

In a Land of Fear

4 May 1996

For 34 years the people of Burma have been ruled by a military junta as tyrannical and secretive as any in the modern era. Now, desperate for hard currency, the country's dictators are at pains to establish Burma as a holiday destination.

Posing as a travel consultant, John Pilger penetrated beyond this brand new tourist trail to uncover a nightmare world of slavery, forced displacement and intimidation...

At dawn, in Burma's ancient capital of Pagan, crows glide without a quiver among the temples in the desert. In Ananda, the most celebrated of these great cathedrals, there are four colossal standing Buddhas. As the light catches one of them, it is smiling. As you get closer the smile becomes enigmatic, then it fades. As you walk to one side and look back, the Buddha's expression is melancholy. Walk on and it becomes fear veiled in pride. I have not seen anything quite like it. For the devout, no doubt, it symbolises Buddha's timeless wisdom. For me it is the face of modern Burma.

Six years ago, more than 4,000 people lived in Pagan, a city which stands as one of the last wonders of the ancient world. They were given two weeks to leave, some only a few days. The city was being opened to mass tourism and only guides and the staff of a planned strip of hotels were permitted to stay. The people's homes were bulldozed and they were marched at gunpoint to a shadeless, waterless stubble that is a dustbowl in the dry season and runs with mud during the monsoon. Their new houses are of straw and poor-quality bamboo and stand mostly out of sight of the tour buses that come down the new and empty dual carriageway. Those villagers who objected were sent out on to the barren plain, or beaten, or taken away in the night.

The dispossession was mild by the standards of the dictator Ne Win and the generals who have ruled Burma since a military coup in 1962 crushed the democratically elected government. Last year the International Confederation Of Free Trade Unions reported that a million people had been forced from their homes in Rangoon alone, in preparation for tourism and foreign investment. Throughout Burma perhaps three million have been brutally swept up and exiled to 'satellite zones' where they are compelled silently to serve Burma's new facade of 'economic growth'.

Arriving in Rangoon on a Sunday afternoon, there is a veneer of normality. Frangipani perfumes the air and incense fills the covered bridges that lead to the stupas surrounding the great golden pagoda of Shwedagon. Families seek the intonements of a passing monk, though there is a furtiveness about them all. Rowers glide on Inya Lake. Behind them, work on high-rise tourist hotels proceeds at a frenzied pace. There are surreal touches. A billboard advertising Lucky Strike cigarettes has 'Welcome to Yangon' in the space otherwise allotted to a cancer warning. 'Yangon' is the name the military regime has given Rangoon; Burma is 'Myanmar', which is the equivalent of the German government insisting that the rest of the world call their country Deutschland. A billboard near the airport announces 'Visit Myanmar Year 1996' beneath a cartoon picture of a Burmese Betty Boop. In the next street is the headquarters of Military Intelligence, known to the Burmese as 'Em-eye'. It is Burma's KGB and, alongside the old tyrant Ne Win and the army, it is the power in the land and the source of what the United Nations special rapporteur has described as 'an atmosphere of pervasive fear'.

For arriving foreign tourists and businessmen the drive to their hotel inevitably includes a short detour along University Avenue. To the uninitiated, this has a frisson of the forbidden and seditious. Number 54 is the home of the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize winner and leader of the Burmese democracy movement, Aung San Suu Kyi. Here, she spent six years under house arrest until her release last July. Now, every Saturday and Sunday, she is allowed to speak from over her garden gate to several thousand supporters corralled behind barbed wire barriers. This is not so much a concession by the regime as a showcase for the new 'openness' of 'Visit Myanmar 1996'. A coachload of Taiwanese tourists was just ahead of me, snapping through the tinted glass. What struck me was the extraordinary courage of the Burmese who came to listen to her - in doing so they branded themselves as opponents of the regime - and the Kafka-like absurdity of the country's elected leader having to address people standing on a platform behind her garden fence.

Since her 'unconditional' release, Aung San Suu Kyi has been denied freedom of movement. On a recent attempt to leave Rangoon she tried to catch a train to Mandalay, only to find her carriage adrift at the station as the train pulled out. She cannot freely associate with anyone. Those Burmese who pass through her gate take a risk: their names are noted and they can expect a call in the night. Shortly before I interviewed her, eight members of a dance troupe who had celebrated Independence Day with her, 'disappeared'. They include the popular comedians U Pa Pa Lay and Lu Zaw, who are said to have made a joke about the generals. Each has since been sentenced to seven years' hard labour.

