THE FORGOTTEN WAR IN BURMA

Introduction

Imagine if . . .
Imagine if the prime minister of Canada decided to move the nation’s capital from Ottawa to Sioux Lookout, Ontario. Imagine if the reason for doing this was based on the need to relocate the government to a more remote area for fear of a coup d’état by dissident factions within the nation. Then imagine that the fear of a coup is warranted since many people in Canada live in abject poverty and the Canadian military routinely wages war on the nation’s ethnic minority groups. In this imaginary scenario, the Canadian government is the epitome of xenophobia—possessing a powerful fear of potential enemies—seeing bogeymen around every corner, fearing invasion from foreign powers, and, most of all, being terrified of what its own citizenry might do to them given the opportunity.

Such a scenario is dystopian in the eyes of most Canadians. Canada has a record of honouring human rights, promoting democratic values, and defending the interests of minority groups. However, many Canadian immigrants come to our nation having left scenarios like the imaginary one posed above. Such a scenario is dystopian in the eyes of most Canadians. Canada has a record of honouring human rights, promoting democratic values, and defending the interests of minority groups. However, many Canadian immigrants come to our nation having left scenarios like the imaginary one posed above. Such a scenario is dystopian in the eyes of most Canadians. Canada has a record of honouring human rights, promoting democratic values, and defending the interests of minority groups. However, many Canadian immigrants come to our nation having left scenarios like the imaginary one posed above. Such a scenario is dystopian in the eyes of most Canadians. Canada has a record of honouring human rights, promoting democratic values, and defending the interests of minority groups. However, many Canadian immigrants come to our nation having left scenarios like the imaginary one posed above. Such a scenario is dystopian in the eyes of most Canadians. Canada has a record of honouring human rights, promoting democratic values, and defending the interests of minority groups. However, many Canadian immigrants come to our nation having left scenarios like the imaginary one posed above. Such a scenario is dystopian in the eyes of most Canadians. Canada has a record of honouring human rights, promoting democratic values, and defending the interests of minority groups. However, many Canadian immigrants come to our nation having left scenarios like the imaginary one posed above.

A Nation of Promise
While its colonial ties with Britain did prove problematic at times for Burma, it was the ability to broker a deal with the British at the end of the Second World War that made Burma the potential bright light of South Asia. Envied by many for its abundance of natural resources and the organization of its economy, many believed that Burma could become a major player on the world stage. By 1945, several groups within Burma had positioned themselves to lead an independent nation as the British began to relinquish control of the colony. However, in 1947, the infighting began as Aung San, the founder of the independence movement, was assassinated by rivals. Once the British granted full independence to Burma, the wheels for ethnic conflict were set in motion. Civil war between the dominant Burmese and several other ethnic minority groups erupted. While Burma strove to contain the conflict with modest democratic reforms, hard-liners in the military began to position themselves as dictators of the nation. In 1962 Ne Win, a commander in the army, took the reigns of power via a coup. While the civil war raged on, Ne Win and his military government put a stranglehold on the ethnic groups. Minority groups were kept in line by use of terror: the torching of villages, the rape and murder of citizens, mass arrests, executions, and forced emigration. Meanwhile the government did whatever it wanted.

It wasn’t until 1988 that any serious threat was posed to Ne Win. When the dictator decided to devalue the nation’s currency, many people lost their life savings. Protests ensued, Ne Win was forced out of office, and the army came down hard on the people. As many as 3 000 were killed in skirmishes between the military and progressive, pro-democracy groups. Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of the independence leader killed in 1947, took the lead of the National League for Democracy (NLD) and rallied the people behind democratic reform. In 1990, the NLD won a shock-
Further Research
To stay informed about events in Burma, consider a visit to the following Web sites:
www.myanmar.com and www.myanmar-information.net. These are government-directed. For more information about the plight and point of view of the Karen people visit www.womenofburma.org and www.karenpeople.org. For more on Karen human rights, go to www.khrg.org.

ing, landslide victory in the nation’s parliamentary elections despite the fact that the military government had declared martial law and had prevented Aung San Suu Kyi from campaigning by placing her under house arrest. For her efforts, Suu Kyi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991.

