

## BURMA 2008

### CULTURE OF FEAR

*“Our lives begin to end the day we remain silent on things that matter” – Martin Luther King Jr.  
Speak for those who can not speak for themselves – Proverbs 31:8-9*



I honestly did not have a working definition of the word “oppression” until I came to Yangon, the capital of Myanmar (formerly Burma) where the people live in constant FEAR that their government will harm them and/or throw them in prison at any time. What is ironic to me is that the Generals who rule the country also live in fear. What a paradox! For a 3-minute narrated photo essay that is current, click on this link:

<http://www.smh.com.au/multimedia/2008/world/burma/index.html>

### Proverbs 28

We were in Yangon on February 28th so I read the 28<sup>th</sup> chapter of Proverbs. Being inside Burma/Myanmar and in the context of this oppressive government has shifted my paradigm so that I see scripture differently. The following verses have a different meaning in a land where people live in constant fear, where they are not free to speak as they choose, go where they choose or do what they choose.

- A ruler who oppresses the poor is like a driving rain that leaves no crops (28:3)
- Evil men do not understand justice but those who seek the Lord understand it fully (28:5)
- When the wicked rise to power, men go into hiding (28:12)
- Like a roaring lion or a charging bear is a wicked man ruling over a helpless people (28:15)

### Wednesday in Yangon

Our day began early – 4:30 am with a cab ride to the Bangkok airport. We had flown to Bangkok on Sunday in order for Craig to get his visa for Burma. He had been turned down and was told to appear in person at the Myanmar Embassy if he wanted to enter the country. Early Monday morning we waited in line to submit our paperwork. The next day (Tuesday) we returned to wait in line again but this time we were given our tourists visas allowing us to go into Myanmar. The early morning Air Asia flight to Yangon brought us into the country by 9:00 am. The new airport in the capital was impressive but deceiving. Our cab driver told us that just three days ago, government officials came to his village trying to find people in the video’s the soldiers took last August and September



during the Monk’s protest in the streets. It seems that this government wants to make sure that anyone who considers participating in the next protest will know that they will be filmed, found and punished. Our driver had already seen the new Rambo film that is banned here (I have never seen any of the Rambo films). He told us that the punishment for selling it or watching the movie is 14 years in prison. Our driver told us of some of the other new laws in the past few months: Burmese people are forbidden from having a foreigner visit their home. All Burmese who leave their village each day must report to a central office in their village when they return home each day and if they stay away from home, they must report this to the government. The last thing our driver

told us was the how much his used 1987 Toyota van costs: \$40,000 US dollars. There is very tight control on who gets cars in this country.

We spent some time in the afternoon talking with an old friends of Craig's – a translator Craig had worked with when he lived here. He told me:

- People were rounded up in Yangon last fall and forced to march and shout pro-government slogans which included slogans that foreign influence should leave. Those who would not voluntarily participate in the pro-government march faced a possible 2 weeks in jail and a fine. This nation is controlled by fear. This confirms what we heard from Kara's translator in another part of the country about 2 weeks ago where she said people were rounded up and had to travel a days drive on the back of a truck and ordered to march in a pro government event.

We walked into the neighborhood where Craig and Kara lived when they were in Yangon. Craig immediately pointed out that a large area of "slum" housing had been moved overnight and replaced by very large mansions that the Generals are building for themselves and their families.



We went to a small grocery store where Craig shopped when they lived here and Craig told me the story of the bombing which happened about two years ago. Only 30 minutes after Craig left the store, a bomb went off and several people were killed. The facility was owned by the Generals and most people thought it was bombed to send them a message.

We visited the Myanmar Compassion Project and met Dr. Dal who started the organization in partnership with an American named Dr. Bill. Dr. Dal is a medical doctor who worked in the villages of the Chin people until he was 60 years old. He told us several stories about growing up in Burma. He is now 67 years old. For the past 7 years, he has been organizing projects to help orphans. They now have 120 different homes and are starting schools. The primary vision of the Myanmar Compassion project is to build capacity for orphanage staff leadership and children. They help fund, train, give oversight and provide accountability for funders who send money and want to support orphanages. But are these kids really orphans? Not all of them. This is what has been going on in many places: Parents who are desperate for their children to get an education send their children to the orphanages even though the kids are not orphans. This is the parents only hope. With out an education, these kids will remain in deep poverty.



### **CAN YOU BELIEVE IT?**

- Motorcycles are illegal in the city of Yangon.
- Cell phones cost \$200.00 but the sim card to make it work costs \$2000.00 (US) additional
- 1987 Toyota van costs \$40,000.00 (US). (see photo at right)
- No one takes any credit cards. They don't exist here. Everyone must bring US dollars and exchange them for chat. It is about \$1.00 to 1000 chat.



