For 15 years, the archive that these materials are a part of was lost in the totalitarian nation. Three attempts failed to retrieve the more than 50 hours of recordings before they were finally spirited out of the country in 2009. Now a Vancouver resident named Alan Clements is working to make the information available to the world.

Clements is the new partner successor successfully entered Burma. The dissidents there were nervous about meeting with anybody, Clements recounts. But his man was persistent and gained their trust. A meeting was eventually arranged, and while driving through the streets of Rangoon, with the government’s soldiers everywhere, Clements’ friend was instructed by his driver to reach into the glove compartment. He grabbed what was there, stepped out of the car, and ran.

After lying buried in the earth for 15 years, the archive was recovered.

Still inside Burma, Clements continued, the man stayed awake for the better part of a week, painstakingly digitizing as much of the material as he could. Then he carried the archive out of the country and back to Clements in Australia.

"Getting the material out of the country was a first step," Clements emphasizes. "Because we have...a Nobel peace laureate who is a prisoner of conscience, who the world does not know, yet we can...a Nobel peace laureate who is a prisoner of conscience, who the world does not know, yet we can...a Nobel peace laureate who is a prisoner of conscience, who the world does not know, yet we can...a Nobel peace laureate who is a prisoner of conscience, who the world does not know, yet we can...

"We will do what is in their minds and hearts."

Burma’s voice

Alan Clements is working to achieve some of the rarest multimedia footage in the world from Burma. All hell broke loose when a terror attack damaged somewhere in the totalitarian southeast Asian nation for 15 years.

"I had attempted to get these tapes out of Burma three separate times over 15 years and each time had failed," Clements recounted in an exclusive interview with the Georgia Straight. "In 1997, 2003, and 2006. And then they were lost.

He was describing a rich archive of video and audio interviews with Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.

For 22 years, Suu Kyi has led a struggle against tyranny in Burma (also known as Myanmar). She has been imprisoned or held under house arrest in Rangoon for roughly 13 of the past 20 years. Her supporters describe her as a light for democracy shining in a country shrouded in the darkness of a ruthless military regime.

Over a period of months in 1995, Clements, a journalist and former Buddhist monk, gained unprecedented access to Suu Kyi. The result of the time they spent together was a book detailing their conversations, the recordings of which were hidden. In his modest home in Kitallano, Clements described Suu Kyi’s movement as a spiritual revolution with a political front.

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"We will do what is in their minds and hearts."

ON MAY 27, 1990, Suu Kyi was democratically elected the leader of Burma. Her political party, the National League for Democracy, won a landslide victory over the State Peace and Development Council, the military junta’s two most significant opposition groups. As the leading role of the military in Burma is written in the constitution.

For this story, the Straight repeatedly attempted to interview NLD spokesperson and Suu Kyi’s lawyer Nyan Win. Telephone numbers supplied to the Straight often rang briefly before disconnecting.

For many living in Burma, the junta’s continued rule is a matter of life and death. A report submitted to the UN Human Rights Council in March 2010 states: "There is a pattern of gross and systematic violation of human rights which has been in place for many years and still continues. Given the extent and persistence of the problem, and the lack of accountability, there is an indication that those human rights violations are the result of a State policy."

The report details dozens of recent atrocities, coming as clear that the situation in Burma is not improving. Take just one example: in Shan state, since July 28, the military has forced the relocation of about 40 villages, making that operation the largest forced migration in the country since 1996–1998, the worst to date."
when more than 300,000 people were displaced. Paul Pickram, a Canadian journalist and the author of the recently published No Easy Road: A Burmese Refugee's Story, has seen the work of the junta firsthand.

"What is happening in Burma is the real dark side of humanity," he said from Chiang Mai, Thailand. "A sea of this could very well be the undoing of human civilization."

For the past two years, Pickram has worked for Burma News International, a collective of exiled Burmese media organizations. His job has often taken him to the Burma-Thailand border region, where an estimated 150,000 Burmese refugees live in a string of camps and where the price of opposing the junta is perhaps most evident.

"What they do is they just hammer you," he said. "The brutality that they strike back with is so strong, so overwhelming, for even the smallest infraction in their eyes, that the people are just bludgeoned into total submission. And if they're not, they're just totally destroyed."

Pickram recounted some of the stories he's heard. "There are dark zones—they call them black zones in Burma—where people are shot on sight. Rape is regularly used as a weapon of war. They starve people; they burn villages to the ground; they have publicly executed people. They have killed thousands."

