

No Freedom, No Independence

By Saw Yan Naing

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Today, Burma celebrates the 60th anniversary of its independence. But very few people in the country are in a celebratory mood.

Nyan Win, a spokesperson for the main opposition party, the National League for Democracy, said, "From my 20s until now---my 60s---I feel there is no independence in Burma, because people feel they are not free."

Independence hero Gen Aung San's statue in Rangoon

At the party headquarters, the NLD held a solemn ceremony with 600 people in attendance.

It seems many Burmese feel they are now slaves or prisoners of the military leaders who have ruled the country since 1962.

On Friday, about 12 NLD members held a brief vigil in front of the party's headquarters wearing convicts' white uniforms and calling for the release of all political prisoners. Burma currently detains more than 1,000 political prisoners.

Nyan Win recalled when the father of the Burmese independence struggle, Gen Aung San, lamented that "under Japanese occupation, there was no freedom of expression and the Burmese lived in fear." He compared that sentiment to the current situation under the military dictatorship.

However, the NLD spokesman remained optimistic: "We believe that democracy and human rights will prevail in the country one day."

Speaking to The Irrawaddy by phone, a government worker in Rangoon said, "As a government employee, Independence Day is an official holiday. However, there is nothing to celebrate. My daily survival is more important than Independence Day."

A computer shop owner in Rangoon lashed out at the military rulers: "I'm not interested in Independence Day! If possible, I want to kill the generals. What I see and what I hear is such a contrast---injustice is everywhere in Burma!"

Meanwhile, the regime's top brass celebrated Burma's Independence Day in a Rangoon park near the famous Shwedagon Pagoda. The ceremony was simple: officials held a flag-raising ceremony in the early morning and then a message from the junta chief, Snr-Gen Than Shwe, was read out.

The Burmese leader reiterated that his military government will implement democratic reforms according to its own road map. He also urged citizens of Burma to cooperate in the building of a modern, disciplined and flourishing democratic nation.

However, his message was unlikely to win any applause from the Burmese public. The regime has been facing growing international and domestic pressure since the bloody crackdown in September. Several activists and monks are now leaving the country as there has been an on-going crackdown in Burma. Activists inside the

country confirmed that the military and secret police have been searching for former activists and monks who are suspected of taking part in the anti-junta uprising.

A former activist who was involved in the 1988 uprising confirmed to The Irrawaddy that several of his colleagues who did not take part in the demonstrations were also apprehended and some had run away and were in hiding.

Reliable sources from the Thai border town of Mae Sot also confirmed that several activists from the 1988 uprising have fled to Thailand in fear of imprisonment even though they were not involved in the uprising.

Pyinya Zawta, a member of the underground monks' group, the Alliance of All Burmese Buddhist Monks, said: "On this our Independence Day, I want people to enjoy real freedom and independence. As long as we are not free, we must demand freedom."

Burmese living overseas also joined in the calls for change in their homeland.

Thura Aung, a 40-year-old Burmese migrant worker currently working in Malaysia, said that he left his hometown five years ago because of a lack of justice, prosperity and freedom.

Malaysia---like Burma, a former British colony in Southeast Asia---is now a haven for many Burmese seeking refuge and work.

Thura Aung said that in spite of the harassment and human rights abuses a migrant suffers in a foreign country, the situation is generally better than in Burma.

He said, "Here in Malaysia one person can feed the rest of his family; but that's not possible in Burma."

Another Burmese migrant, Aung Naing Thu, who has been working in Malaysia for the last three years, said: "It may be correct that our country regained independence, but there is no freedom." He added that at least under British rule, the economy and the political situation were stable, and a good education system existed in Burma.

Burma lost its independence in 1885 after Great Britain annexed Upper Burma. It regained independence from Britain on January 4, 1948. However, the country has been under the military rule since 1962.

Excerpts from Snr-Gen Than Shwe's Independence Day message published in the state-run *The New Light of Myanmar* today:

1. All national people to constantly join hands for safeguarding the perpetuation of independence and sovereignty of the State;
2. All national people to collectively strive for non-disintegration of the Union and non-disintegration of national solidarity;
3. To ensure emergence of an enduring constitution in line with the fundamental principles and detailed basic principles adopted by the National Convention that has been completed successfully;

4. All national people to harmoniously make all-out efforts for building of a modern, developed discipline-flourishing democratic nation;

5. All national people to cooperate in realizing the State's seven-step Road Map with Union spirit, patriotic sprit and the spirit of sacrifice.

http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=9816