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The 2007 Student Peace Prize goes to Charm Tong

The 2007 Student Peace Prize goes to Charm Tong from Burma

The Situation in Burma

Burma is a country in South-East Asia with approx. 48 million inhabitants. The population is divided into eight larger ethnic groups, whereof the largest group is ethnic Burmese that make out 68 % of the population. The other groups are the "Shan people" (9%), "Karen people" (7%) and the "Rakhine people" (4%) as the most populous ethnic groups. With a diversity like this, the the country has 106 different languages and dialects. The many religions tell of a country with a considerable historic and cultural diversity; 89% of the population are buddhists, but also Christianity, islam and different variations of animism is represented. Burma achieved independence from Great Britain in 1948, The Burmese Union was established and democratic elections were held. But when general Aung San was killed in 1947, it did create problems for the, then coming, democracy, as he had been the icon for an independent Burma. The militia has now ruled since 1962, when General Ne Win succeeded in a coup that re-established the army's reign over Burma. Burma (named Myanmar by the rulers since 1998) has since then had a military regime. General Ne Win kept the country isolated from outside influence since 1962, and the country has gone from being one of Asia's wealthiest, to one of the poorest.

The present military junta, lead by general Than Shwe, demonstrated it's power in 1988, when they opened fire against non-violent demonstrations held by monks and students in the former capital Rangoon 8th of August 1988, near 3000 were killed. In order to calm the population, the military government, State Law and Order Restoration Council held elections in May of 1990. National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi, got 392 of 485 seats in parliament, but the still ruling government has not accepted NLD's victory, or let them to power. Aung San Suu Kyi has now spent 11 years in house arrest. In 1997 State Law and Order Restoration changed their name to State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997, but it has not improved the military junta's reputation in Myanmar.

Suppressing Military Regime

Today Burma is still ruled by one the world's most oppressing military regimes. SPDC controls every form of legal system, as military officers inhabit all ministry posts in the country. They are also in charge of the country's private and commercial sectors. There are also more than 20 other ethnic political parties besides NLD, and they are categorically suppressed by the rulers. In 2005, at least 10 ethnic Shan politicians were arrested and transported to remote prisons across the country. The junta also controls the press by either

owning or in other ways managing newspapers or broadcast medias. Magazines are pre-censored and foreign publications are strictly controlled, as well as the Internet.

The population of Burma is subject to murder, rape, imprisonment without trials, underage drafting, forced moving and slavery, all of which make their situation one of the inhumane in Asia. The ethnic nationalities population suffers the most under the ruling force. The junta prefers Theravada Buddhism, and the try to force this religion upon the ethnic minorities. These groups have now been in decades-long conflicts with the military regime, resulting in forced labour and the ethnic population is regularly forced to give land away to the militia. In areas of war, situation is even worse for the ethnic people. Shan State Army - South is one of the few ethnic groups that still fight the governments troops, numbering about 400,000.

Shan State Army - South's headquarters is not far from Loi Taileng, a settlement on the border to Thailand that works as a sanctuary for the thousands that are on the run from the military junta. Here, children are thought Shan in school, something teachers could get killed for in Burma. Shan signs and historical Shan buildings are destroyed all over the country, and as a result of this, children now know little about their original language and culture.

The Suppression of ethnic groups near the country's borders has led to a massive stream of refugees. Near one million Burmese are now fleeing within their own country, and even more have fled to neighbouring countries; official numbers say there are at least one million Burmese refugees in Thailand of whom most live under poor conditions with little right to work. Burmese opposition operates with even larger numbers, and estimates the number to at least two millions. These refugees are often subject to harassment by the government, and young girls often end up in Thailand's numerous brothels.

The junta's use of forced labour to build infrastructure, tourist sights and transport of military equipment in the war against minorities, is well documented, and international human rights organisations and nations have condemns Burma's violation of human rights. In June of 2006, 503 members from countries across the Globe handed UN's Secretary-General Kofi Annan a letter calling for a binding resolution against the crisis in Burma. The reports are clear: Burma is ruled by one of the world's most ruthless military juntas. Politicians are convinced that the situation is worsening and that something needs to be done soon. Actions needed include the release of the opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and over 1000 political prisoners.

