

# Hope amid Burmese pain

Despite the ruthless crackdown on protest in Burma, one expatriate believes the fire of revolution has been sparked. JESSICA WAUCHOP reports.

The images shown around the world were of pacifist monks marching for freedom and democracy, of military retaliation, of a photojournalist being shot and killed, and of beaten Buddhist monks strewn across roads and in rivers.

The images were harrowing and heartbreaking. Yet for some Burmese people, this latest battle for democracy carries new hope.

One hopeful Burmese expatriate of 30 years is Aucklanders Stanley Saw.

"Seeing people on the street protesting makes me happy. The consequences which follow, killing and torture, sadden me but [the protests] have been taken to a new level by the horrific treatment of the monks.

"The significance is very, very deep. The protests won't stop here. The junta may have it under control now but it has been taken to a new level."

Saw came to New Zealand in 1977 – 11 years before the 1988 uprising – to get away from the corrupted state.

"I simply could not work under an oppressive regime. I couldn't live with the bribery and corruption.

"I would have walked across the border to get away if it had come to that," he says.

Late last month he joined almost 500 other Aucklanders in a demonstration calling for democracy in Burma.

Buddhist monks, children, Burmese, Maori, Pakeha, peace activists and MPs all gathered to march against the recent treatment of protesters in Burma.

However those who marched down Queen St did not face fear, imprisonment or bullets like the demonstrators in Burma.

A peaceful protest in Rangoon on September 5 was the catalyst for further repression. The march was broken up by Burmese troops and three Buddhist monks were injured.

Some of the reports that have emerged on burmanet.org say hundreds of monks have been imprisoned. Many are feared dead.

"It is unheard of treatment of Buddhist monks – they are revered in our culture," says Saw.

The result is what is now being called the Saffron Revolution – a series of mass peaceful protests led by monks, many who have since been imprisoned, beaten or killed by the military junta.

"There is a power beast in Burma that must be destroyed. Lives must be given back to the people for them to get the basic freedoms they are entitled to," says Saw.

In late September, tens of thousands of Burmese people marched against the military junta – the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC).



PHOTO: JAMES LITTLE

OPTIMISM: The next generation of Burmese showed their support.

The initial reason for the protests was a rise in fuel prices but injuries inflicted on the three Buddhist monks quickly escalated the situation.

Senior general of the military junta Than Shwe has since been excommunicated by the monks in a move that Saw believes holds great significance.

He says excommunication in Buddhism is a momentous thing and the monks' actions should not go unreported.

"If someone dies, and they have been excommunicated, what it means is their spirit goes directly to the eighth level of hell," he says, quoting a senior monk.

"Buddhists believe in reincarnation so for someone to reach the eighth level of hell, it is virtually impossible for him to move his way up to heaven."

The significance of the monks' rejection of Shwe is vital to the ongoing resistance movement.

And this is not the only action taken which has upset the military regime, says Saw.

Monks have refused alms and offerings from the junta.

"Again it is very significant. It is spiritual bankruptcy.

"When the monks die they will be reincarnated to a state below human. This self-sacrifice has shaken the junta."

The country has slipped to bottom ranking in

Transparency International's corruption perception index (CPI) – it is now rated along-side Somalia.

The index naming Burma at the bottom of 180 countries was tallied and released before the September brutalities. The same day the CPI report was released three monks were reported dead.

The junta cut all access to the internet and blocked text and picture messages to prevent the world from seeing the brutalities. However video footage and photos were already online – an advantage and disadvantage for the Burmese.

During the 1988 uprising, when thousands of civilians were killed, the junta used photos and footage to identify, persecute, torture and kill activists.

It is feared by many the same thing will happen again.

"It is so systematic – identify, prison, torture and kill," says Saw.

However he is hopeful the internet will also help the democratic movement.

"The junta can't leave the internet off for long. They have lucrative contracts with other countries who need the internet working in Burma – this was not the case in 1988."

He says the worldwide broadcasting of photos taken of the brutality of the junta has raised awareness that was not possible in 1988.

And it is this awareness that has sparked New Zealanders to protest on Queen St.

Signs and placards called for the release of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, freedom and democracy for the Burmese people, and pressure on the New Zealand Government.

Co-leader of the Green Party Keith Locke believes the Government should seriously considering imposing sanctions against Burma, as the European Union has.

"As far as sanctions go we are pretty much at the back of the field. We have to put pressure on. We have to support the people.

"We should use every diplomatic channel we can. There are people who have been denied the right to take up their rightful seats in Parliament.

"We should be pressuring China, and the fact that they are hosting the next Olympic Games – if China wants respect for the games then they should not be working with the Burmese junta."

Representatives from Amnesty International called for members of the public to write letters, as did Marian Patrizio, a teacher from the refuge centre in Mangere.

"I've seen the cost of the junta on these refugees' lives. People need to write letters to Amnesty International, to newspapers and to your friends raising awareness."

Support also came from leading peace activist John Minto, students and university groups, several Buddhist monks and the National Party. Noticeably absent from the political spectrum was the Labour Party.

A New Zealand First spokesman said: "Sanctions usually cause more hurt to ordinary people than they do to governments, who generally have the ability to find ways around such sanctions.

"In the case of Burma, for example, our exports there are only worth \$2.5million and consist mainly of dairy products such as milk powder for infants."

New Zealand does have travel and visa restrictions on Burmese military and key supporters of the junta.

"Words are helpful," says Saw. "But this is not great enough. We need the help of these government organisations.

"To the junta, people are a problem. The more they kill the better it is for them. So I have resolved to do everything I can to get support for my people."

PHOTO: JAMES LITTLE



COLOUR, PASSION AND ANGER: The flags fly high on Auckland's Queen St but in Burma protests have been silenced.