Xenophobia and the Karens
Instead of accepting the will of its people after the election results were announced, the military junta strengthened its grip on the nation. The election results were ignored. The government changed the country’s name from Burma to Myanmar to more effectively reflect the Burmese language of the ruling class. Defence spending went up as the government tripled the size of its army. Today, Burma has the second largest army in Southeast Asia, almost 500 000 strong. It spends five times more on its military than it does on health care and education combined. Meanwhile, the people of Burma live in poverty, while the ruling class lives like kings. The average income is $10 to $20 per month. The private banking system is in disrepair, and the nation’s currency is virtually worthless.

The people feeling the brunt of the regime’s xenophobic policies are the nation’s ethnic minorities. No group has been hit harder than the Karens. Most of the Karen community lives in the state of Karen on the southeast side of Burma that shares a border with Thailand. Since the civil war began many of the Karen people have been murdered by the Burmese army. Thousands have fled their homes and crossed the border into Thailand. Some have been living in Thai refugee camps for as long as 30 years. Despite efforts to organize guerilla armies to combat the national army, the situation at present can only be described as dire. The government has the power, and the people have seen their fighting efforts overwhelmed by a much better equipped and trained military force.

Conclusion
In a surprising move in fall 2005, the regime decided to move the capital from Yangon (Rangoon) over 300 kilometres north to the city of Pyinmana. While the military rulers claimed that the move was designed to make the government more accessible because Pyinmana is more centrally located, many believe that the move was designed to protect the government from a potential coup. The shift deep into the jungles of Burma allows the government of Burma to isolate itself even further from the reality of the people it governs. Meanwhile, the nation becomes poorer, the people become more destitute, and the military junta continues to do whatever it wants. The dystopian nightmare—the one that Canadians find unimaginable—is a reality for the people of Burma.

Questions
1. Why does the author use the “Imagine if . . .” scenario at the beginning of the article?
2. How did Burma change from a nation of great promise to a nation caught in the grips of civil war?
3. Who is Aung San Suu Kyi?
4. Describe three things that demonstrate the difficulties of being a citizen of Burma today.
5. Why did the government decide to move the capital from Yangon to Pyinmana?
6. Should anything that happens in Burma be of interest to Canadians? Explain.
THE FORGOTTEN WAR IN BURMA

Video Review

View the documentary and complete the questions in the spaces provided.

1. How long has Delia Si lived without a home or a country? _______________

2. In what country is the refugee camp where Delia Si has been living? ________________________________

3. Who are the Karens?

4. How many Karens are there in Burma? ________________________________

5. Why is the work of the Burma issues video team so dangerous?

6. Why does Phillip Thornton believe Burma should be treated as an international problem?

7. How many refugees does Thornton think are living in refugee camps?

8. How many refugees does Thornton say are in jungle hideouts in Burma?

9. Describe the mission and work of the 300 backpack medics who sneak into Burma whenever they get a chance.

10. How will the orientation class prepare Delia Si for life in Canada?

11. How difficult do you think it will be for Delia Si to settle in Canada?

12. How many Karen people will be heading to Canada in 2007? ____________

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Country Profile

Why might Burma be a nation where military security is a central issue?

Read the following country profile and complete the activity that follows.

Official name: Union of Myanmar – formerly known as Burma
Capital: Pyinmana – capital moved 300 km north to Pyinmana from Yangon in 2006
Largest city: Yangon – formerly known as Rangoon
Population: 50.7 million (UN, 2005)
Life expectancy: Men - 57 years; Women - 63 years (UN)
Ethnic groups*: Burman (68%), Shan (9%), Karen (7%), Rakhine (4%), Chinese (3%), Indian (2%), Mon (2%), other (5%)
Major languages: Burmese and many other indigenous ethnic languages
Major religions*: Buddhism (89%), Christianity (4%), Islam (4%)
Area: 676 552 square kilometers
Main exports: Teak, pulses (edible seeds) and beans, prawns, fish, rice and opiates
Type of government: Military dictatorship known as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). The SPDC was formerly known as the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC).
Head of state: Than Shwe, Chairman of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC); Than Shwe is also the defence minister.
Vice-chairman: Maung Aye
Prime minister: Soe Win
Foreign minister: Nyan Win
Home affairs minister: Maung Oo
Media: All media are state controlled; information disseminated is essentially SPDC propaganda.

Activity

Review the facts listed above to see if any have changed since February 2007. Investigate the changes and report your findings to the class.
THE FORGOTTEN WAR IN BURMA

Statistical Analysis

Review the following statistics and complete the activity that follows.

