

Learning with The Irrawaddy, No. 25

To accompany the **December 2007** issue of The Irrawaddy magazine.

Selected article: *Deceptively Calm*, page 39.

A. Activities before reading

Activity 1 Discussion

The title of this month's article is 'Deceptively Calm'. Do you know what the adverb 'deceptively' means? Think about the verb 'to deceive'.

Why do you think the writer describes the street of Rangoon as 'deceptively calm'? What do you know about the events of September 2007?

Activity 2 Brainstorm

What words would you use to describe how the people of Burma are feeling now?

B. Activities during reading

Activity 3 Match the vocabulary

a) Go through the article and underline the words you don't understand.

b) Match these words or phrases with their definitions.

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|-------------------|---|
| 1. defiance | a. lacking wisdom and good judgment |
| 2. trishaws | b. violent, aggressive |
| 3. skeptical | c. resistance, refusal to obey |
| 4. incantation | d. saw |
| 5. brutal | e. strong action taken by authorities to stop something |
| 6. self-assured | f. memories |
| 7. hardships | g. ideas, plans |
| 8. witnessed | h. three-wheeled bicycle taxi |
| 9. solidarity | i. self-confident |
| 10. initiatives | j. difficulties, suffering |
| 11. recollections | k. doubting, disbelieving |
| 12. crackdown | l. unity, working together |
| 13. naive | m. religious song or chant |

Activity 4 Gap-fill

Fill the gaps with the words from exercise b.

1. There was much _____ among the protesters. They worked together.
2. There was a lot of _____ among the people. They refused to obey the government's orders.
3. I watch the government TV station but I am _____ about what they say. I don't really believe it.
4. There was a _____ on drugs by the police last month. They arrested many people.
5. Treatment of political prisoners in Burma is _____. They are often tortured.
6. I was there. I _____ the soldiers attacking the monks.
7. Refugees have a difficult life. They face many _____.
8. My grandmother often talks about her childhood. She has so many _____.
9. I like to spend time in the temple. The sound of _____ makes me feel calm.
10. My friend thinks that the military regime really wants to bring democracy to Burma. He is _____. He doesn't understand the situation well.
11. The students are very active. They have many _____ that they want to make happen.
12. If there were more _____ and fewer cars the city would be less polluted.
13. He doesn't often doubt himself. He is very _____.

Activity 5 Phrases in context






Choose the word or phrase that means the same as the underlined phrase from the article.

1. ...witnessed the September demonstrations and brutal crackdown at firsthand. (para. 2)
 - a. at one o'clock in the afternoon.
 - b. at the same time.
 - c. with their own eyes.
 - d. before everyone else.
2. Their recollections tumble out. (para. 2)
 - a. Their ideas fall out of their pockets.
 - b. They start talking about many memories all at once.
 - c. They can't remember anything.
 - d. They go crazy.
3. ...an older monk had to raise the volume of his incantation to drown him out... (para. 9)
 - a. so that he could not hear him
 - b. to pour water on him
 - c. to make him be quiet
 - d. to make him go away

4. ...two men recounted how they took to the streets... (para. 10)
- stole things from the streets
 - ran away
 - went out into the streets
 - stayed in their homes
5. ... the realities and hardships of just scraping together an existence... (para. 14)
- making a lot of money
 - working with other people
 - just managing to survive
 - fighting with people

Activity 7 True or False

In the article the writer interviews different people and asks them what they think. Are the statements below correct? If not, correct them.

1.  If we give up now it will be 5 years before we get another chance.
2.  The violence against the monks by the armed forces was not a major sin, according to Buddhist principles. They can be forgiven.
3.  For the first time in our life we didn't really feel a sense of solidarity with the Buddhist Burmese.
4.  My classmates knew a lot about 1988. Now they have seen the brutality of the military with their own eyes, they don't want to do anything.
5.  The harvest looks good this year, so I'm not very worried about it.

Activity 8 Comprehension

Answer the questions below.

