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# A Buddha to Protect

Cyclone Nargis and the Visual Politics of Security

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## INTRODUCTION

After nearly twenty-one years of house arrest, Aung San Suu Kyi arrived on 16 June 2012 in Oslo to personally accept the Nobel Peace Prize she was awarded in 1991 for her non-violent struggle for democracy and human rights in Burma/Myanmar. She said in her lecture: “War is not the only arena where peace is done to death. Wherever suffering is ignored, there will be the seeds of conflict, for suffering degrades and embitters and enrages.”<sup>1</sup> Understanding and explaining the causes of war, conflict and violence as sources of human suffering has been a central normative and analytical challenge for International Relations Theory. But as Aung San Suu Kyi also noted, human suffering reaches far beyond instances of physical violence. Insecurities come in different forms, including hunger, exploitation, depression and natural catastrophes. In a globalized world, these threats, dangers and risks become visible through images of disaster, which travel easily from one place to the next via transnational media networks.

The question how such culturally-shaped images of disaster influence the practices and discourses of international politics is a rising topic in the discipline of International Relations (Alexander 2006). However, the relation between visual representations of disasters and political decisions taken by states, NGOs and the international community remains a difficult, yet important question to answer: Do images of disaster enable and/or constrain political and military interventions in order to help people who suffer? There are many images which have had a profound impact on political decisions: images of genocide and ethnic cleansing in Rwanda and Bosnia, images of hunger in Somalia and images of torture in Abu Ghraib. These pictures possess a strong affective and emotional power, saying, in effect: “Do not let this happen again.” With this general background on the relation between images and international politics in mind, Cyclone Nargis is an interesting example with which to discuss the relation between images of disaster and international politics.

On 2 May 2008, the tropical cyclone Nargis caused one of the most severe disasters recorded in the history of Burma/Myanmar. The tropical storm killed over 140,000 people and destroyed the infrastructure of the Irrawaddy Delta in Myanmar’s coastal region. The *Republic of the Union of Myanmar*, formerly called Burma, is ruled by an autocratic military

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<sup>1</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi, Nobel Lecture, 16 June 2012, Oslo; accessed 1 July 2012, [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/1991/kyi-lecture\\_en.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1991/kyi-lecture_en.html).

elite, which overthrew the democratically elected government in 1962. Even today, Myanmar remains – beside North Korea and the Republic of Iran – one of the most isolated countries in the world (although this has slightly changed since the reforms in 2012). This statement holds true when recalling the reaction of the regime to the destruction caused by Nargis: the military leader Than Shwe and his generals rejected the entry of international aid workers, refusing to let medicine, food and other relief supplies into the country. The natural catastrophe was followed by a humanitarian crisis.

While the situation of people in Myanmar worsened, French Foreign Minister Kouchner publicly proposed that the UN should invoke the *Responsibility to Protect* (R2P, see Bellamy 2008, 2009; Junk 2011; Reinhold 2010). R2P is a relatively new principle in international law which re-defines state sovereignty and restricts the norm of non-intervention in order to protect people from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleaning and other inhumane acts. Yet R2P is a contentious legal doctrine and has been criticized for its Western bias as well as its ineffectiveness. So why did the French Foreign minister refer to this principle? By invoking R2P, Kouchner constructed the situation in Myanmar as a humanitarian crisis to which the international community should respond immediately and with extraordinary measures. Such a securitizing move, however, was not supported by the images distributed through BBC.com, and therefore Kouchner's proposal did not meet with success. The pictures told another story: they constructed a visual narrative that expressed "everything is under control" and "help is on the way". This mismatch between the invocation of a humanitarian crisis on the one hand and the images of control on the other hand directs our attention to the genuine power of images: what we see must be true – and what we do not see might not be happening. It illustrates how images are powerful acts which configure the *conditions of possibility* for action.

What follows is a brief discussion of the relation between natural catastrophe and security cultures and how images of disaster could be approached from an International Relations perspective. The second part of this article presents a case study of the events after Cyclone Nargis.

