.

We wanted to say hello to him but the two accompanying warders warned us not to. "Don't speak to him now," they said. "The MIS captain is still in the main jail office." Because the warders were friendly with us we followed their advice and instead smiled at the new foreign prisoner. Blank and perplexed, he looked back at us but didn't say a word. Shortly afterwards, we saw warders drag him into Cell-5. However, to our luck the next cell housed an elected representative of the NLD who knew the foreign prisoner. Soon they were speaking in English, a language the warders didn't understand.

Within half an hour, we came to know that his name was Mr. Leo Nichols and that he had just been sentenced to three years imprisonment for helping Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. He was suffering from dysentery and we were soon busy looking for medicines for him. He said he could not eat the prison food, so we collected biscuits and other dry snacks for him from fellow political prisoners. We sent the food to him through a friendly warder and hoped that it might satisfy his hunger for a while.

Mr. Nichols was unlucky. We were between family prison visits and the supplies we had secretly stockpiled were almost gone. We were therefore unable to give him better food. Later we were informed that the rights of political prisoners and of foreign prisoners. He advised Mr. Nichols to talk to the prison authorities to demand his rights. The Member of Parliament also explained to him that the jail hall where he was being housed was for political prisoners and that he should not be disheartened. As soon as Mr. Nichols heard that he was surrounded by political prisoners, he said "Hello" to everyone in English.

The same night he was thrown into prison, MIS officers came and took Mr. Nichols away for further questioning. He was taken after the warders called lights-out. They took him to the Interrogation Cell in the prison. As usual, a hood was pulled over his head. Mr. Nichols had to spend the whole night in the Interrogation Cell while being questioned and abused. We saw warders bring him back to his cell the following evening.

We cheered him up whenever we had the chance to get out of our cells and walk by his cell. Those who could speak English spoke to him as soon as the warder disappeared, and asked him various questions.

I recall some of the things he told us. He said he was detained for helping Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and that he had sent faxes for her. As a result he said he was given three years imprisonment with hard labour. The court that sentenced him conducted a summary trial. He couldn't tell us the name of the court, but he tried to explain to us that it was a special court.

Before he was sentenced he was taken to a MIS Interrogation Centre and questioned for six consecutive days. He said when the MIS came to arrest him they confiscated all his money, which was more than two million kyat. The money had come from the recent sale of some land in Maymyo. We didn't know whether it was his own land or if it belonged to someone else. He told us that he was arrested the day after the land sale.

He wasn't able to tell us exactly where he was sent after his sentencing and before his transfer to our cells. But he did say that he was taken to a hall where there were many prisoners, and that he had to stay there for a few days. He was then transferred to a tiny room and had to stay there a few more days until he was taken to our hall.

The prison authorities confiscated his watch and other clothes upon his arrival at Insein. The pair of trousers he was wearing was taken away because the prison officials said that he could not wear trousers in prison. Instead, gave him the yellow sports shirt he was now wearing.

We asked him whether he was beaten or forced to sit in a *poun-san*¹ position upon his arrival. He said he had to sit in this position for a long time although he was not beaten. When he was telling us this, we sensed a feeling of distress in his voice. Judging by what he had said, we concluded that prior to his sentencing he was detained in the section of Insein where prisoners are held before they are taken to court. On the day he was given three years imprisonment, we believe that he was probably transferred either to Hall 6, which was known as the punishment hall, taken to a 'dog kennel' cell or held in one of the detached cells within the interrogation hall. We also concluded that by forcing Mr. Nichols to sit in the *poun-san* position for long periods, the military junta had shown their extreme hatred of him.

This reminded us of U Win Tin and Saya U Tin Moe, the two most well known political prisoners in Insein at the time. The junta had made U Win Tin, an NLD Central Executive Committee member, stay in a cell with well-known criminals, notorious for their bullying, extortion and physical abuse. As for Saya U Tin Moe, who is widely known for his fiery poems, he was forced to share a cell with criminals in the same hall. However, both of them were allowed to keep a shirt and a sarong, which they each brought from their homes. In the case of Mr. Nichols, he was not even allowed to keep any of his belongings. We therefore all thought that Mr. Nichols was probably the most hated prisoner of the regime.

Mr. Nichols also had diabetes and that made his condition all the worse. As a sufferer of this disease, he was required to be very careful with what he ate. In addition, he needed regular exercise. However, he wasn't given proper food and he was never able to take regular exercise, which he needed to alleviate his suffering.

Mr. Nichols told us that he had to stand up for hours during his interrogations and was not allowed to either sit down or walk around in order to diminish his stiffness and pain. According to the friendly warder, the MIS officers and Mr. Nichols exchanged angry words in English during one of the interrogation sessions. He told us that he overheard some MIS officers discussing how to break down Mr. Nichols' morale and said they were talking about the best ways to give him a 'lesson' and 'psychological torture.' We also learned about the ruthless determination of his interrogators. Another warder, who got on well with us, said that MIS Major Soe Nyunt ordered his men to carry out their duties regardless of the consequences after he had read Mr. Nichols' interrogation report. The major said, "Be tough on him on him no matter who he is. I'll take full responsibility if anything happens."

Mr. Nichols confided in us that he was very afraid of the night when he was taken away for questioning. Trembling and pitiful, he recounted what happened during the interrogation sessions. He said he was interrogated countless times before being sent to Insein, and yet it was far from over. "They have continued to question me even now, and I don't know if I can go through this any longer," he said. "I can't take this anymore."

He said he told the MIS everything he did for Daw Aung San Suu Kyi but they had continued to question him repeatedly in the mistaken belief that Mr. Nichols had helped her more than what he had revealed to them.

We suggested to Mr. Nichols that he appeal to Chief Warden U San Ya, who was in charge of the Special Prison, and to his deputy U Min Wei regarding his declining health. However U San Ya simply told Mr. Nichols that he had no authority to provide any medicine for his dysentery, diabetes and hypertension without the permission of the MIS. He told Mr. Nichols, 'I am afraid the prison cannot arrange any food that is suitable for your diabetes.'

A while later U San Ya warned us, "You must not give any medicine, food or clothes to Mr. Nichols." He said that if the MIS conducted a surprise search and found anything more than what he now had in his cell, all the Special Prison officials would not only lose their jobs but would also stand trial. "And you prisoners who have provided food and medicine will be severely punished," he added.

Another problem that added to Mr. Nichols' misery was defecating. The chamber pot was difficult enough to use, but he also had nothing with which to clean himself afterwards. It was all right for Burmese political prisoners because during our first few days and weeks in prison we used cigar butts to clean ourselves and broken bits from our bamboo sleeping mats. It was, however, a great discomfort and embarrassment for Mr. Nichols.

We gave him bits of clothing torn from old prison uniforms and told him to soak them in the water from the drinking water pot to clean himself. One of the prisoners exchanged his new prison sarong with the old one that Mr. Nichols was wearing, and another prisoner temporarily changed his shirt with Mr. Nichols' yellow sports shirt so that he could wash it for him.

We hid a small piece of soap in one corner of the water enclosure for him. By various means we persuaded the warder, whose duty was to keep an eye on Mr. Nichols was able to spend a little more time having his bath. We also provided him with towels. We pleaded with the warder not to report these activities to the prison officials, and we succeeded because we didn't hear any complaints from the officials' regarding Mr. Nichols. In return, Mr. Nichols would repeatedly thank all the political prisoners who walked past his cell. We took his expression of gratitude as recognition of our help.

While he was in Insein, Mr. Nichols was particularly interested in four political prisoners whom he felt extremely sympathetic towards. They were the Venerable Saya Daw U Nyana, a monk who was forcibly disrobed and sentenced to ten years imprisonment; the youngest political prisoner Han Win Aung who was only 20 years old at the time of his imprisonment; Kyaw Soe Lin (a.k.a. Kyet Oo). When Mr. Nichols heard that Han Win Aung, Kyaw Soe lin and Thein Htun Oo had each been given seven years for their political work, he repeatedly cried out "Oh, my God!" He was deeply concerned at their heavy prison terms and was so sympathetic and upset that he wanted to find out more about them whenever the opportunity availed.

Mr. Nichols promised everyone that when he got out of prison he would tell the world about the suffering of political prisoners in Burma. He was never able to fulfil his promise.

One day we saw him taken away by MIS officers in a truck carrying empty rice pots. As usual, there was a hood over his head. When he failed to return after a few days we began to get very worried. Four days later he finally showed up with the MIS officers. We noticed that his legs were swollen and his face was all puffed up. As soon as the MIS officers left, he told us that he was forced to stand for many hours on end while being questioned, and that he was not allowed to rest. He repeatedly said that he didn't understand why he was being treated his way even after they had sent him to prison. The MIS had repeatedly asked for his opinions on the possible actions of the European Union regarding Burma. They also asked questions concerning Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's personal life.

