

Rice Bowl

MISSION



Global Mission's Myanmar Newsletter

December 2023



Internally Displaced Persons (IDP's) who fled fighting in their villages were fed and accommodated by the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar in Tahan. Civilians have borne the brunt of the suffering caused by the civil war that is taking place throughout the country. The Presbyterian Church has been active in reaching out to those in need.

Crisis Conditions in Myanmar

Due to the escalating civil war in Myanmar, the nature of this edition of Mingalaba is different to other editions. Much of this content is hard to read, as it shares the very real distress caused by the violence taking place in Myanmar as the civil war rages, and the direct impact this is having on the Presbyterian Church and its members. Throughout the past year life in Myanmar has become increasingly more dangerous with the military stepping up its indiscriminate attacks on villages in their attempts to suppress opposition from ethnic militia and Peoples Defense Forces (PDFs). This includes air force strikes on civilian targets and the bombing of residential areas. Innocent civilians are victims of this violence. Although much of this is going unreported by world media, the BBC published an article describing an attack on one village on April 11th that left an estimated 168 dead. Throughout 2023 the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar has been active in providing humanitarian care for hundreds of internally displaced persons in the Tahan region at Tahan Theological College and various church compounds. Despite the very grim situation, PCANZ Global Mission has been able to offer financial support for various projects and crisis support, as well as being active in an international ecumenical support network. Read more inside, but take note that some of the content is difficult reading.

Cyclone Mocha

Cyclone Mocha was a Category 5 cyclone that hit Myanmar and Bangladesh on May 14th causing extensive damage with the loss of hundreds of lives. The Presbyterian Church of Myanmar (PCM) sustained serious damage to property in the Southern Chin and Rakhine States and many homes belonging to their pastors and members were destroyed. The PCM responded as best they could in the circumstances and also sent a request to their global partners for support as the needs were great. Some donations were received and these, along with a grant from Global Mission, were forwarded to the PCM in support of cyclone relief. Transport difficulties as a result of cyclone damage and military activity have created logistical problems getting aid through, but these efforts are continuing. Donations for Cyclone Mocha relief can still be made to PCANZ Global Mission 02 0500 0086963 10 with the reference Cyclone Mocha.

Evidence of the devastation caused by Cyclone Mocha in the Southern Chin and Rakhine States in May 2023



Visit to Seoul for Presbyterian Church of Myanmar Partners Roundtable Meeting

At the invitation of the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK), Global Mission Director Phil King had an opportunity to visit South Korea in September. He was there to participate in a Presbyterian Church of Myanmar (PCM) Partners Roundtable meeting. This was hosted by the PROK which is a major supporter of the PCM. PCM leaders were able to attend via Zoom and update the meeting on the current situation in Myanmar, which confirmed the serious issues the country is dealing with in the current civil war conditions.

While in Seoul, Phil King had the opportunity to meet with two PCM members who are studying with academic scholarships. Rev. Zo Lian Khuma and Ms. Lal Ruat Kimi are lecturers at Tahan Theological College and will return there after they complete their post-graduate theology degrees. While grateful for the scholarships, it is difficult for them to be living in Seoul while they fear for the safety of their families back home.



This article was written by Elder Thang Mawia, a lecturer at Tahan Theological College. It first appeared in the Council for World Mission's Insight magazine, September 2023 and is used with permission. Where he refers to Kalay, this is interchangeable with Tahan. Kalay Township is the greater urban area that includes Tahan.

PCM: A Beacon of Hope

The Life Flourishing Church in Action in Myanmar



Internally Displaced Persons queue for their meal at Tahan Theological College where they fled for shelter when fighting broke out in their villages.

Myanmar has been in a state of turmoil since the military coup in February 2021. The National Unity Government, a Myanmar government-in-exile formed by the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) and several local ethnic armed groups, initiated a revolutionary war against the military junta, officially known as the State Administrative Council, leading to a civil war.