## THE NATURE OF DISASTER AND THE CULTURE OF SECURITY

How people make sense of disasters, their causes and consequences, has changed over time from a theological to a social pattern of meaning. While a natural disaster was once seen as a punishment by God (or gods), such a religious interpretation has largely ceased to exist (Groh, Kempe, Mauelshagen 2003; Masius 2012). Today, nature is an object of human action: nature has been transformed into culture. What makes an event a disaster, thus, is the experience of ontological insecurity (Steele 2008). Insecurities, however, are not given facts—they are socially constructed. An often cited sentence by Max Frisch nicely expresses this interrelation between nature and culture: “Only man knows natural disasters, so far as he survives them. Nature does not know disasters” (Frisch 2007). One should thus consider that an extraordinary event becomes a disaster in that it is referred to as such. This does not imply catastrophes or disasters do not happen, but that their *social* meaning depends on people’s interpretations and actions.

International Relations scholars have mainly focused on the social and political aspects of the humanitarian crisis which often follows a natural disaster. The concept of “disaster diplomacy,” for example, directs our attention to the question of conflict resolution as an unintended consequence of natural disasters.<sup>2</sup> As events of uncertainty and insecurity, disasters constitute a phenomenon of security studies in a broader sense. International Relations scholars commonly define security as the statist ability to defend societal goods against a potential military attack (Walt 1991). It might not be surprising that such a narrow focus on military aspects has been criticized from different perspectives. Constructivist approaches thus emphasize the inter-subjective and performative quality of security. They are interested in the social processes whereby dangers and threats are constructed and the institutional consequences which arise from such an invocation of in-security. These approaches understand security not as a given fact but as a performative act or a securitizing move. In this act, references to in-security bring an issue beyond the established rules and procedures of political contestation and frame it as “special” and “above normal politics”. Hence, “if we do not act, x will not survive”.<sup>3</sup>

How threats, dangers and risks are perceived directs our attention to the cultural dimension of politics. Security cultures, Christopher Daase argues, are embedded in discourses and

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Greg Bankoff for this information. For the concept of disaster diplomacy, see Kelman 2006.

<sup>3</sup> For more details, see Wæver 1995; for a conceptual history of security, see Conze 1984; Buzan et al. 1998.

practices, which decide what counts as an in-security and how actors might respond to it (Daase 2011). These cultures reach far beyond the daily political business of parliaments, governments, NGOs and International Organizations. Security cultures are deeply inscribed in media networks which bring the stories and images of suffering people to us (Heck/Schlag 2012; Moeller 2006).

## IMAGES OF DISASTER IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Niklas Luhmann stated, “[w]hat we know about our society, indeed the world we live in, we know through mass media” (Luhmann 1996, my translation). This diagnosis of the interrelation between the worlds of politics and media has never been more compelling than today, in an era of global networks such as CNN, YouTube, and Twitter. Disturbing documentary pictures have repeatedly triggered debates on social mobilization and the misuse of images, but also strengthened our sensitivity to the ethical and moral dimension of our visual culture. Distributed by a global network, images of disaster often speed political decisions whenever politicians invoke a responsibility to re-act. Frequently they are the emotional anchors in public debates on whether an intervention is legitimate or not. The *political* power of images is thus a power to change our attitudes and to force us to action (Butler 2010; Sontag 1977, 2003; Mitchell 1987, 1994).

It’s not surprising that the influence of media on politics is a quite popular theme in the social sciences and is commonly associated with notions such as the “CNN-effect” (Robinson 2002; Bahdor 2007). These approaches often imply a causal relation between the images we see and the political decisions which follow. Such a perspective, however, overestimates and underestimates the power of images at the same time: it overestimates the impact of images because it implies that pictures have an *objective* meaning. If this is the case, then it might even be more puzzling why some disturbing images provoke interventions and others do not—remember the genocide in Rwanda. Rationalist models of the media-politics relationship underestimate images because they often imply that images can be *used* (and misused) as politicians and journalists want them to. By focusing too narrowly on cost/benefit calculations based on actor preferences and interests, the social and cultural dimension of politics is regularly lost.