Aung San Suu Kyi lived in Britain for many years before she returned to Burma, and her family live here still. A few weeks ago her husband, the Oxford Tibetologist Michael Aris, was once again refused permission to visit her. The ban also applies to their two sons, whose Burmese nationality has long been withdrawn. The official newspaper the New Light Of Myanmar attacks her regularly and with mounting viciousness. She is 'obsessed by lust and superstition'; she 'swings around a bamboo pole brushed with cess'; she is 'drowning in conceit' and 'it is pitiable and at once disgusting to see a person (like her) suffering from insanity . . . now at a demented stage'. Aung San Suu Kyi dismisses all this with a laugh that is brave though difficult to share.

Of course, the reason for such intimidation is her popularity, which could not be greater, it seemed to me. At the mention of her name, the contrived neutrality of faces, by which people survive, breaks into smiles. People whisper her name as you brush them in a market, then turn and put a finger to their lips. And if you are able to speak and disclose that you have been to see her, all caution is discarded and questions pour forth as to her well being. But with expressions of admiration, affection and solidarity are fears for her safety and the recognition that she, and the democracy movement, may be trapped. "She is a

Mandela without a De Klerk," a close friend of hers told me. "Unless pressure comes from the very governments that the regime is now courting in Asia and the West, nothing will change for a long time." Aung San Suu Kyi herself told me that foreign investment and tourism were shoring up the power of the junta, and that the world must realise the scale of Burma's human rights abuses, particularly forced labour. "News comes and goes like fashion," she said. "After the people rose up in 1988 and paid the price in bloodshed, we slipped from the headlines. It will be a pity if we slip again."

In February the UN Commission on Human Rights reported, as it does every year, that the following violations were commonplace in Burma: 'Torture, summary and arbitrary executions, forced labour, abuse of women, politically motivated arrests and detention, forced displacement, important restrictions on the freedoms of expression and association and oppression of ethnic and religious minorities . . . ' Take at random any of the reports by Amnesty International and what distinguishes the Burmese junta from other modern tyrannies is slave labour. 'Conditions in the labour camps,' says one study, 'are so harsh that hundreds of prisoners have died as a result . . . Military Intelligence personnel regularly interrogate prisoners to the point of unconsciousness. Even the possession of almost any reading material is punishable. Elderly, sick and even handicapped people are placed in leg-irons and forced to work.' Pick up a travel brochure these days from any of the famous names in British tourism - British Airways, Orient Express, Kuoni - and there is no problem. Indeed, to British Airways Burma offers 'the ultimate in luxury' and a 'fabulous prize' for its Executive Club members. 'To find an unspoilt country today may seem impossible,' says the Orient Express brochure, 'but Burma is such a place. It has retained its charm, its fascinating traditions . . . its easy-going ways are a tonic to the Western traveller.' Moreover, this 'truly unique experience' includes a 'free lecture on Burma's history and culture'. I enquired about this lecture. It makes no mention of the momentous events of 1988.

In 1988, the year before the democracy movement in China was destroyed so publicly in Tiananmen Square, the people of Burma rose up and as many as 10,000 were killed by the army. Unlike the Chinese leadership, the generals in Rangoon moved quickly to curtail foreign media coverage. Although there was eye-witness reporting, there were no professional TV cameras and no satellite images to shock the world. Troops had orders to shoot on sight anyone with a camera. On one tape smuggled out of Rangoon, the voices of two amateur Burmese cameramen are caught at the moment they were spotted by soldiers. "What shall we do?" asks one of them. His friend replies, "Keep on filming until they shoot us." It was in April 1988 that Suu Kyi returned from England to take care of her dying mother. Her father was Aung San, the revered national hero, whose guerrillas were trained by the Japanese, then turned against them during the occupation of the second world war. Having laid the foundations of a democratic state, and negotiated independence from Britain, he was assassinated in 1947. More than 40 years later, his daughter agreed to take on leadership of a renewed democracy movement. It was her demand for the restoration of democracy that led to her house arrest in 1989. However, the generals did hold elections. Having banned canvassing, threatened the electorate and disbarred and silenced Aung San Suu Kyi, they were confident they had fragmented her party, the National League for Democracy, and that their own front would gain the largest bloc of seats. The opposite happened. The NLD won 82 per cent of seats in the new parliament.