The military junta, consistently prioritizing its own interests, has shown little concern for the lives of civilians. They have employed various strategies of annihilation and committed widespread violence. Between February 2021 and August 2023, they have been responsible for the deaths of a total of 4,023 people, including democracy activists and civilians. Additionally, they have arrested 24,586 individuals, with only 4,685 of them released, while 19,901 remain in custody. Furthermore, the junta has launched 1,427 air strikes between February 2021 and May 24, 2023. In the first four months of this year alone, they conducted 454 airstrikes. Moreover, the junta has burned down 70,324 houses across the country from February 2021 to June 14, 2023. These acts of violence have exacerbated the humanitarian crisis and doubled the

number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) this year. According to UNHCR, the estimated total population of IDPs within Myanmar reached 1,934,200 by August 28, 2023.

As a result of these incidents of violence and crisis, the livelihoods of the Myanmar people have crumbled. The value of the currency has fallen by 50% since the coup, causing the prices of goods to rise three to four times. People are struggling to afford food, housing, and healthcare. Armed conflict and a shortage of doctors and nurses have hindered people from receiving proper healthcare, leading to a significant decline in the overall health of the population. The prices of medicines have also skyrocketed, making essential medicines limited and less accessible. This crisis has also severely impacted education, causing a collapse in the education system.

The Sagaing Region, situated in the northwestern part of the country, has been plagued by severe incidents of violence. Out of the 37 townships in this region, 32 have fallen victim to arson. Shockingly, the Sagaing Region accounts for 84% of all the houses that have been burned in the country during the first six months following the coup. Reports indicate that, within



the two years since the military coup, the military junta has set fire to 5,900 houses in the Sagaing Region. This year, the number of IDPs in the region has also increased, with an estimated 813,200 IDPs, constituting 42% of the total IDPs in the country.

Kalay is a town situated in the Sagaing Region. It gained notoriety as the first township to take up arms against the junta following the coup on February 1, 2021. Kalay is home to a substantial number of members of the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar (PCM) and many Chin Christians, and it is also where the General Assembly office of PCM is located. Frequent armed clashes have occurred, resulting in numerous civilian injuries and casualties caused by gunfire, heavy artillery shelling, and airstrikes. In response to the critical crisis unfolding in the Kalay area, churches have taken action to assist the IDPs by providing food and shelters.

On March 31, 2023, the military junta launched an attack from the air, using MI-35 helicopters and heavy artillery during an armed clash near Pyin Taw Oo village in the northern part of Kalay Township. A confrontation between the junta and the People's Defense Forces (PDFs) occurred between March 31, 2023, and April 6, 2023, in the vicinity of Pyin Taw Oo and Nan San Pu villages. Two church buildings, Hosana Assembly of God and Shiloh Baptist Church, were damaged in fires caused by military aircraft. Additionally, two civilians were brutally killed by the junta. One civilian also lost his life in the airstrike. As a result of these clashes, residents from Pyin Taw Oo, Let Pan Chaung, Myauk Chaw Taw, Chan Thar Gyi, Nyaung Kone, Inn Kyin Khon, Zo Suan, Kim Lai, Tuithim, Tharyar Kong, San Taike, Zo Nuam, and other villages were forced to flee to Kalay.

Many individuals fleeing the armed clashes had neither relatives nor extended families in Kalay and lacked places to find shelter. Consequently, the Disaster and Crisis Response Team (DCRT) of the General Assembly, PCM, extended their hospitality by accommodating them at Tahan Theological College (TTC). They provided food, shelter, clothing, drinking water, medicine, soap, electric power, and other essentials to over 300 people. Those who were sick or injured were transported to the hospitals.

This support initiative commenced on March 31, 2023, and continued until April 11, 2023. As the number of displaced people increased daily, the DCRT negotiated with other camps and local NGOs and relocated the newcomers to these camps. To manage the growing responsibilities, more volunteers from PCM churches in Tahan and the surrounding areas were recruited to join the DCRT volunteer team. Eighteen volunteers from PCM churches of Tahan contributed by meeting the needs of those fleeing the armed clashes. TTC staff and faculty members also lent their support to the volunteers, offering assistance to the best of their efforts. Because the majority of the displaced individuals accommodated at TTC were Christians from various denominations, and given that the incident occurred during Holy Week, a Good Friday service was conducted on April 7, 2023, in the chapel of TTC. Rev. Cin Khan Suan, a pastor of Tedim Synod, presided over the Holy Communion service as requested by the CCRT.