No other Asian countries use less on social welfare than Burma. One of the gravest problems is HIV/AIDS as the government has ignored its existence over many years. Critics around the world also doubt that humanitarian aid reach those who need it in Burma, many believe that it ends up with the military junta. There is however little doubt that the country needs aid, as the UN lists Burma as one of the world's least developed countries. Reports tell that poverty is wide-spread, illiteracy is high, healthcare and education ignored, number of HIV/AIDS patients increasing and that there is a still rising number of refugees.

Most of Burma's educational system is about to collapse. Teachers are paid near to nothing in state schools, and often choose to do private lessons that pay more, resulting in them not showing up for their jobs at state schools. Higher education is no better, as students played an integral part in the national pro-democracy demonstrations in 1988. The junta then took killed thousands of students and closed universities as punishment. Many had to finish their education by distance learning. These actions by the government have kept many students from engaging in demonstrations for democracy, and a generation of Burmese has no prospect

of a proper education today. Those who get to study in Burma experience poor conditions and a lack of elementary equipment as well as corruption. Student's leaders, as the newly arrested Min Ko Naing, are almost routinely imprisoned.

The organisation Freedom House gives an insight into today's situation in Burma. In their analysis, Burma score a 7 on political rights and a 7 on civilian rights, and the country is viewed as un-free. The magazine "Foreign Policy" published last summer, in collaboration with The Fund for Peace, their overview over the world's most unstable states – The Failed States index. The higher on the list, the worse is the situation. The index is based on scientific studies, reports from official and private organisations that give an insight into each country's social, economic and military situations. There are twelve categories, with a potential score of 10 in each, indicating very poor conditions. Burma ended up as the eighteenth worst country with a score of 96,5.

Charm Tong

As a teacher, activist and student, Charm Tong aims to educate and inform the world of the human rights violations that take place in Myanmar. She is one of the most visible activists of Burma's pro-democracy exile movement, and one of the founders of Shan Women's Action Network that in 2002 published the report "License to Rape". Today she is also the head of School for Shan State Nationalists Youth on the Thai-Burma border.

25 year old Charm Tong is born in the state of Shan in Burma. At the age of 6 she was sent to a catholic children's home on the border of Burma and Thailand, as her parents did not want to her to grow up amongst the junta.

At the home, Charm Tong got an education, which would not have been the case if she had stayed in the Shan state. She attended a Thai high school, and learned English, Chinese and her original mother tongue: Shan. Charm Tong views herself lucky as she has had nine years of education. Many of her fellow country men are less fortunate. With mass evacuations and forced labour, survival is often the first priority for those who live in Burma's Shan state. Education is not a priority, especially not amongst girls and women. Young women must often cross the border to Thailand in order to seek work to help their families. The Shans have no refugee status in Thailand, and are therefore not subject to any official aid or protection. Many of those who cross the border experience arrest and bad treatment as illegal workers and young women often get tricked into the sex industry.

When she was sixteen, Charm Tong started to work with human rights groups the Thai-Burma border and home of many immigrants from Burma. She interviewed people in the sex industry, illegal immigrants, people with HIV, and rape victims. The year after, she gave a lecture on the junta's crimes in her home country to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in Geneva. Among the audience sat junta members. Today Charm Tong is the leader of the School for Shan State Nationalities Youth (SSSNY). She works as a teacher and human rights activist. At the same time, she seeks to educate herself to get more knowledge and help her community. Even though she is not enrolled at any university or another institution of higher education, she considers herself to be a student in a unique non-governmental education system. Her opportunities to get education are restricted to shorter periods of training in human rights, media, research, and organization methods. These courses are provided to young people from Burma who risks persecution if they return to their home

country. Charm Tong has taken advantage of several exchange programmes, courses and workshops offered by non-governmental organizations and human rights groups through the last eight years.