## Thursday in Yangon

I have never visited a country living under a Junta dictatorship before. I have never been so aware of the freedoms I have as I am today. To think that I could not have someone visit my home that I'd like to have visit me. To think that after a foreigner visited my home, the local police would come and ask me who they were, why they were there and what we talked about. To think that they would threaten me with a fine or jail sentence because I had visitors. To think I would have to register with someone in my neighborhood each night when I come home from work. To think I would be required to tell the government when I stayed away from my house for a day. To wonder if every room had some kind of listening device in it – this would profoundly affect my daily living. To have knowledge that I can buy a car for \$600.00 but that in this country, to buy the same car I must pay \$20,000.00. These are basic freedoms I have come to take for granted. As if poverty were not enough to bear from the people of Burma, they also must live in the fear that their every move is watched, reported and could be deemed a punishable offense. The people often do not know who the spies are so this creates a high level of mistrust among their neighbors.



Richard is an old friend that Craig knew when he lived in Yangon. He is from the Lisu tribe. Craig and Richard worked together when Craig lived in Yangon two years ago. Craig had invited Richard to visit with us at our hotel. Soon after Craig and Richard got caught up, Craig asked him if we could talk with him about some of the events which happened last August and September- the monks march in the streets, the shootings, the killings and the crackdown by the government. Richard looked all around, lowered his voice and indicated that it was risky talking to us but he was willing.

- Richard confirmed that he had heard that there will be another protest march some time this year. The 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1988 uprising in Yangon (8/8/88) will be this August and Richard indicated he had heard that the Buddhist Monks were ready for forty thousand martyrs. He also told us that the Burmese people are very angry now and that they are likely to join in a march this year much quicker than last time.
- We asked and Richard confirmed that he too had heard the reports we had heard that injured monks and other protestors were taken to crematoriums and burned alive.
- During the September 2007 march in Yangon by the monks, Pastors from local churches told their parishioners to “not get involved”
- Richard also confirmed what we had heard several weeks ago – that many Burmese people were ordered to participate a pro-government march. Richard said that if they marched and shouted pro-government slogans, they would be paid fifteen hundred chat (about \$1.50) but if they refused to participate, they would be fined.

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## A FINAL WORD



Being here makes me feel very rich. The people here are suffering under the heavy weight of poverty and oppression. You can feel the oppression everywhere. We went to downtown today and I counted about only 4 westerners that we saw in the whole city of tens of thousands. We learned that tourism is down 60% from last year. Tourists are afraid to come here because of the instability of the country.

Everyone seemed to watch us as we walked on the street and through the markets. Several times throughout the trip, men would come up to us and ask is if we wanted to exchange money and children would badger us to buy postcards. Child monks could ask us for money. Even the merchants whose stores we would go in would not stop shoving things in our faces. It was intense and overwhelming. The only people I felt comfortable spending money on were the women beggars. I enjoyed giving to these women. So little (500 Chat) was so much to them.



THANKS for taking the time to read these thoughts. I have much more in my heart to say but space is limited. Sometime the future, I'd like to share with you about visiting the American Embassy, having diesel fuel for lunch, the smell of fish paste, riding in thirty-year old taxi's, the smiles from people when I looked them in the eye and the costs of hotels. I would also like to share about our different eating experiences, what Taxi drivers don't know....The gap between the rich and the poor here is dramatic (Ecclesiastes 5:8-9) and the 4 tons of gold on the golden Shwegadon (photo at left) a major tourist attraction we didn't stop to see seems so insulting to the people. But this e-mail is long enough. I would be grateful to hear from you!



Love is a verb,  
Keith (for Timothy too)

PS- We return to the USA on Wednesday March 5<sup>th</sup>.



### IRONY

As we left the country, we saw this sign (left) over the street near the airport. Because the people are so frightened to speak with you about what is going on politically and because they are so weary with the weight of poverty, it is hard to see behind the platitudes and mottos the government posts around the city. This sign gives the impression that this country wants to move forward but they remain the #3 in ruthless dictatorship (next to North Korea and The Sudan)

**This is what the large red sign in the center of downtown Yangon says:**

#### PEOPLES DESIRE

- 1) Oppose those relying on external elements, acting as stooges, holding negative views.
- 2) Oppose those trying to jeopardize stability of the State and progress of the nation.
- 3) Oppose foreign nations interfering in internal affairs of the State.
- 4) Crush all internal and external destructive elements as the common enemy.

