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Guest Post: Notes from Burma - Story vs. Security

By: karenzusman, Posted: Oct 12 09

Regions: Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand

Issues: Freedom of opinion & expression, Internally displaced persons, Refugees

Tags: audio, burma, consent, dignity, documentary, ethics, filmmaking, migration, safety, security, slavery

TAKE ACTION: [Sign this petition](#) and call on the Malaysian government to uphold the rights of Burmese refugees in Malaysia.

In October of 2007 I found myself walking cautiously through customs in Rangoon. I'd come to bear witness to the immediate aftermath of the [monk-led protests](#) -- and the brutal crackdown that ensued. Few foreigners -- and no journalists -- were obtaining visas, so I was pretty certain I'd be watched.

And that posed a prickly riddle: If I did anything that branded me a journalist, including photography, those that I was seen conversing with might be picked up for questioning -- or worse.

My first trip to Burma was in 2004; at that time if one asked a question that was even remotely political, peoples' eyes turned black and they quickly looked away.

But the recent protests had changed things, and, for the first time since the [demonstrations of 1988](#) when thousands of protesters had been killed, people were eager to break the silence.

Now that the world's eyes were watching, speaking out seemed a way to keep that window of attention cracked open a little longer. Support from the international community seemed their only hope and they appeared willing to bear the risks.

One day I was on a bus with a Burmese friend, a former monk, who had just learned that a small protest was breaking out in Bago. Bago was on the way to our destination, and soon a convoy of about 30 military trucks snaked by our bus. Two child soldiers sat on top of one, maybe 10-12 years old, manning rifles as big as themselves. They were so close I could have touched their uniforms. My companion grabbed my camera and shoved it in my hands: "Take it, take the picture of the soldier boys!" he whispered frantically.

As I took the camera from him I looked up and caught the eyes of the bus driver, who was watching us in the rearview mirror. If any soldiers saw me snap that photo, it would not have been my head but that of the bus driver. So I didn't take it and my friend, who so badly wanted the outside world to see what was happening inside his country, did not hesitate to share his disappointment.

Soon after that event, one of my student friends received an anonymous call advising her to "take good care of your journalist friend." My paranoia reached a point where I questioned whether my presence was doing more harm than good, especially since I had limited ways of verifying anything I saw or heard. I was afraid of taking notes out of the country, the internet was shut down, photos were out of the question, and I certainly could not record audio. If I were to be stopped at the airport with any of these things, it wouldn't be my safety in question but the safety of all these friends.

I left Rangoon for Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; my intention was to continue to interview recent refugees about life in Burma without the threat of constant surveillance.

What I learned in Malaysia disturbed me. It prompted my return earlier this year to make a radio documentary about what life is like for Burmese refugees in Malaysia who daily face the risk of arrest, detention and deportation. Many of them fled from aggravated encounters with the junta in Burma and would be killed if they were to return.

The decision to use audio instead of video diminished my audience exponentially, but I had no choice. Because so many refugees fear for the families they left behind in Burma, their identities must be protected. But soon there was another reason, which had more to do with the Malaysian government than with the junta in Burma. Many of the refugees I was working with had been sold to traffickers by Malaysian immigration officials. This horrible discovery led to my making an hour-long audio documentary entitled [Please Don't Say My Name](#); here's the trailer for that work:

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(some photos courtesy of suaram.net)

When I returned to the States this spring I successfully pitched the trafficking story to a producer at [PBS/World Focus News](http://PBS/WorldFocusNews). It was a great opportunity to widen my audience beyond radio and web and get it onto TV. But the news team needed imagery. I called my contacts in Malaysia. One of the refugees was willing to show her face to the camera, and her testimony had been one of the most damning. I had her photographed and the images were sent to us. Still I was worried. I called the translator to confirm she knew the risks. "Yes," came the answer.

With her approval, the decision was mine. Did I comprehend the dangers more than she? Could I, or World Focus, do anything to help her should something happen as a result of the story?

Shortly after the story broadcast, [five Malaysian immigration officials were arrested](#) and accused of trafficking refugees. I can't say it's because of our story (*the US State Department recently listed [Malaysia as one of the world's worst offenders](#) in their [2009 Report on Human Trafficking](#)*) but I believe the cumulative coverage created enough pressure that the Malaysian government had to respond with appropriate measures (though I'm not confident the crackdown will be sustained if coverage of the stories isn't).

In addition to the arrests of the immigration officials, deportation, which is the point at which the refugees have been sold, has also decreased. But the arrests of refugees have not. As a result the detention camps are dangerously overcrowded and there are [numerous reports](#) of inhumane conditions and mistreatment inside the camps.

To counter these reports, the Malaysian government recently invited journalists and some human rights activists to view a few camps. It didn't seem to me that what they were allowed to see would be an honest representation, so I interviewed a recently released detainee and again, [World Focus published the story](#) and included imagery.

It was a strong account but the refugee was upset that his image – which I cropped myself so as to hide his identity but still show some emotion in his face – exposed too much. We pulled the story immediately and re-cropped the photo, but I will never forget the feeling that I had erred on the wrong side of caution – it's not a good one and I don't recommend it.

