

Learning with the Irrawaddy 16

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Min Ko Naing

Modest conqueror

For many people, the high-profile background of Min Ko Naing (the pseudonym for Paw Oo Tun) which translates as “The Conqueror of Kings,” puts him second only to detained Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi as one of the most respected leaders of Burma’s democracy movement. But he is uncomfortable whenever someone gives him a lot of attention and respect.

The 44-year-old former student leader who led the democracy uprising in 1988 is not in good health after 15 years in prison. He was arrested again in September, along with four comrades. Despite his years in prison, he has never shown antagonism toward his captors. Instead, he has a great sense of humor.

And he is not just a political animal. He loves to play the guitar and piano, he writes poetry and paints like his father, a respected artist.

As a close colleague, I greatly admire him and try to help him promote people’s peaceful participation in politics and to address the problems facing Burma.

Min Ko Naing says he wants to devote more of his time to writing and painting rather than political activism, but his status puts him in a special category.

-Jimmy

Thet Win Aung

Another fallen hero

Thet Win Aung, who died in Mandalay Prison on October 16, was a close colleague of mine. We attended the same class and spent our teenage years playing guitar and soccer together. We shared the same hideouts when we were involved in the 1988 pro-democracy uprising, or when we were on the run to avoid arrest by military intelligence. Now he has left us. The parting was untimely.

Since the early days of the 1988 uprising, Thet Win Aung played an instrumental role in the founding of our national high school student union. I remember how we produced student union statements in the attic of his house by etching characters into inked wax paper and rolling fluorescent-light tubes over the impressions in a crude homemade duplicating process. Thet Win Aung’s patience and ingenuity in working

out these tasks and details were remarkable. He was also known among our fellow student activists as a great organizer.

In August 1997, Thet Win Aung and I, along with three other student activists, fled to Thailand. After almost a year in exile, Thet Win Aung felt a greater obligation to return to Burma to continue underground activities. He ignored pleas to stay in exile, and went back to Burma. But luck was not on his side. Military intelligence officers captured him in October 1998.

Thet Win Aung was sentenced to 52 years in prison, a draconian sentence that was later extended to 59 years and then to 60 years. He was severely tortured during interrogation. Moreover, he was sent to malaria-ridden prisons in the northwestern part of Burma, far from his family. Malaria paralyzed him from the waist down, confining him to a wheelchair. One of my mutual friends, who was confined with him in Mandalay Prison until late 2005, told me that prison authorities sold for their own profit medications provided by the International Committee of the Red Cross, substituting Chinese-made knockoffs for political prisoners. When political prisoners, including Thet Win Aung, refused to take these medications, they were punished by a variety of means, including solitary confinement.

I could not find any words to console Thet Win Aung's father when I spoke to him after learning of the death of my dear friend. At the depth of his sorrow, I felt I was with him sharing what the writer Barrington Moore Jr has called "the unity of misery."

-Min Zin

General Surayud Chulanont

A consummate professional

I still have in mind the excellent impression I got of Gen Surayud when I first met him in August 2003 in the garden of the Thai ambassador's residence in Stockholm during an official visit he made to the Swedish capital as supreme commander of the Thai armed forces. During a few hours of lively conversation, I discovered in him a certain number of inherent qualities: righteousness, integrity, honesty, modesty, moderation, a sense of compassion and a strong dose of self-discipline.

I said to myself at the time that, with such a character, Surayud would never be an inactive, retired general. My prediction came true. When I met him again, in Bangkok in June this year, he had already been appointed a privy counsellor.

The announcement of his nomination as prime minister did not surprise me. With conflict still present in the heart of Thai society because of the Thaksin regime, and the "undercurrents" provoked by his remnants—apart from the security problems in the three southern provinces—Thailand needed to put the right man in the right job. Surayud is certainly the man most able to cope with such issues and pave the way to national reconciliation and the emergence of the political reform Thailand so badly needs.

Regarding Burma, it is our earnest hope that with Surayud, who sympathizes with the ethnic minorities from Burma and who is well aware of the political situation in that country, kindness and humanitarian assistance to the Burmese displaced persons along the border will be more focused.