Stunned, the junta responded by arresting 3,000 NLD workers and handing out prison sentences of up to 25 years to those of the new MPs who tried to establish the government.

The euphemism for oppression was now 'economic stability'. Having re-invented themselves as the State Law and Order Council, which goes by the fine Orwellian acronym, Slorc, the generals declared Burma 'open to free enterprise'. At the same time, in order to rebuild the crumbling infrastructure - roads, bridges, airports, railways - they set about turning the country into a vast labour camp. Last year the moat around the imperial palace in Mandalay was excavated and restored almost entirely by forced labour, including chain gangs guarded by troops. When photographic evidence of this was produced, the regime claimed that 'contributing labour' was 'a noble Burmese tradition' and, anyway, many of the workers were convicted criminals who had 'volunteered to work in the open air'. In totalitarian Burma the term 'convicted criminal' can embrace someone guilty of having been elected to office or of handing out leaflets calling for democracy (five years' hard labour), or of singing a song the generals don't like (seven years' hard labour).

This has thrown up a terrible irony. Alongside the 16,000 British and Allied soldiers who died as slaves on the Japanese 'death railway' that linked Burma with Thailand during the second world war were some 100,000 Burmese and other Asian dead. Outside the gates of the Commonwealth war cemetery at Thanbyuzayat in the south of Burma, the death railway is still there. The same rusted lines rest on the same sleepers: a life was lost for every sleeper laid, one survivor calculated. A Japanese locomotive stands as it was abandoned on the day the horror ended. It is jet black and on the track in front of it is a square of barbed wire enclosing three figures rendered in cement - a Japanese guard with a rifle and two emaciated, shaven-headed PoWs working with pick axes.

Now, history is repeating itself. An extension of this line is being built in Mon State, between the towns of Ye and Tavoy on the Andaman Sea. This is Burma's great secret. Although human rights organisations have documented the testimonies of the slave workers on the new death railway, few outsiders have seen it and the slave camps along the route. This is because much of Mon State is closed to foreigners. It is Burma's gulag.

In making our forthcoming ITV documentary, my film-making partner David Munro and I entered the country under the subterfuge of travel consultants. We headed south, leaving Rangoon well before dawn, travelling over spine-gutting roads, often without headlights. We passed watchtowers and groups of prisoners in chains, quarrying rock. Those guards at roadblocks were junior, asleep or uninterested; money fluttered across to them.

The towns in this remote part of the country are a step back in time, as if the British Raj were temporarily away at the hill stations. Ancient sewing machines whirred on balconies; the roads were filled with bicycles not cars; carbon paper, radiograms and sleeveless sweaters were for sale. Tavoy has streets of decorous teak houses, the biggest with lace iron balconies. Others are dungeon-like, with iron bars and damp trickling over torn posters of coy women holding parasols.

People considered us with due curiosity; a whole generation here has seldom laid eyes on Europeans. To talk openly to anyone is to beckon interrogation and worse. Hotels must copy guest registration forms to as many as 14 different authorities. On the day we arrived in Tavoy all 'independent travellers' were told they had to leave. Fortunately all the roads out were now closed, and the ancient Fokkers of Myanmar Airways had been commandeered by a general. We calculated that we had about a day and a night to find the railway before we were caught. Following the line of embankments north into the jungle, we succeeded in getting lost, then by chance came upon a clearing that presented what might have been a tableau of Victorian England. Scores of people were building embankments and a bridge across a dry river bed that is now, with the arrival of the monsoon, an ochre-coloured torrent. From out of jungle so dense that its bamboo and foliage formed great wickerwork screens, they were carving the railway. A 20-foot-high embankment had been built with earth dug by hoe and hand from huge holes. The skilled were paid about 30 pence a day. The majority were slave labourers, of whom many were children. Laboriously and clumsily the child workers wrested clay from the excavations, sharing a hoe between three. One little girl in a

long blue dress struggled to wield a hoe taller than herself, then fell back exhausted and, with a wince, held her aching shoulder.

The children carried heavy loads of mud mixed with straw in baskets and dishes on their heads and clearly agonised under the weight of it. They poured it into a vat and grinder, turned by two tethered oxen. The sticky clay, now almost as hard as rock, was gathered by two small children, one of them small enough to fit up to his shoulders in a hole directly beneath the grinder.

