

Rice Bowl

MISSION

Global Mission's Myanmar Newsletter

March 2021



Military Coup in Myanmar Resisted by Mass Civil Disobedience Movement

News of the military coup in Myanmar has dominated our partnership with the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar (PCM) since it took place on February 1st this year. The coup has caused distress throughout the widely diverse nation, with people from all walks of life and ethnic groups uniting in their opposition. The coup has dismayed and disturbed governments around the world and international condemnation has been forthright from the beginning – with the inexcusable exception of some nations whose silence has played into the hands of the military. Opposition from Myanmar's population has been resounding, with a civil disobedience movement growing in strength daily. This has included doctors and nurses who have refused to work at Government-run hospitals that are now under military control, and hundreds of thousands of other employees have joined the movement. This resistance is coming at a significant cost to those who are taking part, with some protesters being shot by a combination of police and military. At the time of writing the situation is in an uneasy stand-off between the military regime and the civil population. Read more inside ...



Presbyterian Church
of Aotearoa New Zealand

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The coup has led to the PCM's first-ever public comment on political affairs, with a six-point statement condemning the coup and calling for a return of the democratically elected Government (see this on the back page). This is a significant step for the church who under previous military rule were very cautious about becoming involved in political issues, for fear of backlash and reprisals. The emerging democratic movement in Myanmar has given them courage to take the first steps to speak out publicly. Staff and students from the Presbyterian Church's Tahan Theological College also became involved, leading a protest march with other academic institutions in their community.

Throughout this time the PCANZ has been in regular contact with the leadership of the PCM, offering what support we can, with Global Mission Director Phil King participating in conversations with the PCM General Secretary and international partners; and through our Moderator Rev. Fakaofo Kaio, PCANZ wrote to New Zealand's Minister of Foreign Affairs urging ongoing international pressure on the illegitimate military regime. The members of the PCM are aware of our support and advocacy and are extremely grateful for it. The support of the international community means a lot to them as they face this illegal and unwelcome challenge to freedom and democracy in their country. The situation in Myanmar continues to change daily and we ask congregations and members of the PCANZ, and all supporters of freedom and democracy to stay informed and pray for the people Myanmar at this time of national crisis.

Online websites to help stay informed include bbc.com, Irrawaddy.com, frontiermyanmar.net



The coup has sparked demonstrations throughout Myanmar and around the world. Staff and students from the PCM's Tahan Theological College led a march in Tahan (left); and residents of Tahan and Kalaymyo held a prayer vigil in the city (below). International support has been strong (below left) and street protests throughout Myanmar have drawn enormous crowds not seen since the uprising of 1988.

In the prayer vigil below, even the tree seems to be bending in prayer with the protesters.





Nationwide protests have taken place in the wake of the coup. The photos show demonstrations in Yangon, Mandalay and Mindat in the Chin State (below). The ethnically diverse population has been united in opposition to military rule.



Wellington Rally for Peace and Democracy

New Zealand is home to thousands of former refugees from Myanmar. Some are Burmese (or Bamar) Buddhist, but most are from the ethnic minority groups known as Chin, Kachin and Karen, the majority of whom identify as Christian. The largest groups are located in Wellington and Nelson, with a sizeable population in Auckland and smaller groups elsewhere. Most still have family back in Myanmar. When the military coup took place, members of the Myanmar community arranged a Rally for Peace and Democracy in Myanmar, which was held in Parliament grounds in Wellington on February 9th. A large crowd turned out, and it was pleasing to see politicians from across the political spectrum supporting the rally. Foreign Affairs Minister Hon. Nanaia Mahuta attended and addressed the crowd, assuring them of the New Zealand Government's support for the return of the democratically elected government.

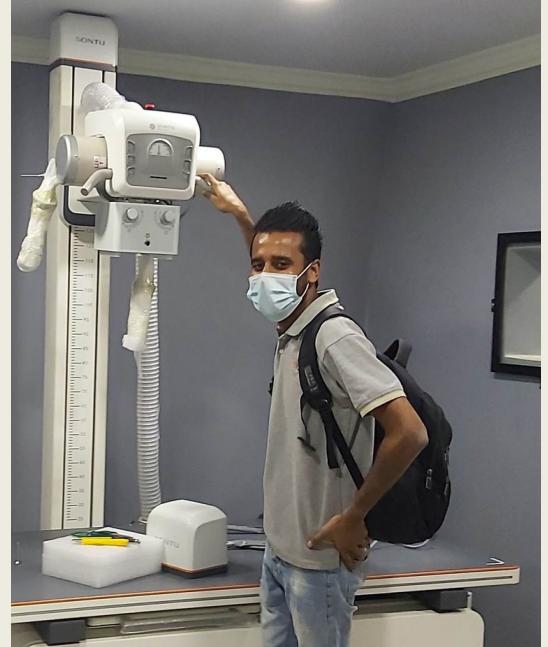


Good News in the Midst of the Bad ...

Although the coup has naturally dominated the news from Myanmar, there is some good news to share in spite of that. Here are two positive stories to emerge in the past few weeks.

