

Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB):

Strategies of an exile media organisation

By Khin Maung Win



Khin Maung Win, born in 1966, is the Deputy Executive Director and Deputy Chief Editor of the Burmese media organisation *Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB)* <http://www.dbv.no>. He was assigned to work for DVB when it was set up in Oslo, Norway, in 1992.

As a student he participated in the nationwide democracy uprising of August 1988 in Burma. The same year he left his country for the Thai-Burmese border after the military coup in September.

He completed his Master's Degree in Human Rights in Bangkok before moving to DVB's headquarters in Oslo. In addition he attended journalism training courses at several different training schools outside of Burma after he started working for DVB.

20 years ago, in August/September 1988, millions of Burmese from all walks of life and all over the country took part in a nationwide uprising. They demanded the end of the totalitarian regime and the return to democracy which Burma used to experience from independence in 1948 until 1962 when the military junta took over power. The repressive regime cracked down on the peaceful demonstration by killing 3,000 people and arresting several thousands. But worldwide neither the demonstration nor the casualties were adequately reported by the media.

Quite contrary, the international community was well informed about similar demonstrations led by the Buddhist monks in September 2007, known as the *Saffron Revolution*. Key international players, including the United Nations, the European Union and individual countries, timely responded to the Burmese situation so that the ruling military regime could not commit crimes against its own people as it did 20 years ago. Of course, thousands were put into prison this time but many of them were later released, and (only) about 100 persons were killed.

Why was the death toll and the international community's response so different? One key factor probably was the existence of media reports about the events and brutalities committed by the regime.

Making a difference

The *Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB)* which is based in Oslo/Norway was hardly known until it attracted the attention of mainstream international media because of its service during the *Saffron Revolution*. DVB played a



very important part in the dissemination of uncensored visual images from Burma. DVB's underground journalists in the country took the risk of capturing images of the demonstrations including the shootings and brutalities carried out by the troops. These images appeared on TV screens worldwide a few hours after the events had occurred.

The regime seems to have realised only on 27 September 2007, when the footage of the killing of Japanese journalist, Kenji Nagai, 50, circulated worldwide within hours after images were sent out of the country via Internet by people including journalists from the DVB. The authority then shut down the entire communication system (phone and Internet).

However, DVB survives and still manages to send images out. The regime could not stop its operation. But how does DVB do it? DVB works by using modern IT and satellite technology. This was not the case 20 years ago.

DVB network in Burma

The DVB is confident in saying that it has the largest news network inside Burma compared to other independent media. The DVB network includes:

- 40 committed underground and undercover journalists on the ground at the time of the *Saffron Revolution*. (DVB has 80 undercover journalists, in January 2009)
- Modern equipment including satellite technology for “safe” communication
- Communication technology and transportation channels to send news and information out of the country.

The military regime started a systematic crack down against DVB following the successful put down of the *Saffron Revolution*. During the press conference in Naypyidaw, the new capital of the military regime, Police



DVB TV studio in Oslo, Norway
Photos: DBV

Chief Major General Khin Yi said: “We are still investigating the role of DVB (in the demonstration). At this stage I prefer not to reveal the details of what we know about it so far. Nanda of DVB and people inside the country have made contractual agreements regarding sending out false news and images. So we can generally say that the DVB is the worst medium as it most effectively distributes false news.” (Khin Yee, Police Chief, 03 December 2007).

Many DVB journalists have been arrested in the past 12 months, and not less than ten have been given heavy prison terms, up to 65 years. An important site of operation has been raided, and DVB has lost an enormous amount of equipment. Anyone with a camera is closely watched¹.

DVB's dual strategy

Transmitting information via the airwaves is the most effective way in the prevailing situation in Burma because the regime cannot block or stop it. The radio signal broadcast via shortwave reaches everywhere in the country



Millions of Burmese nowadays are tuning into many foreign TV channels via satellite dishes

and people with a shortwave radio receiver can pick up the signal. This broadcast strategy is cost-efficient and effective in terms of reaching the audience and creating impact. That is what DVB has been doing since 1992. There are also other well-known radio stations, namely *British Broadcasting Cooperation-Burmese Service*, *Voice of America-Burmese Service* and *Radio Free Asia-Burmese Service*.

However, DVB satellite TV, which was launched in May 2005, is the only independent Burmese TV channel that millions of Burmese inside Burma can rely on. Meanwhile DVB has become a major source for international mainstream media looking for images from Burma. DVB distributes images from Burma via international agencies including AP, Reuters, AFP and major networks including CNN and BBC.

Opportunities through satellite technology

Millions of Burmese nowadays are tuning into many foreign TV channels via satellite dishes. In the 1990s, people started putting up satellite dishes, and the government allowed it because it gains a certain amount of revenue from a registration fee. However, analysts believe that 95% of the dishes in the country are unregistered, technically illegal and can be removed at any time. It is estimated that about 10 million Burmese have access to satellite TV. (This figure refers to the audience, not the ownership of a TV set).

A huge number of satellite TV viewers in the country persuaded DVB to enter into satellite TV broadcasting. That is why in May 2005 DVB launched a weekly satellite TV programme that became daily in September 2007.

Due to DVB TV millions of Burmese people saw their demonstrations on a TV screen for the first time. DVB discovers and reports

about what the government is trying to hide, including the scale of disaster caused by cyclone Nargis which left 138,000 dead and 2,5 million homeless.