School for Shan State Nationalities Youth

In 2001, the winner established SSSNY along the Thai-Burma border. The school was established as a reaction to the significant limitations on education in the Shan State and Burma. SSSNY is mainly financed through private donations. One school year consists of nine months, and the education takes place in a simple class room equipped with plastic chairs and a blackboard. Most of the students at SSSNY are in their early twenties, and with different backgrounds: Some are migrants that have applied for work in Thailand; some are refugees, while others are teachers and social workers. Charm Tong and SSSNY believe in ethnical equality and diversity. Therefore, people of many different ethnic groups, like Palaung, Akha, Lahu, Kachin and Pa-O, are welcome to receive an education at this school. All of these groups experience the same oppression from the regime in their home country. By attending the same school, learning the same things and staying together, the Winner believes that the students will achieve an understanding and respect for the culture, religion and identity of others.

At SSSNY the students are offered lessons in English and computers. Most of them have never seen a computer before. The students get to speak freely, and are encouraged to discuss political themes. Every weekend, there are courses in different Human Rights-related issues. Guest lecturers from different organizations, like The Shan Human Rights Foundation, Shan Herald Agency for News, Shan Women's Action Network, Lahu National Development Organization and The Constitution Drafting Commission of Shan State are invited to have workshops, and give training in human rights and international human rights instruments. There are also lessons within media, documentation of Human Rights violations, environment, genders and differences, basic health issues, HIV/AIDS, rehabilitation from drug abuse and so on. The school receives about 150 applications every year, but only has the capacity for 36 students.

When Charm Tong doesn't teach and study at SSSNY, she works with the organization *Shan Women's Action Network* (SWAN). Charm Tong was one of the founding members of SWAN in 1999. The organization has formed various programs, which consists of themes. These themes are; Education, health, documenting violence against woman, support- and helpcenter for women in crisis, exchange programmes, programmes to empower women, and newsletters. One of the most important contributions by the organisation is the report published in 2002 titled "*License to rape*". The report reveals 173 cases of rape and other forms of sexual abuse against 625 women and girls in the state of the Shan in the period 1996 to 2001.

The report claims that the soldiers of the junta used rape and sexual abuse as a weapon to terrorize the different societies in Burma. Other reports made by the Human Rights Watch as early as in 1992 tell about rape of women in the Muslim Rohingya-people southwest in Burma when a large military offensive occurred. Still the world's attention was strongly focused at the women of Burma after SWAN and Shan Human Rights Organizations (SHRF) report "*License to rape*".

SWAN has also formed an interest group that handles different media when publishing the report and the group gives interviews to all news agencies that wishes to question them. Charm Tong has presented the report in various assemblies/forums; two examples are the World Social Forum (WSF) in Mumbai, India in January 2004 and for the UNCHR in Geneva in April 2004.

Results

Over 100 students have now graduated from the SSSNY. Today a number of these students work as teachers for youth organizations, human rights activists, healthcare personnel and radio hosts. Some of these risk their lives for the work they do today.

By forming the SSSNY, Charm Tong shows that she is willing to do more than talk about dreams of how the country should be in the future; she has put theory to practise. By attending the same school and learning the same as the other students, Charm Tong hopes that this will construct mutual understanding and respect amongst the students. This again will build a basis for trust. This is a basis the regime continuously tries to dismantle between the various ethnic groups.

Through her work in SWAN, Charm Tong shows how women can work effectively and contribute to political and social changes. The use of rape as a weapon by the Burmese military is today well-known, much due to the report by SWAN. The rapes also serve as “punishment” for women who are accused for supporting the different opposition groups. Even though the rapes are used against a small group, the soldiers of the government scare the local communities to silence and obedience. Other ethnic women’s groups from Burma, including Karen, Mon and Chin, have subsequently published reports documenting the systematic rape of women by the regime’s troops in Burma.

Charm Tong establishment of SSSNY and her involvement in SWAN has undoubtedly made her unpopular with the Burmese junta, this including to several other enemies. But on the other side she perhaps has even more admirers among people. She has been recognised internationally among others, by winning the Marie Claire Women of the World Award in 2004 and The Reebok Human Rights Award in 2005. In October 2005 Charm Tong also met with President George W. Bush in the White House, where she for about an hour talked about subjects including forced labour and the usage of rape as weapons of the Burmese military regime.