Table #1: Number of people from Burma in Thailand’s refugee camps (August 2006)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Camp</th>
<th># of families</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mae Sot</td>
<td>Mae La</td>
<td>10 272</td>
<td>51 153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Um Pheim Mai</td>
<td>3603</td>
<td>20 447</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North</td>
<td>Mae Ra Moe</td>
<td>2562</td>
<td>15 225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mae La Oo*</td>
<td>2720</td>
<td>16 013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>Noh Poe</td>
<td>3720</td>
<td>13 956</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ban Dong Yang</td>
<td>934</td>
<td>4417</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Htam Him</td>
<td>1823</td>
<td>9775</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25 634</td>
<td>130 986</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


*Mae La Oo is the refugee camp in a remote jungle area of Thailand that was deemed so destitute that a number of nations worked with the United Nations to ensure that it was evacuated and shut down. Ten countries, including Canada, agreed to accept refugees so that the camp could be closed.

Analysis

What steps does the government of Thailand need to take to address the massive number of people from Burma seeking safe haven in their country? In your view how should the international community respond to the refugee crisis in Burma? Explain.

Table #2: Refugees to Canada – 1996-2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government-assisted</td>
<td>7869</td>
<td>7711</td>
<td>7432</td>
<td>7444</td>
<td>10 671</td>
<td>8697</td>
<td>7505</td>
<td>7506</td>
<td>7411</td>
<td>7416</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>refugees</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privately sponsored</td>
<td>3189</td>
<td>2742</td>
<td>2267</td>
<td>2348</td>
<td>2933</td>
<td>3576</td>
<td>3052</td>
<td>3252</td>
<td>3116</td>
<td>2976</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>refugees</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refugees landed in Canada</td>
<td>13 462</td>
<td>10 634</td>
<td>10 181</td>
<td>11 797</td>
<td>12 993</td>
<td>11 897</td>
<td>10 546</td>
<td>11 267</td>
<td>15 901</td>
<td>19 935</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refugee dependants</td>
<td>3 958</td>
<td>3 221</td>
<td>2 962</td>
<td>2 809</td>
<td>3 495</td>
<td>3 749</td>
<td>4 021</td>
<td>3 959</td>
<td>6 259</td>
<td>5 441</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Refugees</td>
<td>28 478</td>
<td>24 308</td>
<td>22 842</td>
<td>24 398</td>
<td>30 092</td>
<td>27 919</td>
<td>25 124</td>
<td>25 984</td>
<td>32 687</td>
<td>35 768</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analysis
Should Canada make more of an effort to take more refugees from Burma? Why? Why not?

Table #3: Permanent Residents Admitted to Canada in 2005 by Source Area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Africa and the Middle East</td>
<td>49 277</td>
<td>18.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia and Pacific</td>
<td>138 057</td>
<td>52.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South and Central America</td>
<td>24 638</td>
<td>9.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>9 262</td>
<td>3.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe and the U. K.</td>
<td>40 909</td>
<td>15.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source Area Not Stated</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>262 236</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Analysis
Do the numbers in the chart above surprise you? Did you realize that Canada accepts as many immigrants as is indicated above? Explain your answer with specific reference to information found in the chart.

Table #4: Top 15 Immigrant Source Countries (2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th># of immigrants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. China</td>
<td>42 291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. India</td>
<td>33 146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Philippines</td>
<td>17 525</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Pakistan</td>
<td>13 576</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. United States</td>
<td>9262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Colombia</td>
<td>6031</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. United Kingdom</td>
<td>5865</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. The Republic of Korea</td>
<td>5819</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>262 236</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th># of immigrants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9. Iran</td>
<td>5502</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. France</td>
<td>5430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Romania</td>
<td>4964</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Sri Lanka</td>
<td>4690</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Russia</td>
<td>3607</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Taiwan</td>
<td>3092</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Hong Kong</td>
<td>1784</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other countries</td>
<td>118 061</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Analysis
Burma is not mentioned in the list above. Why isn't Burma more of a priority for Canada? Do you think Canada should be seeking more immigrants from Burma?

Why do you think so many people are choosing to immigrate to Canada?
THE FORGOTTEN WAR IN BURMA

Timeline

Read the following timeline and complete the activity that follows.

