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PRESENTS

BURMA VJ: REPORTING FROM A CLOSED COUNTRY



OPENS AT FILM FORUM – MAY 20, 2009
NATIONAL EXPANSION TO FOLLOW



Running Time: 84 minutes
Rating: Not Rated by MPAA
World Premiere: IDFA, 2008

DISTRIBUTOR CONTACT:

George Schmalz
Oscilloscope Pictures
511 Canal Street, #5E
New York, NY 10013
O: 212.219.4029 ext: 35
F: 212.219.9538
george@oscilloscope.net

PUBLICITY CONTACT:

New York & National:
Jessica Edwards
Murphy PR
333 7th Avenue, 5th Floor
New York, NY 10001
O: 212.414.0408
F: 212.414.0413
jedwards@murphypr.com

Los Angeles:
Nancy Willen / Elisabeth Kasson
Acme PR
O: 310.396.0443
nancywillen@acmepr.net
elisabethgk@acmepr.net



- SYNOPSIS

Anders Østergaard's award-winning documentary shows a rare inside look into the 2007 uprising in Myanmar through the cameras of the independent journalist group, Democratic Voice of Burma.

While 100,000 people (including 1,000s of Buddhist monks) took to the streets to protest the country's repressive regime that has held them hostage for over 40 years, foreign news crews were banned to enter and the Internet was shut down. The Democratic Voice of Burma, a collective of approximately 30 anonymous and underground video journalists (VJs) recorded these historic and devastating events on handycams and smuggled the footage out of the country, where it was broadcast worldwide via satellite. Risking torture and life imprisonment, the VJs vividly document the brutal clashes with the military and undercover police – even after they themselves become targets of the authorities.

- THE SAFFRON REVOLUTION

Economic desperation was the trigger for the peaceful uprising that would come to be known as, “the Saffron Revolution,” after the color of monks’ robes. In a setting where market prices had already tripled or quadrupled within the past year, in August 2007, the Burmese junta suddenly decided to lift fuel subsidies. Fuel prices jumped as much as 500% overnight, with food and other commodities prices following suit. Pro-democracy activists and ordinary citizens began protesting on August 19th.

With each passing day, more and more Burmese citizens summoned the courage to join the protests, which were increasingly led by members of the sangha, the Buddhist clergy. On September 5th, troops broke up a demonstration in Pakokku, injuring dozens of monks. Members of the sangha demanded an apology from the military government, with a deadline of September 17th. Meanwhile, public protests continued, building day by day.

On September 22nd, thousands of monks marched in cities across Burma. Ten thousand monks took to the streets in Mandalay alone. In Rangoon, monks chanting the Metta Sutta, a prayer of loving kindness, marched to the home of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to honor the democracy leader. Daw Suu Kyi appeared before the monks and shed tears of gratitude.

Led by monks, the demonstrations multiplied and swelled in size over the next days. On September 24th, crowds filled the streets of more than 25 cities across Burma, with 100,000 peaceful marchers in Rangoon alone. The next day, machine-gun toting soldiers gathered ominously at intersections. On the 26th of September, the landmark Shwedagon Pagoda was barricaded by troops, and a curfew was imposed by the military dictators. During the night, soldiers raided dozens of monasteries across Burma, beating and killing monks according to eyewitness accounts.

On the morning of September 27th, 50,000 courageous citizens gathered on the streets of Rangoon to demand freedom from fear. Soldiers opened fire on the crowds, killing at least nine unarmed protesters. One of these was Kenji Nagai, a Japanese journalist, whose murder was caught on video and beamed around the world.

With each passing hour, more monks disappeared into detention centers as more soldiers filled the streets. The Burmese junta shut down internet and cell phone service to stifle the flow of information to the outside world. Even so, accounts emerged of a crematorium burning day and night to destroy evidence of military brutality. A Burmese colonel defected after refusing an order to slaughter hundreds of monks.