-Poksak Nilubol

Bo Kyi and Tate Naing

Voices for the silenced

Bo Kyi and Tate Naing founded the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma) after serving several years in prison in Burma and later fleeing to Thailand. The AAPP, which has the support of Amnesty International, provides valuable documentation about political imprisonment in Burma, and also acts as a powerful advocacy group on behalf of those whose voices have been silenced. Because its members and founders are former political prisoners themselves, AAPP's understanding of all aspects of political imprisonment is extensive. It includes the process of arrest, interrogation—often under torture—the trial process and conditions of imprisonment. Like all human rights defenders working inside or outside Burma, they face tremendous risks, yet they have bravely continued to do what they can to help the 1,100 political prisoners there.

-Donna Guest

Zipporah Sein

Campaigning for peace

Zipporah Sein is an ordinary woman, and yet the hopes of tens of thousands of Karen women rely on her ability to persuade international politicians, government leaders, humanitarians and journalists to advocate on their behalf. Her efforts for her people and her much loved Karen Women's Organization have not gone unnoticed.

Last year she was nominated by an international women's organization for the Nobel Peace Prize. She is the first woman elected to the Karen National Union central executive and is the executive secretary of the KWO and its 30,000 members, a position she has held since 1998.

She is held in high regard by men and women alike as a compassionate visionary, and a committed fighter for women's rights. She has set up schools, safe houses and documented the horror of war and rape. She admits to being married to the Karen struggle; her fiancé was killed on the frontline.

Born in 1955, she describes her teacher-mother and activist-father as her heroes: "Mother inspired me. She told us we had to be responsible to the needs of our people." Forced by Burmese soldiers from her village, Zipporah Sein has never known true peace. "I was born into the conflict. [But] I only want peace and security," she says. "It's my dream."

-Phil Thornton

Free Burma Rangers

Aid with a Bible

Founded during Burmese army offensives in 1997, which displaced more than 100,000 people, the Free Burma Rangers are a multi-ethnic, Christian-based voluntary organization providing aid and a “love-thy-neighbor” philosophy to refugees in Burma’s conflict regions.

Their medical and food packages with a Bible don’t suit everyone, but most people recognize the “missions” by the FBR as both welcome and essential.

FBR teams have undertaken 300 humanitarian expeditions into war zones on foot, assisting 1,000-2,000 people each time.

The FBR is a shadowy group that draws in adventurers and ex-soldiers from the West, as well as locally trained medics. On its website, the group says it is “dedicated to the establishment of liberty, justice, equal rights and peace for all the people of Burma” under its motto *De Oppresso Liber* (Free From Oppression.)

The group, which is reluctant to discuss its funding sources or its operational base, also produces situation reports on refugees based on the findings of some of its teams that penetrate deep into conflict areas.

—*Shah Paung*

Free Funeral Service & Byamaso

Tending to the dead

It’s not unusual in Burma for even apolitical associations to face pressure from the military regime. The Free Funeral Services Society, a purely social group in Rangoon, has provided about 40,000 free funeral services in the past five years to thousands of families who can’t afford funeral expenses.

Many more families are in need of free services from the FFSS, which currently provides several dozen funeral services a day.

In the middle of this year, FFSS authorities faced unprecedented pressure to be taken over or controlled by a military-backed civilian group, the Union Solidarity and Development Association.

Fortunately, the authorities—after the initial government effort was disclosed—withdrawed their takeover plans. Authorities started putting pressure on the funeral services society after its vice president and secretary-1 attended the 18th anniversary commemoration of the 1988 pro-democracy uprising in August, which was organized by former student leaders.

The FFSS’s founders got their inspiration from Byamaso, a social welfare association in Mandalay that provides free funeral services. Byamaso has also experienced harassment and pressure from authorities. Previously, it had received a large donation

of money from wealthy citizens to build a local hospital and buy medical supplies. But local authorities banned it from building the hospital. No reason was given.