1057 The first unified Burmese state is founded.

1287 Kublai Kahn conquers Burma.

1824-1826 First Anglo-Burmese War – The treaty ending the war sees part of Burma ceded to British India.

1852 The Second Anglo-Burmese War – Britain annexes lower Burma.

1885-1886 Burma becomes a province of British India.

1887 The British separate Burma from India; Burma declared a crown colony.

1942 Japan invades and occupies Burma.

1945 Japan invades and occupies Burma.

1945 Britain liberates Burma from the Japanese with the help of Aung San.

1947 U Saw, Aung San’s main political rival, assassinates Aung San and six members of his interim government; U Nu leads the new government.

1948 Burma becomes independent; U Nu becomes prime minister.

1960 U Nu’s party wins the national election; military expresses uneasiness with U Nu’s strong support for Buddhism as the state religion and his apparent tolerance of separatist movements among the nation’s ethnic minorities.

1962 General Ne Win stages a coup, ousting U Nu and his government; Burma becomes a military dictatorship with a single-party governing the nation. The period of mass oppression begins.

1974 A new constitution is introduced, solidifying Ne Win’s stranglehold on the nation.

1975 Opposition National Democratic Front is formed by regionally based minority groups; guerilla attacks by insurgent opposed to Ne Win begin.

1981 San Yu, a retired general, assumes the presidency; Ne Win remains chairman of the ruling Socialist Program Party.

1982 Law is passed that designates people of non-indigenous background (e.g., the Karens) “associate citizens”; the law effectively prevents “associate citizens” from taking public office.

1987 Burma’s economy collapses; rioting ensues; in the aftermath Ne Win is forced from office.

1988 Up to 3000 people are killed in anti-government riots. The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) is formed to bolster the strength of the ruling military junta.

1989 The SLORC declares martial law, arresting thousands of people, many of whom are human rights and democracy advocates; Burma is renamed Myanmar, with the capital, Rangoon, becoming Yangon. The most influential leader of the democracy movement, Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of Aung San, is put under house arrest.

1990 Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy (NLD) wins a landslide victory in parliamentary elections; the results are ignored by the SLORC.
1991 Aung San Suu Kyi wins the Nobel Peace Prize for her commitment to peaceful, democratic change in Burma; she is afraid to leave the country to accept the prize for fear that she would be prevented from returning.

1992 Than Shwe becomes SLORC chairman, prime minister, and defence minister; some political prisoners are freed in an effort to improve Burma’s international reputation.

1995 After six years of house arrest, Aung San Suu Kyi is released.

1996 Aung San Suu Kyi attends an NLD pro-democracy meeting; the SLORC arrests 200 people before they arrive at the meeting.

1997 SLORC changes its name to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC); more pro-democracy supporters are released from prison.

1999 Aung San Suu Kyi’s husband, Michael Aris, dies of cancer in Britain; she is prevented from visiting him prior to his death.

2000 Aung San Suu Kyi begins secret talks with the SPDC; the same year she finds herself under house arrest.

2001 SPDC claims the release of 200 pro-democracy prisoners is a reflection of a progressive trend toward democracy; Aung San Suu Kyi remains under house arrest.

2002 Aung San Suu Kyi is released from house arrest after nearly 20 months.

2003 Aung San Suu Kyi finds herself back under house arrest (the SPDC calls her incarceration “protective custody”); Khin Nyunt becomes prime minister and speaks of drafting a new constitution as part of “road map” to democracy; later that year the UN human rights envoy visits Burma.

2004 The SPDC and the Karen National Union agree to a ceasefire; a constitutional convention begins despite a boycott by the NLD, whose leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, remains under house arrest.

2005 Burma moves its seat of government to a new isolated site near the town of Pyinmana.

2007 China and Russia veto a draft U.S. resolution at the UN Security Council urging Burma to stop persecuting minority and opposition groups.

Source: BBC News – Timeline: Burma, bbc.co.uk

Activity

Use a highlight marker to indicate the 10 most important events on the timeline. Write the top five on a separate sheet of paper in order of importance. Explain your ranking in a 75- to 100-word paragraph.
THE FORGOTTEN WAR IN BURMA

Aung San Suu Kyi

The one ray of hope for the oppressed people of Burma comes from the leader of the National League for Democracy (NLD), Aung San Suu Kyi. She is the daughter of Aung San, the founder of the independence movement that resulted in Burma shedding its British colonial status. Aung San was assassinated by his main political rivals in 1947. His daughter was just two years old at the time. Raised by her mother, Suu Kyi gained strength from her mother’s rise to power as a Burmese diplomat in the 1950s and 60s. Suu Kyi was exposed to the world outside of Burma. She was educated in India and Britain before marrying Michael Aris, a scholar of Tibetan culture, and starting a family in the early 70s.

