

# Sowing the Seeds for a Human Rights Film Festival in Burma

*Written by Mon Mon Myat, festival co-organiser*

Three years ago, if we had tried to organise a human rights film festival in Burma—a country where military dictatorship had taken root for a half a century—it simply would not have been possible. The possibility did not arise magically. Rather, it was formed step-by-step, and grew through the inspiration, passion and efforts of its founding partners.

I can remember well the day that a certain foreigner—he seemed like a giant—first came to my apartment. It was 2012, and had been two years since the alleged end of military rule; at the time, roughly 2,000 political prisoners remained. I was helping my partner with a local film festival entitled, “The Art of Freedom”, though *freedom* was still considered a sensitive word in Burma. Since 2010, Burma had become a popular case study among the international community as an example of a peaceful transition process from military rule to quasi-civilian rule. However opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi warned the world to keep a “conscious optimism” about the so-called-reform process of the former military regime.

When we met this giant white man, we did not know that he was Igor Blazevic, the founder of One World

Human Rights Film Festival in Prague. A close friend had emailed me and introduced Igor as a foreigner who was interested in helping out with The Art of Freedom Festival. Though he offered his help, we were not very warm with him at first; we had never heard of One World, and were concerned that the influence of a foreigner could cause a problem for our own festival. The film festival we were planning was very political and was meant to put a spotlight on the remaining political prisoners in the country. Most films submitted to the festival were very political and anti-government; none of the films were submitted to the film scrutiny board for screening, which meant that the festival was completely unauthorized.

Because the film festival itself was already very risky and operating within a sensitive political situation, we were especially wary of involving a foreigner in our activities, knowing his presence might increase the dangers we faced. For instance, the government might accuse the festival of being a foreign-funded event and use that as justification for banning the festival. Unfortunately we could not accept Igor’s offer of help. His proposal having been rejected, he left our apartment, perhaps a bit confused by our response. Still, he did not give up hope. When we came to Lifescapes

Southeast Asian Film Festival in Chiang Mai, Thailand, he reached out again. This time, Igor invited my partner, Min Htin Ko Ko Gyi, to One World Human Rights Film Festival in Prague, Czech Republic. Indeed the trip to One World was very inspiring for Min Htin, and he returned home with a dream to organise a human rights film festival in Burma.

Igor had sowed a seed in Min Htin's heart, but the seed didn't remain there—it grew up and spread out to others. When Min Htin first told me of his dream to start a human rights film festival, I wasn't aware that it would be such a big undertaking. Having already helped him with The Art of Freedom festival, I didn't think it would be that difficult. Day by day, though, I came to realise that there is a great deal involved in such a complex process.

## Seeking Out Funding

When we began to pursue Min Htin's dream of a human rights film festival, we had no resources secured. We approached potential donors and explained our idea to organise a human rights film festival in Burma. The first donors who supported our human rights film festival project were two organisations, Internews and Norwegian Burma Committee (NBC). Internews provided a shared office space for one year and NBC provided a small grant for the project. We also approached the Western Embassies in Yangon and sent out proposals to different donors including the EU, Goethe Institute, Movies

That Matter (MtM) and International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA).

With Igor's help, in November 2012, we were also able to arrange an event to introduce human rights films to the local media and potential donor organisations. Soon after that event, the British Council in Yangon offered to sponsor our human rights film festival. Later, we also received funding from the British Embassy to support a travelling film festival and additional support from Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) and Open Society Foundation (OSF) for a documentary film library and seminars.

With the help of all those initiatives, Human Dignity Media Organisation (HDMO) was born in early 2013 with the aim to organise Human Rights Human Dignity International Film Festival (HRHDIFF) in Burma. We announced our open call for film submissions in January 2013. The HRHDIFF is dedicated to human rights defender Aung San Suu Kyi, who introduced human rights to Burma. The festival's awards ceremony is held every year on her birthday, June 19th.