The international community has slowly started to turn its attention toward Burma. At the UN, efforts are under way to establish a commission of inquiry. The governments of Canada and the United States have expressed support for the initiative, but China—Burma's most important economic partner—is opposed. Canada and the United States have expressed support for the initiative, but China—Burma's most important economic partner—is opposed. But Hoffmann was quick to add that if such developments do mark the beginning of a transition to democracy, that process will be a long and arduous one.

He noted that the junta has proven itself unpredictable, and he warned that there are indications the situation in Burma could actually get worse after the election. "The junta's government has repeatedly oppressed ethnic minorities—such as the Muslim Rohingya, Karen, and Chin—with violence, causing the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people. With renewed confidence after an election, Hoffmann continued, the military could intensify operations against minorities in the country."

On Suu Kyi, Hoffmann was cautiously optimistic. He said that the information he has does suggest that Suu Kyi will be released on or close to November 13. "We don't know what that release will be," he added. "But it will probably give her greater freedoms than she has at the moment."

Hoffmann emphasized that Canada's political and economic sanctions targeting Burma and the junta have long been the toughest in the world. For that to change, he continued, Canada would have to see "significant, tangible, and enduring reforms."

The Straight filed an interview request with the Embassy of the Union of Myanmar in Ottawa. An e-mailed reply stated that the submission would be sent to "HQ." Further inquiries received no response.

AFTER LEADING the campaign against Burma's military government for more than two decades, the NLD was dissolved on May 6, 2010. Once the party refused to register for the November election, Burma's electoral commission—which is controlled by the military—declared the NLD illegal.

On October 14, a letter bearing Oo's signature was sent to NLD members and other opposition groups. The letter (which was translated and supplied to the Straight by Canadian Friends of Burma) stated that the NLD is fighting the regime's decision and that Burma's high court has agreed to hear the case.

Tim Aye Hardy, director of outreach for the Burma Global Action Network, told the Straight that Suu Kyi will never cease to fight for a democratic Burma. Speculating on what Suu Kyi will do if the junta does grant her a degree of freedom, Hardy said that he is sure she will speak out against the junta. "She will talk about issues of injustice and human rights and speak out for the people," he affirmed from his office in New York City. "That is who she is; that is what she has been doing, and that is what she has devoted her life to."

Hardy, one of the student leaders who dared to publicly oppose the regime in 1988, has long shared Suu Kyi's dream of bringing democracy to Burma. "She will speak out," he repeated. "When that happens, it is guaranteed that people will rally behind her, that people will come and listen to her, and that people will support her."

And every other Burmese the Straight spoke with hold Suu Kyi in the highest regard, the tone of their voices audibly changing as they spoke of her.

"She is truly a symbol of light, of democracy, human rights, and liberty," Oo said, despite the possibility of the regime's reprise. "And once she is released from custody, she will go around and talk to the people."

Clements, finally in possession of the long- lost archive, said there is much that people of every nationality can learn from Suu Kyi.

"You've got this woman who is basically saying, 'No. I am going to confront you with the power of kindness over cruelty, dialogue over destruction, and decency over death,'" he said. "She has a very beautiful condemnation of force."

What Suu Kyi is doing extends far beyond the borders of Burma. Clements continued. "Aung San Suu Kyi is bringing forth this new vision, this new paradigm, for a new form of world democracy that is decidedly committed to nonviolence."

And yet Suu Kyi remains a prisoner of the state, separated from her family but refusing to leave her people. Whether or not she is released from house arrest on November 13, one thing will not change. In 1990, Suu Kyi was democratically elected to lead the people of Burma. She has been doing so ever since.

Canadian Friends of Burma will hold a demonstration on Saturday (November 6) at 11 a.m. at Library Square. Hollyrock and Banyon Books are hosting a series of presentations by Alan Clements on Saturday and Sunday (November 6 and 7), and November 13 and 14. These sessions will explore Aung San Suu Kyi's call for a global revolution of spirit, which Clements described as "a form of nonviolent, feminist-based activism grounded in liberated Buddhism, love, and direct democracy." The event is a reading of a copy of the audio version of Clements's book, The Voice of Hope, and are available at worldofburma.com/.
light in Burma

Why democracy activist and Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi’s party is boycotting the military regime’s upcoming election. Plus, exclusive access to recovered audio and video interview archives.

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