

The following letter was published in the Editorial section of the August 12th 2008 New York Times, in response to the Times' article 'Exiles Try to Rekindle Hopes for Change in Myanmar, published on the 6th of August 2008 (provided below).

August 12, 2008

Letter

Justice for Myanmar

To the Editor:

“Exiles Try to Rekindle Hopes for Change in Myanmar” (news article, Aug. 6) doesn’t convey the views of most Burmese exile groups.

The leading groups are on record as calling for the United Nations Security Council to refer Myanmar to the International Criminal Court and end the impunity given Senior Gen. Than Shwe and his criminal cabal.

These groups include the International Burmese Monks Organization, 88 Generation Students, the Women’s League of Burma, the National Coalition for the Union of Burma and the legal arm of the exile movement, the Burma Lawyers’ Council, in partnership with the Global Justice Center.

A March 25, 1990, editorial in The Times said, “Behind closed doors, Myanmar’s military rulers are committing monstrous deeds.”

Eighteen years later, these monstrous deeds — rape, torture, detention, murder and terror — have become official state policy.

Those of us in 88 Generation Students, many of whom were tortured and imprisoned, urge the United States to first and foremost support the rule of law and criminal accountability.

The people of Burma have the same rights to justice as victims in Cambodia, Sudan, Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia. Htun Aung Gyaw

New York, Aug. 7, 2008

The writer is a spokesman for 88 Generation Students in exile. The group is made up of former student leaders who led an uprising against military rule in Myanmar in 1988.

Link to letter:

http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/12/opinion/112burma.html?_r=1&scp=4&sq=exiles%20try%20to%20rekindle%20hopes%20for%20change%20in%20myanmar&st=cse&oref=slogin

Exiles Try to Rekindle Hopes for Change in Myanmar

By SETH MYDANS

Published: August 6, 2008

BANGKOK — Win Min has spent 20 years trying to recover a moment of hope in Myanmar, when it seemed that the people had defeated their brutal military rulers and freedom lay ahead.



Associated Press

Twenty years ago this month, pro-democracy demonstrations erupted in Burma, now known as Myanmar. Protesters, like those at left in September 1988, filled the streets of Rangoon, now known as Yangon, and other parts of the country. But the popular uprising against the junta was soon crushed by the military, and 3,000 people were killed.

Friday is the anniversary of the beginning of a huge popular uprising in 1988 that was crushed by soldiers at the cost of 3,000 lives, leaving the country in the grip of a military junta and setting the course of Myanmar's history ever since — and likely well into the future.

“We had a big hope that we would succeed,” said Mr. Win Min, who was a student leader in Myanmar, which was then known as Burma. “It was the biggest struggle ever in Burmese history. Not just in one town but even in remote villages. The whole country was marching in the streets.”

On Thursday, Mr. Win Min will be among a small group of activist exiles who are scheduled to meet here with President Bush, who has given his backing to what has so far been an unsuccessful struggle for democracy in Myanmar. The military junta that seized power in 1988 has only tightened its grip since then, locking up opponents and hunkering down in the face of criticisms and sanctions from the West. The pro-democracy leader, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, has been under house arrest for 12 of the past 18 years.

The junta violently suppressed a peaceful uprising led by monks in September and restricted foreign aid to victims after a cyclone in May.

The generals have demonstrated that they will take whatever steps are needed to retain power, Mr. Win Min said, so it is hard to remain optimistic.

“Twenty years afterward, well, you know we won’t see that kind of demonstration happen again in the near future,” said Mr. Win Min, who is now a lecturer at Payap University in Chiang Mai, Thailand. “And if it happens, we know that as long as this government is in power they will crack down.”

Since the September crackdown on monks, Mr. Bush has tightened economic restrictions on Myanmar. But some dissidents say the restrictions, along with harsh criticism of the junta, have added to a wall of hostility between the nations that limits Washington’s influence.

This is the message that Aung Naing Oo, another former student leader, hopes to deliver to Mr. Bush.

In the few minutes he may have to speak with the president, Mr. Aung Naing Oo said, he will urge the United States to move beyond its “ethical policy” of supporting human rights and begin pragmatically to engage the ruling generals.

After the cyclone struck, for example, the United States had little leverage to persuade the junta to overcome its suspicions of interference and accept large shipments of aid from Navy vessels near the coast.

Shunned by the West, Myanmar has been able to turn to its big neighbor China, as well as to Russia and India, for economic and diplomatic support that undermines any policy of sanctions.

“Isolation has pushed the Burmese military toward authoritarian regimes instead of democracies,” said Mr. Aung Naing Oo, who is now a political analyst in Thailand. “So it’s time for the West to think about these issues in perspective and try to engage the military.”

While the West and the junta have been locked in mutual isolation, China has been moving in with trade and development projects that have increasingly become part of Myanmar’s economy.

“The most important development of the last 20 years is not so much suppression of the democratic movement but the opening up to China,” said Thant Myint-U, a historian who wrote “The River of Lost Footsteps: Histories of Burma.”

“I think the life of the ordinary Burmese people in 10 or 20 years from now will depend much more on how that relationship evolves than almost anything else,” he said.

Indeed, the junta may be quite comfortable in its isolation from the West, which began after a military coup in 1962 and continued after the current junta took power in 1988.

“We have a long history of isolation in Burma, and that has given the military a free hand to do anything it wants,” said Mr. Aung Naing Oo. “Isolation is what the Burmese military wants.”

Link to article: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/06/world/asia/06myanmar.html?ref=opinion>