## Organising the First Edition of HRHDIFF

The main challenge for us was running the festival with a low budget for the first year. Fortunately, we were able to find local sponsors with small theatres—Junction Square and Nay Pyi Daw Cinema in downtown Yangon. The owners of both cinemas provided screening venues for free for the first edition



Members of the festival audience loving human rights symbols and the festival logo. Photo courtesy of HRHDIFF.

of our festival. Igor Blazevic was now our international consultant, and with his help we were able to get access to One World's films and filmmaker contacts, as well as input from Watch Docs International Human Rights Film Festival (Poland), Freedom Film Festival (Malaysia), Steps International and Amnesty International.

Based on Igor's suggestion, we decided to invite three international jurors to help establish our festival as an international event and also to strengthen our network with well-known international film festivals. We invited Ally Derks from IDFA, Don Edkins from Steps International, Canadian filmmaker and producer Peter Wintonick, as well as Igor himself, and they comprised our first international jury for HRHDIFF. Together with one local jury member, they selected the winner of the Aung San Suu Kyi Award for best documentary.

For the first edition of the festival we screened approximately 26 international, feature length documentary films and short documentary films. For the first edition of the HRHDIFF, we divided the submitted films into competition categories including main competition (for international and national documentary films), best short film and best animation categories for local films and non-competitive categories. It was important for us to divide up the international and national films because local filmmakers are working under such difficult conditions that the production value can be quite different. Other international films were

shown in our non-competitive Panorama section. A handful of short documentary films were also selected for our Docs for Kids section, for which we invited children from the schools to the film festival. All films in the international section were translated and subtitled into Burmese language.

We also had a national program section in which we screened about 28 films, documentaries, shorts and animations. Films in our national program were also included in the competition. Three members of our national jury selected the best three local films in three separate categories—best documentary, best short, and best animation. The award for best film was named the “Min Ko Naing Award”, in tribute to a poet and legendary student leader who has spent more than seventeen years in jail for his leadership of the 88 Student movement. Another award title carries the date March 13, which is when the democracy uprising started in Burma in 1988. Two additional awards—one honoring Vaclav Havel, the late president of Czech republic and strong supporter of Aung San Suu Kyi, and another named after the Norwegian Burma Committee (NBC)—were included in the first edition of HRHDIFF.

Ultimately, the Human Rights Human Dignity International Film Festival was successfully organised in Yangon in 2013. Our audience numbers reached approximately 6,000, and we were able to screen 26 international films and 28 national films that focused on human rights. The festival drew significant

media coverage from international and local media in its first edition.

## **Mobilizing Human Rights Film Festivals and Pushing Boundaries**

Our festival began its tour of the country in August 2013. We felt it was important to hold our human rights film festival in different parts of the country in order to create a public space for audiences to be exposed to an overview of human rights films and reflect on the films' connection to their daily life. Within eight months, the travelling element of the film festival had visited thirteen locations, including the country's capital of Nay Pyi Taw as well as ethnic states including Kachin, Kayah, Karen, Chin, Mon and Shan State. We were able to reach about 13,000 people by the end of that tour.

Providing a platform for discussions about human rights in public is at the heart of our festival. For instance, the award-winning documentary *Survival in Prison* is one film that sparked lively debate among audience members. The film itself is a testimony of human rights violations endured by political prisoners, and it gave the audience a platform to discuss human rights abuses that had been perpetrated by the former military government. San Zaw Htwe, the main subject of the documentary, spent twelve years in prison told the audience that his story is personal, and insisted that he did not speak for the many other political prisoners who suffered more than him or died

in custody. After the screening of the film, an elderly lady in Hpa-an, the capital of Kayin state, burst into tears, admitting that she never grasped how political prisoners had suffered until watching the documentary. She wiped away tears as she told San Zaw Htwe, "I could imagine how painful it would have been for your parents while you were in prison. I would have felt the same if you were my son". This prisoner's plight resonated with audience members of all ages, including a number of university students who said they were overwhelmed with the respect they felt for San Zaw Htwe and the courage he displayed during his time in captivity.

During the tour of the travelling film festival, San Zaw Htwe said was struck by the fact that audiences seem more interested in venting their anger about rights abuses than in developing a better understanding of what exactly their human rights are. At many of the festival's stops, audience members have approached filmmakers to ask them to document human rights abuses affecting their local area such as land grabbing, mining projects, hydro power projects and deep sea port projects.

