

OPINION

The unquenchable fire in Burmese hearts

I've seen tremendous courage in the face of a freedom-hating regime.

By Karen Zusman

from the December 1, 2008 edition

[Print this](#) | [Letter to the Editor](#) | [Republish](#) | [Email and share](#) | [E-mail newsletters](#) | [RSS](#)

NEW YORK - Eleven hundred years and counting. That's the cumulative time in prison sentences given last month to a handful of people expressing political dissent in Burma(Myanmar).

The news gives me particular pain.

In August 2007, the Burmese regime eliminated fuel subsidies, causing the price to rise by 500 percent. Food costs spiked enormously overnight. A few weeks later, Buddhist monks took to the streets in nonviolent protest and many of them were shot or beaten by the junta. Understanding the significance of these events, I felt compelled to visit so I could bear witness.

What struck me as much as the horror of their stories was the fact that the Burmese people were willing to tell them. This was in stark contrast to my previous trip in 2004, when no one dared to speak about anything remotely political. Now, emboldened by the world's gaze, there was the hope that by sharing their stories they might keep that window of attention cracked open a little longer.

Much of what I learned, I heard from taxi drivers, flower vendors, waiters, students, housekeepers. Our conversations posed a difficult riddle: Each time I let anyone confide in me, I potentially endangered them. As one of the few white faces to arrive in Rangoon, just postprotests, there was strong reason to believe I was being watched.

Yet despite my caution, it seems I was sought out everywhere I went – people felt the need to express themselves at last. Behind closed doors with the shades pulled down and the music turned up, I sat with a group of students cross-legged on the floor. I pressed them before we began, "Are you sure you want to speak?"

Aung Soe (not his real name), a slender man in his mid-20s, jumped at the question. He shook his fist in the air.

"If we don't talk to you maybe we are cowards. I was downtown where the monks were shot just outside our Sule Pagoda. I was marching, too. In some ways it was the best day of my life. They can't take that away from me. From now on I speak the fire in my heart!"

By the time I returned home in November 2007, Burma had faded fast from the news.

Then, tragically, cyclone Nargis hit this past May and again the troubled nation held the world's attention. Yet despite repeat visits by UN special envoy Ibrahim Gambiri, negotiations with the junta's generals have been a dismal failure.

Just a month ago at the UN, 147 states voted to move forward on the creation of an Arms Trade Treaty (ATT). Only the US and Zimbabwe voted against it. The US must not only reverse its vote but also work to ensure that the ATT includes language curbing arms sales to countries that commit egregious human rights violations against their own people. This would be a giant step forward in honoring Mr. Obama's commitment and would reassert America's role as a leader in the promotion of human rights.

By taking these steps, we could begin to usher in change for the people that, in the words of Mr. Green, "languish in the shadows as the rest of the world concentrates its energies elsewhere."

And we could satisfy the plea of my own Burmese friends, one of whom implored: "Please, Sister, do not let the world forget us." As Aung San Suu Kyi, Burma's detained pro-democracy leader and Nobel Peace Laureate, once said: "Please use your freedom to promote ours."

• *Karen Zusman is a New York-based writer who travels to Burma as a student of Theravadan Buddhism.*

<http://www.csmonitor.com/2008/1201/p09s01-coop.html>