



February 1st 2024 marked three years since the military coup which illegally reversed Myanmar's progress towards democracy and shattered hopes and dreams. Every day since, the people have struggled against brutality, disregard for human rights, and impoverishment.

Early peaceful protests were met with guns and violence. In consequence, many men and women, students, teachers, medics - people from every ethnic group and all walks of life - chose to join the armed struggle against the regime. Civil war now rages and Myanmar spirals towards catastrophe.

The generals are desperate to hold on to power whatever the cost. With superior weaponry the military responds by bombing and burning entire villages, terrorizing people and destroying homes and livelihoods. Thousands of civilians have been killed and millions have fled to refugee camps or have taken shelter in mountains and forests.

Over 2 million people have been displaced and they live in appalling conditions, facing hunger and disease. People of all ethnicities and faiths are being targeted in Myanmar, including Christians.

As the third anniversary of the coup approached, Pope Francis prayed for peace in Myanmar and appealed for the facilitation of humanitarian aid and for pursuing paths of dialogue.

“For three years now, the cry of pain and the noise of weapons have taken the place of the smile that characterises the people of Myanmar.”

Pope Francis, Angelus, 28th January 2024

In November 2023, the Catholic Cathedral in the city of Loikaw in Kayah State was occupied by military troops. The Bishop, priests, nuns, and dozens of elderly and sick patients who were sheltering in the cathedral were forced to leave. Nearly half the parishes in Loikaw diocese have been abandoned and air strikes and shelling have destroyed churches and convents, monasteries and shrines.

Many believe there can be no peaceful resolution to this war. Millions have lost everything, and one third of the population need humanitarian aid. Many insist that they will never again accept military dictatorship, and so they continue to resist.

We Jesuits continue our work to relieve suffering and foster hope. Our schools have become safe havens for youth of all faiths and ethnicities who have had to drop out of school, or who cannot afford to learn. Thanks to your support we can send emergency aid to the poorest and most vulnerable of the displaced.

In the face of immense challenges, the Jesuits aim to bring light and remind the people of Myanmar that they are not alone.



Reaching the Margins

Myanmar's cruel regime has restricted humanitarian access to many regions making it increasingly difficult to deliver aid to people in need, especially in more remote areas.

The Jesuits manage to reach some communities through contacts with Church networks and trusted partners across Myanmar.

In November, recently ordained Jesuit Fr Joseph set out on a gruelling journey in Chin State to reach and take help to people living in camps.

Joseph was joined by two religious sisters and four parishioners. They travelled by motorcycle for over ten hours crossing rivers and riding slowly along muddy and unbeaten paths through thick forest. They left their motorcycles at the foot of a steep mountain path and climbed for three hours into the mountain jungle.

They knew that hundreds have sheltered here since their villages were destroyed. They live in tents or rough shelters made from bamboo and tarpaulins. Mountain springs provide water for bathing, drinking and watering scarce crops of rice, sesame and vegetables.

Many of the families here have lived this way for over two years and each day is a struggle for survival.

In many regions like Chin State, scarcity of food and medicines have added layers of hardship for entire populations and vulnerable communities who have faced years of conflict.

Joseph recalls:

'The lifestyle, faith, and culture of the people reminded me of the Native Americans in the film "The Mission". As a priest, I ministered the sacraments of baptism, reconciliation, confirmation, matrimony, anointing of the sick, and Eucharist. The catechists worked with the old and the young.'

'We pitched our thatch tents and lit oil lamps to dispel darkness while we listened to their stories. We were welcomed by the people and we were conquered by their simple faith in God.'

The Jesuits and their partners have managed to reach remote communities like this one in many regions of Myanmar.

In 2023, over 60,000 people were assisted with food, medicine, blankets and clothes, educational materials and volunteer teachers. For those we manage to reach, our work brings relief and reminds those who have lost everything that even in the darkest times, hope can prevail.



Return to the Golden Land

In March 2020, as Covid-19 silently and rapidly spread, closed international borders and cancelled flights, my husband and I reluctantly made the decision to leave Myanmar, the country that had become home. We had worked in Jesuit projects for eighteen happy months. As we boarded one of the last flights leaving Yangon for UK, we naively thought that we'd return to Myanmar within a few months.

More than three turbulent years later, when we finally returned to Yangon in November 2023, we found a deeply changed country. The optimism that we felt so strongly before the coup has been replaced by a deep-seated determination within the people to take back what has been stolen from them.

On our first day, we headed out at daybreak, the coolest, most pleasant time to walk. We passed heavily armed young men vacantly staring out from military vehicles, beautiful young women balancing impossible loads of vegetables on their heads and lines of burgundy-robed monks serenely processing through city streets. The strength and beauty of the people is ever-present.

In our old neighbourhood we were surprised to be recognised and welcomed by familiar smiles and handshakes of the locals who were curious to know where the 'foreign auntie and uncle' had gone! There are few tourists in Myanmar now, and some even thanked us for visiting. We asked about our friend, the kind newspaper seller and were sad to hear that he had died during the pandemic as had many of the old and weak. The ladies in the tea shop spoke in hushed voices,

glancing nervously around as they told us that life was much harder now: food prices have tripled, and work is scarce. They fear for their sons and daughters who risk imprisonment, torture or death if they take part in a peaceful protest, post a Facebook comment criticizing the military or join the armed resistance. Most have friends in prison or know young people who have died. Those with resources do everything they can to send their children abroad to work. Every family here has had to make sacrifices.