Suu Kyi’s political life began in 1988 when she returned to Burma to care for her ailing mother. Burma was in political turmoil at the time. The nation’s leader, General Ne Win, was forced from power, and the new military regime turned its guns on pro-democracy demonstrators in a show of force resulting in the deaths of 3,000 people. Aung San Suu Kyi could not sit idly by and watch these events unfold. With the non-violent, non-co-operation philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi as her inspiration, Suu Kyi stepped into the political spotlight and helped found the National League for Democracy. The government responded by placing her under house arrest. Despite his ill health, Aris tried to make his way to Burma; he was denied an entry visa by the military government. Suu Kyi remained in Burma and, in March 1999, Michael Aris died. With her husband dead and her two sons living in Britain, Suu Kyi found herself living in almost complete isolation.

International pressure for a democratic Burma has grown slowly over the years. After Suu Kyi’s Nobel Peace Prize win in 1991, many people around the world became aware of the plight of the people of Burma. Recently, the United Nations has sent several high-profile officials to Burma to put diplomatic pressure on the government while openly endorsing the platform of Aung San Suu Kyi. In late 2006, the United States attempted to pass a UN resolution condemning the behaviour of the Burma government toward its citizens. The resolution was vetoed by the Chinese and the Russians.

Despite international pressure, the military government of Burma is intent on bringing down Suu Kyi. In early 2007, she was accused of income tax

“Suu Kyi’s struggle is one of the most extraordinary examples of civil courage in Asia in recent decades. She has become an important symbol in the struggle against oppression.” — Norwegian Nobel Committee, 1991

in the struggle against Burma’s military government.

After the nullification of the 1990 vote, Burma sank deeper into despair. The government expanded the military and stepped up the war on the nation’s minority groups. Meanwhile, Suu Kyi had to deal with some of her own personal despair. In 1995, Suu Kyi’s husband, Michael Aris, was diagnosed with prostate cancer in Britain. She made plans to be with her husband, but the government made it clear that, if she left Burma, she would not be allowed back in. Despite his ill health, Aris tried to make his way to Burma; he was denied an entry visa by the military government. Suu Kyi remained in Burma and, in March 1999, Michael Aris died. With her husband dead and her two sons living in Britain, Suu Kyi found herself living in almost complete isolation.

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evassion by a government newspaper that claimed her Noble Peace Prize money should have been treated as taxable income. Suu Kyi spent the money on promoting the call for democracy in Burma on the international stage. To her credit, she remains open to dialogue with the Burma government and hopes to negotiate some kind of a peace deal for the people of Burma. Suu Kyi continues to advocate for democratic reform and is the symbol of the resistance movement. She has been freed from house arrest on a number of occasions only to be re-arrested a short time later. Since her initial arrest in 1990, Suu Kyi has spent 11 years in detention. Her commitment to non-violent, democratic reform has remained steadfast. She and her supporters believe that the dictatorship will inevitably fall and a democracy advocating for the rights of all of the people of Burma will emerge.

To Consider
Aung San Suu Kyi has always maintained that her family background compelled her to take a lead role in the fight to release Burma from the grip of autocratic rulers. Do you believe that her family shaped her political destiny? Explain.

Quote
“It is not power that corrupts but fear. Fear of losing power corrupts those who wield it and fear of the scourge of power corrupts those who are subject to it.” – Aung San Suu Kyi

(Women in World History Curriculum, www.womeninworldhistory.com/contemporary-06.html)
THE FORGOTTEN WAR IN BURMA

Document Analysis: Accepting the Nobel Peace Prize

This is the acceptance speech delivered on behalf of Aung San Suu Kyi, by her son Alexander Aris on the occasion of the award of the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, December 10, 1991. It is reprinted with permission of The Nobel Foundation.

Your Majesties, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I stand before you here today to accept on behalf of my mother, Aung San Suu Kyi, this greatest of prizes, the Nobel Prize for Peace. Because circumstances do not permit my mother to be here in person, I will do my best to convey the sentiments I believe she would express.