On October 11th, the UN Security Council issued a statement condemning the brutal actions of the Burmese regime, and the US among other countries announced tighter sanctions. With soldiers on the streets of every city and emptied monasteries, large-scale demonstrations ceased. Reports suggest that low-level resistance continued, including small demonstrations and imprisoned monks refusing food from their oppressors. Many report that while the streets of Burma are quiet, the sense of dissatisfaction, anger, and the burning desire for change are stronger than ever.

Information provided by U.S. Campaign for Burma.
To learn more visit www.uscampaignforburma.org.

- NOTES ON THE PRODUCTION

Anders Østergaard was originally planning to make a small half-hour portrait of a young Burmese video reporter, a member of an underground network of activists who daily risk their lives to document the oppressive conditions in the country. Then suddenly, in September 2007, chaotic events involving the rebellion of Buddhist monks against Burma's military junta not only threw the local video reporters into the assignment of a lifetime, it also forced the Danish filmmaker to retool his project.

"To begin with, I was mainly interested in Joshua, my central character as a young documentarian. He and his friends were filming with their cameras concealed in bags, which obviously is a major restriction on what they are able to document. My interest, then, was more about why they were even doing what they were doing. And why do they expose themselves to such risk? What are their thoughts about it and how are they affected by what they do? I was fascinated by Joshua's almost instinctive need to document the world, which apparently came before any considerations about what political goals they might serve. My film was a small, intimate, psychological affair. Then came the rebellion and the dramatic turn of events in Burma was giving the film a whole other potential as an epic tale of high-political drama. At the same time, the material presented an obligation."

As the only director in the world, Østergaard and the filmmakers now had the opportunity to tell the story of the rebelling monks from the inside – the people's eye perspective. While everyone else had only pieces of the story, Magic Hour Film suddenly were having an impressive volume of footage that allowed them to more or less reconstruct the whole sequence of events. Becoming the chronicler of world history.

For obvious reasons, Østergaard couldn't disclose the identity of his 27-year-old video reporter known as "Joshua," or name any of the other activists supplying this rich material. Accordingly, the film revolves around a person whose face we never see. The filmmaker answered that challenge in part by concluding that, even though we can't see the main character Joshua, we can still see with him.

"Once we'd figured out how we were going to experience Burma through Joshua's eyes, we started debating how to connect all his footage and how to depict the circumstances he was working under. To be sure documenting things, but what happens just before or just after these shots is just as exciting. Østergaard didn't actually ask Joshua to leave his camera on. Instead he decided to recreate a truthful representation of the situations around the authentic shots, like telephone conversations in close collaboration with Joshua and the people involved.

- ABOUT BURMA

Burma is a nation in Southeast Asia. It is bordered by India, China, Bangladesh, Thailand and Laos. Its land mass is about the size of Texas and it has a population of about 50 million people.

Burma gained its independence from the United Kingdom in 1948, under the leadership of their independence hero General Aung San. Aung San did not live to see independence; he was assassinated six months before the British surrendered control.

At the time of independence, most of the major ethnic groups in Burma signed onto the Panlong agreement, pledging to work together in a unity government and giving each group autonomy over its own region.

Non-Burman ethnic groups were not pleased with the actions and policies of the leaders who replaced Aung San, feeling their autonomy was threatened. The years from 1948 to 1962 were tumultuous times in Burma. Upset with what they considered an eroding sense of autonomy, several ethnic groups formed their own armies during this period.

In 1962, General Ne Win staged a coup, ushering in Burma's first period of military rule.

At the time of independence, Burma was considered the "rice bowl" of Asia, because of its impressive rice exports, and had the highest literacy rates among its neighbors. Conditions deteriorated rapidly under Ne Win's rule and in 1988 students staged an uprising against his government.

The 1988 uprising was brutally crushed by the military (an estimated 3,000 people were killed during the regime's violent response). However, the protests forced the military regime to hold elections. Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of slain General Aung San, led her party, the National League for Democracy, to win 82% of the seats in parliament.

The military never seeded power, instead jailing NLD and other opposition party leadership including Aung San Suu Kyi. In 1992, General Than Shwe staged an internal coup, further entrenching military rule.