Local churches and NGOs in Tahan and the surrounding areas collaborated effectively in extending hospitality to the displaced people. Tahan Mizo Thalai Pawl (TMTP) took on the responsibility of arranging transportation for the displaced individuals and placing

them in various shelters and camps hosted by local churches in Tahan. The churches that accommodated the displaced people included PCM Tahan Venglai, PCM Tahan Vengchhak, PCM Vengthlang, Phai Synod Center, Methodist Church Vengpui, EFCM Vengpui, EFCM Addict Center, Nazarene Church, Seventh-Day Adventist, Wesleyan National Center, El-Bethel Baptist Church, Biblical Presbyterian Church, and Methodist Church Mission Veng. It was reported that the number of displaced people during these armed clashes amounted to approximately 10,000 individuals.

The Disaster and Crisis Response (DCR) committee of the General Assembly, PCM, has undertaken various humanitarian efforts since January 2022. The committee and team have assisted civilians who encountered various crises between January 2022 and August 2023. The team has carried out various relief efforts as follows:

- They have accommodated over 460 displaced people in Kalay, providing for their needs and extending relief aid to 42 camps and shelters operated by local churches and organizations in Kalay and Tamu townships, as well as to four refugee camps in Mizoram State, their neighboring country, India.

- They have distributed relief aid to 115 families whose houses were burned due to gunfire, heavy artillery shelling, and mine explosions.

- They have offered condolences to the families of 22 casualties and provided relief aid to 56 injured individuals due to violent incidents caused by the junta. They have shown concern for the 31 individuals who

were arrested as porters and brutally tortured by the junta.

- They have provided relief aid to 30 households that were robbed by the junta.

- They have provided some financial aid to PCM Synods for repairing 30 quarters and 27 church buildings that were damaged by Mocha Cyclone. They have provided relief aid to Tedim Synod due to an outbreak of rat plagues in some areas of Tedim Township.

- They collaborated with local NGOs, volunteer nurses, and doctors and provided Covid-19 vaccination regimens to 1,690 people in thirteen different places in Kalay last year. Since people did not trust the junta and were reluctant to receive the vaccinations they provided, many civilians had to rely on NGOs for vaccination last year.

- They also conducted mask campaigns in Tahan market last year.

PCM was able to carry out these humanitarian efforts because of the prayers, gifts, and offerings from its members and partner churches, both inside and outside the country. It is genuinely thankful for their support and desperately needs continuous support. Our God is a God of the lowly, the oppressed, and the downtrodden; He always stands with these people and seeks justice for them. He established laws for His chosen people, Israel, to protect these individuals. They were commanded not to treat ger (strangers, foreigners, IDPs, refugees, etc.) with contempt (Ex



22:21; Lev 19:33), to judge them fairly (Ex 23:9; Deut 1:16-17; 24:17-18), and to meet their needs (Lev 9:19-20; Deut 24:19-22). We, who have become God's new people through Jesus Christ, are also commanded to obey and fulfill these commandments. The Lord Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Mt. 25:40). Those who are beaten, injured, displaced, and without food due to political violence, as well as those affected by natural disasters, are the most vulnerable and the least among us; churches are responsible for meeting the needs of these people.

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Elder Thang Mawia
TTC lecturer
GA (PCM) CCRT Committee member

As this article attests, life in Myanmar remains precarious and the members of the Presbyterian Church there are living with constant threats to their safety. The church has become well versed in providing crisis support for those affected. With other partner churches, Global Mission has been able to provide some financial support for the PCM as they respond.

Donations for the support of this crisis can be forwarded to Myanmar through Global Mission.

Church-led Peace Negotiations

PCM General Secretary Rev. Pek Muan Cuang has been working with a group of senior church leaders who have been hoping the church can take a lead in peace negotiations between the military and the Peoples Defense Force. Intense fighting in and around villages means civilians lives are constantly endangered and church leaders are desperate to try and help broker a ceasefire. They have met several times to consider how this might be possible. At the time of writing, he said that due to the PDF's current success in defeating military in key areas there is little appetite for a peace process.

