

Burmese Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi is again in jail after a period of house arrest that's lasted nearly two decades. In a revised version of his 1995 book "The Voice of Hope," American

Tyranny That Endures

BURMA 1

By Maria Elena Viggiano

journalist and Buddhist monk Alan Clements gives voice to an oppression-marred nation whose civil disobedience movement has attracted the attention of the world

Burma, officially known as Myanmar, has been controlled by a military dictatorship for nearly half-a-century, with Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi still under house arrest after nearly two decades. Routinely charged and jailed by the regime, including again this May, she's become an icon of the south Asian nation's pro-democracy, non-violent movement. She has come embody Burmese dissent.

Her message was spread thanks mainly to journalist Alan Clements whose book "The Voice of Hope" collected conversations he had with her in Rangoon between October 1995 to June 1996. Clements recently revised the book to include interviews with U Gambira, who heads Burma's monks, and U Kyi Maung, deputy chairman of the National League for Democracy. The men suggest Burma has changed little in recent years, and that Burma's 50 million citizens remain virtual prisoners in their own country.

Clements, a U.S. citizen, is profoundly familiar with Burma. He lived in a local monastery for seven years after becoming the first American Buddhist monk. "At the end of 1996 I was expelled from the country and added to the blacklist," he says. "I requested a return visa at the embassy in Paris but was notified that I was *persona non grata*."

Alan Clement's book collects talks with Aung San Suu Kyi, who was put on trial by the Burmese regime in May for allegedly "shielding" an "intruder." She has been under house arrest in Rangoon for nearly two decades.

The book

Alan Clements' book "The Voice of Hope" ("*La Mia Birmania*" in Italian) collects conversations with Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi. Clements was the first U.S. citizen to become a Buddhist monk.





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Aware he faced permanent expulsion, Clements sat down with Aung San Suu Kyi to talk about her country. "Every meeting was treated as if it could be the last," he says. Though some 13 years have passed since their conversations, the book remains topical because the political situation has changed little."

Aung San Suu Kyi constantly asked Clements if anyone really knew the gravity of the situation in Burma. "In recent years," says Clements, "3,000 villages have been burned down. There has been ruthless ethnic cleansing. Some two million people are missing; one million refugees have fled the country and another million live in jungle areas in primitive conditions and in malaria-infested areas. Children are forced to become soldiers and to join an army that seems more of a terrorist force. Like al-Qaeda, its sole purpose is to terrorize the population."

The dictatorship began in 1962, when General Ne Win expelled the democratic government and ushered what he called the "Burmese Socialist Way." Political parties were abolished, parliament dissolved and the constitution suspended. Private industry was nationalized into a centralized state. Soon, the population faced poverty and hunger. Free trade and independent newspapers were banned and tourist visas limited to 24-hours. Myanmar was isolated from the world.

Discontent boiled over, leading to the 8888 revolt (August, 8 1988) in which thousands died and Ne Win resigned. Aung San Suu Kyi became prominent in the pro-democracy movement, heading the National League for Democracy (NDL).

The NDL won 1990 elections in a landslide, but military again intervened. The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) refused to cede power. The constitutionally elected lawmakers were detained or murdered. In 1989 Aung was placed under house arrest and, with the exception of brief excursions, she remains under arrest today. She now faces a prison trial for allegedly "shielding" an "intruder" in her home.

"There is darkness but also hope," says Clements. "Aung San Suu Kyi is a light that becomes ever more luminous. She became



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well known again between September and October 2007 when the whole world saw the latest Burmese massacres and the forced closure of monasteries. There are spiritual and revolutionary forces at work. In 24 years of imprisonment, Nelson Mandela was hardly a renowned figure, even though a British movement worked to obtain his release. Burma is currently witnessing a movement stronger than anti-apartheid in South Africa. It's particularly strong among the young."

"The good news," Clements continues, "is that now the world now knows that Burma is run by one of the most maniacal

_Demonstration in favor of Burmese independence. The country, officially known as Myanmar, has been run by a military junta for nearly half-a-century.

and merciless regimes on the planet. The images of cold-blooded repression have been shown to all. It is unthinkable to imagine that a Catholic priest, protesting in Rome, would be killed by the army."

Images from the summer of 2007 remain indelible. Burmese monks in saffron-colored tunics paraded in protest along the streets of Rangoon, filing past the house where Aung is held. The army later shot at the marchers.



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The protests yielded even more systematic repression, says Clements: "Sixteen of the largest monasteries were closed, 1,000 monks were imprisoned or disappeared, others beaten. Buddhism in Burma is under siege."

Monk leader U Gambira, interviewed in the book, "was among the main supporters of the dissent movement and was in the parade when the military began firing on monks. He is now under house arrest as part of a 68-year prison term."

Now, however, the international community is aware of the situation. "The UN has voted 23 consecutive resolutions (criticizing the regime)," says Clements.