Firstly, I know that she would begin by saying that she accepts the Nobel Prize for Peace not in her own name but in the name of all the people of Burma. She would say that this prize belongs not to her but to all those men, women, and children who, even as I speak, continue to sacrifice their wellbeing, their freedom, and their lives in pursuit of a democratic Burma. Theirs is the prize and theirs will be the eventual victory in Burma’s long struggle for peace, freedom, and democracy.

Speaking as her son, however, I would add that I personally believe that by her own dedication and personal sacrifice she has come to be a worthy symbol through whom the plight of all the people of Burma may be recognized. And no one must underestimate that plight. The plight of those in the countryside and towns, living in poverty and destitution, those in prison, battered and tortured; the plight of the young people, the hope of Burma, dying of malaria in the jungles to which they have fled; that of the Buddhist monks, beaten and dishonoured. Nor should we forget the many senior and highly respected leaders besides my mother who are all incarcerated. It is on their behalf that I thank you, from my heart, for this supreme honour. The Burmese people can today hold their heads a little higher in the knowledge that in this far distant land their suffering has been heard and heeded.

We must also remember that the lonely struggle taking place in a heavily guarded compound in Rangoon is part of the much larger struggle, worldwide, for the emancipation of the human spirit from political tyranny and psychological subjection. The Prize, I feel sure, is also intended to honour all those engaged in this struggle wherever they may be. It is not without reason that today’s events in Oslo fall on the International Human Rights Day, celebrated throughout the world.

Mr. Chairman, the whole international community has applauded the choice of your committee. Just a few days ago, the United Nations passed a unanimous and historic resolution welcoming Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar’s statement on the significance of this award and endorsing his repeated appeals for my mother’s early release from detention. Universal concern at the grave human rights situation in Burma was clearly expressed. Alone and isolated among the entire nations of the world a single dissenting voice was heard, from the military junta in Rangoon, too late and too weak.

This regime has through almost 30 years of misrule reduced the once prosperous “Golden Land” of Burma to one of the world’s most economically destitute nations. In their heart of hearts even those in power now in Rangoon must know that their eventual fate will be that of all totalitarian
regimes who seek to impose their authority through fear, repression, and hatred. When the present Burmese struggle for democracy erupted onto the streets in 1988, it was the first of what became an international tidal wave of such movements throughout Eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa. Today, in 1991, Burma stands conspicuous in its continued suffering at the hands of a repressive, intransigent junta, the State Law and Order Restoration Council. However, the example of those nations which have successfully achieved democracy holds out an important message to the Burmese people; that, in the last resort, through the sheer economic unworkability of totalitarianism this present regime will be swept away. And today in the face of rising inflation, a mismanaged economy and near worthless Kyat, the Burmese government is undoubtedly reaping as it has sown.

However, it is my deepest hope that it will not be in the face of complete economic collapse that the regime will fall, but that the ruling junta may yet heed such appeals to basic humanity as that which the Nobel Committee has expressed in its award of this year’s prize. I know that within the military government there are those to whom the present policies of fear and repression are abhorrent, violating as they do the most sacred principles of Burma’s Buddhist heritage. This is no empty wishful thinking but a conviction my mother reached in the course of her dealings with those in positions of authority, illustrated by the election victories of her party in constituencies comprised almost exclusively of military personnel and their families. It is my profoundest wish that these elements for moderation and reconciliation among those now in authority may make their sentiments felt in Burma’s hour of deepest need.

I know that if she were free today my mother would, in thanking you, also ask you to pray that the oppressors and the oppressed should throw down their weapons and join together to build a nation founded on humanity in the spirit of peace.

Although my mother is often described as a political dissident who strives by peaceful means for democratic change, we should remember that her quest is basically spiritual. As she has said, “The quintessential revolution is that of the spirit,” and she has written of the “essential spiritual aims” of the struggle. The realization of this depends solely on human responsibility. At the root of that responsibility lies, and I quote, “the concept of perfection, the urge to achieve it, the intelligence to find a path towards it, and the will to follow that path if not to the end, at least the distance needed to rise above individual limitation . . .” “To live the full life,” she says, “one must have the courage to bear the responsibility of the needs of others . . . one must want to bear this responsibility.” And she links this firmly to her faith when she writes, “. . . Buddhism, the foundation of traditional Burmese culture, places the greatest value on man, who alone of all beings can achieve the supreme state of Buddhahood. Each man has in him the potential to realize the truth through his own will and endeavour and to help others to realize it.”

