



## No (Photo) Opportunity Wasted

### What Happens Post-exposure?

This month, the EPN monthly asked ourselves a question very fundamental to an understanding of poverty alleviation measures: How do our actions affect - and how are our actions affected by - public consciousness?

Recent memory provides countless examples of the "hot ticket" items which rose to public prominence only to fizzle out before their ultimate resolution (if indeed a resolution had been reached at all). Sweatshop boycotts, the 1999 Tsunami as well as recent political instability in Burma and Kenya serve as illustrative examples. The continuing state of many regions of New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina shows us that even developed nations are not immune to our own collective lack of long-term memory.

To approach this issue, we have looked at the celebrization of philanthropy and to the recent example of Myanmar's social unrest. Though by no means complete, we hope this issue will serve as an important launch point for discussion. Let us think: What happens after the photo-ops?

Editorial responses to this or other topics covered are always welcome. Please share your thoughts with us: [newsletter@endpovertynow.ca](mailto:newsletter@endpovertynow.ca)

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**ENDPOVERTYNOW**

## Activism Goes Glam: Is Philanthropy the New Black?

-Sarah Grys-

Payam Akhavan, a scholar of genocide at McGill University, sees the response to celebrity activism as reflecting a "self-absorbed culture where compassion and empathy is awakened through glamour rather than human conscience and duty". It may or may not be true that celebrities, and those members of the public who support their chosen causes, are motivated by the "trendiness" of it all. Time columnist James Poniewozik is one of many who question celebrity motivation, suggesting that in Hollywood "philanthropy is the new black". Others question the global, as opposed to local, focus of celebrity activism, attributing this choice to the more captivating photo-ops. More important than the motivations of celebrities and their supporters, is whether or not

celebrity activism benefits those included under the banner of their chosen 'cause'. This debate offers valid arguments on both sides of the issue and will provide the focus of this article.

Those opposing celebrities' association with foreign policy and various NGOs offer several reasons for their position. They suggest that international relations "gone glam", give celebrities unwarranted authority in arenas where their intellectual contribution is questionable. Why should *Mr. & Mrs. Smith* be the preeminent voices on CNN, BBC or CTV and who appointed Bono the global secretary of development? Celebrity clout in areas where their expertise is often limited could result in the popularity of uninformed policies. Another cause for concern among those skeptical of the value of celebrity activism is the "fatigue factor".

See *CELEB ACTIVISM* on page 3



Actress Angelina Jolie works as a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador

## End Poverty Now in 2008: From YouTube to Rwanda, Opportunities to Contribute

→ End Poverty Now is launching an innovative video campaign that focuses on the personal side of poverty alleviation: "My Poverty Plan". Given the notion that each individual can do their part to enact change, we are asking you, the public, to create *your* own plan to alleviate poverty. We would like to promote the unique spectrum of ideas of how poverty can truly be affected through local action. But most of all, we would like to get you thinking! Try to make it personal: something that you feel needs to be addressed, something you have always dreamed of accomplishing. Be creative. Our own My Poverty Plan videos will be posted on an interactive website and linked with YouTube, so everyone can contribute their viewpoint to this new database of purposeful optimism! Keep your eyes on the EPN website in the coming weeks for the official launch!

→ End Poverty Now's joint venture with a micro-finance beekeeping project in Rwanda is beginning within less than a week's time. It will be starting out with training sessions and very soon thereafter will begin to integrate 50 widows into beekeeping. This project has been carefully designed to give them sustainable skills and generate income for them and the Huye community. EPN is excited to announce an internship opportunity in the Huye community in the Southern Province of Rwanda. In conjunction with the Rwanda Village Concept Project and the Widows Association, the successful intern will be working with our this grassroots project over the summer to help implement a bee-keeping initiative with the local widows. From early May to August 2008, the intern will have the opportunity to work in both the construction and training in the field, in addition to being EPN's representative. To this end, the intern will act as a liason between EPN and RVCP, while working closely with the women and the community. This would also include overlooking the project and its upkeep in a support position: taking photos, keeping

a journal, collecting minutes, and overseeing the development of this exciting initiative. For more information, please visit: <http://www.endpovertynow.ca/Rwanda2008>

→ EPN is moving forward on a backyard gardening project through the International Association for Transformation. This project will assist approximately 20 villages in the Northern Philippines in establishing backyard gardening projects for income generation, community health and the improvement of sanitation. The project is likely to commence in November to coincide with the appropriate agricultural seasons.

→ Lastly, End Poverty Now would like to thank Abbas Tejani Inc. from Vancouver, BC for their generous donation of \$5,000! □

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End Poverty Now is an organization that is dedicated to the long-term battle against abject poverty. End Poverty Now represents a group of dedicated individuals, mainly students, who want to make a difference in the world through working to address the causes and relieve the effects of poverty. For more information on how to get involved with End Poverty Now, check out our website at [www.endpovertynow.ca](http://www.endpovertynow.ca). To contribute to the production of the newsletter, e-mail [newsletter@endpovertynow.ca](mailto:newsletter@endpovertynow.ca).

