



CIVIL COURAGE PRIZE

Acceptance Speech

Min Ko Naing

2005

Acceptance Speech by Bo Kyi on behalf of Min Ko Naing:

Thank you, Mr. Train for that kind introduction.

Good evening ladies and gentlemen. I accept this Civil Courage Prize medal and the generous check that accompanies it on behalf of Min Ko Naing. When conditions are better, I will present them to him. Regarding the Award he has said, "One day, when there is an open political situation, [in Burma] I want to use [the Prize money] for the good of the people."

I bring a message from Min Ko Naing for this distinguished audience.

"As it is the civil courage award, I understand that it signifies the spiritual courage of civilians. What we understand by the word 'courage' is not something that you do against other people, which the wise men in ancient times had already said. I understand that it is the guts to stand firm, alone, for our own beliefs. Our people have sacrificed their lives and livelihoods, and we will have to continue to do so in the future. So, the Prize is to honor those political prisoners behind bars who stand firm for their beliefs, and it also honors their family members who are facing social and economic problems, and it also honors the public who support us. It honors their courage. We take the Prize seriously. Let me say that I am very proud for all of us."

Now let me continue by telling you how he became Min Ko Naing, which we can translate as "The Conqueror of Kings," and by telling you my personal knowledge of the man and his background.

I have known Min Ko Naing, who heroically led students in the uprising of 1988, since childhood. He was born in 1962 and has three sisters.

His father, a respected painter, was also a musician, and passed this art on to his son. Min Ko Naing can play saun gau (a traditional harp) and patala (a xylophone) as well as the modern guitar. There was peace, friendliness and warmth in his boyhood home. Intelligent, kind and soft-hearted, he always tried to help those in need.

Occasionally, they held family concerts. His father played the xylophone, his eldest sister played the harp, Min Ko Naing sang, and his little sister danced. But the performances stopped in early 1988 when Min Ko Naing got involved in Burma's struggle for democracy.

According to the traditional Burmese calendar, April is the last month of the year. The Thingyan Water Festival is celebrated then. It is a time of fun, when people throw water on each other as part of a

cleansing ritual, and for the Thangyat competition, when singers take to the stage in a contest of traditional chanting. The event gives performers the chance to lash out jovially at the authorities. With Burma under tight military rule, Thangyat is a rare time for freedom, in which Min Ko Naing participated.

But with the crackdown in 1988, things changed. On March 13, riots erupted between police and students from Rangoon Institute of Technology. Students were peacefully chanting slogans when the police forcibly dispersed demonstrators in the campus, using water cannons, smoke bombs and tear gas. Then they fired live ammunition. Hundreds were injured and one student was killed. That night, government forces raided the campus and arrested hundreds of students.

Others managed to flee and to spread news of the crackdown across the city. The following day the news reached Rangoon's Arts and Science University, where Min Ko Naing was studying. Far from hanging back, he joined the demonstrations!

Authorities soon identified him as a student leader. After hearing about the crackdown, he never went home to sleep, because he knew if he did he would be arrested. The police raided his home and threatened his family, but couldn't track him down.

While in hiding, Min Ko Naing made contact with other students from around the country. They called themselves the "All Burma Federation of Student Unions" and issued anti-government statements.

Events came to a head on Aug 8, 1988, when thousands were gunned down on the streets of Rangoon. Parents were informed that their children had been killed, and were instructed not to hold funeral ceremonies. Thousands of protestors were jailed.

A new military regime seized power on Sept 18, 1988. Many students and other pro-democracy supporters fled the country to avoid torture and arrest, but Min Ko Naing stayed on in Burma, moving from one hiding place to another.

The ABFSU continued to operate, in secret. It urged citizens not to obey illegal orders of the regime, and soldiers to abandon the generals and join the people.

On March 23, 1989, Min Ko Naing and I, and another of his close aides, Bo Bo, were returning from a meeting of the ABFSU and the youth wing of the National League for Democracy when a force of military intelligence officers ambushed us.

Min Ko Naing shouted at Bo Bo and me, telling us to run. We didn't want to leave him. I can still hear his voice: "Bo Kyi! Bo Bo! Run, run, run!" We fled. Min Ko Naing was arrested.

Min Ko Naing was tried and sentenced to prison. He spent most of the next fifteen years in solitary confinement. He is finally out of prison, but remains under tight surveillance by the government. Everything he does is watched, and one can only communicate with him by extremely careful indirect means. That is why he cannot be with us tonight.

In conclusion, I would like to share Min Ko Naing's words of appreciation for this Award and for all your support. He says, "We understand that we sacrificed our lives so that our country and race could live with human dignity in the middle of the world. This day, when the people of the world recognize us and support us with this symbol, I could clearly see with my own eyes that we are not on our own. For this, I feel very, very warm. On behalf of the people (of Burma), I want to say these words of thanks."

Finally, I am sure that Min Ko Naing is, of course, extremely grateful for this recognition, which can only add to his safety. Thank you.

Thank you.