Horrified, I watched a load of clay, like fresh cement, tip over him, almost burying him. I reached under his arms and pulled him out. The others laughed, as if this was normal. How many children are trapped and injured and die like that' As many as 300 adults and children have been killed or have died from disease and exhaustion, according to one estimate. There were at least 20 other bridges in the vicinity and children were working on all of them.

Every village along the way must give its labour 'voluntarily' regardless of age or the state of people's health. Advanced pregnancy is no excuse. If people protest that, as peasant farmers, their labour is all they have to keep them and their families alive, they are fined and their possessions confiscated. If a whole village objects, the head man is beaten or killed and all the houses razed.

"I saw one old man accidentally drop his load into the river," a former civil servant told me in a nearby safe area controlled by the Karen National Union. "As he tried to retrieve it, the soldiers shot him in the head. I could see the water turn red with his blood, then the river carried him away." A man who escaped with his wife told me: "I saw people dying because of landslides or fever. Some of the bodies were never found, only the head or a foot. They didn't bother to bury the bodies properly, with a funeral. They just dug a hole and left them there." His wife, Min, said, "I feel for the children. They are too young to anticipate danger, so they are vulnerable. They are the ones who die first." I asked her if she knew why she was being forced to work in this way. "We were told nothing," she said. "We overheard we were building a railway so that a French oil company could run a pipeline through, and foreigners came to look over the site." The oil company is Total, which is part-owned by the French Government. In partnership with the American Unocal company, Total is building a Dollars 1 billion pipeline that will carry Burma's natural gas into Thailand. The deal will give the Rangoon generals about Dollars 400 million a year over 30 years. Since they put an end to democracy in 1990, it is estimated that the Slorc have received 65 per cent of their financial backing from foreign oil companies, including Britain's Premier Oil.

In its 1993 report on human rights abuses throughout the world, the US State Department says the Slorc 'routinely' uses slave labour and 'will use the new railway to transport soldiers and construction supplies into the pipeline area'. Unocal says reports of slave labour are a 'fabrication' and both the oil companies deny the railway is linked to the pipeline project. But more than 5,000 troops have already been shipped to the pipeline area and army patrols protect Total personnel. Although taken aback by the sudden arrival of two Europeans on the embankments, the chief engineer admitted to me that the railway was being built mainly with 'volunteers'. He said that the children made bricks for the army which sold them to the construction company. As we talked, soldiers guarding the 'volunteers' began to emerge from their tent. We left expeditiously.

In 1993 the British trade minister, Richard Needham, told Parliament, "The Government's policy is to provide no specific encouragement to British firms to trade or invest in Burma in view of the current political and economic situation there." In the same breath he said, "British business visitors to Rangoon can of course look to our embassy there for advice and support." Last year most veils had dropped. The Department of Trade funded a seminar in London called An Introduction To Burma - The Latest Tiger Cub. The organiser was Peter Godwin, a merchant banker and government adviser on trade in South East Asia. "To be a Briton in Burma," he told the delegates, "is a privilege." Godwin said he had been assured by the senior general in Slorc "openly and categorically" that Burma's "socialism" had been "a mistake" and that this mistake had caused the upheavals in 1988. He made no reference to the generals murdering thousands of unarmed civilians, then throwing most of the elected government into prison. The "good news", he said, "is that economic growth is picking up".

A few Western businessmen operating in Burma claim that foreign investment in the country has multiplied tenfold since 1992. "It's not so much a gradual pick up," said Pat James, a Texan entrepreneur, "as a skyrocket." This is disputed by, among others, a recent report in The Economist. The World Bank and the IMF have yet to lend the generals a penny. However, what has begun in Burma is a familiar process in which a dictatorship's crimes against its people are obscured and 'forgotten' as foreign businessmen seek to justify what the East Asian governments call 'positive engagement' and the Europeans and Australians call 'critical dialogue'. The prize is a cheap labour colony that promises to undercut even China and Vietnam.

Peter Godwin had just returned from leading a Government-backed trade mission to Burma when I met him in March. Companies of the size and importance of GEC, Powergen and Rolls-Royce were represented. I pointed out that there was documented evidence that some two million people were being forced to build the infrastructure of Burma in brutal conditions so that foreign investment might get off the ground. "Isn't that a factor to you and your business colleagues?" I asked.