During critical times in Burma, like the *Saffron Revolution* and cyclone Nargis, international broadcasters including CNN and several Japanese TV stations monitored the DVB satellite TV which has a footprint on a large part of the globe, and get images directly from DVB TV for re-broadcasting on their TV stations.

DVB also uses satellite technology to dispatch images from Burma. While the regime totally shut down the telephone and communication system, the DVB satellite system remained the only functioning communication structure in late September 2007.

Modern satellite communication technology is key to the success of DVB operations and to keeping audiences inside and outside Burma informed.

The influence of DVB

The statement of the Burmese Police Chief, Major General Khin Yi, that "...DVB is the worst medium as it most effectively disseminates false news" (cited above) indicates the impact of DVB's operations. Probably he is right, as:

- Activists and the ordinary population are encouraged when their struggle for democracy is covered by the media. This contributes to an increased number of people who express themselves and participate in peaceful demonstrations demanding freedom
- Main opposition parties get a forum through which they can express themselves and explain their responses to government policies, which is not possible with the media in the country
- DVB broadcasts promote freedom of expression in a closed society

- DVB broadcasts help reduce corruption and malpractice by officials.

The international attitude towards Burma

Reactions of the international community regarding Burma are largely influenced by images appearing on screens and in publications. One indicator for this is that the Japanese government took immediate action, i.e. cancelling their aid to the regime, after the footage of the killing of their citizens appeared on Japanese TV screens. The international community gets proof of the situation in Burma, allowing no space for the regime's blatant lie regarding serious human rights violations happening on a daily basis. The international community saw images of the disaster caused by cyclone Nargis, which contradict the government's claims that the situation was under control. It is easier to convince the international community of the reality if supporting visual images are available.

Is the DVB strategy effective?

Until a new political atmosphere emerges in the country, the strategy DVB has been using is probably the most effective. Setting up a broadcasting station in exile is the only available option for an independent broadcaster like DVB. Because it is based in a democratic country, it can enjoy the freedom needed to function as a media institution. Of course, DVB depends on its local networks and roots to get news and information from the spot. While the latter come from local collaborators, the editing and broadcasting is done from outside.

Media failure in disaster prevention

The huge death toll caused by cyclone Nargis which hit Burma on 2-3 May 2008 is mainly due to the failure of the media to inform peo-

Democratic Voice of Burma

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Dear Bahein,

We should not wait and seek China's endorsement. If we wait, we must wait China to change to democracy. If China is not a democratic nation, China will never endorse democracy in Burma. So, it will be worse than the greatest expectation.

I would like to email you. May I get your email address? OR How can I be in touch with you?

BTW, are you one person from old AO?

Luke.

Luke Kent Myintthu (USA)
07/12/2009
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LET'S TALK Monday, July 13, 2009

Time for intervention?

In recent weeks, the international community has grown stronger in its criticism of the Burmese junta following the trial of Aung San Suu Kyi. If found guilty, Burma's opposition leader will be sentenced to up to five years in prison, extending her current term of detention to 11 years.

Critics have said the trial is an excuse to keep Suu Kyi in detention beyond the scheduled 2010 elections, thereby eroding any promises of democratic reform from the ruling generals.

In this context, a debate has grown over the extent to which the international community should increase pressure on the junta. Many Western countries, including the United States and European Union, Australia and Canada, hold far-reaching sanctions against the Burmese government. Other Asian countries, particular those in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) bloc, have instead followed a path of engagement with the regime.

In light of Suu Kyi's trial, and ongoing human rights violations against perceived dissidents, there is a case to be argued that neither avenue has worked. The question now, then, is how else can the international community push for democratic reform in Burma?

Should sanctions be dropped in favour of total engagement, or vice versa? Should Than Shwe and his cronies be brought to the International Criminal Court? Should the West even consider military intervention in Burma?

We'd like to hear your thoughts.

Intervention is crucial for the Burmese survival as a people. Is the UN too afraid of China to intervene on behalf of the Burmese?

linda (Canada/New York)

The Burmese Junta, has gone too far. The killings are beyond barbaric. We need to do something about it. Nations should start doing something real and save and promote life. That Government needs to be put down. Intervention is needed for the sake of the nations future. Violence has rage over the land and innocent children no longer dream of good tomorrows but of how to survive for the day. HELP. Their crys are too loud, as keepers of peace and bearers of democracy we should should do something about it.

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- Pressing for media freedom
- Defining Thingyan
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ple in advance about the upcoming storm. In fact, it is the responsibility of the state media to report about it but they totally failed to do so. And, the international media as well as exile Burmese media including DVB were not paying attention to it. As a result, 2.5 million Burmese – mostly poor fishermen and farmers living in the most populated areas of the country – were unaware of the upcoming cyclone. If they could have been informed a few days in advance, which is absolutely possible, and if they would have been evacuated, the deaths of 138,000 persons could have been avoided. Media failure contributed to this enormous tragedy.

Nevertheless, DVB afterwards contributed to inform the world about the scale of the disaster caused by the cyclone by exposing images of the suffering of the surviving victims. Again the regime blocked the information outflow and pretended that the situation was under their control, as they were preparing for what many called the "Sham Referendum" on 10 May, one week after the cyclone, in which people were forced to endorse the constitution that legalises the military rule.

This is the biggest ever lesson DVB learnt in its 16 years of service. DVB and other media must find ways to avoid similar failures in the future.

¹In November 2008 the documentary "Burma VJ" by a Danish filmmaker of Magic Hour Films was released. The film is about the DVB network and the role it plays during the Saffron Revolution and has won several awards in Europe and the United States.