We spoke to warden U Tin Win, who was in-charge of medical care at the Special Prison, and requested that he provide the necessary care for Mr. Nichols. He explained to us that he couldn't do anything because the MIS was handling Mr. Nichols's case. He asked us to understand the situation. But he advised us to give Mr. Nichols at least four tablets of algae medicine everyday. This had to be done secretly. With this advice, we approached a warder to buy us a bottle of algae tablets and we planned to give Mr. Nichols warder to buy us a bottle of algae tablets and we planned to give Mr. Nichols this medicine twice a day. But he never had the chance to take our medicine.

A few days after his return, the MIS took Mr. Nichols away again with a hood over his head. That was the last time we saw him.

In the short time that he lived in Cell-5 of the Special Prison, he was never able to spend twenty-four hours straight in his cell. He was routinely questioned and transferred from one hall to another. When he was taken out of his cell for the last

time, he was suffering from acute dysentery, vomiting and dizziness. His legs were visibly swollen and he couldn't walk properly.

Before he was taken away for the last time, Mr. Nichols said a few farewell words to his cell neighbours as if he was going away for good. He said to the NLD representative, "I'll lie down on the floor if they force me to stand and answer questions this time. I can't take this any more... I think I'll be lucky if I make it back here one more time. If I don't make it back, please tell everyone here for me that I owe them for their kind help."

About a week later we heard the tragic news that Mr. Nichols had died. All that we were told was that he was forced to choose the path from which there was no way back.

Endnotes

1. The poun-san sitting position is used by the authorities for inspection of prisoners, counting prisoner numbers or punishment. The prisoner must sit cross-legged on the floor with his hands on his knees, back straight and head bowed.
2. The poun-san hall is where new prisoners are taken in order to teach them the rules of the prison. It is also used for punishment.

Uphill battle for the NLD *This appeared in The Irrawaddy in 1998*

If the Burmese military had respected the May 1990 election result, this year would be the last one of the second parliamentary term and the political parties would be busy organizing for the next election. But it is only a dream at the moment.

After the election, rather than making decisions about the future of the country, all of the elected MPs have experienced great trouble.

Some elected MPs died, in prison and outside. Most of the jailed MPs were dismissed from their posts. Over thirty MPs are still behind bars. Many were forced to resign from their parties and as MPs for economic reasons. Many political parties were banned. Many members of the NLD, students, monks and workers have been held in prison. Some died prematurely in custody. Some political prisoners were given further extensions of their sentences. Some receive second prison terms under the junta.

Nobody knows how many people have been killed since the 1988 uprising. There are many refugees in neighbouring countries and many illegal Burmese workers who have been sent back from Thailand. Who created this situation?

Before the election, the military regime took steps to restrict the power of the NLD. Most of the members of the party's Central Executive Committee (CEC) were arrested: Daw Suu was placed under house arrest in July 1989, and was banned from running as a candidate in the election.

Restrictions placed on the NLD included a limit of 50 people at any political meeting. The MIS had to be advised two weeks in advance of all political meetings. They were to be provided with a list of people attending, along with the speeches to be delivered. The MIS also censored publications of the NLD.

The junta seemed to believe that holding the election under such circumstances would deny the NLD victory. In fact, the SPDC (SLORC) underestimated the Burmese people. In spite of threats, repression and restrictions by the regime, the NLD won a landslide victory, taking 392 of 485 seats contested-more than 80 per cent of the constituencies.

The junta was unwilling to accept the result of the election and relinquish its grip on power, and from July 1990 the MIS began detaining elected MPs and political activists. In July over 40 MPs were detained. Some are still in detention now, some have died in detention, and some have died since their release.

At the end of July the junta issued Order 1/90, which clearly stated that the duty of the elected representatives was merely to draft a state constitution. This indicated that the junta was systematically trying to eliminate the election result. After issuing Order 1/90, the MIS ordered the central Executive Committee of each political party to agree in writing with Order 1/90. Those who refused to sign were detained and sentenced to long prison terms.

In the first week of September, the SLORC launched a major campaign to annihilate the NLD. This took the form of blanket arrests of 80 MPs and supporters of the democracy movement.

Some MPs had to flee to the liberated area and formed the parallel government. The junta accused many elected MPs of also trying to form a parallel government inside Burma and gave long prison terms of 10 to 20 years to the 80 people arrested.

U Maung Ko, a member of the Central Committee of the NLD, was one of those arrested and he died in the interrogation center. In a press conference, Senior General Saw Maung, the former chairman of SLORC, said that ko died not because of torture but from suicide. However, there was much evidence that he died from physical torture.

Two or three weeks after his death I was arrested for my activities with the student movement. While I was in the interrogation center, the MIS officer asked me whether I knew about U Maung Ko's death in the interrogation centre. Then, he threatened that I must tell the truth if I did not want to end up just like ko.

Worst of all, the junta had a major crackdown on the monks in October 1990. Many senior monks (Sayadaws) were arrested and given ten years imprisonment for their involvement in Thepaikmauk Kan Saung Pwe. This was a monk's protest, in which all

monks unanimously refused to receive alms from the military because of its mistreatment of monks. The junta accused the Sayadaws of being communists. The junta initially labelled everybody who participated in politics a communist, neo-colonialist and terrorist by the junta. The junta later re-labelled them as CIA agents rather than communists or terrorists.

In prison, the best time for political prisoners was after announcement of the election result, between the end of May and beginning of July 1990. This was because the prison authorities believed that the SLORC would abide by their promise and respect the election result.

Just after the election, the chief warden told the political prisoners that they would be released soon because the NLD had won the election. He asked them to tell the prison authorities of everything that they needed. He said it was the duty of the prison to take care of them. "It is the MIS, not us, who sent you here. There is no problem between you and us."

After receiving Order 1/90 by the SLORC, the prison authorities understood what the real situation was, and that the junta would not be relinquishing power.

On 18 September 1990, a prison hunger strike occurred, led by the political prisoners, who demanded that the junta respect the election result and transfer power to the winning party. In prison, it is known as Black September. Many political prisoners were rudely beaten and injured. Many were unconscious. Since then, the situation of political prisoner within the prison has been lower than that of criminals.

Prior to Black September, the political prisoners were able to communicate with prison authorities, for example to seek medicine, blankets or clothing. Since Black September, who have the discretion to ignore their needs.

After Black September occurred, the chief warden said to the prisoners that there were no political prisoners in the prison. All inmates were criminals, and all were to be treated the same under the prison manual rules. Nobody had the right to make requests of the prison authorities, for medicine, blankets or anything else.

Since November 1990 the prisons have become the parliament, universities and monasteries, as they have filled with MPs, students and monks.

According to the prison law, every new political prisoner must be asked why they were arrested, what their charges are and which organizations they belong to. Most of the elected MPs replied to the authorities, "We, the NLD, were arrested because we won the election, that's all."

When the prison authorities reported these answers to the MIS, the angry MIS officers came and met with the MPs in prison. The officers threatened "You were arrested not because the NLD won the election but because you have committed high treason. According to the law, we have the right to punish you with the death penalty."

Some MPs retorted, "Since 1962 all Burmese people have been punished with a type of death penalty. We have had our potential destroyed. We don't care about your

threats.” The MIS held a grudge against those MPs, who refused to say what the MIS wanted to hear.

In January 1991, U Tin Maung Win (the NLD MPs of Kayan Township, Rangoon) died in prison. He was refused proper medical treatment. Why?

At that time, every political prisoner near U Tin Maung Win knew what the chief warder said to win. He said, “If you sign a confession that you really committed high treason and resign from the NLD, you will be sent to Rangoon General Hospital and may be released from prison soon.”

Win replied, “I was arrested because I am an NLD MP. Does this mean high treason? Only resigning from being an NLD MP means high treason, because I was elected by the people.”

On 10 December 1991, when Daw Suu was awarded the Noble Peace Prize, the students peacefully demonstrated in Rangoon University campus and demanded that the junta release Daw Suu from house arrest. Nearly 200 students were arrested. The students were all sentenced to ten to twenty years imprisonment. In addition, U Kyaw San (the NLD MP for Taze Township, Saggaing) was sentenced to seven years for supporting the Noble laureate winner.

His “crime” was to say to his NLD Township members, “That's great. All the Burmese people, except them, surely rejoice at such a great honour bestowed on our Burmese lady for the first time in the entire history of the country.” When the MIS knew about that, U Kyaw San was ordered to sign a statement that Daw Suu did not deserve with the Nobel Prize. Instead, U Kyaw San chose to go to prison.

In April 1992, Senior General Saw Maung, who had said to a foreign reporter on May 27 1990 that he promised to transfer power after the election, was replaced by Senior General Than Shwe. Following this there were many serial orders including Order 11/92 which stated that those jailed people who were “related to politics” and who were not considered to be a threat to State stability and security would be released soon. In this order the junta appeared reluctant to use the words “political prisoners.”

Order 11/92 was known as the limited amnesty. In reality, it was designed to entice the international community to believe that the junta was making moves towards democracy. The order also stated that any prisoner released under the limited amnesty was liable to serve the term of the original sentence if he or she were arrested for any new matter.

Some MPs were released under Order 11/92, however the junta detained them again later when it felt it was necessary. These cases are discussed in more depth below.

