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The Rambo approach to Burma

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The fourth instalment in the Rambo movie series, starring American actor Sylvester Stallone, depicted appalling human rights abuses against Western missionaries and Karen villagers in Myanmar by the country's armed forces. The movie's graphic content and clear political message attracted a wide range of comments from film critics, activists and members of the military government, as was no doubt intended.

Sylvester Stallone has claimed that his movie *Rambo 4*,¹ released internationally in February and available to Australians on DVD next month, has a serious purpose: to draw attention to the Burmese Government's long record of human rights abuses and to mobilise action against the military regime. Yet, its dubious entertainment value aside, this movie in fact has the potential to do Burma's opposition movement considerable harm.

When deciding where to set his movie, Stallone reportedly asked both the UN and *Soldier of Fortune (SOF)* magazine to name the world's worst current war zones. *SOF* nominated the 60-year-old civil war between Burma's central government and the ethnic Karens, most of whom live along the Thailand–Burma border. The cinematic result is an almost cosmic battle between good and evil, as the invincible US Special Forces

1 Sylvester Stallone (dir.), *Rambo*, 2008, www.imdb.com/title/tt0462499/.

soldier John Rambo once again comes out of retirement, to rescue a group of Christian missionaries held captive by the evil Burmese army. As the movie's tagline goes: 'Old heroes never die, they just reload.'

The brooding, disaffected antihero of *First Blood* (1982), *Rambo: First Blood Part 2* (1985) and *Rambo 3* (1988) is now in his sixties and less prone to leaping about the landscape, but he can still mow down the bad guys with the best of them. According to the *Internet Movie Database (IMDb)*,² the film averages 2.59 killings per minute. As one US reviewer has noted, the final body count of 236 dead in just 91 minutes makes it 'possibly the most violent movie ever to get an R rating and a wide release in America'.

Rambo's sizeable contribution to this nonstop slaughter is justified on the grounds that Burma's military government has absolutely no redeeming features and its wicked servants thus deserve everything they get. During the course of the movie, the Burmese army is found guilty of genocide, homicide, infanticide, torture, rape, paedophilia, arson, theft, environmental degradation and cruelty to animals, among other crimes. This gives the avenging Rambo a licence for guilt-free mayhem on a grand scale. Nothing is left to the imagination in this digitally enhanced festival of blood, viscera and severed limbs.

Stallone, who cowrote and directed the latest *Rambo* epic, wanted his movie to reflect real world events and to influence international perceptions of the situation in Burma. He has spoken publicly about Burma's terrible human rights record—the suffering of its ethnic minorities, in particular—and challenged the military regime to let him into the country, so he can tell them where they are going wrong. In the movie, the hero suggests by his words and actions—particularly actions—that violent resistance to such oppression is not only justified, but also necessary. Efforts at humanitarian intervention are dismissed as well intentioned but essentially naive. The only way to improve matters, this film clearly says, is to overthrow the regime by force.

Rambo 4 is such a gross caricature of the violence being perpetrated against the civilian population by the regime that few will see it as a convincing picture of contemporary Burma. Even so, its crude political message has been welcomed by activists and members of Burma's scattered exile

2 'Rambo (2008): Trivia', *IMDb*, www.imdb.com/title/tt0462499/trivia.

community as a vivid and timely reminder of the military government's brutal rule. It is already popular with Karen insurgents based along the Thailand–Burma border, many of whom idolised Rambo even before the release of Stallone's latest film. In addition to sporting Rambo tattoos and wearing Rambo T-shirts, they have apparently taken to repeating the hero's mumbled line, 'Live for nothing, die for something'.

Not only has *Rambo 4* been denied permission to be screened publicly in Burma but, after it was released, the regime's Press Scrutiny and Registration Board ordered all journals and newspapers in the country to publish a government article criticising the movie. Titled 'Speaking Seriously, It Is Hilarious', the article lampooned the movie, describing the lead character as a fat lunatic with sagging breasts. Despite the efforts of the authorities to prevent its unlicensed distribution, however, DVDs of *Rambo 4* can still be obtained from street sellers and many people are prepared to risk jail to watch it, either at home or in underground theatres. Stallone has said that 'it is flattering to be part of a movie that is giving the Burmese people hope'. He also feels 'it is cool to say "I'm banned in Burma"'.³

For all its appeal as a revenge fantasy, however, *Rambo 4* ignores the enormous complexity of Burma's current problems. As Brian McCartan has persuasively argued,⁴ the extreme level of violence shown in *Rambo 4* 'trivializes the actual conflict situation in war-torn Karen State'. The regime's long history of atrocities has been well documented, but some of the more horrific scenes in the film are 'complete fiction', according to human rights groups. More children die from a lack of medicines to treat diseases than are shot by the Burmese army. Also, there is no mention in the film of the hundreds of dedicated Burmese who daily risk their lives to assist their countrymen and women along the Thailand–Burma border.

Indeed, by grossly oversimplifying difficult issues and painting the protagonists in such stark colours, *Rambo 4* may actually hinder resolution of Burma's problems. For, if taken to heart, let alone seen as reflecting reality, the movie supports equally simplistic political views and encourages the advocacy of short-term, black-and-white solutions where more carefully calibrated, long-term approaches are necessary. As David

3 Richard C. Paddock, 'Stars Publicize Myanmar Issues', *Los Angeles Times*, 23 May 2008, www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2008-may-23-et-myanmar23-story.html.

4 Brian McCartan, 'Unreal Rambo Finds an Army of Fans', *Asia Times*, [Hong Kong], 27 March 2008, www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/JC27Ae02.html [page discontinued].

Steinberg has written: '[E]ven more problematic, and far more dangerous, is the implication that the regime may be overthrown by US public or private military action.'⁵ In the current circumstances, an attempt by prodemocracy groups to seize power by force would inevitably result in a bloodbath, and any encouragement given to such a plan—covertly or otherwise—would be very irresponsible.

Also, ever since the 1988 uprising there have been calls by activists for an invasion of Burma to restore democratic rule. This issue resurfaced in public debates about the international community's overriding 'responsibility to protect' the victims of Cyclone Nargis, after the military regime refused to allow foreign countries to deliver aid to devastated areas of the country. For all the rhetoric heard from world leaders, forcible external intervention has never been on the cards. Yet, even public discussion of such an option increases the regime's paranoia and hardens its resolve to resist what it considers to be a gross violation of Burmese sovereignty and unacceptable foreign interference in Burma's internal affairs.

Thus, while it may give Sylvester Stallone a warm inner glow, and bring temporary comfort to the activist community, *Rambo 4* risks delaying the resolution of Burma's complex problems and prolonging the suffering of the Burmese people.

5 David I. Steinberg, 'On Rambo and Burmese Politics', *PacNet*, No.14, 21 February 2008, [csis.org/files/media/isis/pubs/pac0814.pdf](http://www.csis.org/files/media/isis/pubs/pac0814.pdf).

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