In the 1990s, the regime ratcheted up its campaign to militarily crush all opposition and incorporate the semi autonomous ethnic minority regions. Since its beginning, this campaign against ethnic groups has resulted in the destruction of 3,300 villages in the East of Burma alone.

Aung San Suu Kyi, under house arrest for 13 of the last 19 years, is calling for tripartite dialogue between her party, the ethnic nationalist groups and the military government. International pressure is beginning to mount toward this goal. The U.S. and the European Union have imposed financial sanctions against the regime and a UN body called "The Friends of Myanmar," which includes China and Vietnam, recently called for the regime to free all political prisoners.

Buddhist monks have historically played an important moral role in Burmese politics. Monks led demonstrations against British rule in the 1930s and acted as intermediaries between the common people and their pre-colonial monarch. In 2007, Buddhist monks participated in large scale, anti-government demonstrations, which were again violently repressed by the ruling Junta.

In May of 2008 Cyclone Nargis hit southern Burma, causing widespread destruction and a humanitarian crisis. The cyclone again called international attention to the regime's human rights abuses. Many humanitarian experts criticized the government for withholding aid from its opponents and allowing widespread starvation and disease.

Information provided by U.S. Campaign for Burma.
To learn more visit www.uscampaignforburma.org.

- RECENT UPDATES

Since the crackdown, everything in Burma is back to “normal.” The generals are in full control again, fear and repression has been restored. Yet there is a silver lining... On the ruins of the original network, Joshua and the Democratic Voice of Burma have managed to recruit more than 80 new VJs who have been inspired by the events of September 2007. They are now undergoing camera and safety training in Thailand getting ready for the next popular uprising in Burma. The media battle against the junta continues.

-Anders Østergaard, March 2009

- FILMMAKER BIOS

ANDERS ØSTERGAARD

DIRECTOR/WRITER

Graduated from the Danish School of Journalism in 1991. Mixing documentary footage with staged shots has been a hallmark of Østergaard's films almost from the beginning. Awarded Best Documentary at Odense International Film Festival in 1999 for *The Magus*. Was writer-director on the international awarded *Tintin et moi* in 2003; and made his first big impression on Danish cinemagoers in 2006 with a documentary centering on one of Denmark's most popular rock bands *Gasolin*. In 2008, *Burma VJ* was selected for Joris Ivens Competition and Movies That Matter, IDFA, Amsterdam. *Så kort og mærkeligt livet er*, about the Danish poet Dan Turèll, was selected for the opening gala at CPH:DOX.

LISE LENSE_MOLLER

PRODUCER

Founded Magic Hour Films in 1984. The company has produced and co-produced a wealth of award-winning documentaries. Co-initiated the Producer's Education program at The Danish Filmschool and is an occasional instructor. Has led various workshops on script development in documentaries, pitching and documentary development. Has been a group leader in EU's post-education for film producers since 1990.

JANUS BILLESKOV JANSEN

EDITOR

A director and editor, Billeskov Jansen first started working in the Danish film industry in 1970. He has edited a large number of internationally acknowledged feature films and documentaries and directed numerous Danish documentaries. Since 1979, he has taught editing and narratology at the National Film School of Denmark. Billeskov Jansen has worked with influential Danish directors, most significantly a lifelong creative collaboration with the Palme d'Or and Academy Award-winning director Bille August. Billeskov Jansen is the editor of *Family*, a documentary that won the Joris Ivens Award in 2001. He is also recipient of Danish Film Academy Awards in 1984, 1988 and 1995, and an Honorary Bodil Lifetime Achievement Award in 2005.

- CREDITS

DIRECTOR Anders Østergaard

SCREENPLAY Anders Østergaard and Jan Krogsgaard

PRODUCER Lise Lense-Møller

ASSISTANT PRODUCER Cecilia Valsted

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY Simon Plum and Burmese VJ's

EDITORS Janus Billeskov Jansen and Thomas Papapetros

COMPOSER Conny Malmqvist

SOUND DESIGNER Martin Hennel

PRODUCTION MAGIC HOUR FILMS