Challenges

If Burma had been a free and democratic country, perhaps Charm Tong today would have been a "normal" student in the country. This is on the contrary not the case, and if she today would return to her native country, she would most probably be arrested, like the student leader Min Ko Naing has been several times.

Even though Charm Tong and SWAN meet many challenges in their work, either by the military junta in Burma or by society in general, the members of SWAN has managed to keep moral and work up by getting support from their international friends. Several people did not expect much from the organization, this because it has a flat structure, but SWAN on their behalf has proven the opposite. SWAN believes in change; that they one day will live in a

society where the oppression does not exist, and where every man and woman and every ethnic group will be treated with the same respect, and where peace and freedom is for everybody.

Charm Tong wishes that her people shall be free in their own country. This wish she also shared with her deceased father, who earlier was a commander in the Shan State Army. But Charm Tong emphasises that the people of Burma today are using many forms of resistance, not just armed struggle, to oppose the military regime and bring about change to democracy.

Statement from Peace Prize coordinator Juan Manuel Torres Aguilar:

The members of ISFiT and the Student Peace Prize are very satisfied with the announcement of Charm Tong as the winner of the Student Peace Prize 2007. Her work for the ethnic groups in Burma, for democracy, a better education system and for human rights makes her a deserved winner of the peace prize. During the work for The Student Peace Prize 2007, we have received over 200 nominations from across the world. It has been a pleasure getting to know how young students from across the world sacrifice themselves every day in order to make the world a more equitable and righteous place. Charm Tong is one of these students, her work has been a source of inspiration for many, and will remain an inspiration for many to come.

Charm Tong is a special winner of The Student Peace Prize because of many reasons. First she is the first female to receive the prize. Second the Peace Prize has since 2001 only been given to student organizations and not individuals. And finally this is the second time the Peace Prize is awarded to a person or organization from Burma.

This is a clear signal that we have to focus more on conflicts that do not get attention in the western world, where over 80 % of the information we receive is based on the situation in Iraq, the middle-east, Pakistan or Afghanistan.

We in ISFiT and in the Student Peace Prize support the affirmation (statement) of the Student Peace Prize Committee about the winner: "Charm Tong is a good example about how much a single human being or individual can achieve, and therefore a worthy winner of the Student Peace Prize 2007". The Student Peace Prize is handed out during the International Student Festival in Trondheim (ISFiT) which will be held in Trondheim between the 16th and 25th of February, but it is a prize from all of the Norwegian students, together with NSU, STL and SAIH (the three mayor students organizations in Norway).

The Peace Prize Committee's rationale

The committee of the Student Peace prize has decided that the winner of the Student Peace Prize 2007 is Charm Tong from Burma, for her work for democracy and human rights.

In spite of being only 25 years old, Charm Tong already has achieved very much. Already as 16 years old she began working amongst refugees from Burma in Thailand. Charm Tong has herself lived in exile since she was 6 years old, but complicated surroundings did not stop her from making a great effort for other people, and for a free and democratic Burma.

We have all some knowledge of the military junta and dictatorship in Burma. Much of this is thanks to the Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi. But how much do we really know

about what is going on in Burma today? According both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch is the military dictatorship in Burma amongst the worst in the world. The country has severe poverty and HIV/aids are spreading every day. There are more than 1000 political convicts in prison, exposed to torture and lack of health care. One of these convicts has been Min Ko Naing, who received the Student Peace Prize in 2001. He was fortunately set free last week. However, the release was probably a tactical move from the junta, in order to improve the relationship with the Security Council in the United Nations in front of discussions regarding a resolution of Burma.

It is sad to realize that the situation in the country not has improved since 2001. On behalf of the students in Norway we want to send warm thoughts to Min Ko Naing and hope he now is safe. We also want to send a wake-up call to the international society to put a stronger pressure on the military junta to release all political convicts.