"I suppose it is," he replied, "but the involvement of foreign companies is going to improve conditions quite substantially. No foreign company is likely to employ labour under those terms." "But you've got to use the roads and railways." "Indeed." In spite of a certain sound and fury aimed at the regime by Madeline Albright, the US Representative at the UN, US policy is "not to encourage or discourage" business with Burma. The EU countries have followed a similar double-faced policy. While most western aid remains suspended, the Japanese Government gives Dollars 48.7 million a year and the great zaibatsu, Mitsui, Mitsubishi, Honda and Nippon Steel, have offices in Rangoon. By far the biggest investor is Singapore, whose state arms company came to the Slorc's rescue in 1988 at the height of the demonstrations when troops were running out of bullets.

Burma's most profitable export is illegal. More than half the heroin reaching the streets of American and Australian cities originates in the 'golden triangle' where the borders of Burma, Laos and Thailand meet. Under the Slorc, heroin production has doubled. Two researchers, Dr Chris Beyrer and Faith Doherty, conclude from a long investigation for the South-East Asian Information Network that the Slorc have allowed heroin to circulate freely and cheaply in Burma in the hope that it 'pacifies' the rebellious young.

"At last the doors to Myanmar, the magic golden land, are open," waxes Dr Naw Angelene, the Director of Tourism, in an official handout. "Roads will be wider, lights will be brighter, tours will be cleaner, grass will be greener and, with more job opportunities, people will be happier." One of the biggest foreign tour operators in Burma is the Orient Express Group, which operates 'The Road To Mandalay', a 'champagne-style cruise' between Mandalay and Pagan in a converted Rhine cruiser. The cabins, says the brochure, 'are not simply luxurious'; there is a Kipling Bar and a swimming pool.

When I found her at anchor in the heat and mosquitoes, The Road To Mandalay looked squat and sturdy rather than luxurious. Once on board, however, it seemed the perfect vehicle for pampering tourists in one of the world's 10 poorest countries. Like an air-conditioned bubble, it is constantly cleansed of the smells and noise and dust of the land through which it glides. In the 'staterooms' the television rises at the foot of the bed and, hey presto, there is Rupert Murdoch's satellite TV.

In February, the captain of The Road To Mandalay welcomed his inaugural guests. 'They might have been,' wrote the Times travel writer Peter Hughes, 'the cast from an Edwardian novel: a prince and two princesses from the Endsleigh League of European Royalty, our own Princess Michael of Kent among them; a duke; a marche and marchese; a film star, Helena Bonham-Carter; and assorted lords and ladies whose names tended to be the same as their addresses. Those without titles merely had money.' The actual road to Mandalay has recently been converted into an expressway for tourists. For the local people forced to work on it, it is known as 'the road of no return'. According to Amnesty, two workers who tried to escape were executed by soldiers on the spot. Another eight were beaten until they were severely injured; one was hacked to death with a hoe.

Aung San Suu Kyi was two years old when her father was murdered. What distinguished the movement he founded was its complex attempt to apply a blend of Buddhism, socialism and democracy to the freely elected governments that followed. The ideas of Nehru, Sun Yat Sen, Manzini and Voltaire were adapted. Marx was virtually re-invented as a disciple of Buddha. But this flowering coincided with a period of turmoil as the ethnic peoples demanded autonomy. In March 1962 the army stepped in and seized power. Its leader, Ne Win, became Burma's Stalin. He displaced whole populations, built labour camps and filled the prisons with his enemies, real and imagined. His wars against the ethnic peoples were unrelenting and vengeful. He abolished Burma's lively free press; and along the way he made himself extremely rich. In 1984 the Far Eastern Economic Review reported that the privately chartered jet taking him to a Swiss health clinic 'was delayed because chests of jade and precious stones carried on board had been stacked incorrectly and had to be reloaded'. Three years later Burma ignominiously applied for Least Developed Country status so that it might seek relief on its massive foreign debt.

In 1987 the man who called himself 'Brilliant as the Sun' produced his coup de grace. Without warning, he withdrew most of the country's banknotes, replacing them with new denominations that included or added up to the number nine. According to his chief astrologer, nine was his lucky number. The people of Burma did not share his luck. As most of them kept their savings in cash, most were ruined.

In a nation now so impoverished the touchpaper was lit. By March 1988 the regime was at war with the students at Rangoon University. The moment of uprising came precisely at eight minutes past eight on the morning of the eighth month of 1988. This was the auspicious time the dockworkers, the 'first wave', chose to strike. Other workers followed in succession; and in subsequent days and weeks almost everyone in the cities and towns, it seemed, showed a courage equal to those who stormed the Berlin Wall the following year. Without guns, ordinary people began to reclaim their country.