—*Kyaw Zwa Moe*

Ibrahim Gambari

Looking for results

UN Under Secretary-General for Political Affairs Ibrahim Gambari was appointed to act as an envoy of the world body chief Kofi Annan following the resignation of the second special envoy to Burma, Razali Ismail. Gambari's first visit to evaluate the situation in Burma took place in May, when he met the junta's top leaders, including Snr-Gen Than Shwe and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

The three-day visit was followed by briefings at the UN Security Council, which agreed to place the Burma issue on its formal agenda, in spite of a strong protest from China.

Prior to his second visit in November, Gambari went to China in late October to meet Beijing's senior officials and to discuss conflict prevention, peacemaking and peace-building around the world, including Burma.

Gambari's November visit focused on raising key issues, such as a more transparent and inclusive political process, the release of political prisoners, more access for humanitarian assistance and the plight of ethnic Karen who have been forced from their homes because of armed conflicts. He also observed the junta-sponsored National Convention and again met junta officials and opposition members, including Aung San Suu Kyi.

—*Aung Lwin Oo*

Kavi Chongkittavorn

An enemy of injustice

My first impression of Kavi Chongkittavorn was that he is very critical and very un-Thai. And in a country where mentioning the name Aung San Suu Kyi, or declaring that one is Burmese, can result in a negative response, Kavi was warm, welcoming and kind.

That was in 1993 after Thailand was visited by Nobel Peace Prize laureates, including the Dalai Lama and South Africa's Desmond Tutu, to secure the release from detention of fellow Nobel Peace Prize winner Suu Kyi.

Kavi, an assistant group editor at *The Nation* newspaper and publishing organization in Bangkok, and a vociferous political commentator for the past 20 years or so, spoke passionately and also amusingly. We became firm friends.

Kavi is one of a very few Thais who care about Burma and Burmese democratic politics and has written more than 500 editorials on the subject. "In each editorial," Kavi proudly says, "I asked for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi."

For his effort he is blacklisted by the Than Shwe regime.

Kavi was also passionately opposed to Thailand's now deposed Thaksin Shinawatra government, which he believed was turning his own country into a police state version of Burma. Sometimes in our meetings before Thaksin was ousted he would suggest that democracy might arrive in Burma faster than in Thailand.

But when I met him in August this year he prophesized the news one month ahead, correctly predicting the September 19 coup that removed Thaksin. Kavi has also predicted that the new Thai government will have a less cozy relationship with the Than Shwe regime across the border. I hope he is right about that too.

—Aung Zaw

Sone Thin Par

Burma's 'musical treasure'

This talented young ethnic Chin singer earned wide acceptance from Burmese audiences in 2006. Her name—given to her by her grandmother—translates as “treasured flower,” and that’s how many in her growing fan base see this rising star.

A devout Christian, Sone Thin Par honed her skills singing hymns in church. She first attracted attention in 1998 and has since released three solo albums and appeared on numerous compilations. The 25-year-old singer has also performed for Burmese communities in Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and several Western countries.

—Ko Thet

Activities to do Before Reading

Activity 1

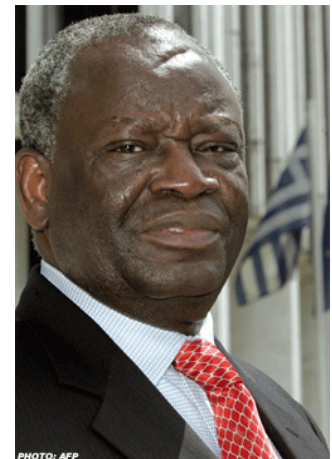
Title

The article is titled ‘People of 2006’, what do you think it is about? Who you think will be in the article?

Activity 2

Match the pictures

Look at the photos and try to match them with the names below.



- a) Ibrahim Gambari
- c) Min Ko Naing
- e) General Surayud Chulanont
- g) Free Burma Rangers
- i) Free Funeral Service and Byamaso

- b) Zipporah Sein
- d) Bo Kyi and Tate Naing
- f) Thet Win Aung
- h) Kavi Chongkittavorn
- j) Sone Thin Par

Activity 3

Who do you know?

Choose three of the people pictured above and make a list of words that you associate with each one.

Activities to do During Reading

Activity 4

Vocabulary Match

Work in pairs to find the words that go with the following definitions. The paragraph where the word appears is given to help you.

