

# Photojournalist's book lifts veil off Myanmar

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**O**SAKA—A freelance photojournalist based in Kobe has recently published a comprehensive book on Myanmar, vividly illustrating in words and pictures the lives of people under a military dictatorship.

Formerly a middle school English teacher, Yuzo Uda, 46, became interested in photography when he began taking pictures at school athletic meets. Eventually his hobby grew into a passion, and he left his teaching job and moved to Boston in 1990 to study photography at a vocational school.

Uda's first steps as a photojournalist took him to El Salvador and Guatemala in 1992 and '93, where he covered internal conflicts and human rights abuses by the military governments.

Later, Uda began covering Myanmar, where he was initially interested in the Karen ethnic minority living along both sides of the 2,000-kilometer Thai-Myanmar border.

The Karen people, who live in the eastern mountainous area of Karen State and also in the southern delta area, have struggled in the jungle against the ruling military for more than 60 years. It is arguably one of the longest internal conflicts in the world.

"I wanted to see firsthand what they were trying to pursue despite the massive hardships," Uda said.

In January 2001, after a difficult journey by car, boat and on foot, Uda was guided to one of the headquarters of the Karen National Liberation Army in Karen State. The KNLA faced financial difficulties, and the people were tired of the long struggle.

Uda interviewed Bo Kyaw, a young brigade commander of the KNLA. A quiet man of the same age as Uda, Bo Kyaw was at a loss for how to get the Karen people out of the deadlock.

He said he had never really been happy during his 16 years of fighting, adding that the military would destroy the KNLA if they laid down their weapons.

While later covering Karen people who had been internally displaced within Myanmar, Uda only had boiled frog on rice to eat as he journeyed several days to their camp. The people were desperate and only wanted to cultivate their own soil and live peaceful lives.

Uda has visited the nation 29 times, including all of its 14 states and divisions. This in itself is an achievement considering the military government's tight grip on the country and the extreme difficulty of obtaining visas.



He has often been asked to reveal his knack for getting the visa. But he says: "I've done nothing special. All I do is apply in accordance with normal procedures. I've never paid a bribe. I have no idea about the reason."

Although the nation's dictator, Senior Gen. Than Shwe, is not well-known outside Myanmar, almost everyone knows Nobel Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, who is general secretary of the National



League for Democracy, an opponent of military rule and a pro-democracy movement advocate.

In May 2003, a bloody clash between her supporters and apparently pro-government forces took place in Depayim, Sagaing Division, in northern Myanmar, while Suu Kyi was on a campaign tour.

For the next three months her whereabouts were unknown. She was finally

discovered in a Yangon hospital in September.

When Uda went to the hospital, he found about 20 of her supporters standing out front with flowers and placards in their hands, quietly praying for her safety.

"Approaching the hospital, my heart was pounding. I was afraid of being detained," Uda said. "But I was determined to take photos of these brave people."

After leaving the hospital, Suu Kyi was again put under house arrest.

In August 2007, people took to the streets to protest a hike in oil prices across the nation.

A total of 100,000 people, including Buddhist priests, followed suit the next month in Yangon.

The demonstration was named the "Saffron Revolution" after the color of the monks' robes. The military govern-



Courtesy of Yuzo Uda

Clockwise from top right: Supporters of Aung San Suu Kyi stand silently in front of a hospital where she is being treated in Yangon in September 2003; Soon after the Saffron Revolution, access to Suu Kyi's residence in Yangon was sealed, and heavy security stationed there in October 2007; A girl studies perched on a strut of a house in the morning at a refugee camp in Karen State; A National League for Democracy office in Sagaing about six months after a bloody clash in Depayim; Bo Kyaw, a brigade commander of the Karen National Liberation Army gives instructions to his soldiers via a mobile radio in January 2001.

ment eventually crushed the demonstration with force. In this incident Japanese journalist Kenji Nagai, who had been covering the protest, was shot dead.

A few days after the incident, Uda visited the site of the tragedy, where people were beginning to return to normal life.

"The hope for the democratization of Burma [Myanmar] is fading and is ignored by the international community, including Southeast Asia and Japan. I have no idea when the international community will focus on Burma again, as the military rule continues," Uda said.

Digital cameras have become commonplace in big cities like Yangon, so it is no longer only foreign photojournalists who can disseminate images from Myanmar to the outside world.

However, Uda remains committed to photojournalism, saying: "If my photos capture precious moments in people's lives as seen through the lens of a foreigner, they'll move viewers' hearts, I hope."

Uda says that on the surface, nothing has changed in Myanmar in 17 years. But in reality, hope for change has been crushed day by day.

"It is hard to freely express your opinion in Burma," Uda said. "I sense that Japan has gradually become a society where minorities are excluded like Burma. I'm worried about the future of Japan."

Uda's book, "Tozasareta Kuni Biruma" (Sealed Country Burma), is now on sale nationwide.