Aung has criticized UN Special Envoy for Burma Ibrahim Gambari for lack of progress in helping to facilitate democracy. She says he hasn't done enough to press for the release of some 2,100 jailed dissidents. The litmus test will come during elections scheduled for 2010, though the military junta has already rejected international observers and announced further revisions to the constitution. International pressure has so far failed to trouble the regime.

"It is a complicated issue," says Clements. "Every person in the United States and Europe know that climate change is a real problem, so much so that Al Gore



won the Oscar for his documentary on the subject. But if a girl is kidnapped and killed in China or tortured in Burma, no one reacts. A visceral sense of human rights is the oxygen of civilization. People must change their attitudes to make a difference.”

He continues: “The next generation of politicians should understand the meaning of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The common rebuttal is: how can we fight Hitler with Gandhi? This is non-violence. Aung San Suu Kyi is just trying to establish a dialogue. She says, ‘We need an army, we need you, why don’t we work together. It’s important that she speaks by

Images of Burma. The dictatorship has endured since 1962, when General Ne Win expelled the democratic government and ushered what he called the “Burmese Socialist Way.”

telephone, in her own voice, and not always through other people, so that people understand her democratic goals. Allowing that is a very simple gesture.”

Clements has no doubts what message the Nobel Prize-winner would transmit if she could. He paraphrases it: “Please use your liberty to help us get ours. Ask organizations and tourists to refrain from doing business with Burma until democracy



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is established. Boycott the country's state corporations. After that, Burma would be open to all. Aung San Suu Kyi doesn't seek a solution imposed from the outside or international community intervention because she truly believes that the revolution starts from the people."

But country such as Burma, the process is hindered because the dictatorship has yielded rampant corruption and illegal trafficking. Burma is the largest producer of methamphetamine in the world and the second-largest opium trafficker. The traffic an estimated \$1 and \$2 billion annually. Human trading is also rampant. Rural

Burmese are trundled forced into manual labor; women are forced into prostitution; children are drafted into the army.

The illegal export of natural resources is fundamental to ties between Burma and chief trading partner China. Says Clements: "China is like a mentor. For many there is a link between the uprising in Burma in 1988 and the Tiananmen Square demonstrations of 1989. But notwithstanding what happened in Beijing, China remains a major player in the world. Even with zero tolerance toward dissidents, it's unpunished. China has become the main supplier of Burma's weapons, which helps modernize the army."

The Chinese are uninterested changing the status quo in Rangoon because it might mean losing influence on a Southeast Asian neighbor. China also fears domestic ripple effects. These excuses are used to justify non-interference.

"I try to determine what is the best solution after having identified the problem," says Clements. "Question: 'How does the regime sustain itself?' Answer: 'It's a narco-dictatorship.' Much of the heroin used in the U.S. and Europe comes from Afghanistan and Burma, in that order, with the Rangoon regime fully complicit. The activists know the situation and also know they have to make compromises. At the same time they lack an outside government as a point of reference. They're like the Mafia in Italy.

"Doing business with China could be considered a crime against humanity. Every time we [the U.S.] support them we dirty our hands with blood and our hearts are made heavy. Russia and China should be more responsible, and Western countries should reflect on how to change the Burmese culture of violence, which is linked to weapons and a pattern of murder."

But the wish for change must arise from the people, united in its desire to overturn a dictatorship that despite nearly 50 years in power and extreme brutality has failed to silence the democratic opposition.

"The regime is pathologically xenophobic," says Clements says. "They hate foreigners and are afraid of a possible invasion. At the same time, their leadership is composed of a band of five-to-10 people also terrified of each other. I wouldn't be



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surprised if there isn't a mutiny in the future. They know that Aung San Suu Kyi is known at international level. She's alive because [the regime] is frightened by a possible overturning of domestic balances. For me, even though these people are violent misogynists, they prefer doing a little evil at a time rather than killing her. I've been to Aung San Suu Kyi's house and I can assure you she lives under very harsh conditions. She can't have visitors and the food is poor. I wouldn't be surprised if something happens, though it's very difficult to assess the fate of political dissidents if change did come."

Dario Fo, in a human rights commercial sponsored by Lancia, begins with these words: "There are people who have always

fought; men and women who have made war on war without ever using life-threatening weapons. Today, we'd like to embrace all of those who belong to that tradition. But there's one embrace we lack. This film is dedicated to Aung San Suu Kyi, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, a prisoner in her own country."

Clements uses the example of the commercial to illustrate how the Burmese situation requires attention. In the film, cars arrive bearing the likenesses of Mikhail Gorbachev, Lech Walesa, Frederik Willem de Klerk and Ingrid Betancourt. But "when you open the door of the last car, there's no one in the back seat because the Nobel Peace Prize winner is in prison. Even without her presence, Aung San Suu Kyi is present."