U Sein Hla Oo (the NLD MP of Insein township, Rangoon) and U Khin Maung Swe (the NLD MP of Sanchaung township, Rangoon) were detained in November 1990 for high treason. They were accused of trying to form a parallel government inside Burma. They were each given sentences of 10 years, but were released from prison under 11/92 in April 1992.

They were arrested again in August 1994. Both were sentenced to seven years imprisonment for trying to translate the book *Freedom from Fear* which was written by Daw Aung San Suu Kyin and for helping Dr. Khin Zaq Win, who was sentenced to twelve years imprisonment, compile information about Burma's political situation.

On their return to prison, we political prisoners asked uncles Oo and Swe, "Is it right that you gave come back here because you remember us?" Both replied with a smile, "Do you forget this is 1994? We have arrived here to attend the second parliamentary term." It is not clear whether they have to serve their former prison sentences in addition to their current sentences.

In April 1991 Daw san San (the NLD MP of Seik Kan Township, Rangoon) was sentenced to 25 years imprisonment under section 122 of the Penal Code as punishment for high treason. She was released from prison under 11/92, not under parole. In October 1997, she was arrested for conducting an interview with the BBC's and sentenced to 25 years imprisonment. However, the SPDC's official statement stated that she had been sentenced to serve her original sentence, not for doing the media interview. It is unclear why she was re-detained.

This means that all MPs who were released from prison under 11/92 will the junta announced that it would hold a National Convention in order to draft a new state constitution. The Convention commenced sitting in July 1993. However, although Order 1/90 stated that the elected representatives would draft the constitution, of the 702 delegates at the National Convention only 107 were elected representatives. The rest were handpicked by the SLORC.

When the junta first announced the Convention, they stated that all participants would have the right to speak freely. However, in reality nobody was allowed to read their own speeches. Instead, they were required to read speeches prepared by the junta. There was also a press blackout on political discussion, so that the people were not able to access information about the Convention.

Dr. Aung KhinSint (the NLD MP of mingalar Taung Nyunt Township, Rangoon) and U Than Min (a member of the CEC of Mingalar Taung Nyunt NLD) were arrested in August 1993. They were sentenced to 20 years imprisonment for distributing leaflets that opposed the restrictions imposed by the National Convention.

In July 1995, Daw Suu was released from house arrest. The NLD boycotted the National Convention on December 28, 1995. It is strange that although the junta claims that the National Convention is most important for the country, its own people aren't interested in it. Nobody knows when the Convention will complete its work and the SLORC has postponed it very often. The National Convention has been postponed for over one year. After the NLD turned their backs on the National Convention, the SLORC had a major crackdown on the NLD again.

Many NLD members were arrested over very minor matters, such as car accidents, taking photos to a prisoner, attending an embassy dinner, having a cent of foreign currency, conducting an interview with a foreign correspondent and attending Daw Suu's weekend talks.

Further, in May 1996, U Soe Thein (aka Maung Win Tha)(the NLD MP of Waw township, Pegu) and U Kyaw Min (the NLD MP of West Bassein, Irrawaddy) were arrested again. Though both are still in prison, it is not clear how many years imprisonment they were sentenced to and why they were detained. Apparently U Kyaw Min is in bad health in prison.

In November 1995, the jail authorities raided the cells of 22 political prisoners. Among these prisoners were U Win Tin (NLD), Dr. Zaw Myint Maung (NLD MP) and U Hla Than (NLD MP). During the raids, the authorities allegedly seized seditious materials that were damaging to the SLORC regime. Among the materials seized was also a letter to the secretary-general of the United Nations, which contained information about conditions inside Insein prison. All 22 prisoners received an additional sentence of seven years for these matters.

On August 2, 1996, U Hla Than (NLD MP of Coco Island, Rangoon) died in prison. It is so sad that Than died from HIV. He was also the main target for the MIS officers. Before he lost consciousness, the MIS officers asked him why he had been arrested. He slowly replied "I was arrested because of winning the election."

Without having any intention of honouring the May 1990 election results, the SPDDC now says it is planning a new election. It is not certain whether this means that the Convention will be finished soon. Nobody knows when the election will be held, but everybody knows that, if the junta is not happy with the results, the newly elected MPs will be arrested. Then the junta may change its name again, or select a new chairman.

Whatever happens, the SPDC should realize that as Burmese people bide their time waiting for real change, they will continue to believe that the winners of the May 1990 election are the real government of their country.

Forced examinations

Although the International Labour Organisation's recent report about forced labour inside Burma made the international community angry, the junta did not seem to pay any attention. In reality, the notorious words of 'forced labour' and 'forced relocation' in Burma are already familiar to the international community. Now a new term that will further anger the international community has appeared inside Burma-'forced examination.'

Since before the tenth anniversary of the 1988 popular uprising, many Burmese students have been trying to show their anger to the junta and their respect for those who were killed in the uprising. At the same time, the junta seemed to have been prepared to crack down on the students. After founding the secret police's special branch that will closely watch the students, the junta announced the re-opening of some university classes to sit exams.

When the tenth anniversary passed quietly and silently, the junta seemed to underestimate its students, and the state-run newspaper wrote that the students did not want to be involved in politics and were not interested in what happened in 1988. The junta claimed that the new generation of students wanted to have only peaceful education. In reality the junta's 'peaceful education' means that the students must keep silent. At the same time, the junta claimed that the NLD had tried to use the pure students as pawns, but the students were not interested in this lure of the NLD.

After the NLD's deadline passed on August 21, 1998, the junta seemed to be more confident that the students were not interested in politics and the NLD's ultimatum. But their confidence lasted only three days. ON August 24, the students from Rangoon University and Rangoon Institute of Technology (R.I.T) demonstrated at the Hleden junction, the historic place of student demonstrations. They shouted anti-junta slogans and distributed many leaflets, on which were written, 'support the NLD's demand to convene the parliament,' to the people standing by and cheering them. On August 25, the R.I.T students demonstrated again near their campus. After cracking down on both demonstrations, the junta announced the re-opening of some classes community that it didn't care about any attention to the NLD's demand to convene the people's parliament.

"We were surprised at their announcement about re-opening our classes during this critical time," said a student, who participated in the demonstration on August 24 and 25, "and it means they underestimate our feelings. I think they are in dilemma between fear of the students and pretending to the international community that Burma has peace and stability."

Just after re-opening the classes, the junta announced the timetable for the exams within a short time. It made the students angry and they demonstrated their feelings in their campus. They demanded the authorities delay the exams because they had not enough time to prepare. The students claimed that if the authorities did not agree with their demands, they would not sit the exams and they would pour their feelings onto streets.

As usual, the junta answered by cracking down on the students and the students were forced to sit the exams.

"We already expected how the junta would answer," a student said, "and we've already decided what we will have to do. We will get in the bus peacefully and sit the exams but we will write only our feelings on the answer paper."

Another student said, "We hope our teachers will show our answer papers to the junta."

After closing for nearly two years, some engineering classes were re-opened but the students had to sit their examinations within a couple of weeks. What and how would they answer without enough time for teaching and practicing? As everybody might know, there must be much practical time to be an engineer.

One student who recently obtained his engineering degree said, "Although I have a civil engineering degree, I know nothing about any construction. I've never been to any construction site during my academic years. I feel shy to tell others that I have an engineering degree.

His words stated clearly the current education system in Burma. During this ten years there are many students who got their degrees without knowing anything regarding their own subject. How do they serve the country by using their worthless degrees?

There were many changes without any development in the education system since the BSPP. The education system goes now from bad to worse under the junta. The opening of schools depends on the weather of politics. Every time the students demand their rights, the junta always closes the schools without trying to get a reasonable solution. Under the junta's ten years of oppression, there have been less than three academic years. But the relatives of those in the junta are studying in western countries.

A final year R.I.T. student said, "It is easy to get a degree under the junta. If you want to get a degree as soon as possible, you will need to avoid involvement in politics. I've never participated in any political movement."

It is also clear that the junta holds university degrees as a weapon to threaten the students' means destroying the country's future. Although the junta always claims that they are trying to build a democratic country, they don't allow the founding of a student union. Whenever a student demonstration occurs, they immediately say that it happened at 'the hands of communists and neo-colonialists.' The junta also claims to be removed from the outside world.

The junta used to claim that students should be involved in the issues of students, not in politics. However, most of the students in prison were punished for their hunger for a student union. Every student who demands to form a student union has to go to prison. When the students realized that without changing the political system, there would be no right to found a student union, they had to demand both political and educational reform.

So far, there is more than 1,000 students in the junta's notorious prisons.

Most of them were arrested when aged 18-24 years and were sentenced to terms of from seven to twenty years. Being involved in politics, they are never treated well. Worse, they do not have the right to read and study in prison. Far from studying something for their future, they are not even allowed to read a little paragraph of religion. They have been spending worthless years in prison for their unfair sentences. What a sorrowful future.

During the recent student demonstrations in Rangoon, the security police arrested more than 500 students. Most of them are aged 15-24 years. Nobody knows how many years they will be sentenced to.

Pyi Soe (not his real name) who was recently released from prison for his involvement in founding the student union on August 28, 1988, said, "They (the junta) hold a theory that arresting and oppressing are the best solutions for the problem. They think that punishing by long sentences will drive out our beliefs.

