

Letter from Burma

Letter from Burma: Reunion, Union - 1

I have always thought of February as the very best month of the year. My father, my maternal grandfather, Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, men I loved and admired most were all born in February, so since childhood I have looked upon it as the month of goodness and heroism. An added glory of February is that the 12th (Lincoln's birthday) is Union Day, which marks the anniversary of the signing of an agreement between several ethnic nationalities of Burma to cooperate in efforts for the freedom of the country. This was an unprecedented political step and although the Panglong Agreement (so called after the name of the Shan town where it was signed in 1947) was not a perfect formula for unity, it represented the essence of the spirit of Union.



Aung San Suu Kyi leaves
NLD headquarters in Yangon,
Myanmar, on Oct. 27, 2011.
(Mainichi)

February this year has not to date failed my expectations. The NLD campaigns for the by-elections started at the end of January in the most auspicious way in Dawei in the southeast tail of Burma. It was my first visit there in twenty-three years and it was a joy and an inspiration to find that the support of our people of the Tenassarim had not diminished in strength of numbers or firmness of spirit. By the first week of February our party campaigns had gathered considerable momentum in spite of a few hitches. A proposed visit to Mandalay had to be postponed because of difficulties with regard to a suitable venue for a public rally. However, a trip to Patheingyi, capital of the Irrawaddy Division, and Myaungmya, my mother's home town, took place as planned.

We started out early in the morning from Rangoon, but progress was very slow as in all the villages along the way our supporters would come out to greet us, waving small NLD flags and proffering flowers and diverse gifts, including traditional painted parasols that came in very handy later that day. By the time we reached Patheingyi we were way behind schedule and the sun had already become uncomfortably hot. The divisional government had decreed that school attendance would be compulsory on that day, no civil servants would be allowed to take leave and that students of Pathingyi College would have to take "mini" examinations that would be linked to their eligibility to take the annual final examinations. These measures were obviously calculated to keep school children, college students and civil servants from coming out to demonstrate their support for the NLD. Nevertheless, there was a strong showing of young people among the crowds that greeted our party and a cavalcade of motorbikes accompanied us along the streets as we made our way to the football grounds where I gave a public address.

Many of the motorbikes accompanied us all the way to Myaungmya along a route that was largely a dirt track. We passed by many small hamlets sunk in abject poverty. The bright smiles and enthusiastic calls with which the inhabitants greeted us in spite of the heat and the dust and their destitution was heart rending. It brought home to us the enormity of our duty to try our utmost to help our people achieve a decent standard of living within a safe and secure environment.

As might have been expected, the people of Myaungmya welcomed me as a long absent member of the family. A high percentage of the population of the township was Karen, and they were present in large numbers at our rally, especially as our candidate for the elections was a much respected Karen teacher. Their colourful costumes added a touch of gaiety, and the enthusiasm and spirits of the gathering remained high despite the noonday sun that beat down mercilessly on us.

A very common Burmese expression is "ye-set," which means "drops of water." When we say to one another "this is ye-set" or "this is the meeting of ye-set," we mean that we have been brought together by a good karmic bonds between us. Traditionally, after we have performed an act of charity we pour some water from a jug into a bowl, drop by drop, and later pour the water into the earth that it may stand witness to our good deed. Those who are present to share the merit of this deed will be brought together again in the course of samsara by the bonds of "ye-set."

The second week of February was a time of "ye-set" for our Karen peoples and me. The seventh day of the month had found me among the Karens of my mother's hometown. On the tenth I was able to welcome to my home the Karen National Union/ Karen National Liberation Army delegation that had come for peace talks with the government. When I received a letter from the KNU/KNLA Supreme Headquarters asking if they could meet me in Rangoon after their peace talks at Naypyidaw, it seemed unbelievable. Were we at long last to be given the opportunity to meet those whom we had long thought of as friends and comrades in our quest for a Union of peace and prosperity throughout long years, years during which we had been distanced from them by geography and by political conditions? Within a short time of the arrival of the fourteen strong delegation it became clear that our hearts and minds had not been distanced by the circumstances that had created undesirable barriers between the peoples of our country. (By Aung San Suu Kyi)

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