FROM LITTLE ROCK TO RANGOON

In September 1957 I was 8 years old and living in North Little Rock, Arkansas. Last week I followed the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the desegregation of Central High School in Little Rock Arkansas. Nine courageous teenagers who became known as "the Little Rock Nine" began the process of racial integration of the schools in America. On September 4, Governor Orval Fabius sent in the Arkansas National Guard to stop these high school students from enrolling in the all white Central High School in defiance of a Supreme Court decision.(1) Like the whole world, I was shocked by the photos depicting the hatred of the young white students toward these brave children. President Eisenhower sent in the US military to maintain order and to protect the black students. I relived this frightening and revelatory event at the same time as I was witnessing courageous monks and ordinary Burmese marching for freedom in Burma, begging for our support. I listened for a response from the International Community and since the General Assembly of the UN was taking place in New York City, I thought that the timing was perfect for a serious response. Yet again, the Security Council showed it uselessness. A scream of indignation stuck in my throat every time I heard yet another Head of State or Foreign Minister say the right words of support without showing the necessary will to do the right actions. And during this time the Military Junta in Burma had started to crackdown on the demonstrators with it usual tactics.

In 1999 with the aid of a clever ambassador I was able to meet for a few hours in secret with Aung San Suu Kyi, who was under house arrest. She asked me if I thought that she and her people could use the example of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights movement to fight for justice. The Civil Rights Movement took form in the churches of the south where Blacks were free to attend even when their right to assemble elsewhere were denied. Buddhists do not assemble on a regular basis and without the possibility to have contact with the people and to get her message out, I thought that organising the masses in the same way would be extremely difficult. However, today the monks have taken the lead in the rebellion. Maybe she was right.

We have no means of knowing how many have already been killed and injured, we must not abandon Aung San Suu Kyi and the Burmese people. We need action now.
How many times can we watch and do nothing. Where is the Security Council, where is Europe? Where have our convictions to defend Human Rights gone?
Will we continue to watch the revolt and perhaps the massacre of a people that have suffered enough without putting a stop to it? As in Budapest in 56, Prague in 68, the Soweto Uprising in 76,or Tiananmen in 89?

The American and European neo conservatives did not hesitate to support sending troops to Iraq to fight an illegal war. Certain voices even speak today, irresponsibly of war with Iran but are content with declarations of support for the suffering people of Burma. Maybe we should drop our hypocrisy and just say," We do not want to jeopardize our oil and commercial interests". But do not pretend that our goal is to defend democracy and freedom. President Eisenhower was not pro integration but he made a courageous decision that changed the course of American history and the bell tolling for justice can be heard from Little Rock to Rangoon.

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Free democratically elected Aung San Suu Kyi, and all other political prisoners! A true democracy not imposed from outside but for which the people of Burma have suffered and died must be restored.

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1. +On May 17, 1954, the United States Supreme Court announced its decision that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." The decision effectively denied the legal basis for segregation in Kansas and 20 other states with segregated classrooms and would forever change race relations in the United States.