

## **Crisis in Burma (Myanmar)**

**notes from September 24-27, 2007**

### **Background**

PEN Canada is watching with alarm the unrest unfolding in Burma (Myanmar) where demonstrations led by monks and pro-democracy activists are being violently suppressed by the military government.

Protests began on 19 August 2007 following a huge increase in the price of oil which sparked an economic crisis, and were initially led by small groups of pro-democracy activists. Monks joined the protests in early September, and increasing numbers of civilians have supported them in recent days. Arrests and violence are being reported, but details remain sketchy and the situation is rapidly unfolding. As foreign media are not allowed into the country and as the regime is blacking out the Internet, especially news sites, the monitoring by international observers is mostly done from outside the country. But the blogs, video and photographs of citizens and activists are telling the story from within.

### **Freedom of Expression Concerns**

PEN has long been concerned about freedom of expression in Myanmar. Since the 1988 crackdown on the National League for Democracy (NLD) in which thousands were killed and thousands more arrested, the numbers of detained writers known to PEN has remained largely unchanged. The State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), that seized power in a military coup on 18 September 1988, has remained apparently impervious to the considerable and sustained international pressure for its gross human rights violations.

International PEN is currently campaigning for the release of **nine** writers serving sentences ranging from seven to twenty-one years imprisonment in Myanmar. All are detained for their peaceful opposition activities. They include Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the NLD and writer, who has spent the large part of the past eighteen years in detention.

### **The situation for PEN Canada's three honorary members:**

There are concerns for the safety of Nobel Peace Prize laureate **Aung Sun Suu Kyi** as the protests escalate. On September 22<sup>nd</sup> in Rangoon, 2000 Buddhist monks walked to the house where she has been under detention for twelve years. She came out to greet them and they chanted, "Long life and health for Aung Sun Suu Kyi. May she have freedom soon." On September 25<sup>th</sup>, there were unconfirmed reports that Aung San Suu Kyi had been removed from her home and taken to the worst prison in the country. These reports have been denied.

Two other imprisoned Burmese writers are also honorary members of PEN Canada: the student activist **Ko Aung Tun**, sentenced for 13 years in 1998 for writing a book about the student movement in Myanmar and currently detained at Insein Prison; and the journalist, writer and democracy activist **Win Tin, now 77**, serving consecutive sentences of twenty years for, among other things, “guiding and influencing Aung San Suu Kyi.”

**PEN Canada’s general freedom of expression concerns:**

- More than 100 demonstrators, including prominent pro-democracy activists, have already been arrested for joining the protests that started in August. There have been a number of people killed.
- The junta has complete control of media and information distribution facilities, and imposes prior censorship on all reporting. There have been rolling blackouts of the Internet, including sites like CNN, YouTube and Mizzima.
- Foreign journalists are not allowed into Burma at all.
- In August, journalists’ phone lines were cut to prevent reporting of the fuel protests in August and a ten-day embargo on news of the protests was imposed.
- Major Tint Swe, director of Press Scrutiny and Registration Division, has summoned journalists and editors in Rangoon and warned them against joining the protests.

**What you can do:**

**Watch** this website for the RAN (Rapid Action Network) letter to be posted this weekend,. Follow the instructions about sending it to Canadian authorities.

**For updated freedom of expression information on Burma:**

IFEX: [www.ifex.org](http://www.ifex.org).

Mizzima News: [www.mizzima.com](http://www.mizzima.com)

Canadian Friends of Burma: [www.cfob.org](http://www.cfob.org)

**A note about the name:** Burma was the name of the country historically and when it was part of the Indian Empire and Commonwealth. In 1989 the current regime changed the name of the country to the Union of Myanmar, and the name of the capital Rangoon to Yangon. The name change was accepted by the UN and some countries, including Japan, China and France, but not by others, including Canada, the UK and the U.S.A. Both Burma and Myanmar are used by news organizations; using “Burma” signifies support of the Burmese people, but the regime is then called Myanmar.