Compared to such a rationalist concept of images, it’s important to understand that images direct our attention to a performative act of showing/seeing rather than to an objective

depiction of reality. They possess an “Eigensinn” – or defiance and resistance – which a merely rational and instrumental perspective on causes and effects often overlooks.<sup>4</sup> Images configure the conditions of possibility for action. They perform what they show and we see what they show—and hide. Such a mimetic quality of images is most obvious in the field of journalistic photography, where pictures of human catastrophe and natural disasters are globally distributed.

## IMAGINING NARGIS AND THE RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT

### Invoking R2P as a Threat to the Regime in Burma

Two days after the Cyclone Nargis hit Burma, Bernard Kouchner, French Foreign Minister and co-founder of *Medicines sans Frontiers*, told reporters he wanted to implement the Responsibility to Protect in order to deliver aid to the suffering people. Without any response from the generals in Burma, Kouchner affirmed his demand:

*I again solemnly appeal to the Burmese authorities to lift all restrictions on the distribution of the aid by the most efficient channels. The specialized United Nations agencies and NGOs must immediately be able to have access to the victims. To address human suffering, wherever it may be, is precisely what is meant by the "responsibility to protect" accepted by the international community and initiated by France. (emphasis added)*<sup>5</sup>

While France, Great Britain and the UN offered their help and support to the regime in Burma, the generals refused to let international aid in and insisted on holding a constitutional referendum planned months before. They literally rejected the notion that Burma was in a state of emergency. Those NGOs already in Rangoon were not allowed to travel to the destroyed areas in the Irrawaddy Delta. Jean-Mauric Ripert, the French Ambassador to the UN, warned that the situation in Burma "could lead to a crime against humanity".<sup>6</sup> The French proposal to the UN Security Council to invoke R2P, however, was refused by the Russian and Chinese representatives. They argued that a natural disaster remains an issue of domestic affairs. Non-democratic regimes often perceive the invocation of R2P as a threat to their sovereignty by powerful Western democracies. They see R2P as an illegitimate policy of

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<sup>4</sup> For the concept of visual performativity, see Bredekamp 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Burma – Communiqué issued by M. Bernard Kouchner, Minister of Foreign and European Affairs (excerpts), Paris, 8 May 2008; accessed 1 July 2012, <http://www.ambafrance-uk.org/Bernard-Kouchner-on-Burma-disaster.html>; Burma – Article by M. Bernard Kouchner, Minister of Foreign and European Affairs, published in the “Le Monde” newspaper, Paris, 20 May 2008; accessed 1 July 2012, <http://www.ambafrance-uk.org/Bernard-Kouchner-on-Burma-disaster.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Özerdem 2010. For an analysis of Nargis and R2P, see Bünte 2009; Barber 2009.

regime change rather than as an act of humanitarian assistance.<sup>7</sup>

According to reports in the media, in particular those referencing statements from NGOs, the situation in Burma intensified in the week after the cyclone. Proposals of dropping aid by air into Burma were criticized as being ineffective. On 12 May, UN General Secretary Ban Ki-moon voiced his concerns that not enough aid had reached the people:

*Today is the 11th day since Typhoon Nargis hit Myanmar. I want to register my deep concern—and immense frustration—at the unacceptably slow response to this grave humanitarian crisis. [...] We are at a critical point. Unless more aid gets into the country—very quickly—we face an outbreak of infectious diseases that could dwarf today's crisis. I therefore call, in the most strenuous terms, on the Government of Myanmar to put its people's lives first. I emphasize that this is not about politics. It is about saving people's lives. There is absolutely no more time to lose. (emphasis added)*<sup>8</sup>

The regime, meanwhile, continued its policy of accepting relief supplies from neighboring countries but rejected foreign aid workers and support from Western states.<sup>9</sup> While the first ships and planes from India and Thailand arrived on 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> of May in Rangoon, other governments would have difficulties getting access to Burma for months. The generals insisted on having their own forces distribute the aid, and for obvious reasons: the regime feared that the more foreigners came to Burma, the more their own power would vanish, and that the distribution of food and medicine by soldiers would help give the regime credit for aid and assistance. Negotiations between Ban Ki-moon and General Than Shwe, supported by the diplomatic efforts of ASEAN, slowly improved and, after three weeks, international aid was delivered to Rangoon and the Irrawaddy Delta more easily.