"When they know that most of the students who were released from prison have become stronger and stronger, they fear more and more and try to annihilate us systematically. The wicked way they are behaving is completely destroying the education system and convincing parents that sending their sons and daughters to school is worth nothing for their future."

Under the economic crisis and the junta, the people of Burma are trying very hard for their daily lives. Most of the parents also know that even though their sons and daughters might get a degree they would not get any job inside Burma. When most of the parents cannot afford to send their children to other countries to get any job and to continue their study, their sons and daughters have to try to enter illegally into a neighboring country to get any job, especially Thailand.

Then, the parents of Burma have to consider carefully about where their sons and daughters should be sent-to university or to Thailand.

Even though they send could send their sons and daughters to university by spending much money, the probable result is either that their sons and daughters will be political prisoners or graduated jobless. On the other hand, if they agree to send their sons and daughters to Thailand, the certain result at the moment is that they will be arrested for illegal entry and sent to a Thai prison.

In comparison, sending them to Thai soil seems to be much better for them. It is also what the junta really wants to happen. They don't want to see many students in the campuses. The junta is destroying the students' life and education system for the sake of clinging to power. They think that the students of Burma are the biggest troublemakers for them. It is really a sorrowful future for Burma.

The junta is now faced with the big problem of both the NLD's bold defiance and the students' skilful hit and run demonstrations. The junta is so fearful that they are now trying to keep their eyes on even the high and middle school students. Although the junta was able to threaten some cease-fire groups to release pro-junta statements, they could not do so to the students.

Most of the people of Burma now say softly everywhere that the junta wants to deport not only Daw Aung San Suu Kyi but also tis own people, especially students.

The junta could not control the students by imprisoning their leaders. So now the junta has had to use forced examinations, forced closing and re-opening of schools and forced control of the students as a group. So far, it's wicked tactic to make the students keep silent has not succeeded and it will never succeed. Even if the junta

forcibly deports all its students, its wishes can't be fulfilled. The young student generation will be ready to substitute their brothers and sisters to continue to achieve democracy in Burma. They can do forced examinations but it will never be possible to forcibly stop the generation.

Still walking for freedom

“I appreciate Mr. Madela so much and could not stop thinking about how he could have survived 26 years in prison. His prison life was longer than my whole life. If someone asked me which book I like the best, my answer would surely be Mandela's long Walk for Freedom,” said Thet Winn Aung, 26, a prominent young student leader. He did not know that in the future he would be sentenced to double the imprisonment of Mr. Mandela.

Thet Winn Aung actively participated in the 1988 popular uprising but at that time he was only 16 years old and a high school student. After the bloody military coup in September 1988, he successfully founded a young student union, the All Burma Basic Education Students Union (ABBESU). However, like the other student unions, ABBESU was declared an illegal organization by the junta. Although all its members were under 16 years old, it was ABBESU that could trouble the junta the most because of their skilful hit and run demonstrations.

There are only two prominent students organizations inside Burma, the ABBESU and its big brother-the All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU). When almost all the ABFSU's leaders were arrested by the junta, some young leaders from the ABBESU replaced their brothers to continue the democracy movement. Thet Winn Aung is one of them.

In 1994, all members elected him as General Secretary of ABFSU. At the same time he led the ABBESU as well. When he was arrested by Military Intelligence in September 1998, he was the General Secretary of ABFSU. In January 1999 he was given 52 years imprisonment as a New Years gift for his leadership of the student demonstrations in August and September of the previous year.

Since the 1988 popular uprising, there have been three outstanding student demonstrations in Burma-the 10 December 1991 student demonstration (which happened when Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize), the December 1996 demonstration and the demonstration for the tenth anniversary of 1988 and in support of the NLD's parliamentary demand in August 1998. Although Thet made good his escape from the junta for his participation in the December 1991 and 1996 demonstrations, he could not do so for the last one.

Many students who were arrested in the December 1991 and 1996 demonstrations were given from ten to 20 years' imprisonment. They are all still in prison.

“Thet was given 52 years because of his involvement in all the student demonstrations. Before, he appreciated Mandela so much, but now I believe that Mandela would admire him,” said Ye Taiza, a prominent student leader and former political prisoner.

“We all were shocked by the news of his trial. He is not a murderer or terrorist, and not a drug dealer. He is only an innocent young student. What's his crime? Does leadership of peaceful demonstrations deserve 52 years?” More surprisingly, the sentencing took place before the Japanese government invited Brigadier Kyaw Win, Deputy chief of the Military Intelligence Service, to visit Japan. “Japan made no complaints about Thet's unfair trial,” complained one student student activist who declined to be named.

If nothing changes in Burma, he will be released from prison only when he is 78 years old. However there is a saying in Burma's prisons that no Burmese prisoner could survive more than 15 years in prisoners have to live in solitary confinement. Before they are sent in, they have to pass through Military Intelligence's hard interrogation center, where nobody can escape many different kinds of torture. Thet had to stay there for nearly four months. One can only wonder how much he suffered and was tortured.

“Although I had to stay there for a few days, it seemed to last longer than my whole life. I really do believe that only his strong beliefs and commitment could enable him to survive there,” Ye Taiza added.

In an attempt to be allowed the 1999 EU-Asean Ministerial Meeting in Berlin, win Aung, the junta's new foreign minister, has claimed that Rangoon is ready to discuss all sorts of issues, including human right and democracy. Rangoon claims that it does really want to host international seminars, meetings and the like because it wants to show the international community how things are progressing in Burma. At the same time over 100 students were sentenced to from seven to 52 years imprisonment for their involvement in politics; many NLD party offices were forcibly closed; many elected members were also forced to resign and some were given long prison terms.

On the surface, the harsh punishments seem to influence the people of Burma, who have been living with fear under the junta, not to be involved in politics any more. The junta may think that after Thet's unbelievable trial all Burmese students will keep quiet. In fact, such harsh punishments incense Burmese students. Now Burmese students are waiting for the re-opening of their classes by secretly discussing Thet Winn Aung's brave movement and leadership. So far, the junta dares not re-open the universities and colleges, although its spokesmen said all would be re-opened at the beginning of 1999. Why?

The answer is clear: the junta clearly understands that there are many students like Thet Winn Aung.

It may also be that has been given the longest prison term for a student political prisoner in the world. If Mandela is still alive when Thet is released from prison, he will surely have a great chance to read Thet's book-“Long walk for Freedom.”

Nobody can know when he will be released from prison. There are many students, including Min Ko Naing, the Burmese students' leader, who have been in prison for nearly ten years. In reality, their release depends not only on the people of Burma but also on any outsiders who really respect human rights and democracy.

In the end, the Burmese students will be walking on their long way to freedom whatever Tokyo, Beijing and other governments do.

Conqueror of the king

Min Ko Naing- “Conqueror of the king”-was a popular student leader during the 1988 popular uprising and was elected as the chairman of the ABSFU by the majority of Burmese students. He was supported not only by the students but also by the people of Burma during the popular uprising, especially for his fiery speeches against the then ruling party. After the bloody coup by the military, he continued fighting for democracy and delivered further fiery speeches against the military regime. The people of Burma continued supporting him as well. The people of Burma were very confident of him and paid their respects to Min Ko Naing as a new generation's student leader. On the other hand, the military regime greatly feared its people's strong support for him. Finally the military regime put him in solitary confinement for 20 years. He was arrested by the military regime in March 1989. However, only in 1992 was he sentenced to 20 years imprisonment for his strong leadership of students and the democracy movement.

After the military coup in September 1988, the generals thought Min Ko Naing would flee to the border. But he took a different path. He did not move an inch from his own land because he strongly believed in his own people and a non-violent way to achieve democracy. When the authorities realized that he would not go from the country and that the students and the people were still supporting him, they chose to send him to prison for a long time. At that time, there were three main targets for the military regime-Daw aung San Suu Kyi, U Win Tin (who was believed to be the mastermind for Daw aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD), and Min Ko Naing, the favourite student leader. Firstly, the military regime cracked down on U Win Tin and Min Ko Naing. Both were arrested by the MIS without any substantial charges. Although U Win Tin was given three years imprisonment, Min Ko Naing was imprisoned for nearly two years without trial. Later, U Win Tin's sentence was extended for another eleven years and then another seven years, and Min Ko Naing was given 20 years imprisonment. So far both have been in prison for nearly ten years.

Due to harassment in prison, Min Ko Naing's health is deteriorating. As with other political prisoners, he has no right to read any books - even the state-run newspaper. In September 1998, there was a rumour in Burma that Min Ko Naing had died in

prison. “The rumor seemed to be carried by the Burmese students because of his health, so I think they spread the rumour to see the response from the military regime,” said Ye Teiza, a prominent student leader and former political prisoner. He continued, “During the uprising, I was close with him and admired him so much—especially for his honest and brave work for democracy.”

