

## Freedom Writ Large

by John Pilger via rialator - ICH Sunday, Oct 28 2007, 8:14pm

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*This is John Pilger's address to a London meeting, 'Freedom Writ Large', organized by PEN and the Writers Network of Burma, on October 25.*

Thank you PEN for asking me to speak at this very important meeting tonight. I join you in paying tribute to Burma's writers, whose struggle is almost beyond our imagination. They remind us, once again, of the sheer power of words. I think of the poets Aung Than and Zeya Aung. I think of U Win Tin, a journalist, who makes ink out of brick powder on the walls of his prison cell and writes with a pen made from a bamboo mat - at the age of 77. These are the bravest of the brave.



***Burmese Generals -- faces of corruption***

And what honor they bring to humanity with their struggle; and what shame they bring to those whose hypocrisy and silence helps to feed the monster that rules Burma.

I had planned tonight to read from my last interview with Aung San Suu Kyi, but I decided not to - because of something Suu Kyi said to me when I last spoke to her. "Be careful of media fashion," she said. "The media like this sentimental version of life that reduces everything down to personality. Too often this can be a distraction."

I thought about that, and how typically self effacing she was, and how right she was.

In my view, the greatest distraction is the hypocrisy of those political figures in the democratic West, who claim to support the Burmese liberation struggle. Laura Bush and Condoleezza Rice come to mind. "The United States," said Rice, "is determined to keep an international focus on the travesty that is taking place in Burma."

What she is less keen to keep a focus on is that the huge American company, Chevron, on whose board of directors she sat, is part of a consortium with the junta and the French company, Total, that operates in Burma's offshore oil fields. The gas from these fields is exported through a pipeline that was built with forced labor and whose construction involved Halliburton, of which Vice President Cheney was Chief Executive.

For many years, the Foreign Office in London promoted business as usual in Burma. When I interviewed Suu Kyi I read her a Foreign Office press release that said, "Through commercial contacts with democratic nations such as Britain, the Burmese people will gain experience of democratic principles."

She smiled sardonically and said, "Not a bit of it."

In Britain, the official public relations line has changed, but the substance of compliance and collusion has not. British tour firms - like Orient Express and Asean Explorer - are able to make a handsome profit on the suffering of the Burmese people. Aquatic - a sort of mini Halliburton - has its snout in the same trough, together with Rolls Royce and all those posh companies that make a nice earner from Burmese teak.

When the last month's uprising broke out, Gordon Brown referred to the sanctity of what he called "universal principles of human rights". He has said something similar a letter sent to this meeting tonight. It is his theme of distraction. I urge you not be distracted.

When did Brown or Blair ever use their close connections with business - their platforms at the CBI and in the City London - to name and shame these companies that make money on the back of the Burmese people? When did a British prime minister call for the European Union to plug the loopholes of arms supply to Burma, stopping, for example, the Italians from supplying military equipment? The reason no doubt is that the British government is itself one of the world's leading arms suppliers, especially to regimes at war. Tonight (October 25) the Brown government has approved the latest American prelude to its attack on Iran and the ensuing horror and bloodshed.

When did a British prime minister call on its ally and client, Israel, to end its long and sinister relationship with the Burmese junta. Or does Israel's immunity and impunity also cover its supply of weapons technology to Burma and its reported training of the junta's most feared internal security thugs? Of course, that is not unusual. The Australian government - so vocal lately in its condemnation of the junta - has not stopped the Australian Federal Police from training Burma's internal security forces in at the Australian-funded Center for Law Enforcement Cooperation in Indonesia.

There are many more of these grand, liberal hypocrites; and we who care for freedom in Burma should not be distracted by the posturing and weasel pronouncements of our leaders, who themselves should be called to account as accomplices - unless and until their fine words are matched by deeds that make a genuine difference and they themselves stop destroying lives. We owe that vigilance and that truth to Aung San Suu Kyi, to Burma's writers and to all the other bravest of the brave.





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