From a legal perspective, most experts argue that Cyclone Nargis and the refusal of the regime to let international aid in caused a severe humanitarian crisis but did not meet to the narrow terms set out by R2P for intervention.<sup>10</sup> Why, then, did politicians invoke R2P? References to R2P usually raise the awareness of conflicts due to the moral overtones of pro-

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<sup>7</sup> See for example the first sentences of a joint article by Kouchner and Milliband where the regime in Myanmar is de-legitimized: "The Cyclone Nargis disaster is doubly tragic for the people of Burma. Already suffering from the lowest living standards in Asia and years of misrule and mismanagement, they have now been struck by this terrible natural catastrophe" (Joint article by Mr David Miliband, British Foreign Secretary, and M. Bernard Kouchner, Minister of Foreign and European Affairs, in the "Times", 9 May 2008; accessed 1 July 2012, <http://www.ambafrance-uk.org/Bernard-Kouchner-on-Burma-disaster.html>).

<sup>8</sup> Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, Opening remarks at press conference on Myanmar, 12 May 2008, UNHQ, New York; accessed 1 July 2012, [http://www.un.org/apps/news/infocus/sgspeeches/statments\\_full.asp?statID=239](http://www.un.org/apps/news/infocus/sgspeeches/statments_full.asp?statID=239).

<sup>9</sup> BBC.com, 13 May 2008; accessed 1 July 2012, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7398611.stm>.

<sup>10</sup> For different political accounts, see Garret Evans, Facing Up to Our Responsibility, in *The Guardian*, 8 May 2008 and R Thakur, Should the UN Invoke the "Responsibility to Protect"?, in *The Globe and Mail*, 8 May 2008.



tection and help. The invocation of R2P constructed the situation in Myanmar as a serious problem the international community had to respond to. It mobilized support and sped the decision-making process within the UN to call for immediate action as Kouchner and Ban Ki-moon emphasized. In situations like this, which lead to the invocation or implementation of R2P, we often see images of dead, displaced or suffering people, which call on our own responsibility to end violence.

## Images of Disaster between Destruction and Relief

Images of disaster typically fall into two general categories: images of destruction, force and suffering on the one hand and images of relief and reconstruction on the other hand. These two categories also imply that we have an image of the non-destroyed in mind, i.e. how everything was *before* the disaster. It is this imaginary image of the normal day-to-day that disasters temporarily destroy by invoking a state of emergency. Images of disaster show that culture and our lives remain vulnerable to the forces of nature.

The following visual history of Nargis is based on the articles, videos and pictures published on BBC.com.<sup>11</sup> Two days after the cyclone hit Southeast Asia, the BBC reported “Hundreds killed by Burma cyclone”. A Rangoon resident described the damage in the city for the BBC Burmese service: “Everything was wrecked. Roofs of the houses and satellite dishes were blown away.”<sup>12</sup> The images related to Cyclone Nargis shown on BBC.com presented the following different subject types: (1) maps and charts; (2) satellite images of the cyclone; (3) the event itself; (4) destroyed infrastructure (streets, houses, fallen trees); (5) reconstruction and rebuilding efforts; (6) officials meeting and visiting the destroyed locations (in particular General Than Shwe and UN-Secretary General Ban Ki-moon); (7) homeless people, in particular women and children; and (8) the delivery and distribution of international aid supplies. While the first days after the cyclone were dominated by images of the event itself, the following two weeks were mainly represented by pictures of destroyed infrastructure and the clean-up efforts of the local population, including soldiers and monks. Due to the fact that no journalists and aid workers were allowed to travel to the most affected area of the Irrawaddy Delta, the pictures focus on Rangoon. They were produced either by the news agency of Burma, journalists for AP and AFP, or eyewitnesses.

