

The Martin Luther King Prize Acceptance Speech

The Bååthska Hall, Stockholm, Sweden

15 January 2007

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, and Dear Friends:

I am standing before you to accept a prize bearing the name of one of the persons I most admire, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. This indeed is a great honor for me, and at the same time, I do realize that this prize is awarded not only to me but also to the peoples of Burma as the recognition of our struggle for democracy, political equality, and self-determination. Even as I speak, thousands of my compatriots are sacrificing their freedom and their well-being, and our leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, as you all know, is still under house arrest. My dear friend Khun Htun Oo, a Shan leader, is still serving his sentence of 90 years imprisonment in the most notorious jail in Burma. Many more had sacrificed their lives already; on the battlefields of the on-going fifty years of civil war, on the streets of our capital and other cities when they demonstrated for democracy and freedom, in the notorious prisons in Burma when they were imprisoned without proper trials, in the jungles after they escaped from tortures and imprisonment but lost their lives to jungle diseases and enemy bullets, and in the foreign countries where they were in exile. They sacrificed their lives, their freedom and their well-being so that Burma may have the future with freedom. Now here in Sweden, a very peaceful country, you have recognized our struggle because you know that “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere”, as Martin Luther King said.

In this struggle, we are fighting for democracy, human rights, freedom, peace and justice. We want “freedom from fear” because we live our lives under this military regime in constant fear. We want “freedom of expression” because freedom of expression is a huge crime under military dictatorship. We have over one thousand political prisoners in Burma, who committed no crime but daring to express their free will. We want “freedom from *want*” because the peoples of Burma are destitute living under extreme conditions of impoverishment, hunger and disease without remedy in the land that used to be known as the “rice bowl of Asia”.

We want “peace” because the regime in Burma has been at war with its own people for more than five long decades. Yes, we want peace but the peace that we want is not just in terms of the absence of conflict but in terms of the presence of justice.

We want “justice” because there is no such thing as the rule of law under a military dictatorship. “Martial Law”, according to General Saw Maung, “is no law at all but the use of force”. In today’s Burma, law and order exist not for protecting its people but for sustaining dictators in power. We want basic “human rights” because human rights abuses have become part of the political system in the so-called “law and order restoration”, as the military junta in Burma used to call itself the “State Law and Order Restoration Council”.

Finally, what we want is we want to live with human dignity because when all kinds of rights are abused people lose their dignity, integrity and identity. And, what we want is to live just like a human being who is the image of God. So, our struggle is a struggle to be an *authentic human being* again.

Our struggle is not just for changing the government in Rangoon, or in *Naypidaw*, but for building a democratic open society and restructuring the country into a genuine Federal Union as it was agreed by General Aung San and ethnic national leaders in 1947 at the Panglong Conference, when the Union of Burma was founded at the first place. The root cause of political crisis in Burma is not just ideological confrontation between military dictatorship and democracy; it also involves constitutional problems rooted in the denial of the rights of self-determination for ethnic nationalities who joined the Union as equal partners according to the Panglong Agreement. The only solution for political crisis in Burma, therefore, is to establish a genuine Federal Union of Burma, which will guarantee the fundamental rights for all citizens of the Union, political equality for all ethnic nationalities, and the right of self-determination for all member states of the Union within the framework of federal arrangement.

In this struggle, we are opting for the “tripartite dialogue” as a means to achieve our goal. The “tripartite dialogue” means dialogue amongst the military regime, the 1990 election winning party led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, and ethnic nationalities — who are the founding members of the Union, as called for by the United Nations General Assembly since 1994. The “tripartite dialogue” strategy for us is the core essence of non-violent movement, and finding the common ground between current conflict parties in Burma. Instead of fighting each other and killing each other, we want to solve our political problems through political means on a dialogue table not on the battlefields. So, what we are saying is “stop fighting”, “stop killing”; killing innocent lives will not solve the problem, denying human rights will not make the country free, and destroying human and natural resources will not make any benefit for the future of Burma. However, by finding the common ground through dialogue, negotiation and compromise, we can solve all of our problems together.

Unfortunately, the military government in Burma is still opting for violent confrontation instead of peaceful negotiation, killing and taking innocent life instead of negotiated settlement, destroying ethnic identity and abusing minority rights instead of building a peaceful country. When they implemented their policy of ethnic assimilation by force, the present military junta applied various methods: killing people and destroying the livelihood of ethnic minorities in the on-going civil war, using rape as a weapon of war against ethnic minorities, and religious persecution as a means of destroying ethnic identity, especially of the Chin, Kachin and Karen Christians. So, it seems that the current political situation in Burma looks not only unpromising but the political storm is blowing violently into undesired end.

Despite all these negative images of the country, we are confident that we will be able to turn current political situation, and change the political storm into a freedom breeze. We

are quite sure that we will be able to turn the current political situation in Burma with the help of international community, including the UN, EU, USA, ASEAN, Japan, China and India, and we are hoping that we will overcome all the obstacles and we will achieve our goal of building a free Burma. The inner strength of democracy movement in Burma, of course, is the peoples of Burma. And we know that the solution of Burma's problem will not come from outside but from inside through the unity and collective efforts of the peoples of Burma. The inner strength of this unity is what you are recognizing today, here in Stockholm.

I therefore receive this prestigious award as the recognition of our struggle for human rights, justice, peace, democracy, political equality and self-determination in Burma. I thank you for your recognition of our struggle! With all your help, and with the unity and strength of the people of Burma, "We shall over come some day".

In conclusion, I would like to express my sincere thanks to the Martin Luther King Prize Committee for your recognition of our struggle, the people of Sweden for your support and solidarity that you have shown to the people of Burma time to time, and all of you — my dear friends in Sweden. I would like to acknowledge also to my colleagues at the Ethnic Nationalities Council, Chin National Council, United Nationalities League for Democracy, Chin National League for Democracy, Federal Constitution Drafting and Coordinating Committee, and National Reconciliation Program; and individually I would like to thank Harn Yawnghwe, Jack Sterken and Sai Mawn — although they are not here today, I must say that without you guys I would not be able to survive in the jungle of Thai-Burma border. And I would like to express my love and gratitude to my wife, Aapen, and my children — David Van Lian and Laura Thachin. Without your support, understanding and love; I would not be able to stand here, and would not be able to work for what I believe and for the oppressed people of Burma.

Thank you!

Lian H. Sakhong
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The Union of Burma.