- 1) A person who takes control by force (paragraph 1)
- 2) People who take someone prisoner (paragraph 2)
- 3) Alone (paragraph 9)
- 4) Doing nothing (paragraph 12)
- 5) Felt sorry for someone (paragraph 14)
- 6) Feeling concern or sympathy for others (paragraph 18)
- 7) Very necessary (paragraph 21)
- 8) Unwilling (paragraph 24)
- 9) Have enough money for something (paragraph 25)
- 10) The act of getting control of something (paragraph 28)
- 11) Given a job or role (paragraph 30)
- 12) List of things to be discussed at a meeting (paragraph 31)
- 13) A person in the same situation (paragraph 35)
- 14) Against (paragraph 39)
- 15) Many (paragraph 42)

Activity 5

Complete the story

Use the words from Activity 4 to complete the gaps in the following story. Each word is used once.

Katie was recently _____ leader of a small country called Burmania. However, a group of people led by the famous _____ Cleo, _____ the new leadership and planned a _____ of the government. Cleo's army attacked the government building with over a 1000 men. They lost the battle but were able to kidnap Katie's comrade Derek.

The following day Derek's _____ demanded 10,000,000 Burmanian dollars for his release. Although Katie knew she couldn't _____ this, she did not want to remain _____ and called a meeting with her comrades. The first point on the _____ was securing the release of Derek, who was Burmania's strongest soldier and _____ to the country's safety. Fortunately, Katie knew a _____ guard at the prison who _____ with her and provided information about the prison where Derek was being held.

The government of Burmania decided that the best option was to plan a rescue mission. Initially, Katie wanted to rescue her friend alone as she felt a _____ mission would be easier. However, her comrades were _____ to accept this idea as they feared for the safety of their beloved leader. After a long debate and

_____ suggestions, it was decided that 10,000 soldiers would attack the prison after dark.

At 10.30pm that evening Katie's army marched to the prison and after a long battle they were able to rescue their _____ Burmanian. They also managed to capture the opposition leaders and secure peace for the small country of Burmania.

Activity 6

Who is this?

The article features 10 people or organisations. Look at the sentences below and try to match the description of the person or organisation to those in the article.

- 1) This person does not want to stop working and recently started a new job.
- 2) This person is a journalist and did not like the previous Thai government.
- 3) This organisation is secretive.
- 4) This person is a good musician and does not like attention.
- 5) This person has met Burmese leaders and has been to China.
- 6) This organisation tries to help over a thousand people in captivity.
- 7) This person was nominated for an award and dreams of peace.
- 8) This person liked playing soccer and was a good organizer.
- 9) This person believes in God and has traveled to many countries.
- 10) This organisation had problems with the USDA.

Activity 7

Adverbs

An adverb is a word that modifies or gives more information to a verb, adjective or other adverb. Often they are formed by adding the suffix *-ly* to an adjective, *e.g. truly or quickly*.

Look at paragraph 4 in the text, why do you think the writer adds the adverb 'greatly' to the phrase 'I admire him'? What is he trying to emphasize?

Now find the following adverbs in the paragraphs given. Read the sentences and discuss with your partner why you think the adverb was used.

- | | |
|---------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1) severely (paragraph 9) | 4) currently (paragraph 26) |
| 2) bravely (paragraph 15) | 5) previously (paragraph 29) |
| 3) purely (paragraph 25) | 6) correctly (paragraph 39) |

After you have discussed this with your partner share your ideas with the class. Now work alone and try to write sentences using the adverbs 1-6. When you have finished show them to your partner.

Activities to do After Reading

Activity 8

Writing

You have been asked by the Irrawaddy magazine to choose your person of the year 2006. Who would you choose? Why? Think of someone and make some notes about them. Now write an article for the Irrawaddy about the person you chose and why you chose them.

Activity 9

Speech

Imagine you are the person you chose as your person of the year 2006. You have been invited to a ceremony to receive an award for helping Burma and its people. You will have to give a short speech at the ceremony. What would you say? Make some notes and then prepare a speech. After your speech, you will be asked some questions by the audience.