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<sup>11</sup> BBC.com is a global media network with a strong presence in Asia and Africa. The BBC certainly is not an unbiased agency but interested in a more or less objective reporting of international events. The selection of images from BBC.com is not representative but serves as an illustration how the disaster was visually represented.

<sup>12</sup> BBC.com, 4 May 2008; accessed 1 July 2012, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7382298.stm>.

The first images published on BBC.com are geographic maps locating the region of disaster, as well as satellite pictures of the event taken by NASA. These rather abstract depictions construct a spatial demarcation of the event. Then, photos and videos of the natural forces follow showing the immense power of the storm and the rain. Just like a disaster movie, we see palms falling down and roofs tearing away. Most images, however, show the aftermath of the storm, in particular the destroyed infrastructure and broken houses. While these images of destruction and force provide a first impression of what happened, the images published two days after the cyclone hit Burma already showed locals beginning to clean up. A woman in Rangoon is cited as saying: "I've seen about 200 monks in Kemmedine township, and the same number in Sanchaung township, clearing the fallen trees and leading work parties. The USDA [the civilian arm of the military junta] have turned up but they're not really doing anything—they're just standing around."<sup>13</sup> For days, the BBC had reported on representatives of NGOs in Rangoon and elsewhere who referred to the problem of getting visas and access to towns in the affected areas.<sup>14</sup> Paul Danahar, a BBC correspondent, sent his report from the southern part of Burma writing that

*[a]id is starting to arrive, but not quickly enough. Huge sections of the Irrawaddy Delta lie cut off from the outside world. [...] The world does care but it cannot get in because the government is still dragging its feet on opening up to foreign aid workers. The government has relaxed its grip on the aid groups permanently based here. Those workers, local and international, are free to travel and do their best to help. But there is much more help waiting on Burma's doorstep. Days, hours and minutes are a matter of life and death in the aftermath of any disaster. Hundreds of thousands of people are now waiting for help. But while the authorities discuss visas and permissions, people are probably dying. (emphasis added)*<sup>15</sup>

On 8 May, the reports intensified their focus on the regime's policy of denying access to the international assistance teams. The assumed death toll rose to 100.000 people. But this was also the day that the first planes from India landed in Rangoon with food and medicine. We see pictures of the arriving aircraft carriers with food supplies to be distributed by the regime.

All these images, one could argue, represent the forces of nature and the vulnerability of Burma's infrastructure; however, they do not depict the humanitarian crisis that Kouchner

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<sup>13</sup> BBC.com, 6 May 2008; accessed 1 July 2012, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7383821.stm>.

<sup>14</sup> Philippa Fogarty reports for BBC News from Bangkok: "Highly suspicious of foreign aid agencies, the regime said that it could provide for the thousands left homeless without any external aid. But it appears as though the sheer magnitude of the devastation caused by Cyclone Nargis could perhaps force a shift. [...] Aid agencies in Burma currently face a difficult operating environment. Most of their work in the country is done by local staff, because visas for foreign nationals are restricted. In-country travel is also restricted, and agencies must apply in advance for official permission. In some cases, ministry representatives sit in on agency meetings." (Burma: the challenge for aid agencies, BBC News, Bangkok, 7 May 2008).

<sup>15</sup> Paul Danahar, *Keeping a Lid on Burma's Chaos: The devastation caused by the cyclone*, BBC News, 7 May 2008; accessed 1 July 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7387540.stm>.

and others referred to. Such crises are rather presented by pictures of displaced people – in particular children – and images of dead bodies. In the case of Nargis, there is only one picture (a still taken from a video) which shows dead people, while many photos depict (presumably displaced) women and children.<sup>16</sup> But the overall visual narrative is one of control and help. This stands in sharp contrast to what British Foreign Minister Miliband said in an interview: "A natural disaster is turning into a humanitarian catastrophe of genuinely epic proportions in significant part because of what I would describe as the malign neglect of the regime."<sup>17</sup>