Finally she says, “The quest for democracy in Burma is the struggle of a people to live whole, meaningful lives as free and equal members of the world community. It is part of the unceasing human endeavour to prove that the spirit of man can transcend the flaws of his nature.”

This is the second time that my younger brother and I have accepted a great prize for my mother in Norway. Last year we travelled to Bergen to receive for her the Thorolf Rafto Prize for Human Rights, a wonderful prelude to this year’s event. By now we have a very special feeling for the people of Norway. It is my hope that
soon my mother will be able to share this feeling and to speak directly for herself instead of through me.

Meanwhile this tremendous support for her and the people of Burma has served to bring together two peoples from opposite ends of the Earth. I believe much will follow from the links now forged.

It only remains for me to thank you all from the bottom of my heart. Let us hope and pray that from today the wounds start to heal and that in the years to come the 1991 Nobel Prize for Peace will be seen as a historic step towards the achievement of true peace in Burma. The lessons of the past will not be forgotten, but it is our hope for the future that we celebrate today.

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Activity
Pick two of the excerpts below and write a personal response to them in a brief paragraph.

1. “She would say that this prize belongs not to her but to all those men, women, and children who, even as I speak, continue to sacrifice their wellbeing, their freedom, and their lives in pursuit of a democratic Burma.”

2. “The Prize, I feel sure, is also intended to honour all those engaged in this struggle wherever they may be.”

3. “In their heart of hearts even those in power now in Rangoon must know that their eventual fate will be that of all totalitarian regimes who seek to impose their authority through fear, repression, and hatred.”

4. “Although my mother is often described as a political dissident who strives by peaceful means for democratic change, we should remember that her quest is basically spiritual.”

5. “The quest for democracy in Burma is the struggle of a people to live whole, meaningful lives as free and equal members of the world community. It is part of the unceasing human endeavour to prove that the spirit of man can transcend the flaws of his nature.” — Aung San Suu Kyi
THE FORGOTTEN WAR IN BURMA

Activity: You Make the Choice

The situation of the Karens of Burma is too painful for most people living in Canada to comprehend. It is hard to imagine a government turning on the vulnerable members of its minority groups—in effect, forcing them to flee to foreign lands to save their own lives. However, such has been the case for the Karens. Your task in this exercise is to pick one of the following scenarios and write a letter explaining your position to someone directly affected by your decision.

Scenario #1
You are living in a UN refugee camp for displaced Karens in Thailand. The government of Canada has offered you and your family the opportunity to leave the camp and move to Canada. However, you are a doctor and have been working in the camp to help others maintain their precarious grip on their own health. To leave the camp will be devastating to those working on the medical team at the camp’s medical centre.

What will you do?
• Stay in the camp with your family and continue working as a doctor.
• Stay in the camp and continue working as a doctor while allowing your family to proceed to Canada.
• Leave the camp to start a new life with your family in Canada.

Write a letter to the head of the camp’s medical team explaining your answer.
Length: 200-250 words

Scenario #2
You are living in a remote village in southeastern Burma. You have learned that government forces have recently burned a neighbouring village to the ground. Rumours of rape and murder in the attack are creating a climate of fear within your community. It appears that your village may be next on the government’s attack list. You have tried to lay low for years, but it appears that, as a Karen, it may be time to make your move.

What will you do?
• Stay in the village and fight the army when they arrive.
• Leave your village and join Karen resistance fighters in their guerilla war against the army.
• Take your family and move to a UN refugee camp in Thailand.

Write a letter to your neighbour in the village explaining your decision.
Length: 200-250 words
Scenario #3
The Canadian government has made its decision. You, your spouse, and two children have been granted refugee status. However, your best friend and his family will have to remain in the camp. This is the opportunity you have been waiting for; however, you are heartbroken at the idea of having to leave your friend behind.

What do you do?
• Leave your friend behind and move to Canada, hoping one day that he and his family will be as lucky as you.
• Remain in the camp until such a time that both your family and your best friend’s family have a chance to leave together.
• Move to Canada and work with refugee groups to see about finding a sponsor for your friend and his family to facilitate their refugee claim.

Write a letter to your friend explaining your decision.
Length: 200-250 words