People were interested in the festival because the term *human rights film* was itself very new to them, and they were curious to know what kind of films would be shown at our the festival. Local audiences came from all walks of life and sectors of society, from MPs to trishaw drivers. Anyone could freely join the public space created in the cinema venue by asking

questions, sharing their own experiences related to the films, and expressing their opinion.

Only a few cities in Burma outside of Yangon have cinemas. If there was no cinema in the city where we took the travelling festival, we were required to ask permission from the local authorities to screen in another suitable venue. That permission needs to be secured at least two weeks before the festival. Making these arrangements is time-consuming, but it also is illegal to publicize a film festival without official permission. We decided to take the risk and not obtain permission for any venue except Loikaw in Kayah State. Technically, running the festival without permission is breaking a law as it is considered organising public assembly without permission. So far, we have not faced any legal action for our activities during the first edition of the HRHD Travelling Film Festival, but we are well aware that human rights issues are still especially sensitive when it comes to local authorities.

## **Producing Human Rights Films**

In the first edition of HRHDIFF, we found that the quality of human rights documentary films submitted to national competition was not yet up to the production value of international films. In addition, because Burma was under military rule for so long, people were still lacking in knowledge about human rights. To fulfill the need for human rights documentary films in our country, we organised a human rights documentary

filmmaking workshop for twelve young participants together with two international trainers, using funding provided by Burma OTI/USAID. We advertised an open call for applications for the workshop. We ultimately selected twelve participants using three main criteria: a quota of 35 percent women, 50 percent minority ethnic participation, and the engagement of youth. We invited two international filmmakers whom we had met during the first edition of HRHDIFF and International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) to be our trainers. After a six-month long filmmaking workshop, our twelve participants produced five human rights documentary films related to constitutional amendments, freedom of assembly, freedom of religion, child rights, and the rights of people with disabilities—all of which reflect human rights issues and the political situation faced in Burma. Those five student films were then submitted to the second edition of HRHDIFF in June 2014.

## **The Second Edition of HRHDIFF**

Because of how successful the first edition of our festival had been in 2013, other embassies including the US, France, Canada, Czech Republic and Sweden were willing to support the second edition of HRHDIFF. Our primary partners the previous year, such as British Council, Norwegian People's Aid (NPA), International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) and One World Human Rights Film Festival (Prague), continued supporting the HRHDIFF in its second year.

We awarded three Aung San Suu Kyi awards for best national, regional and international documentary films, the Min Ko Naing Award for the best short film and the March 13 Award for best animated film.

In addition to the award named for Vaclav Havel, late president of the Czech republic, we established two new awards: one named for Hantharwady U Win Tin, late Burmese human rights defender and journalist, and another for Peter Wintonick, late well-known Canadian documentary filmmaker who was an international jury member of HRHDIFF 2013. Peter Wintonick had introduced Burmese filmmakers to the word “Docu-mocracy”; the award in his honor was given to the winning student-film from the human rights documentary film production workshop.

A total of 9,200 people attended the second edition of the festival, a number that included 500 children and roughly 150 people with disabilities. We screened thirty-one national films, twenty-six international films, and nine films from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In order to establish Human Rights

Human Dignity International Film Festival as an ASEAN event in the future, we will continue to include an ASEAN films category in upcoming HRHDIFF editions. The festival took place over four days, with screenings held in two cinemas; entrance to screenings was free, opening up the festival to people from all walks of life. The festival again drew significant media coverage from both international and local media. We invited 300 domestic accredited guests (government officials, diplomats, representatives from NGOs, film professionals, press, etc.) and twenty-three international guests (jury members as well as some international filmmakers, including those from the ASEAN region).

The seed that Igor Blazevic carried from One World in Prague has now grown up in another land. What this shows is that the plant of Human Rights is universal and can be sowed wherever there is inspiration, passion and the effort to make things happen.

## Filmography

*Survival in Prison* (dir. Yee Nan Theik, 2013).



Award ceremony of Human Rights Human Dignity FF 2014. Photo courtesy of HRHDIFF.