After the audio documentary had already been produced I began receiving requests for an accompanying slideshow. In a few instances the host of the event didn't feel that they could showcase the work without imagery. So I phoned my refugee friends in Malaysia and asked if they would be comfortable having their faces revealed to an audience in New York that I would be monitoring.

Several months had passed since I'd recorded their stories and they'd been following the news coverage I'd produced closely. They also had begun to realize how powerful their own stories had become and wanted to continue to help me raise awareness for these unthinkable actions inflicted upon them and their communities by the Malaysian government, and, ultimately, about the crisis inside of Burma as well.

So I spent the next few days frantically assembling a slideshow that was synced up with the hour-long audio. What the images brought was immeasurable. Now, we had what felt like a movie.

Here's a short introduction for [Please Don't Say My Name](#), which takes place in Burma:

The reactions from the first audiences underscored how much more powerful this addition had been. In fact, had I not made the imagery component many of the people there probably would not have even attended the event. Who wants to sit through one hour of audio only? It's a hard sell. But the night before I showed the movie, I was up wondering if I had gone too far for the sake of the story. Here's a short excerpt from the documentary featuring one refugee who had been sold into 3 years of slavery on a fishing boat.

The possibility for dissemination has opened up greatly with the imagery component and the refugees and I agreed that I would only show it to US-based audiences, where my own presence could be guaranteed to monitor the crowd and make sure no one takes pictures of the screen. Sadly, though, the sections of the movie that show the faces need to be cropped significantly, or blurred out for any posting on the web. The versions you see here are cropped for this post for those refugees whose identities continue to need protection. In this next excerpt, Jack – a refugee whom I first met in Malaysia in 2007 – discovers that his girlfriend, brother, and best friend were all arrested by the Malaysian immigration:

As I work on these stories I've encountered situations where other journalists want to interview my contacts for additional stories. Recently a producer forwarded me an email from one, which requested my subject's contact info. I responded that I could not give that out but would help with the story any way I could, and as a result it looks as if we might collaborate in the future. But it raised a good question. We should never assume that one writer's subject would be comfortable speaking to another writer. It could potentially make the subject feel more vulnerable, and possibly undermine the trust between the subject and the original journalist. I think that's something to bear in mind as we go forth in pursuit of a story (no matter how wholesome our intentions).

When I think back to all these instances I realize how the only formula for answering the question of story vs. security seems to be a careful consideration of possible outcome – and motivation. I know that an image of a child soldier in Burma just post-2007 protests, for example, would have brought me, a budding journalist, the attention I craved. But I'm convinced I made the right decision and that I will have more opportunity to make a difference with my reporting down the line when no innocent life will be on the line because of it.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

*To learn more about Karen's work, go to [Please Don't Say My Name](#) and read [this opinion piece](#) she published in *The Christian Science Monitor* in 2008.

*To learn more about the **situation in Burma**, see these [videos and blog posts on the Hub](#).

*For more on the **ethics of making documentary media**, [read this post by WITNESS' Grace Lile](#).

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COMMENTS

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My son, Garrett Combs, sent
By Judy Oxley on Oct 30 09

My son, Garrett Combs, sent me the link to your website. He said you are a friend of a woman who is involved with FM world charities. He is a photographer and has just gotten involved with them as well. He is part of the team that is planning on going to Afganistan.

God Bless you for what you are doing. I believe if many would do there part we could change the course of this fatal atrocity that is happening to human life. We are in the process of moving to Phuket, Thailand to fight against human trafficking. We should be there by mid March 2010. Our hearts are to help those who have been trafficked. We were recently with our friend who is from the Karen people group and he told us that there is a woman who has come to the church and had been shipped in on a container from Burma. She explained that many died in the process. Our friend now said they estimate about 250,000 Burmese in Phuket alone.who have been trafficked in to Thailand.

I would like to stay in touch with you. Please keep me posted and let us know if there is anything we can do to help from our end. We are in San Diego, Ca until mid-Jan. then off to WA state and in mid-March we will be off to Thailand.

blessings,
Judy Oxley

[reply](#)

ONLINE PETITION TO HELP THE REFUGEES!

By karenzusman on Oct 29 09

hi, if you were moved by this story please take a moment to add your name to a petition to the Malaysian Government that they take steps to protect the rights of refugees in their country. the signatures will be delivered to their Prime Minister on World Refugee Day, 20 June 2010.

<http://www.petitiononline.com/1951Conv/>

we thank you!

[reply](#)

remember our common bonds

By Alan Clements on Oct 28 09

Karen's investigative work on behalf of the oppressed peoples of Burma is a courageous expression of the very heart of the universal declaration of human rights, that of conscience and compassion; the foundation of freedom itself.

May these precious-tragic video clips spread worldwide and serve to inspire us to remember our common bonds as equal members of the human family, and moreover, to take action to help these victims of tyranny, as we would our own family.

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