## Celebrity Involvement in Politics : Genuine "Goodwill"?

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*Actress Audrey Hepburn with Somali children in the 1980s*

Celebrity activism was not born in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but more recent involvement is distinctive in its scale. When Audrey Hepburn was a UNICEF goodwill ambassador, her efforts did not continually become the subject of daily headlines. Overexposure risks aggravating the long-term public interest in any particular 'cause.'

Others see the awkward lifestyle gap between celebrities and their 'causes' as giving the entire enterprise an aura of exploitation. Celebrities championing poverty alleviation in thousand dollar outfits have the potential to cast all activism in a self-interested light. Those truly affected by the plight of the global poor would certainly spare themselves the most unnecessary luxuries. If activism is increasingly seen as a tool of the publicist, there is the possibility that the mass public will reject all activists as exploiting their 'causes' to better their images. In a day when each and every cause has a face, sincerity will inevitably be questioned. This skepticism has the potential for backlash that could work against those people whom celebrities purport to selflessly represent.

Arguments in favor of celebrity activism point to their successes in captivating public interest towards otherwise neglected issues. Lucy Liu appeared on the Oprah Winfrey Show in 2006 shortly after traveling with UNICEF to visit earthquake victims in Pakistan. Following her appearance, traffic on UNICEF website rose by ninety-one percent. Marissa Buckanof, public relations direct for the U.S Fund for UNICEF, reported a three hundred percent increase in calls. Following Angelina Jolie's two-hour interview with CNN's

Anderson Cooper in June of 2007, donations skyrocketed by more than half a million dollars.

The public of the 21<sup>st</sup> century consumes information in a new way, incomparable to any previous generation. In his book, "Soft News Goes to War", Matthew Baum suggests that the majority of the Americans look to *Entertainment Tonight*, *The Daily Show* and *Access Hollywood* for the latest in world politics. The celebrities featured on these programs reach an audience that is "unattainable" by, for example, the New York Times. Those who support celebrity activism would argue that more far-reaching exposure of global issues is an undeniable plus. As Claire Lewis of Oxfam insists, "celebrities can turn something that is an issue in boardrooms and grey-suited meetings into a water-cooler moment and bring these subjects into cafés and pubs." Those who maintain this stance will offer Al Gore as case and point, arguing that Gore the celebrity activist was far more successful in furthering his cause than Gore the vice president. According to some advocates, "this is the kind of parable that could lead aspiring policy wonks to wonder if the best way to command policy influence is to attend Julliard instead of the Fletcher School". Parable or no parable, those who say 'yay' to celebrity activism would argue that it shouldn't matter who is generating public interest in global issues. Depending on who is the viewer, a camera aimed at the people of Darfur could be perceived as a good thing, even if it seems morally detrimental that it took a celebrity to get them there. □

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## The Tragedy Of Unrealized Potential: A personal perspective on Burma's military regime

-Benjamin Ezekiel Holzman-

"Everyone here hates the government, but everyone is too afraid to talk about it." Even though I'm paraphrasing, that is the clear message I'm receiving, in broken English, from Aye Myat Soe, a teacher at a monastic School in Mandalay, Burma. The fiery Mandalay sun has just set and I'm sitting in on an 'English conversation group', where young teachers gather each evening to practice their budding English. We're in a surprisingly well furnished library on the school grounds, recently built with an influx of funds from English benefactors. It is October 2006, exactly one year before the recent uprising.

After a full day of teaching at a school of over 7,000 students, Aye Myat Soe and her colleagues, all between their late teens and mid-20s, usually share their time together in the English conversation group. They use this time together to relax and converse casually about the multitude of social problems facing their country, and to discuss their roles as educators in this context. With this in mind, I somewhat apprehensively inquire about their sentiments towards the government, half expecting the very articulation of the question to be met with silence. Luckily the teachers are unexpectedly forthcoming, and their responses are unanimous. They tell me of the rigid, propagandist educational curriculum that the government compels them to implement; of the dearth of opportunities for even the most educated among them; and of the endemic poverty that pervades all corners of the country. The dissident teachers also confide that the only place they are comfortable discussing their aggravation with the oppressive military regime is in their close-knit English conversation group.

These teachers have it better than most; as a general rule, frustration and resentment goes unvoiced and unheard in Burma.

I came to Burma to teach English, yet in the 3 short weeks that I was involved in the school's program, I'm quite certain that I learned a lot more than I taught. Burma is a large, populous, and wondrous country, replete with a rich history and a mystic cultural tradition. Yet this has been, for the most part, totally cut off from the rest of the world. Though the country has opened its doors to foreign tourists in recent years, Burma has not been assimilated into the well-worn Asian tourist trail; Foreigners are still quite a rare sight, even at the countries' biggest attractions.