Pre-coup, our street was buzzing with life from morning to night, with people buying snacks at food stalls, groups chatting in tea shops, children playing football. These days, by early evening the streets of Yangon are deserted. Most want to make sure they are indoors hours before the enforced curfew. We were warned that it is hard to find a taxi in the evening, most drivers choosing to head home early.

While on the surface, Yangon seems a quiet and relatively safe place, there is a tension and feeling that violence could erupt any time. The usual cheerful chat of the locals is now talk of preparing for shortages of food and supplies, and even martial law. People worry that if the fighting comes to Yangon they will suffer from aerial bombings and street battles.

Our days in Myanmar were full of contrasts just like the country itself. The joy of seeing old friends was tinged with sadness at what they must now endure just to survive. Visiting Jesuit schools, we saw the students' thirst for learning and the perseverance of the teachers, as well as memorials to students who had lost lives in the violence.

There is hope here. It is in the hearts and the courage of ordinary people, who long for peace, and who are ready to give everything they have to make sure their children's lives will be better.



Bridges to Peace

We work with the youth, the old, the sick and the vulnerable through our schools, pastoral work, social outreach and emergency relief efforts. Though the challenges are many, we are uplifted by the resilience, courage and determination of the people we meet.

In our education projects, we bring together youth of all faiths and ethnicities. Our schools are safe places where young people can learn, grow and enter into dialogue with youth from different ethnic groups and states.

Living, studying and playing together they have built communities of empathy and understanding, and created lasting friendships.

Our schools reach over 4000 youth each year and graduates become the teachers, social workers and peace-leaders of Myanmar.

These young people bring us joy as we witness them work together to bridge divisions and build peace. They inspire us with their energy and their willingness to help the less fortunate. They constantly impress us as they strive to leave their fears aside, focus on the positive and bring a smile to all that they do.

They teach *us* – and convince us that a better, more just and peaceful future is possible for Myanmar.



**When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
the work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost, to heal the broken,
To feed the hungry, to release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among others,
To make music in the heart.**

Gratitude for Many Gifts

Twelve Community Colleges now operate across Myanmar; new ones are opening and being planned in this mutually supportive network. The colleges specialise training in vocational skills for youth who are denied education due to poverty or ethnic status. Everyone who meets the young people of our colleges is inspired by their enthusiasm and their determination to achieve their dreams. Ludo was no different. As CEO of Pizza Hut restaurants in Yangon, he is used to training young Burmese employees. But on a visit to a community college, he was so impressed by the students and their thirst for learning he was moved to help the youth, saying he wanted *'to rewrite their stories and replace limitations with endless possibilities'*. Ludo set himself a goal to raise \$10,000 by running 230km across the Jordan desert!



Before embarking on his fundraising adventure, Ludo said;

'The Community College can create lasting change in the lives of these young people. It is the launchpad that can propel eager young minds towards their first jobs. Their destination is a brighter future and better opportunities. My contribution can ensure education, life skills and practical experience that can set students on a path of growth and success.'

After successfully completing his amazing challenge, Ludo shared his story (and pizza!) with the delighted students. **Thank you, Ludo!**

A joyous ceremony was held in November 2023 to bless and distribute 200 bicycles to community college students. The reconditioned bikes were donated by the Singapore Association of Myanmar (SAM).

A bicycle can change the life of a young person in Myanmar. Many cannot afford to use buses or tricycle taxis, and they walk long distances daily. The new bikes allow them to travel to college, school or work safely. These gifts are truly appreciated and will be well used.

On behalf of the newly-mobile young people, we are sincerely grateful to our friends at SAM.



Bicycles bring change!





Our work is only possible with the help of friends and donors like you. Your support for Myanmar brings hope. Thank you for walking with us and the people we reach.

Please pray for the safety of our brothers and sisters in Myanmar, and a peaceful end to conflict.



Smiles of Hope

In October 2023, Jesuits organised an activity camp for young people living in an area of conflict.

They made a video which reflects the joy of their gathering, and the importance of reaching out to them to instil hope.

The support of our friends makes these occasions possible.

Please take a few minutes to view the video:

VIDEO

If you can support our work, online donations can be made via:

[Jesuit Mission Australia](#)

[Jesuit Conference of Asia Pacific \(Manila\)](#)

[Jesuit Mission Germany \(quote reference X66520 Myanmar\)](#)

For other ways to give, please contact the Development Officer:
mynsjdo@gmail.com



How can you help Myanmar?

Keep informed by following reliable news outlets reporting on Myanmar (links below):



[Frontier](#)



[Irrawaddy](#)

[DVB English News](#)

[United Nations in Myanmar](#)

Listen to expert opinion on Myanmar – Podcast

Sean Turnell was economics adviser to the ousted government of Aung San Suu Kyi. Soon after the coup, he was arrested and held for 650 days in Myanmar's terrifying Insein Prison on the false charge of being a spy.

In this podcast, Sean shares how he survived his traumatic incarceration, and managed to leave Myanmar with his spirit unbroken and his love for the people undiminished.

This is a must-listen for those interested in a deeper analysis of the situation of Myanmar today. (Listening time - 28 minutes)

[CLICK TO LISTEN TO PODCAST](#)

[Straight Talk South-East Asia, Interview with Sean Turnell](#)
[30 January 2024](#)