

Witness Testimony: Paul Rush

The Revolution That Almost Was A Presentation by Paul Rush

For the US Commission on International Religious Freedom During the pre-dawn hours of September 27th, military trucks filled with Burmese soldiers stormed key monasteries in Rangoon. The pictures of blood-stained floors in monk's quarters and, later, of a Buddhist monk's badly beaten body lying face down in a stream, shocked us all. Later that morning, I was in the business center of a prominent hotel, reading the wire reports that were beginning to emerge. At ten minutes to 1 PM, I left the center to make my way down to the protests. I entered a restroom in the hotel to wash my hands. Two well-dressed men exited stalls and washed their hands in nearby sinks. If I was in a hurry, then the men seemed in an even bigger hurry. I took longer than usual, and observed the men as I walked out, 10 steps behind. An older, venerable looking Buddhist monk awaited them. In the context, something seemed ominous, and woefully wrong with this picture. The men quickly descended the staircase to the hotel lobby. Within seconds, an army jeep pulled up to the main entrance. Half a dozen soldiers with machine guns, grinning and joking, were packed in back. The monk, and the two men, got into the front of the jeep and drove into the direction of Sule Pagoda, the main rallying point for the protests. Though I could have no way to know precisely what this meant, whoever this monk was, he moved freely, and without fear-and, under the circumstances, he kept the suspicious company. A monk in exile, on the Thai/Burma border later explained to me that not all monks were following the path of enlightenment-and that some had chosen to use their position to inform the military government of their fellows engaging in, or supporting, the pro-democracy movement in Burma. Others were planted from a young age to be informers. Clearly, the monk in the military truck was not one of the many thousands who took part in the largest ever protests by monks in Burma. Nor did he seem to be adversely affected by the pre-dawn raids on more than a dozen monasteries around Rangoon. The people I saw in Burma-taxi drivers and shop keepers courageous enough to talk-echoed the same sentiment: they were deeply hurt and angered by the military dictators' violent actions against a sacred institution, and against their democracy heroes. They would never forget. A friend, and pro-democracy Burmese activist in exile said the following: "Buddhism is very sacred for Burmese. Monks are followers of Buddha -- sons of the Buddha. Monks are supposed to be untouchable," he said. "I was really surprised and shocked when they beat and killed the monks. If the SPDC can torture, beat and dare to kill the monks, they can torture and kill EVERYONE in our country. That means they will stop at nothing, and they will do anything. My people are now very depressed." I continued from the hotel toward Sule Pagoda. A monsoon rain delayed the protests by about 45 minutes. I was on the same street, and two short city blocks away from the Japanese journalist Kenji Nagai when he was killed-the soldiers were shooting in my direction. My camera was trained on a truckload of military arriving in the far intersection when I noticed that someone was down. There was so much noise and confusion, that I could only focus on one thing at a time. I zoomed in to the wounded man as he lay dying. Protesters later told me that a journalist had been shot. Even then, it didn't occur to me that the man on my tape was a colleague. I watched in horror over the next days, as CNN and the BBC ran images of Kenji Nagai being killed, over and over again. As I composed my next frame, I was distracted by the metallic jangle of a soldier's machine gun as he came barreling toward me. He wore a manic, terrified expression under his helmet. He knew my camera contained evidence of the atrocities. He grabbed me by the arm, but I broke free and escaped up a side street, with hundreds of pedestrians and fleeing protesters. Within minutes, the protesters regrouped on a parallel road and, despite the violence, boldly continued to march. I was the only western journalist to march with them until the military confronted us again, a couple of hours later. This time they stormed us with their trucks, firing into the crowd as they went. I filmed what I could, including the protesters as we hid in an apartment courtyard, then in a stairwell, and as we crouched our heads each time the soldiers fired from within the courtyard. The murderous events of the 1988 massacre in Burma were very clearly in our minds, and I was sure that the soldiers would open fire into the stairwell. The military didn't do this, of course; and relative to the 1988 massacre, they exercised great restraint-but only because they were forced to. The events of 1988 occurred in a media vacuum; the generals, and soldiers under their care, were free to do as they pleased. Now, nineteen years later, thanks to the Democratic Voice of Burma Television, several underground networks of courageous Burmese, and citizen journalists-the whole world was watching. The generals could play brinkmanship, but they couldn't bring events much beyond that brink without also toppling the regime. Their hands were tied. UN Special Envoy Ibrahim Gambari was scheduled to arrive in 36 hours; meanwhile, CNN and every major news network was receiving regular photo and video updates via the internet. Even so, the SPDC ruthlessly killed unarmed civilians in the streets. And we all fear that they've killed and tortured even more behind closed doors. They hunted their own people in alleyways, in stairwells; in their homes as they slept, and in monasteries. All of that, simply for demanding basic freedoms that we take for granted in the west. The events that came to a head on Sept. 27th, could have yielded a revolution, or another Tiananmen Square. Instead, the world saw an inconclusive outcome-a little of each, a reality that serves to remind us that the work of democracy is not done in Burma, that the Burmese people are angry, hurt and depressed. This inconclusive outcome seems to indicate a sequel. The people of Burma are withering; their ethnic minorities are being exterminated, their men, women and children suffering from malnutrition and the spread of communicable disease. Democracy and religion in Burma are very much flip sides of the same coin: they are about civic and spiritual understanding, the great yearning for each, and the sacrifices necessary to achieve them. Democracy and Buddhism especially, go hand in hand. The Buddhist monks spoke for the people when it was too dangerous for them to speak for themselves. They courageously defended the rights of the people who feed them, and they took a valiant stand against injustice and tyranny. Aung San Suu Kyi, Min Ko Naing, Ko Ko Gyi and many others have sacrificed their lives and freedom to see democracy take root. Democracy, and the yearning and struggle for it, cannot be separated from Buddhism. It cannot be separated from religion in Burma. The Burmese people, which includes the country's badly persecuted ethnic minorities, need the help of the international community to shed the yolk

of half a century of oppression by a minority of murderous military elite. That, I presume, is why this hearing is taking place here today. It's why the international community is still listening. The Burmese people want democracy; they yearn for democracy. It is why I join with you all today, to reveal the tremendous reservoirs of light struggling beneath the darkness of a tiny, unconscionable minority.