Another former student political prisoner said, “In a speech to young students who were staging a hunger strike near Shwegonedaing junction in the capital during the uprising, he said ‘what I give to you all is only my word that I have dedicated myself to our democracy movement, and what I can give my own people is my truthful sacrifice for them. What you will receive back from your brave movement is poverty, starvation and even death but a good, new generation will have weapons but we have only pens and pencils. However we have bravery for our people, we dare to face reality, we love justice and truth, and we are ready to pay the price. It is enough to win over them, who rely only on weapons.’”

In an interview with a reporter, a former student political prisoner said, “While we were in prison, what we talked about daily was Min Ko Naing. Although we had the chance to talk with other inmates, Min Ko Naing has no such chance because he has to live alone in special solitary confinement. I still remember that some warders who sympathized with us told us that while we were talking with each other, Min Ko Naing had to talk with two lizards and some ants in his cell. No warder has the right to go and talk with him. Before I was released from prison at the end of 1996, we heard bad news about him, that he was suffering from tuberculosis, and he demanded the authorities that he wanted to talk with somebody because it's been so long that he doesn't even know what talking means.”

According to former student political prisoners, Min Ko Naing suffers not only from tuberculosis but from hunger to talk to someone. He has only 15 minutes each couple of weeks to talk with his family. This is only an estimated 60 hours in his nearly ten years in prison to talk with his family. As with others he has no right to study or read any books. He has no right to do any exercise or to walk outside his cell. How does he survive here?

His strong beliefs, true resolution and unswaying commitment help him to survive in the military regime's notorious prison. According to former political prisoner and sources, just before he was given 20 years imprisonment, the MIS offered that if he signed a letter stating that he would not involve himself with politics and the ABFSU, he would be released. But he refused and chose the long prison term.

When Senior Gnereal Than Shwe took the chairmanship of the SLORC (now the SPDC) in April 1992, the MIS again came to Min Ko Naing and asked him whether he would sign. Again, he refused. Before the golden anniversary of military day, on March 27, 1995, the MIS again tried to persuade him, but as usual did not succeed. After the change of name from the SLORC to the SPDC, the MIS tried another unsuccessful effort to persuade him. Finally, the authorities sent him to another prison (Sittwe), far from the capital, hoping his mind would change because his family would be put to great trouble to travel from Rangoon to Sittwe to see him. However, they didn't succeed and will never succeed.

Yan Naing, a former political prisoner said, “While I was in prison I noticed that most of the prisoners wanted to see and meet with our leader. When a foreigner who sympathizes with our movement arrives to visit Burma, who he or she really wants to see and meet first is our lady Daw Aung San Suu Kyi-but most of them are refused by the authorities. In the same way, when a new prisoner arrives in Insein prison, he wants to see and meet our leader Nin Ko Naing-but none of them ever succeed. And every criminal wants to know where he is put. However, everyone who tries to talk about Nin Ko Naing is severely punished by the prison authorities.”

A warden who declined to be named said, “When we knew that Min Ko Naing was going to be sent to prison, all the warders and their families were waiting near the main prison main gate to see him. But the military high officers shouted at us to go back our barracks. If we have a chance to go near his cell, we always try to peer in at him. It is dangerous for us to do so because the MIs directly watch and guard his cell. But we have a chance to pass through his cell one day a week when the chief warden makes his normal round-check. I think our chief warden is reluctant to talk with and ask him anything because of his brave words. I still remember -one day we escorted the chief warden and we heard the chief warden ask him ‘What do you need, Min Ko Naing? Is everything ok?’ Min Ko Naing replied slowly ‘You mean that if I need something you can help me? Thank you very much. As chief warden you should know what I need. I do know that you cannot help me because you have not the right to do so. I understand you are a so-called chief prison warden, so I don’t want to tell you.’ Our chief warden had no words to reply.”

Another medic-warder said, “When he was put in the special solitary confinement, he could not walk well. His legs were sore. Although I wanted to ask him about it I dared not because there were many MIS officers near me. I understood that he was tortured by the MIS in the military interrogation center.” In reality, it is not only Min Ko Naing who is treated like a beast. There are many student political prisoners who are treated life imprisonment for their involvement in politics. Nearly 200 students 500 students were sentenced to from seven to ten years imprisonment. Nearly 1000 students were awarded from three to seven years imprisonment for their desire to establish their student unions.

These other student political prisoner, though, are allowed to stay in-group cells and unofficially have the right to talk each other. They can help and encourage each other when someone is sick or feels something is wrong. Min Ko Naing is very different from the others. Even the warders are not allowed to talk with him. After the news about the deadly AIDS virus in prison appeared in public, the people of Burma worried about Min Ko Naing, who has had to live in prison alone for nearly ten years and suffers with the HIV virus, and U Hla Than (an MP from the NLD) has already died from HIV in prison.

On the surface the military regime still controls power but in the generals' minds fear overwhelms them. Putting Min Ko Naing in prison for a long time means the military regime has been morally defeated by the “conqueror of the king.” As the military regime does not have the ability to make a dialogue with Daw aung San Suu Kyi, 1991 Nobel Peace Laureate and a leader to the NLD that won the 1990 election, it dares not face and release Min Ko Naing, a famous Burmese student leader.

Min Ko Naing was nominated by a Norwegian friend of Burma for the Student Peace Award for 1999. This is a new prize, which is to be awarded for the first time in 1999. The prize will be awarded to outstanding student activists around the world every two years.

Although Min Ko Naing did not win the Student Peace Prize for 1999, the people of Burma believe that his time will come, and that his strong resolution will be rewarded.

Denying the anti-fascist revolution

This appeared 'Denying the anti-fascist revolution in Burma' in The Nation newspaper in 1998.

On November 10, 1998, Lieutenant General Khin Nyunt, head of the Burmese military intelligence unit, spoke at the opening of the Burma-Rangoon. "We shall never forget the important role played by Japan in our struggle for independence," said the SPDC First Secretary, the most powerful general in the SPDC. "In the same vein, we will remember that our Tatmadaw [military] was born in Japan."

Many Burmese were confused about the General's words. They didn't understand exactly what the General wanted to mean, especially by using the words "the important role played by Japan." The word 'important' is now controversial for Burmese people.

The term 'fascist' and mention of the cruelty of Japanese troops were missing from the General's words. While Korean women have the right to claim compensation from the Japanese government, Burmese women who were used as concubines for the Japanese troops, and men who were used as forced laborers to construct the Death-Railway during the war have no right to compensation for their sufferings. It is not because of the Japanese government paid reparations after the war, none of this money went to Burmese victims of Japanese atrocities. Instead, Burmese authorities pocketed the money.

"If such sorrowful incidents had occurred under the British rulers, the junta would at the moment push and help the victims to claim compensation from the British government," said an old politician who didn't want to be named. "The junta targets the British because of Dr. Michael Aris, husband of Daw Aung san Suu Kyi. If Michael Aris were Japanese, their target would be changed and the junta would complain about Japanese fascism."

In Burma's history, there are two famous revolutions in the struggle for independence—the anti-fascist and the anti-colonialist revolutions. Just before the 1988 military coup, Burmese students from primary to high school classes had to learn about those two revolutions. Students who took history as their major subject had to learn those two revolutions before they could get their degree. However, under the BSPP most of the historical films that could be seen by Burmese people were anti-fascist. In particular, the movies showed the brutality and rudeness of the fascist Japanese during their occupation. Although the movies showed the fascist Japanese troops rape, torture and act inhumanely, there were no movies about such actions by the British troops. Every actor and actress in the anti-fascist movies was awarded the Burmese Academy Prize for acting. But everything has changed since the 1988 military coup.

Since the 1988 military coup the junta has ordered that historical films must show only the situation under the British government. The state-run newspapers report about the British colonialists 'oppression very often. Worse, the junta has also slowly been changing the curriculum for its own students. There may be only one famous revolution in the Burmese students' curriculum—anti colonialism—and no longer an anti-fascist revolution. Why? The answer is that western countries strongly support the democracy movement and constantly criticize the junta over human rights abuses.

In the state-run newspaper published in 1990, the junta daily described a massacre by British troops, which occurred in Taung Tha Township, Mahdalay Division. These serial articles are now being published in the state-run newspapers again. The so-called journalists who were recruited by the junta had many interviews with whose local people who were still alive and eyewitnesses. The junta had many interviews with the villagers who were living in Mandalay and Magwe Divisions, where the massacres by the British troops occurred during the Second World War. This doesn't mean that the junta is trying to explore the true history, though.

According to the local villagers, the massacres occurred not only under the British rulers but also under the Japanese troops. At first, they wondered why the junta only tried to dig out history about crimes perpetrated by the British rulers. It was only after the villagers were forcibly sent to an infrastructure site as laborers that they realized the methods the junta used were the same as those used by the Japanese troops during the war.

If the elderly people who have lived under both the British rulers and Japanese troops were asked, they could explain the true story, that they never saw or heard about rape cases committed by British troops, only by Japanese troops.

"To be frank with you, there was nothing good about living under either invader. However, the Japanese troops were more brutal and ruder than the British. As far as I know, the British seemed to follow and respect the laws and regulations," said one elderly man who had to live under both rulers. "The Japanese troops seemed to understand only killing, torture and rape. I am not confused about why the junta is trying to hide the history of Japanese occupation. It holds the same attitude to its ethnic minority people at the borderline. And remember that after Daw Aung San Suu Kyi criticized the junta as fascist, the Generals were so angry that they put her under house arrest for six years."