Then the slaughter began. The army fired point blank at the crowds and bayoneted those who fell. In Thailand and Norway, I have interviewed the exiled witnesses to these epic events, most of them speaking publicly for the first time. "One of my friends was shot in the head right there, in front of me," said Ko Htun Oo, a former student. "Two girls and a monk were shot next to him." Another student, Aye Chan, said, "A lot of flame was coming out of the crematorium which was surrounded by troops. They weren't even identifying bodies, so the parents would never know. The dead and wounded were all mixed up. They just burned them alive." Another spoke of hearing a wounded schoolboy cry out for his mother as he was buried alive in the cemetery: "The caretaker didn't want to do it," he said, "but the soldiers had guns pointed at him." Now well into his eighties, Ne Win remains the centre of the Slore's power. His former aide, the secret police chief, General Khin Nyunt, is 'Secretary One'. Behind sunglasses Khin Nyunt's pudgy face appears at least five times a day in the New Light Of Myanmar. His seminal work goes under the catchy title, The Conspiracy Of Treasonous Minions Within The Myanmar Naing-Ngan And Traitorous Cohorts Abroad. One wonders how many of the gallery of faces in its pages are dead. Pol Pot and his gang turned out similar tracts. This is the man whose job is the silencing of 'heretics': those like the lawyer Nay Min, serving 14 years for 'spreading rumours' to the BBC, and the Unicef researcher Khin Zaw Win, serving 15 years for sending 'fabricated news' to the UN, and the writer San San Nwe, sentenced to 10 years for 'spreading false information injurious to the state'. Last year the general subjected a US senator, John McCain, to an hour-long harangue about how the Slorc were holding back the 'red tide', then played him a videotape showing 'communists' beheading villagers with machetes: footage so sickening that McCain's wife had to leave the room. The aim was to convince the senator that Aung San Suu Kyi was a front for 'red subversives'. The taxi dropped us far from the long green fence of number 54 University Avenue. Our cameras were concealed in shoulder bags; a figure in sunglasses stood up to watch us. We peered through a hole in the corrugated iron gate and a face asked our names. Inside, another sunglasses told us to write down our names and occupations. We then crossed an imaginary line into friendly territory and were greeted warmly by Suu Kyi's assistant, U Win Htein, who was arrested with her and spent six years in prison, mostly in solitary confinement. He led us into the house, a stately pile fallen on hard times, overlooking a garden that tumbles down to Inya Lake and to a trip-wire, a reminder that this was one woman's prison.

Aung San Suu Kyi wore silk and orchids in her hair. She is a striking, glamorous figure who looks much younger than her 50 years and appears at first to carry her suffering lightly. Only in repose does her face offer a glimpse of the cost and the grit that has seen her through, though when she laughs this vanishes; it is like a blind closed and open.

We talked in a room dominated by a huge portrait of the father she barely knew, painted in the style of Andy Warhol by the artist Soe Moe at the height of the 1988 uprising. I asked her if her release from house arrest was a cynical exercise by the regime to give itself a human face. "I think they also miscalculated," she replied, "that the National League For Democracy was a spent force and that releasing me was not going to make any difference . . . " "But with such a brute force confronting you, how do you reclaim the power you won at the ballot box?" "We are not the first people to face this dilemma. In Buddhism we are taught the four basic ingredients for success: first, you must have the will to want it: then you must have the right kind of attitude; then you must have the perseverance, then wisdom . . . " What struck me was her extraordinary optimism, fuelled, it seemed, by her Buddhist principles that draw a stark contrast with the realities outside. This changed when I mentioned foreign investment. I said that the Foreign Office minister, Jeremy Hanley, had told Parliament that "through commercial contacts with democratic nations such as Britain, the Burmese people will gain experience of democratic principles".