Most of the images published on BBC.com showed the two sides of disaster: force and destruction on the one hand and assistance, relief and reconstruction on the other. Graphics, satellite pictures and charts show where the disaster happened. Most of the other pictures refer to a typical temporal distinction of *before* and *after* the cyclone. The spatial localization of the disaster demarcates the zone of risk where help is now needed, while the temporal distinction already imagines a future where life goes on as before. Although disasters refer to a responsibility to help, the strong focus on either images of destruction or of reconstruction affirms a central idea of modernity: that mankind is able to civilize nature, although nature might—from time to time—violently resist. These images seem to be embedded in a modern discourse where the force of natural catastrophe is perceived as the inevitable side-effect of civilization. This image, showing reconstruction efforts in the background, and an unharmed Buddha in the front, symbolically expresses the central visual narrative of Cyclone Nargis presented on BBC.com: "Everything is under control" and "help is on the way". The symbolic notion of a divine guardian – a *Buddha to protect* – seemed to imply that reconstruction depended on the belief and work of Myanmar's people excluding foreigners from the scene.

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<sup>16</sup> BBC.com, 11 May 2008; accessed 1 July 2012; [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in\\_pictures/7394838.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in_pictures/7394838.stm).

<sup>17</sup> BBC.com, 11 May 2008; accessed 1 July 2012; [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/politics\\_show/7385755.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/politics_show/7385755.stm).



Associated Press, Yangon/Myanmar, 8 May 2008; © AP

One could conclude that the images published on BBC.com make the human suffering of the people in Myanmar invisible. This is certainly the result of the regime's policy of restricting foreign journalists and aid workers travel, preventing them from going to the most destroyed regions in the Delta. While BBC.com published many photos and videos of eyewitnesses which supported the overall narrative of reconstruction and control. The majority of these images depicted the destruction of infrastructure and clean-up efforts by the people, military units and the monks. This absence of heart-breaking and iconic images, I argue, undermined the invocation of R2P as a response to the difficult situation in Burma. The references to a humanitarian crisis and the call for immediate action were not supported by these pictures and the visual narrative they told. They did not fit into the depiction of a humanitarian crisis, but already envisioned that "help is on the way".

Kouchner's unsuccessful invocation of R2P, then, directs our attention to common practices of securitization: the call for immediate action and the use of extraordinary measures in the name of a threatened referent object (Schlag 2011; Hansen 2011). While the R2P discourse about Burma and Cyclone Nargis centered on this invocation of a state of emergency, the images shown on BBC.com told another story: destruction of the infrastructure, clean-up, and "help is on the way". Such visual narratives, one could say, bring the genuine power of images to the fore: what we see must be true – and what we do not see might not be happening. While images are used by journalists to illustrate their reports, pictures are productive of distinct visual narrative which might reach beyond the intentions of their producers and users. It's this "Eigensinn," or defiance and resistance, which make images problematic to political instrumentalization, but also vulnerable to ethical critique.

## CONCLUSION: THE VISUAL POLITICS OF SECURITY

Images of disaster are omnipresent in our globalized visual culture. How they relate to political decisions, however, remains contentious. Many images of suffering people, violence and atrocities have enabled political decisions on intervention—but the opposite also holds true. The impact of visual cultures of security on the legitimacy of interventions is highly ambivalent. Some pictures force the international community to intervene; some pictures do not. What we can conclude is that images configure the *conditions of possibility* for action in the way they are produced and used, but they are usually not grounds for an intervention.

It remains, however, the main task of the international community to prevent violence and create a peaceful world as Aung San Suu Kyi concluded in her Nobel Lecture: “Ultimately our aim should be to create a world free from the displaced, the homeless and the hopeless, a world of which each and every corner is a true sanctuary where the inhabitants will have the freedom and the capacity to live in peace.”<sup>18</sup> While R2P was intended to prevent human suffering, the politics of power can often eclipse human rights protection. It is then that the power of images reminds us that we should not let this happen again.

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<sup>18</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi, *Nobel Lecture*, 16 June 2012, Oslo; accessed 1 July 2012, [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/1991/kyi-lecture\\_en.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1991/kyi-lecture_en.html).

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