Another one said, "It is right that our army was born in Japan. It's also right that Saya San, a famous farmer revolution leader under the British rulers, was hanged in Tharrawaddy prison in central Burma. It's true that Bo Aung Gyaw, a famous student leader, was killed during the 1938 demonstrations. We can try to understand those sorrowful happenings because we had to live under invaders. But I don't understand why under our Burmese rulers we are now treated even worse. If Bo Aung Gyaw were killed during the 1988 uprising, we could not even see his corpse. If Saya San were arrested under this junta, he would be tortured before his death sentence. We are now under our own neo-fascist rulers."

His explanation is very clear about the Burmese ruling junta. Although there were many innocent people and students who were killed during the 1988 uprising, the junta claimed that just 15 were killed. So far, nobody knows where other corpses were secretly buried. Many NLD members and activists have been sent to prison without trial. Many political prisoners died in custody because of harassment and the prison conditions. In the military intelligence center, all political detainees have been tortured, not by the Japanese and British, but by the Burmese military intelligence officers.

Although the junta claims that the civil war occurred because to the Divided Rule policy of the British, it also uses this policy towards the minority ethnic groups, the NLD, students and people.

"The junta complains about the worst things of colonialism on the surface. However, I believe that in their minds they thank the British so much for how to divide the opposition groups," said a retired history lecturer. "In reality, the junta chose to practice even worse things than Fascist Japan and the British colonialists. The junta has been using many laws and rules, which were adopted by the British to oppress our Burmese people, especially the revolutionaries."

Under British colonial rule, the laws regulating prisons and courts were created. The junta uses the same laws, but has taken away the rights that prisoner once had under the British. Now political prisoners have no right to a lawyer for their trial. Once imprisoned, they are not allowed to read or study.

Ye Teiza, a prominent student activist and former political prisoner, said, "I had a chance to meet with many old politicians in prison who have lived in prison under the British and the BSPP. When I asked them which prison situation is better, they all answered that the situation under the junta is the worst."

The junta always complains very loudly that general Aung San was assassinated by a British government conspiracy. However, from the time of the BSPP to the ruling military junta, no top military leader has paid respect to Martyrs' Day on July 19, when General Aung San and other national leaders were assassinated. They are never interested in attending the Martyrs' day ceremony. In the past, Burmese people anxiously awaited the sound of sirens, which would sound on Martyrs Day at the time that General Aung San was assassinated. This allowed them to pay their great respects to their national heroes, and they would observe one minute's silence. Under the junta there are no more sirens as the national sign of sorrow. This clearly means that the junta has been trying to tarnish the image of General Aung San.

Why? The answer may be that General Aung San is the father of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi who is supported by the majority of Burmese people. If General Aung San had been assassinated by Japanese troops, the junta would try to hide the whole history of Martyrs' Day, and not only tarnish the image of General Aung San.

As long as the British and other western countries strongly criticize the junta's human rights abuses and ignoring of the May 1990 election result, and Dr. Michael Aris is still British, the words that loudly come from the junta will be 'anti-colonialism.' As long as the junta, which has been accused of being neo-fascist by its own people, holds the power, and the Japanese government healthily supports so-called humanitarian aid to the junta, the anti-fascist revolution will no longer appear on the Leaves of Burmese history. However, it is the Burmese people who will need to prove that history is not in the hands of the junta.

Hostages, scapegoats for how long?
This appeared in The National newspaper in 1998.

“We didn't arrest any members of parliament and members of the NLD. We just invited them to discuss the situation of Burma. We are taking good care of them, they are just in our guesthouse,” the spokesman of the ruling military said. “Whether they are sent back to their homes or not depends on the activities of the NLD.”

It really looks like a dirty political kidnap and a big lie to the international community. Many NLD members and members of parliament are now in custody and military interrogation centers. Members of the NLD from Botahtaung, Pazundaung, Tamwe, Seikkan and Dawbon Townships have been kept in military interrogation center (14) since the first week of September. Those from Bahan, Kemmendine, Sanchaung, Latha, Lanmadaw and Kamaryut townships have been kept in military interrogation center (7). Many NLD youth wing members who are considered hard-core are being kept in Insein prison.

Some members of parliament have now been put in Insein special jail and some are in military interrogation center (6). Just a handful of members of parliament who have already resigned from their posts are in the junta's under section 5(j) of the Emergency Provision Act. Some have already been sentenced to seven years imprisonment. Some are in the custody of their respective township police. All MPs have had to choose one of two ways; either to go to prison or to sign testimonies and documents which state that they do not support the NLD's activities and the Committee Representing people's parliament. It may be that those under detention will at the very least be pressured by unlawful methods and be forced to resign from their representative positions and from the NLD.

At the same time many student activists are in police custody at "Aung-tha-pyay," the special police branch's headquarters, as well as in military intelligence interrogation center (12). There may be no more places in the custody and interrogation centers at the moment of put those who have committed murders, drug-deals, rapes and all types of crime.

It is now clear that custody and interrogation centers in Burma are not for criminals but for political activists. Meanwhile there are many political prisoners who have already completed their unfair punishment, but have not yet been released.

A woman, whose husband is a Member of Parliament and still in Prison despite having completed his years of sentence, said, "I don't think that my husband will be released from prison under this situation. When I asked the authorities why my husband was not released, they told me that it depends on the activities of NLD. I understand that my husband and others who have finished their unfair punishments are being used as 'political hostages' by the junta. All people who hunger for democracy are being used as scapegoats."

In reality, there are many political prisoners who had already completed what should have been their prison terms before Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's trip to outside Rangoon, the NLD's demand to convene the people's parliament and the student's hit and run demonstration.

All the people of Burma under the junta have to live with the term 'force'. Forced labor, forced relocations, forced examinations, forced rallies, and arbitrary sentences are now familiar not only to the people of Burma but to the international community.

When asked by a reporter which prison he had had to live in, Ye Tay Za, a prominent student activist and former political prisoner replied, "Which prison do you mean? There are only two prisons in Burma- the prison with walls and the prison without wall."

His answer clearly states the situation of Burma. All activists have to go to the prison with walls and the rest have to live in the prison without walls.

During the junta's forced rallies, the junta's hired men accuse Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD of destroying the country's future, but they never acknowledge that the NLD was the winning party in the May 1990 election. Although the NLD constantly demands a genuine dialogue, not power transfer, the junta refuses not only dialogue but also every reasonable demand.

The problem is that the junta has no intention of accepting the NLD as a winning party in the May 1990 election. The junta ignores the fact that as long as they don't recognize the result of the May 1990 election, the country's situation will get worse and worse. However, they still claim that they are the only ones who really love the country.

When the daughter of SPDC secretary (2) General Tin Oo died in a bomb explosion at her house on April 6, 1997, the state-run newspaper accused Daw Aung San Suu Kyi,

as a Peace Nobel Laureate, of not being compassionate because she had not sent a condolence letter to General Tin Oo. They forgot to explain why U Tin Maung Win, U Hla Than, U Saw Win, (all are members of parliament from the NLD), U Maung Ko) a member of Central Committee of the NLD) and Mr. Leo Nichols, honorary consul for Norway, Denmark, Finland, and Switzerland, died in custody. The junta never sent condolence letters to their families. Worse, their families did not have the right to see their loved ones' funerals.

There are many political prisoners who have died in prison because of poor medical treatment and harassment. The junta never thinks to sympathize with those whose relatives died in prison and interrogation centers and to send condolence letters to them. Although there were many innocent students shot dead during the 1988 popular uprising, far from sympathizing, the junta never allows anybody to hold the memory of them. Anyone who tried to hold the memory was accused of trying to destroy the country's stability and was sent to prison, charged under section 5(j) of the Emergency Provision Act.

The junta accuses the Lady of trying to persuade western countries to impose economic sanctions on Burma. However, it still neglects to explain to its own people why the Golden Land has turned into the lowest developing country and the World Bank has declared that it will not grant loans to or have financial dealings with Burma any more. Although the junta has a huge budget for the extension of the military, the secret police, interrogation centers and prisons, there is a small budget for social welfare, medical care and education. But they still cry that they are paving a path to democracy. A tourist who recently came from Burma said that he met with many ordinary people and asked many questions about what he wanted to know. When he asked one civil servant about the junta, he was told, "We don't like the junta completely. At the same time, we don't want to see an uprising like 1988. The junta and the people have different reasons for not wanting another uprising. The junta fear to face an uprising because of losing their power. We fear because of losing innocent people. The junta is now taking advantage of our fear. But I believe there is a limit to how the people can go on without taking action. Much of our people's patience has now nearly run out."

