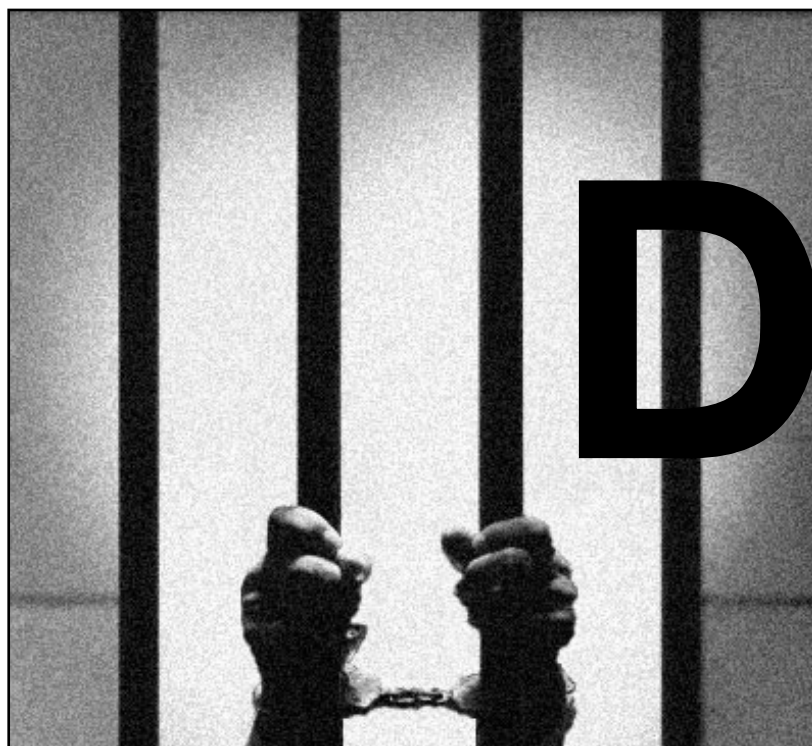


Feature



Dark...

and alone

JOSEPH BARRATT talks to Naing Ko Ko about his fight for democracy in Burma.

The open air and green grass of Albert Park is in startling contrast to the time of darkness and hunger that Naing Ko Ko speaks of.

He describes his time of solitary confinement in Burma and what he hopes to achieve in New Zealand.

A high-ranking democratic unionist and former political prisoner in Burma, Naing Ko Ko has been in New Zealand for seven months.

He has met Helen Clark three times in the hope of convincing her Government to speak out against the regime controlling his country.

"New Zealand needs to take a stand," says Naing Ko Ko.

This month marks the 19th anniversary of the infamous "8888" protests, the largest peaceful democracy uprising in Burma.

On August 8, 1988, people from all walks of Burmese life protested against the Government and were met by bullets from the military.

Thousands were killed.

Naing Ko Ko was 16 years old when he joined the student union that was campaigning against the regime of the military junta.

Five years later Naing Ko Ko was hiding in the jungle to escape from military intelligence.

Eventually he was caught and subjected to intense interrogation.

For the first two weeks he was given just one teaspoon of water three times a day.

For the rest of that first month he received more water but was given no food.

Hooded and shackled around the clock, he did not know if it was day or night.

Living in darkness, starving, his body sore, Naing Ko Ko agreed to sign the confession put in front of him by his captors.

His sentence: seven years solitary confinement in some of the most notorious prisons in the world.

Nineteen years after 8888, Burma is still ruled by a military junta called the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). Human rights abuses are rife.

According to a 2007 report on Burma by Amnesty International there are "widespread and systematic violations of international human rights and humanitarian law".

Naing Ko Ko wants the New Zealand Government to put more pressure on Burma through organisations such as the



HOPEFUL: Naing Ko Ko wants New Zealand to change its position on Burma.

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

New Zealand is Burma's ASEAN co-operation partner for the next three years. The two nations will be co-hosting talks later in the year.

Foreign Minister Winston Peters did not reply to questions sent to him but his office released a press statement saying: "New Zealand remains deeply concerned about the political and human rights situation, and the lack of genuine reform there."

"We will continue to express these concerns to Myanmar directly and through appropriate regional forums."

Frustrated by the lack of "result-oriented engagement", Naing Ko Ko asked for the New Zealand Government to ban the issuing of visas to Burmese military personnel and cabinet ministers of the regime.

ASEAN currently pursues a policy of constructive engagement and non-confrontation with Burma.

The results of constructive engagement are yet to be seen, with Amnesty International reporting that last year "the authorities stepped up repression against both armed and peaceful political opposition throughout the country".

Having seen the results of the Burmese Government's offensives against peaceful

political groups, Naing Ko Ko is desperate to see a change in his homeland.

In Burma today countless other political prisoners are detained and tortured in prisons like the notorious Insein Prison where Naing Ko Ko was held for 17 months.

He describes Insein, the main political prison in Burma, as "South-east Asia's Auschwitz".

Even Aung San Suu Kyi, a Nobel Peace Prize winner and leader of the National League for Democracy, was held there for a time.

Naing Ko Ko says he talked to the walls to keep mentally active and "drew on the ground with a stick and spelt words like democracy and human rights, because I did not want to lose my vocabulary".

He even managed to get an English dictionary and *Time* magazine smuggled in, keeping them hidden in the ceiling of his cell.

But then he was caught with the illicit reading material, and was taken to the dog cell.

The dog cell is designed to completely dehumanise, humiliate and destroy a person mentally.

For more than four months Naing Ko Ko was treated like a dog.

When prison guards were outside his

cell they would ask him questions.

In response he had to walk around on his hands and knees.

He wasn't allowed to talk.

"They make you bark, like a dog."

Food was thrown on the floor.

"To eat, you cannot use your hands.

They put it on the ground for you to bend down and eat it off the floor."

He was eventually transferred to another prison to serve the remainder of his five years in solitary confinement.

As a testament to his character and determination, Naing Ko Ko immediately got involved in the democracy movement again after his release.

Travelling to the Thai-Burma border, he organised campaigns and received a scholarship to study at Rangsit University in Bangkok. He completed a degree in economics, politics, and philosophy.

He has since travelled to more than 20 countries, meeting officials and raising awareness of the campaign for Burmese freedom.

This raised the ire of the Burmese Government and it cancelled his passport, which resulted in his being arrested again, this time in Thailand.

After his arrest there were three possibilities: being sent back to Burma to face imprisonment, going to jail in Thailand, or getting refugee status in another country.

The New Zealand Council of Trade Unions requested that New Zealand intervene and within three days he was granted refugee status.

Now Naing Ko Ko is in New Zealand on scholarship, completing a post-graduate diploma in international relations at the University of Auckland. He is focusing his attention on New Zealand officials.

He is currently arranging another meeting with Helen Clark. He says she showed signs of support but so far there has been no "tangible result".

Aiming for support across the political spectrum, Naing Ko Ko has tried to contact National Party leader John Key, but has not yet received a reply.

Determination written all over his face, Naing Ko Ko admits that the path to reform in his country will be hard and long.

"I do believe that I will see it in my life time. We will win because we are right."

New Zealand has recognised the change of name from Burma to Myanmar, despite the fact the Burmese government did not consult its people. Accordingly, I have used Burma. - Joseph Barratt.

PHOTO: JOSEPH BARRATT