She laughed. "Not in the least bit, because the so-called market economy is only open to some. Investors will help only a small elite to get richer and richer. This works against the very idea of democracy because the gap between rich and poor is growing all the time. The same applies to tourism. They should stay away until we are a democracy. Look at the forced labour that is going on all over the country. A lot of it is aimed at the tourist trade. It's very painful. Roads and bridges are built at the expense of the people. If you cannot provide one labourer you are fined. If you cannot afford the fine, the children are forced to labour." In his moving introduction to Freedom From Fear, a collection of essays by and about Aung San Suu Kyi, Michael Aris quotes from a letter she wrote him shortly before they married: "I only ask one thing: that should my people need me, you would help me to do my duty by them . . . if we love and cherish each other as much as we can while we can, I am sure love and compassion will triumph in the end." I reminded her about this. "I asked him," she said, "to be sympathetic when the time came . . . and he said, 'yes' . . . During my house arrest the longest period we were out of touch was two years and four or five months. I missed my family, and I worried about my sons very much because the young one was only 12, and he had to be put into boarding school. But then I'd remind myself that the families of my colleagues in prison were far worse

off." She revealed that in her isolation she had difficulty breathing and would lie awake listening to the thump-thump of her heart, wondering if it would fail. There were times when she did not get enough to eat and her weight fell to 90 pounds.

"Weren't you terrified?" I asked.

"When I was small," she said, "it was in this house that I conquered my fear of the dark. I just wandered around in the darkness and by the end, I knew all the demons weren't there." During the first years of her house arrest soldiers were ordered to lie with their ears to the ground so as to detect her 'tunnelling' to the house next door. They failed to grasp that she had no intention of escaping, or seeking exile. Outside, her name became a byword; and people would pass her house just to be reassured by the sound of her playing her piano. When it stopped there were rumours that she was dead. "That was when the string broke," she said. "I was pumping too hard. I have a hot temper, so I took it out on the piano!" "Will Burma be free in the foreseeable future?" "Yes!" she replied unhesitatingly.

"That's not just a dream?" "No, I calculate it from the will of the people and the current of world opinion . . . I knew I'd be free . . . some day." The next day I joined the crowd outside her gate waiting for her to speak. The people were different from any I had seen; they were smiling, talking freely with each other, as if waiting for a gig to start. There were betel nut sellers and cheroot sellers and a man with a block of ice ingeniously balanced in a red sock, selling cups of cold water. With the grace and courtesy that is never deferential and is so much part of the Burmese character, people made way for the foreign Gulliver, offering a cushion for me to sit on.

When Aung San Suu Kyi appeared she was flanked by two other figures of principle and courage: General Tin Oo and U Kyi Maung, a former colonel, the vice-chairmen of the NLD, both of whom have spent years in prison. The clapping and whooping lasted minutes. She now looked grey and drawn. Yet she had people in stitches as she carefully mocked the dictatorship, using irony and parable (so I was told; she spoke only in Burmese). As they laughed I counted the spooks in sunglasses, filming, photographing, watching. Their arbitrary power was like a presence. Recently a young man tried to ease the crush by moving the barrier and was bundled away and given a two-year sentence.

At the end of her speech people asked questions. She leaned over the spikes in the fence and listened intently, replying expressively. An old monk pushed through and asked her if she would join him in prayer; and she did. Most did not linger. A man told me he never went straight home after a meeting. "If they follow you," he said, "things start to happen. The power goes off; the kids are sent home crying from school." When I asked him if 1988 could happen again, this time successfully, he said: "Imagine a zebra crossing. The traffic never seems to stop for the pedestrians. One or two dart across. The majority wait impatiently at the kerb, then they surge across, until the traffic has lost all its power. Well, we are all back at the kerb now, waiting impatiently." At that, he looked over my shoulder and walked quickly away.

Desmond Tutu - like Aung San Suu Kyi, a Nobel Peace Prize winner - said recently, "International pressure can change the situation in Burma. Tough sanctions, not constructive engagement, finally brought about a new South Africa. This is the only language that tyrants understand." What is hopeful is that there is the promise of sanctions in a remarkable disinvestment campaign already well underway in America. Based on the boycott of apartheid South Africa, selective purchasing laws have been enacted by a growing number of US cities, including San Francisco. These make illegal municipal contracts with companies that trade with or invest in Burma. Last week New York State was considering similar legislation; and one of the biggest investors in Burma, Pepsi Cola, with its headquarters in upstate New York, has withdrawn.

A Massachusetts Representative, Byron Rushing, who has written a selective purchasing law for his own state, told me: "In the case of South Africa, we were able to put pressure on a whole range of companies, like General Motors, Coca-Cola, Pepsi Cola, and most eventually withdrew. And that really added to the pressure on the white government. That was a victory. As for Burma, it's not going to happen overnight, but we have started. The civilised world should follow."