Supporting Farm Development at Tahan Theological College



A major project we have been supporting at Tahan Theological College has been developing infrastructure on their farm – specifically constructing a perimeter fence, and internal roads. Both are necessary to allow greater access to the farm in all weathers and also to avoid encroachment from neighbours. These developments will help to increase farm productivity and create long-term sustainability. The goal for the farm is to provide food for students and staff and be a source of income for the college.

This work has naturally been delayed due to the outbreaks of fighting, the arrival of internally displaced persons from time to time, rising costs, and the lack of product availability. However it is progressing slowly but surely.

The conditions have made it difficult for the college to function but they been able to resume academic classes and have 63 students enrolled for the 2023 – 2024 academic year.

At the time of writing this newsletter, an email was received from the TTC Principal Rev. Lal Awma Puia. He wrote:

“We had to close the college yesterday because there was a fierce gunbattle just one furlong away in Thanglui Village, north of TTC, which started early at 5:45 a.m. and was over at 12:00 noon. The military shells were passing over the campus and falling among the village houses, and at least one child died of injury to the head. Another man died due to hit by a bullet in the back. It was very horrifying for us as the blast and jolt of the shells were felt intensely in our quarters. By the grace of God, we can resume our classes and office this afternoon. “

These are terrifying conditions for civilians to be living in. Please uphold them in prayer.

Ethnic Chin Congregation Shares in White Sunday

Wellington is home to thousands of former refugees from Myanmar. Many of these are ethnic Chin who are mostly Christian, and a number of them have close connections with the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar. Some of them have formed their own ethnic language congregations and one of these is called Grace Hill Church, which is led by Pastor Frank Parte. Grace Hill worships in the Hutt City Uniting Church building in Stokes Valley, and they were invited by the Rev. Les Solomona to join in the White Sunday service in October. For the Grace Hill congregation it was their first time to share in worship with a Pasifika congregation, and it was good to see the multicultural engagement. Congratulations to Rev. Les and the HCUC congregation for extending the invitation.



Nurse Aid Training Feedback

Despite the fragile nature of life in Tahan the PCM has been able to support one female student through her Nurse Aid training. PCANZ provided her scholarship for this. Womens Secretary Sangi sent through this report:

"I would like to report the latest update about Nurse Aid training. We had one student from Phai Synod last year and she has now completed her course and got a certificate at the closing ceremony which was held on November 1, 2023. Her name is Ms. Malsawmhlui and she is now 23 years old. This is really a true blessing from PCANZ! I attach here her certificate photo. Two students from Dairam Synod also are doing fine and their training is still going on. May God bless you all."



For those reading this newsletter online, here is a link to two articles that give further information about what is happening in Myanmar:

Early this year Global Mission Director Phil King asked Stuff journalist Thomas Manch if he would consider writing a story to highlight the plight of Myanmar's civilian population, as the civil war in Myanmar has largely been forgotten due to many other crises around the world. Phil introduced Thomas to an ethnic Chin from Tahan in Myanmar who lives in Wellington, and his story is here, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/world/asia/131108436/living-the-nightmare-that-is-militaryruled-myanmar-twoyears-after-coup?fbclid=IwAR2Usiufkyui5vAZemT10YMzWO6ammY5oinJahhouzobIOr5AeNfFqFJTE>

In April, the Council for World Mission asked Phil to write an article about the situation in Myanmar for the news section on their website and this can be viewed here <https://www.cwmission.org/humanitarian-crisis-in-myanmar-why-is-a-bad-situation-always-followed-by-bad-things/>

Let us continue to keep in mind the people of Myanmar who are suffering under a brutal and unjust military regime. While there seems very little we can do to help, they are extremely grateful for our moral support, our prayers, our advocacy for their freedom, and our financial support. It means a lot to them to know that their Christian family around the world remembers them and upholds them in prayer. Please continue to remember the Presbyterian Church and all citizens of Myanmar who long for a restoration of their democratic freedoms and rights.

Thank you to everyone who financially supports our partnership with the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar.

Donations are always welcome and allow us to achieve more.

Online donations can be made to 02 0500 0086963 10. If making a new donation please send an email with contact details for receipts to katrina@presbyterian.org.nz

For more information please contact Global Mission Director Phil King, phil@presbyterian.org.nz