When he asked another civil servant why he attended a mass rally to denounce Daw Aung San Suu kyi and the NLD, he was told, "Before the mass rally, we all had to sign an agreement that we would attend whatever it was. We also had to sign that if we were absent, we would be fired from our jobs. We felt so sad hearing the denouncing of our lady and the NLD. We voted for the NLD because we believe in the lady. During that pretend mass rally, we felt ourselves to be scapegoats and robots. However, when the high-ranking officers at the rally called out slogans denouncing the NLD, we did not shout these slogans as we were expected to do. I do hope we all will be united in not attending such a forced mass rally."

According to sources, all businessmen have to donate to the junta. They are threatened that if they refuse to donate, their work permits and licenses will be withdrawn. The term 'forced donation' has also become familiar to all Burmese businessmen.

The source said, “Many ordinary people are watching what the 10 member committee [the Committee Representing the People's Parliament] will do and are waiting for their guidance. At the same time, they wonder why the committee delays doing what it should do.” It's clear that the junta is now taking all kinds of advantage of the situation to the people of Burma.

For the civil servants and workers, the junta is using job dismissal as a weapon. For the students, bans from continuing their studies and closure of the schools at any time have become the conventional armaments of the junta. For the political prisoners, their prison terms no longer depend on their original sentences, but on the activities of the NLD. For the NLD members and members of parliament who are in the so-called guest house, the way back to their homes seems to depend on the 10 member committee representing the elected members of parliament, according to the junta.

Strongly holding onto power, constantly telling lies, and being unwilling to accept the results of the May 1990 election, the junta has been oppressing its own people as hostages, scapegoats and robots for over ten years. However, whether they end up in a life of being scapegoats and robots depends not only on the NLD, but also on the people of Burma who voted for the NLD in the May 1990 election.

Red tape as psychological tactic

There is a saying amongst Buddhists in Burma- “The three happiest days in a man's whole life are day he returns home from his temporary ordination as a monk, the day he is released from prison, and his wedding day.”

Because of this everyone who has to live in prison always talks about the day when they will be released from prison because they all want to know whether or not the saying is true.

But the saying may be different from reality for political prisoners. Some political prisoners think that without any changes in politics, being released from prison is nonsense and the unhappiest thing. Some think that being released from prison without any political changes may not be a happy event but is necessary to continue the struggle. But there is the same feeling that all want to know how they will feel when they are released from prison, no matter whether there are political changes or not.

I had that feeling myself on November 22, 1996 when I was released from Insein Special jail. At that time every political prisoner was convinced that I would never be released, because on the evening of November 20, 1996, a warden called U Aung

Khiang officially informed me that I would be released on November 21, 1996. We all were surprised and asked him whether it was a joke or not. Before no political prisoner had been informed about when he would be released. The warden confirmed it and said that the information came from the prison director's office.

I still remember that night we all were singing in turn many songs secretly composed in prison about "meeting soon outside the wall with victory." After the singing, my friends advised me what I should do when I was released and not to forget them, left in prison.

I have to confess that I could not sleep the whole night and I did not know whether I felt happy or not. The next morning a warder opened my cell and advised me to take a shower in order to prepare for my release. I was surprised because it was not normal for us take a shower in the morning. After the shower, the warder allowed me to greet my comrades who lived in other cells.

When I told everyone that we would meet each other with victory, I noticed we all were ready to cry. We had all lived together in the small cells for nearly six years. Even couples do not live like we did. We lived together for 23 and half hours a day in a small and dirty cell. One may imagine how many hours we had to be together over six years. As a result, our familiarity with and trust in each other were very deep.

After these greetings, our cellblocks were silent. I could understand that all were lost in their thoughts, happy about my great moment, but wondering about their own futures, and whether they would be released. Normally anyone who was to be released was celled to the jail office before 10 a.m., but by 1 p.m. no warder had celled me. I was still waiting outside the cells. My friends advised me to ask a warder why my release was delayed. Finally, I asked a warden but he answered that he knew nothing.

Then a great noise erupted from all the cells—"This is not a joke but a psychological attack. Give an explanation!" At nearly 4 p.m. the vice chief warden came to see us and explained that it was their fault. In reality it was not my release date. After apologizing, he ordered his warders to send me into my cell. That night our cellblock was obviously more silent than before. In my mind I concluded that I would not be released, but rather sentenced to another prison term. I thought the authorities had discovered my leading role in the 'Prison University.'

In my cell, I noticed my cellmates were looking up at the very dirty ceiling without saying any words. I could not sleep or say words to them also. At midnight, Ko Maung, the eldest in my cell, said without looking at me, "Don't think about anything. Take a rest and try to relax. One day we will all be released, not only from here but also from any kinds of dictatorship."

I didn't know how the night turned into day. According to the prison rules we all have to sit in the prison sitting position twice every day, in the early morning (5.30. a.m. to 6.30. a.m.) and in the evening (5.30. p.m. to 6. 30. p.m.).¹ After sitting in the jail position that morning, one warder suddenly opened my cell and told me to pick my materials up, and asked me whether I had any non-prison clothes. He also told me to

go out of the cell. We were all surprised and asked him “what for?” He said that he knew nothing but he thought that I was going to be released.

As soon as we heard his words, we looked at each other and Ko Maung suddenly shouted to him, “We are not foolish. Tell your officers they do not need to wage psychological attacks on us.”

The warder replied, “Please understand me. I am only a low ranking warder. I don't know anything.”

Then he called a high ranking warden who said that he knew nothing but this time he believed I would be released or my prison term would be extended. He continued, “You should say goodbye to your friends because whatever happens you will not be sent back here again.” The policy of the prison authorities was that when a prisoner was given an extension to his sentence he would be transferred to another prison.

I gave aloud goodbye to my friends and they replied to me loudly also by shouting “Good luck Moe Aye, and down with the dictator!” Ko Lay, the youngest of my cellmates, softly said, “Wherever you are, please try to inform us.” Ko Win, another of my cellmates, also said, “If your prison term is extended, take care of yourself-especially your health. If you are released, keep holding our resolution and fighting for our movement.”

Then, I followed the warder towards the office of Insein special jail. When I arrived there, two warders and one warden searched my body thoroughly. After being searched numerous times, I had to follow the warden towards the main gate of Insein special jail. While walking there, I could not guess my future and know whether I would be released or not. I didn't try to ask the warden about it.

When I entered into the gate bowing my head (according to the prison rules, every prisoner has to do so), my heart was beating at a record pace. I realized that this was where I would find out whether I would meet my mother or a new military tribunal. The warden ordered me to sit in the jail position and told some warders to search me again. After the search, U San Ya, the chief warden of the Special Jail, said, “You are going to be released.

After leaving here, I'd like to suggest you concentrate on your future like. I don't really want to meet you here again.”

He ordered some warders to lead me to Insein Central jail. I noticed that I could feel nothing about his words. I told myself not to expect it to be true, because I had been subjected to psychological tricks in the past.

Then I followed two warders out of Insein Special jail, which was totally contained inside a large compound along with Insein Central jail. The main administration for both jails was located in the Central jail. Prisoners must attend the main administration area before they can be released. The warders and I had to walk for 10 minutes out of the gate of the Special jail and along the road to the gate of the Central jail.

Although I did not know whether I was being released or not, it was the first time for six years that I could walk outside the ugly red wall of the Special jail. While walking towards the central prison, I could see many people waiting outside the central prison for their turn to visit their loved ones. They seemed to be worried about them. I noticed they were so busy and hurried that they did not notice me with a jail uniform walking outside the wall. But a few people noticed me and undoubtedly were surprised to see me, because the only prisoners they were used to seeing outside the under the sunshine and rainfall very hard. In comparison, my skin was overly white as a result of living for six years in a small, dirty cell where there was no fresh air and no sunshine. One thing about me that they would have been familiar with, though, was my too thin body.

I wanted to say something to anyone because it had been so long since I had a chance to see and talk with outsiders, and I was bored with seeing and talking only with my cellmates. However my wish was not fulfilled. I had trouble with my vision, because for six years I had not looked at anything further away than my cell walls. Now I was surrounded by open sky and space, and my eyes could not adjust and began to stream with tears. I also noticed that my skin became very itchy, which I think was reaction to being exposed to sunlight after so long without it.

Then, I arrived at the Insein central jail gate. What a funny situation-I was told that I was nearly going to be released, but I was now about to enter Insein Central prison. The prison gate area consists of two separate gates with offices between them. As usual, I had to enter bowing my head and take my slippers off. As soon as I arrived, my body was searched by many warders. One high officer ordered to me to take off my shirt and asked some questions about my biography. I still remember my position at that time. One of my hands held my shirt and the other had to hold my slippers, but my hands also had to clutch each other in accordance with the prison rules.

Then I had to follow a warder to the registration office inside the central prison. When I arrived there I saw nearly 50 prisoners with naked upper bodies like me squatting in front of the office. First, I had to enter the office and the warder who lead me reported to a high prison officer that I was a 5(j). This referred to section 5(j) of the Emergency Provision Act, which most of the political prisoner were charged under. I was really disappointed because not only the junta but also the prison authorities were reluctant to use the words 'political prisoner.' We were called '5(j)' in prison.

