

TRAVELLING BRIEF

Mortars and micturition

A couple of months ago I gave some talks on how activists can use the mass media as a tool in their campaigns for human rights. Some of the students in the class raised a problem which I personally have never had to face as a media advocate: 'What about when the media is part of the government? Or when it is a criminal offence to criticise the government?' Welcome to human rights, third world style.

My talks on the media were part of a course run in Bangkok by the Diplomacy Training Program (DTP), a program based at the University of NSW which trains 'human rights defenders' from developing countries in Asia and the Pacific. The DTP teaches members of non-government organisations how to use the UN and other international mechanisms in their work — to turn local struggles for social justice into international human rights issues.

The students, from 12 countries in our region, included Kanak women from New Caledonia; Aboriginal people from Australia; a lawyer from the Philippines; Thai activists opposing the trade in Asian women; a Catholic priest from India who works with the 'untouchables' (people so downtrodden they don't even think of themselves as human, much less as having rights).

One of the students was Kim, a woman from Cambodia who told a mundane little story about education in her country. Her daughter, who is in primary school, brought home her school report for her parents to sign. After Kim signed it and gave it back, her daughter asked, 'What about the money?' 'What money?' The little girl explained that all the children must pay a bribe to the teacher, in cash or in kind, before they can advance to the next class. Teachers are so poorly paid that they resort to extortion in order to make ends meet; parents are so desperate for their children to be educated that they accept this as part of the price; the state presumably relies on this system to keep the salary bill down. Kim said the money-not-merit principle applies throughout the education system, including Phnom Penh University. With a health system staffed by graduates of the university, she hopes no one in her

family will ever require any kind of complicated medical treatment.

Another student in the course was Ruby, whose native Bougainville is suffocating under a blockade imposed by the PNG Government. Ruby is a devout Christian, an ordinary middle-aged nurse with an ailing husband; she wore print sundresses, not slogan t-shirts; she said she had never heard the term 'NGO' until about a year ago. Like many of the other students in the course, she was keen to visit the Chatuchak Park markets on the weekend. Unlike many of the others, she had a very short shopping list which did not include souvenirs: 'I need a telescope, so I can watch for Navy gunboats coming through the straits'.

One group of students were members of the Karen ethnic minority in Burma, a country in the oppressive grip of a military dictatorship dysphoniously named the SLORC (for State Law & Order Reconstruction Council). During my stay in Bangkok the SLORC army was moving on Manerplaw, the Karen people's headquarters on the Burmese side of the border with Thailand. Every day the news was worse — the SLORC was getting closer, the evacuation had begun, the roads and lines of communication were cut, Manerplaw was being shelled, reports of casualties were coming in. The Burmese contingent in our course began to look tired from not sleeping. They spent the lunch breaks clustered around the payphone, seeking news from the front and from the refugee camps in Thailand, where the evacuees from Manerplaw were headed.

One young woman worried about her parents — her father had recently undergone surgery and was hardly fit to make a long trek through the jungle. She also worried about those wounded in the shelling (who would carry them out?); about the orphaned children (who would take charge of them, when everyone was fleeing?); about the Karen fighters, whose food supply was cut off by the road closure. [I tried to imagine what it would be like if the town where I live was being evacuated (and ultimately burnt to the ground, as Maner-

plaw was) — forget that favourite jacket, those treasured books and letters, the deluxe superjet cappuccino machine.] Not to mention the loss of infrastructure built up over many years by a cash-starved, embattled community — equipment, files, buildings, vehicles.

I was intrigued by Win, a slim, bespectacled man of 22, an age considered in Australia to be a time of glorious irresponsibility. Instead of being at university or haunting the discos, he had been a fighter with

the armed opposition since the age of 16. I asked what everyday life is like for the fighters: what do they eat, for example? Win said they live on rice and fish-paste, 'but in the trenches you often don't feel like eating because of the smell of the corpses'.

Life in the trenches has its own rhythm. After a while the fighters get to know the characteristics and recognise the sound of different types of mortars being fired by the enemy: a 120 mm mortar sounds different from an 81 mm, and takes longer to explode after being fired, and so on. Apart from eating, other basic human functions also become difficult — like having a pee, when you're stuck in a confined space with no means of waste disposal. The solution is to wait until you hear a big mortar fired which you know takes a long time to hit, then leap out of the trench, undo your daks, have a quick whiz and scramble back to safety before you get blown to bits.

Back in Sydney, I also do human rights work. I work for the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, in a glittering pink-marble-and-brass office tower downtown, where journalists ring up seeking comment on a bunfight over breastfeeding in public, or about a boy who takes action against his school over the right to wear a ponytail. These are the human rights issues which activists in decent societies should properly have to be concerned with. I fervently wish them on the students in the DTP course.

Rebecca Peters

Rebecca Peters is a subject with an interest in guns.