Traveling through the country, however, my impressions are mixed. One cannot escape the confrontation of crushing poverty everywhere; from the conspicuous cases of sickness and street beggars, to the more concealed yet far more commonplace masses who toil for over 12 hours per day simply to eke out a bare living. The abject injustice of this widespread deprivation is sickening. Yet what seems to offend me most, somehow, is the sheer inefficiency of it all. As an example, I think of the veritable army of rickshaw-pullers who crowd Burma's busy street corners, lining up patiently for hours on end just to take one or two wealthy Burmese or tourists per day a distance of a few blocks, the payment of which provides just enough income to buy basic foodstuffs to last til the next day. In the same vein, I recall a conversation with a teenage girl who explained how she needed to forgo her schooling to work, simply to buy rice for her family - a tragically common story. Witnessing such inane, unnecessary hardship as a Westerner is both exasperating and heartbreaking.

At the same time, however, I also find a forward-looking, innovative and charming people, who strive to make the best out of their ghastly circumstances. Put plainly, the military junta that seized power in Burma in 1988 has succeeded in isolating and marginalizing the majority. And yet the morale of the people and their boundless good humor remains, as far as I could see, indomitable.

Reflecting on my experiences one year later, I can see how the stories of the spirited teachers that I worked with mirror the story of the country under military repression as a whole: that of unrealized potential. For the most part, the young teachers at the school are university educated, witty, vivacious, and have lots of personal contact with foreigners. If they are lucky, a few of them will get permission to study at Chiang Mai University in neighboring Thailand for a few months. Beyond that, their chances of seeing the world beyond Burma are slim to none. They will more than likely have their careers determined by the state's stringent policies, with few prospects for anything else.

On my last day at the school, having become somewhat emboldened after candidly probing the teachers on their attitude towards the government, I audaciously teach one of my classes about the concept of human rights. Hopefully some part of my spiel struck a chord in a curious young mind. I can only hope that this single act of boldness will make a difference somewhere down the line. □

*Benjamin Holzman is a 4<sup>th</sup> year Political Science student at McGill. He traveled to Burma last year in the context of a 9 month journey which also took him to Thailand, India, & Bangladesh.*

## The Interdependence of Poverty and Repression in Burma

-Hannah Getachew-

The Burmese military and Buddhist monks have a long history of tension, dating as far back as the 1960s. Upon Burma's independence from Britain in 1948, the newly-appointed prime minister U Nu undertook policies that angered the military. Among the most contentious was his promotion of Buddhism as the religion of the state, along with his tolerance of separatism. U Nu's party continued to rule concomitantly throughout the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century until being overthrown by a *coup d'état* in 1962 at the hands of Army Chief of Staff General Ne Win. As a new leader, General Ne Win sought to bring his people into the new "Burmese Way to Socialism" – nationalising the economy, banning independent newspapers, limiting freedom of political expression, and repressing opposition groups.

Discontent among the Burmese grew, and in 1975 the Opposition National Democratic Front, established by minority groups, mounted guerrilla insurgencies. The devastating currency devaluation of 1987, however, proved to be the final straw. Furious that their savings had been wiped out, students staged anti-government protests which would eventually gain wide support from the public. In response, the regime took a dictatorial turn by violently repressing the protests and imposing martial law. Thousands were arrested, including advocates of human rights and democracy. Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the National League for Democracy (NLD), was placed under house arrest, during which she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, after winning the nation's first free elections in almost 30 years. Meanwhile, a second military *coup* brought about the new State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), under which Burma was renamed Myanmar and the capital's name was changed from Rangoon to Yangon.

During the 1990's the SLORC

released over 300 political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi from under house arrest, in an attempt to boost Burma's international image. They also changed their name from SLORC to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997. However, student demonstrations broke out in 1998 when the government failed to follow through on its deal with the NLD to convene parliament.

The Myanmar government's repression of its people continued to escalate until 2007. Despite its usually neutral political perspective, the International Committee of the Red Cross accused the government of human rights abuses. Later that year fuel prices hiked, triggering a "wave of public dissent" catalyzed by an active presence of Buddhist monks protesting against the government. The immediate outcome of these protests became well known throughout the world media late last year. Several protests were held against the government in Rangoon, leading to the government crackdown which ultimately set off nationwide demonstrations.

Since the high profile protests the state has continued to actively disperse the monks. Hundreds are rumoured to be in detention, monasteries have been closed down and others are under armed guard. More recently, in February of this year, state controlled media recently announced the governments' intention to hold general elections in 2010. However, viewed in a historical context, the possibility of just and representative results for the people of Myanmar remains an up-hill battle. □

Works Cited: BBC, CIA Factbook

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*Children at a monastic School in Mandalay, Burma.*