1. Why does the writer in Rangoon say that, 'Anything can happen, any time?'
2. How does the group in Rangoon describe the way in which soldiers beat people on the heads?
3. Why does the author of the article say that words are so important for many Burmese?
4. What do you think the phrase 'Fear is a habit' means?
5. Why does the young woman in the rice paddy say that she doesn't know what to believe because she only watches government TV?
6. Why does the writer think that the generals have left Rangoon?
7. Why does the writer in Rangoon compare the regime to a woman with cancer?

C. Activities after reading**Activity 9 Interviews**

How many different people are interviewed in the article? What do they do and where do they live? Make a list of all the people you notice. For example, 'A local writer in Rangoon'. Why do you think the author of the article has chosen these people?

Activity 10 Feelings

What are the feelings/emotions that you see in the article? Make a list. How do you think you would feel if you lived in Burma today?

Activity 11 Poster

Design a poster illustrating one or more of the ideas expressed in this article.

Activity 12 Discussion

What do you think/hope will happen in Burma in 2008? Do you think protests will continue? Why/Why not? Do you think there will be change? Why/Why not?

‘Deceptively Calm’

by Kim Williams

December 1, 2007

But anger surfaces when people recall the September crackdown

The glimmering pagoda seems to attract people like a large golden magnet. Trishaws are slowly pedalled through the darkness as if the passing of time does not exist. “It seems so calm,” says one of the group, a local writer. “Deceptively calm. People are so angry. Anything can happen, any time.”



Everyone in the small group, seated at a table in downtown Rangoon, has witnessed the September demonstrations and the brutal crackdown at firsthand. Their recollections tumble out.

“They beat skulls as if they were crushing ice in a bag...Never in the history of our country have the pagodas been so empty...We have no words to describe this...If we give up now it will be 50 years before we get another chance...It is the beginning of the end.”

Talking to foreigners has always been an act of defiance in Burma. And for many Burmese, words are all they have these days to battle the regime. So they speak, as soon as they sense a chance—about what they saw, what they feel and think, and about what they want to do.

In Mandalay, a self-assured activist frowned when asked if the protests were over. “If we were so naive to think that we could bring about change at this one time we would deserve rulers like these,” he said.

He gave his own version of Aung San Suu Kyi’s famous words “Fear is a habit”—saying, “We should not let fear poison us, because then we can’t do anything.”

A monk sitting next to him agreed and was keen to point out that his pagoda was continuing the religious boycott against the military. “The violence against the monks by the armed forces was a major sin, according to the Buddhist principles. There is no forgiveness for it.”

In a remote town in Arakan State, a young monk who participated in the demonstrations struggled to control his anger, and the words just spilled out. “The future life of the military will be very bad. They will not go to hell, but to a place below there.”

His voice became so loud that an older monk had to raise the volume of his incantation to drown him out as he prayed with a visiting family of pilgrims.

In a nearby Muslim quarter, two men recounted how they took to the streets in support of demonstrating

monks. “For the first time in our life we felt a sense of solidarity with the Buddhist Burmese,” said one.

Back in Rangoon, a young female student said: “My classmates never believed that 1988 really happened. Now they have seen the brutality of the military with their own eyes, and they want to do something.”

In a modern sports center, a businessman of Chinese origin said after watching BBC coverage of the demonstrations “this government is very cruel,” and then walked rapidly away as if he feared being overheard.

Many Burmese with whom I talked said they want to give initiatives for political change a chance, but after years of disappointments they are skeptical.

The realities and hardships of just scraping together an existence were uppermost in many people’s minds. “I live from day to day,” said one.

“The harvest doesn’t look too good this year, so that is my main worry,” said a young woman working in a rice paddy in the countryside near Rangoon.

Asked about the protests in Rangoon, she shrugged: “I only watch government TV. How do I know what to believe?”

As night falls in Rangoon, the writer in our group surveys the quiet streets where only weeks ago thousands defied the regime. “Our city is so beautiful. And yet the generals are too afraid of their own people to live here.”

He laughs as if that thought is his revenge for what Rangoon has had to suffer. “The regime reminds me of a woman cancer patient. Every day she puts on makeup and puts flowers in her hair. She will never confess to her illness, but she will somehow have to deal with it.”

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