Charm Tong is part of the Shan, and is like other ethnic groups in Burma exposed to assaults from the military junta. Great parts of the Shan people have fled to Thailand, in spite of lacking status as refugee in Thailand. This means that they are not allowed to make refugee camps, and are forced to live their lives hidden, something that makes them even more vulnerable for assaults. It is estimated that at least 300,000 Shan are illegally living in Thailand. Under such conditions are young girls and women particularly exposed, and both trafficking, sexual assaults, physical and psychical violence is common.

Burma needs young leaders with initiative, which can stand in front in the battle for a democratic and inclusive Burma, also the ethnical groups. Charm Tong is such a leader. Nelson Mandela once said: "Education is the most powerful tool to change the world". Charm Tong has taken the consequences of this and started her own school; a school for young people that wants to be a part of and change the world. Through school they learn about the crimes against human rights which are happening in Burma, and in the same time they get a tool they can use to make change happen in their own society. Most of the 100 person that have finished the school work in different organisations, with education, human right work or journalism. The school has students from different ethnical groups, something Charm Tong finds important to build respect and trust between the different groups in the Shan-state in Burma.

In conflict situations, women and children are generally put into the same category: victims. Charm Tong on the other hand, is one of those who prove to us that women are also an important and more visible resource in the struggle for peace and development. In 1999 she was one of the founders of SWAN; Shan Women's Action Network. SWAN works towards gender equality and justice for the Shan-women in Burma.

When awarding this years Student Peace Prize, the committee wishes to raise awareness about the subject of rape as an instrument of war. SWAN, with major contributions from Charm Tong, has issued the report "License to rape". This report uncovers hundreds of rapes and other sexual offences towards girls and women in the Shan state in Burma, and gives proof to how soldiers of the junta systematically uses rape as a weapon to suppress people. Later reports from similar organizations show that this also is a problem among other ethnic groups in Burma.

In addition to having initialized and executed several practical means to improve the situation in Burma, Charm Tong is also a renowned international speaker. Already at 17 she spoke to

the UN Commission on Human Rights about the junta's human rights violations. Junta members were also present at this meeting. Charm Tong has also had met with several heads of state, among others President George W. Bush. She has proved herself as a fearless defender of human rights. If she returns to Burma, she is bound to face the same destiny as Min Ko Naing and hundreds of other human rights activists.

On behalf of all the Norwegian students, we award this prize to Charm Tong. We hope it will be an encouragement to further the struggle, not just for Charm Tong, but for all those working for a believing in a free and democratic Burma.

As students and future leaders we have a special responsibility to contribute to a more just world. Norwegian students have a lot to learn from Charm Tong. To change to world for the better, skill and a good heart will not suffice. One also needs to create opportunities, take the step from word to action, and dare to risk everything for this cause. Charm Tong is a brilliant example of how much one human being can do, and is thus a truly worthy winner of the Student Peace Prize 2007. We hope she will be an inspiration to us all.

On behalf of the committee for the Student Peace Prize,

Kathrine Sund (Head of committee)

Facts about the Student Peace Prize

The Student Peace Prize was first awarded in 1999 and is the only peace prize in the world to and from students. It is awarded every second year on behalf of all the Norwegian students during the international student festival in Trondheim, ISFIT. This peace prize aims to give more attention to the importance of student's efforts for peace, democracy and human rights, to be a reward for achievements and to inspire to future work. The Student Peace Prize will this year be awarded for the fifth time. Its importance is highlighted by the fact that the winner of 1999, min Ko Naing, and the winner of 2003, the leader of ZINAZU, today are imprisoned.

In 2005 the Student Peace Prize was awarded to ACEU, a student organization working for a just and democratic Columbia and against corruption in the education system. Previous winners originate from East Timor, Burma and Zimbabwe.

The prize itself consists of 50,000 Norwegian crowns. The winner is invited to Norway to receive the peace prize, participate in the International Student Festival in Trondheim, and hold lectures in Norwegian universities and colleges. This year the winner or a representative of the winner will visit Stavanger, Bergen, Oslo, Tromsø and Svalbard.