Before the high officer asked me anything, one warder in the office told me how to answer politely and humbly to his officer. Then the high officer asked me my prisoner number and about my body markings, to check my identity. He continued by asking when I was arrested and how many years I had been sentenced to, and which tribunal had heard my trial. And he asked me where my parents lived and where I would go after being released. After asking many questions, he said that I should not be involved in politics, that it was not my business. Then he ordered his warders to send all prisoners including me to the office of the chief warden. I asked him if I could wear my shirt because of my bad health. He answered slowly, "Keep in your mind-you are still in prison."

Although I wanted to complain, I successfully calmed myself down and followed the warder. All the prisoners went back in between the prison gates, where the chief

warden had his office. Before we could enter the office, we all had to sit in the prison position inside the gates and some were beaten because they could not answer swiftly enough. I still remember the corporal's angry words to all-“Everyone has to be beaten in order to make them afraid to come back here.”

Then he called each name and beat everyone's back with the baton. Luckily before my turn a warden ordered him to send us into the office quickly because the chief warden would go out soon.

After being driven into the office like cows, we had to sit on the concrete floor in the jail position. I noticed the office was just an area in which to give prisoners a final check, rather than the actual office of the chief warden. The hall was a little wide and very dirty. There was no furniture except for one table and one chair located at the top of the hall. Ten minutes later, the chief warden along with one warden and three warders entered the hall. Then the chief warden had a seat and the warden called each name loudly. Everyone whose name was called had to stand and walk to the table, bowing his head. When he arrived there the warden asked some questions and the chief warden checked the registration book. After being questioned, the prisoner had to go back to his place and sit down again. All had been sentenced to less than one year's imprisonment. Some women were sentenced for prostitution activities, either for working as prostitutes or for owning brothels.

In Burmese criminal law, it is permitted to convict people on suspicion of committing a crime, and they can be sentenced to up to one year's imprisonment without trial. The people usually targeted are homeless people. When a crime is committed and the police are unable to locate the offender, homeless people in the area of the crime will be arrested so that the police can show that they have found a suspect. Of the 50 prisoners being released an offence. Two young guys had been sentenced on suspicion of using drugs.

Finally I was called and had to follow the procedure. Every one seemed to be surprised at my case and after the chief warden went out they asked me how I could have survived living there for six years. Their questions made me surprised also, because I thought they would already know about the conditions the political prisoners were kept in. I tried to explain to them that there were many political prisoner who were sentenced to from seven years to life imprisonment, and they had all been living here longer than international community must also be totally ignorant of the situation. (When I later arrived in Thailand I learned, in fact, that the international community knew a lot more about this than the people inside Burma, political prisoners and their families are intimidated and threatened not to say anything about the situation of political.)

After that we went out of the hall and were driven out of the gate. We changed out of our prison clothes into ordinary clothes, and squatted in front of the prison wall for a while. Then 11 prisoners including me were pushed into a prison van. At that time the sun was overhead, yet I still had not been released. I could not think about my friends in prison or my family.

Until then I didn't know what was really happening and didn't feel anything about my release. I knew only that I was treated like a beast. In the van I asked one guy where

the van was going. He replied that the van was going to the criminal record department of police headquarters. He explained that everyone who had committed any crime had to be sent there before being released. If the department concluded there was no need to release a prisoner, anyone could be sent back to prison. I felt really disappointed after listening to him and wondered why the junta behaved so. Why did the junta think its political prisoners were criminals?

In the first few minutes of the journey I was glad to be able to look out of the van to look at the many changes in Rangoon. But then I began to feel carsick, as I had not been inside a vehicle for six years. It felt like it was the first time I had ever been inside a vehicle, and it made me want to vomit. There was no food in my stomach, though, as I had not been given any meals that day.

When we arrived at police headquarters (the former BSPP headquarters) located in the crowded area of Rangoon, we were all driven out of the van and ordered to sit in a closed-off portion of the platform around the building. Many people were walking past our enclosure, and I hoped that I might see a friend there, but this was not so. While we were sitting there, many people who walked near us gave us brief glances but were not interested. I thought they might think we were all criminals, and might underestimate us as well.

Then five armed police lead us in big room on the third floor where only female police officers were sitting and working. When we arrived there six female officers were having lunch on their table and one female officer ordered us to sit in silence on the concrete floor. After finishing lunch, one to come her table. I didn't know what she asked them, I knew only I felt very hungry. I looked at the watch on the wall and knew the time was 2 p.m. I thought my friends in prison would talk and guess about me. At that time my patience was running out and I wanted to run out and go back to my dirty cell. While I was thinking this, two male police officers ordered me to follow them and we went out somewhere where many photos were taken of me. After having my photo taken, I could not bear my feeling any longer, and I asked them if I would be released or not. They replied, "We don't know. Our duty is to take your photo."

I explained them that I had not yet had breakfast and felt hungry. One officer said that they had no responsibility for 5(j). After that I was sent back to the first room but at that time there were no prisoners there. I didn't know if they had been released or not. I asked one female police officer if I might have the right to sit on a chair and have any snack. She also replied that she had no authority to allow this. I will never forget the feeling that I suffered at that time. Finally, I took a risk and I stood up and walked up and down in the room. When no officer complained about my action, I went to one female officer who I thought was kinder than the others and asked her if I could drink water.

She looked around and pointed to somewhere where I could drink water. Then, another female officer told me that they really understood my situation and in return I should understand their situation also. She continued that someone from the political department would call me soon and that department would make the final decision. Twenty minutes later, a policeman came into the room and told me to follow him. At last, I had arrived in a big room where someone would make the final decision. I saw three police officers sitting on the chairs in the room. One officer smiled at me and

asked me if I felt hungry. I replied nothing and stared at them for a while. Two or three minutes later, a policeman brought tea and many snacks and put them on the table. As soon as I saw them I could not stop my desire to eat, but I warned myself to remember my first experience at the military interrogation center six years ago.

One officer said, "I am really sorry for everything. I do hope you will understand our situation. Now, feel free to take tea and snack. In the next half hour, MIS 7 will ring us to say whether you will be released or not."

I was really angry and replied, "I don't understand your procedure. If they (MIS) don't want to release me, there is no need to bring me here. They don't need to wage a psychological attack against me. I'm not a criminal but I was treated worse. You look at your watch at what the time is now. Nearly 4 p.m. I have spent many hours and been treated as a beast."

Another officer interrupted by saying, "After checking your case within 20 minutes, you will be released. I understand your inconvenience, but I will ask some questions of you."

Then, I drank tea and ate snacks. At that time suddenly I remembered my friends in prison and wanted to run there in order to send them tea and some snacks. In prison we could never drink and eat such tea and snacks. When one officer asked me questioning me, he asked me if I needed some more. In reality I needed them, but I answered "no thanks".

It was nearly 5 p.m. when a policeman came into the room and gave a letter to one of the officers. After reading it he said, "You are really released but not from here. A police officer from Kyauktada Township, where you were arrested in 1990, will take you to the police station and you must sign some documents there. And then everything will be finished."

I didn't want to complain about anything but I said that if I were really to be released, I would like to ring my friend, who had already been released from prison, so that he could pick up me. I said, "As you might know my parents live far away from Rangoon and I have no relatives here. I also have no money. So I need to stay with my friend in Rangoon tonight."

He agreed and allowed me to call my friend. Luckily I could talk with him and he promised me that within 30 minutes he would arrive at police headquarters. After that I felt I might be released, but I could not feel it completely. I remember I wished my friend would come to see me. Twenty-five minutes later, one policeman reported to his officer that my friend had arrived downstairs and had requested to meet with me. The officer nodded to his policeman and said to me that they were going to go home and one policeman would stay with me. Before my friend arrived, they wished me good luck and went out.

It was only when my friend arrived that I could think about being released from prison. He had been arrested in December 1991 and was released in February 1996. We had lived together in the same cell for nearly three years. As soon as we met each other we could not say any words and we hugged each other with tears in our eyes.

Then he asked me what I wanted to eat and where I wanted to go that night. He also asked many questions about our friends in prison. I also explained to him the situation there and passed messages from friends in prison to him. It was strange that we never talked about each other's families. At that time one policeman came in and said that we had to go to the police station to sign some documents. I became convinced that I was being released because we had a chance to go to the police station by taxi and my friend was also allowed to go with me. After signing my release papers, the officer asked me where I would sleep that night and when I would go back to my hometown, and noted my answers.

It was 8 p.m. when my friend and I walked out of the police station. In my eyes, there were many changes in Rangoon, especially the latest model taxi that I'd never seen before. On the way to my friend's house I noticed there were many restaurants and vendors. When I arrived at his house, his whole family warmly welcomed me and asked me what I wanted to eat. They already understood about the situation in prison, so I had thought this might be their first question,

After meeting my friend's family I wanted to meet with my mother. And I could not sleep on the mattress with the mosquito net the whole night, missing my friends in prison and with my strong desire to see my mother. I do believe my friends in prison could not sleep that night thinking about me, wondering whether I was released or had an extended prison term. I have tried to tell them how political prisoners are released and how I felt the day I was released. The saying about the day of being released from prison was not true for me.

Endnotes

1/ In the prison sitting position the prisoner must sit cross-legged on the floor with his hands on his knees, back straight and head bowed.