Purchase of Digital Scanner for Agape Hospital

Towards the end of last year Global Mission received a very generous donation for the purchase of a digital scanner for the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar's Agape Hospital in Tahan. Earlier in the year, the PCM had sent a request for the scanner as the previous machine had failed and they had no capacity to provide a diagnostic service for their patients. For cultural and language reasons most of the ethnic Chin are reluctant to attend the larger Government-run hospital and so the provision of a scanner will improve the delivery of health care to this demographic within the Tahan/Kalaymyo area. The NZD \$75,000 donation was an answer to prayer for the staff and leadership of the hospital. The scanner arrived in January and despite the restrictions of Covid-19 and the outbreak of the coup, two technicians arrived in early February to install and test the scanner prior to use (pictured). All hopes are now centred on life settling down to normal rhythms so those requiring treatment can get the help they need. On behalf of the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar, we are very grateful to our donors for their generous support.



Dedication of Augcheng Church

Another positive news item is the dedication of the new Augcheng Church building in the Chin State. This is a project that Global Mission has contributed funding to over the past couple of years. Church buildings are an important factor of mission for churches in Myanmar – due to government regulations, churches must have a registered building in which to worship and this remains true even in remote areas of the Chin State. This is a low-income area and PCANZ donations have helped to contribute to the completion of this project. A dedication took place in the days after the coup. PCM Pastor Lawn Kee, who was in charge of the project said, "As Augcheng village is among the most remote areas we were able to celebrate the dedication service freely."



Wayne and Helen Harry, Partners in Mission with the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar

Wayne and Helen Harry who have been serving as Partners in Mission at the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar's Tahan Theological College returned to New Zealand on furlough just prior to the outbreak of Covid-19. The coup is obviously a significant blow to their plans to return to Myanmar when Covid-19 restrictions ease. In the meantime, Wayne and Helen have continued to remain active in their work, doing as much as possible from distance while remaining in New Zealand. Helen has maintained her role as Head of English at the College, with classes being held online; and Wayne has been in daily contact with staff on the college farm, supervising the gradual development of the land. This has included the establishment of a goat herd (see one of the kids pictured here).

Wayne and Helen are naturally keeping a close eye on developments, keeping regular contact with their friends and colleagues in Myanmar. They are also available to speak at churches and mission groups. You can read their latest news on their blog, helenharry.com.

One of their close friends in Myanmar is Henry Van Thio, former deputy Vice President who lived in Dunedin and attended Leith Valley Presbyterian Church prior to returning to Myanmar for the 2015 elections. Henry and his wife Anna hosted members from Leith when they visited Myanmar on a mission trip in 2019. Please pray for Henry and Anna and their family during this difficult time in Myanmar's national life.



Covid Relief Fund

In October last year we sent NZD \$25,000 as a Covid relief fund to financially support pastors and staff in eight of the PCM's synods that were suffering financially due to the economic downturn. In January, General Secretary Rev. Ramthanga reported on the use of the fund. He said:

"The COVID-19 pandemic posed a new lifestyle like lockdown, semi-lockdown, stay home, social distancing and the likes. All these meant that life changed and became difficult in Myanmar as in other parts of the world. Families of pastors and staff members encountered economic crises in different ways. In this situation, your contribution to PCM in a form of COVID relief fund is much appreciated."

For those who are aware of the PCM Synod structure, the relief fund supported pastors and staff in the following synods (in Burmese Kyats):

Dairam, 280000	Falam, 4850000	Zo, 2050000	Victoria, 7150000
Maturam, 2900000	Tedim, 2400000	Hakha, 1550000	Lairam, 1700000.

What Happens Next?

It is hard to predict what will happen in Myanmar so our main roles over the next period of time will be to maintain contact with the Presbyterian Church of Myanmar and ensure them of our ongoing support. A combination of Covid-19 and the unsettling impact of the coup on Myanmar's economic situation means that our financial support will be more important than ever. So we will maintain our standard practice of funding projects that support the mission of the PCM, while also seeking information as to other means of support that might be required as a result of their current context.



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Statement of Attitude and Standpoint

(Following Military Coup on 1 February 2021)

Kalaymyo, 8 February 2021.

1. The Presbyterian Church in Myanmar (PCM) stands for love, justice and peace according to the teaching in the Bible.
2. We were surprised and astonished on hearing the news of the coup d'etat on 1 February. We, along with the people of Myanmar, are deeply saddened by this.
3. Based on Biblical theology, PCM condemns any form of oppression which is against the truth.
4. We urge the military to release from house arrest the State Counsellor, President and other elected leaders without exception.
5. We urge the authorities not to cause any harm or to oppress anyone in the Civil Disobedience Movement who are pursuing non-violent means of protest.
6. PCM prays that love, peace, tranquility, human rights and dignity may rule our government; that there would be no oppression; and that federal democracy would be implemented successfully.

Presbyterian Church in Myanmar

General Assembly Office.

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. Donations for the work of Wayne and Helen Harray are also invited. 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