

People from Myanmar are saddened by events in their homeland

by Dan Olson, Minnesota Public Radio

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In 1988, Aung Ko was one of the protesters in Burma, renamed by the military rulers as Myanmar. The difference then with now is the rise of information technology, he says.

Aung Ko was 35 and a government lawyer when he and others took to the streets in Rangoon, renamed Yangon by the generals, to protest the military leaders seizure of the country's political system.

Ko, who now lives in St. Paul, says the world didn't hear much about the 1988 demonstrations. But now people inside the country and on the border with Thailand send pictures and accounts to the world.

"Internet and media, very high tech, so that the world knows right now what is going on," he says.

Benjamin Aung was another protester in 1988. He was a policeman in Myanmar at the time. Like Aung Ko, Benjamin Aung's views favoring political freedom placed him at risk for arrest and an uncertain fate.

He and his wife Priscilla were among the first refugees from Myanmar to settle in Minnesota.

Aung is doubtful that sanctions put in place by the United States against the Myanmar generals will have much effect because China is the country's most important economic partner.

"(In) Burma, (the) military can buy a lot of stuff from China," he says.

Benjamin Aung and Aung Ko are American citizens who have lived in Minnesota for years. They have little contact with their friends and family in Myanmar. Benjamin Aung says letters sent seldom arrive. Electronic communications are erratic and monitored by the regime. More recently, the military regime ordered Internet connections blocked.

Glen Hill is one of the few westerners to see first hand what's happened inside Myanmar recently. Hill is director of the Minnesota Food Association based near Stillwater. He and his family lived in Myanmar for five years until 2006. Hill worked there as a rural community development adviser for a Swiss aid organization.

He says the military's violent rule, the decay of the country's economy and infrastructure and recent price increases for gasoline motivated people to stand up to the ruling generals, who Hill believes are cornered.

"I don't think they're going to win this time. They'd really have to kill and arrest a lot of people before it would go down," he says.

The generals, when cornered, are trained to fight rather than talk, Hill says. That's why he says the only way to limit the bloodshed in Myanmar is for some group - either an ally or younger military leaders - to help the generals save face and be allowed to retire.

"If there is a way they can honorably leave, maybe leave the country or go to their mountain house and never be seen again -- there needs to be an outlet for them to leave with some dignity, because they are born and bred military soldiers and insulting or disgracing them is not going to lead to a good healing process," he says.

Hill argues Myanmar's most important trading partners, China, India and other neighbors, covet the country's reserves of oil, gas and timber. He says they may be more interested in preserving their access to the resources than advocating for reforms in the country.

Since Myanmar's independence from Great Britain 50 years ago, most of the rest of the world has paid little attention to the suffering of the people in Myanmar. The result is a largely lawless nation credited as one of the world's major suppliers of opium and methamphetamine, according to according to human rights groups.

There is a positive note.

The United States and a handful of other countries have opened their doors to one of Myanmar's most oppressed minority groups, the Karen. The largest number of Karen refugees in this country - one estimate is 3,000 - live in Minnesota, with 50 to 100 arriving from Thai refugee camps each month.

Eh Taw Dwe, his wife and children made a harrowing escape through Myanmar's jungle across the border to safety in Thailand, and then resettlement in Minnesota, four years ago. He thanks the United States government for allowing him in.

"They hear our cry and see our problems, our suffering in the country and they do the resettlement here," he says.

Eh Taw Dwe and others gather Saturday afternoon at the Capitol in St. Paul to show their support for the demonstrators in Myanmar.