

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN BURMA/MYANMAR?

August 22 marks the International Day for Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief, and this year, Catholic Religious Australia (CRA) has marked the occasion with a Prayer Service for the people of Burma/Myanmar. The situation in Burma/Myanmar has exploded since the military seized control of the country in February 2021, and this issue of *Just Now* will explore what has happened and suggest ways that we might support the peoples of Burma/Myanmar today.

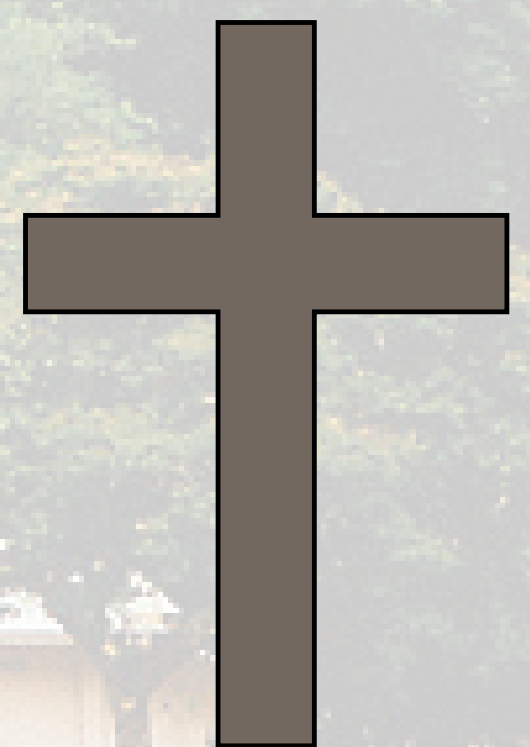
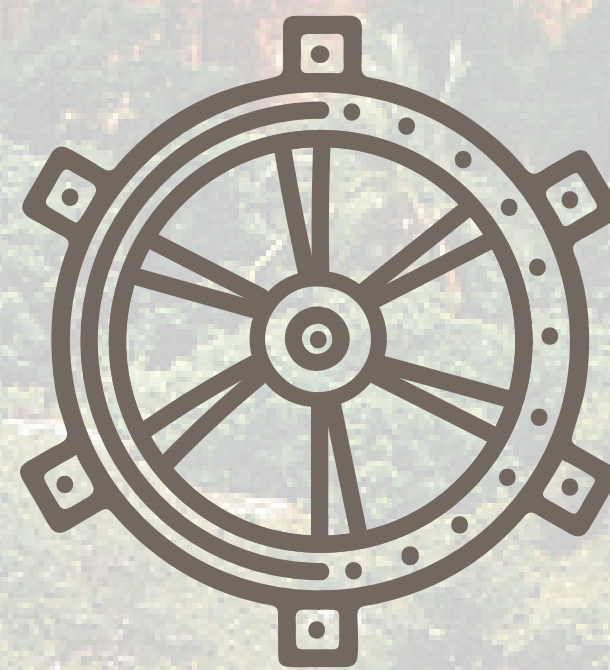
MYANMAR: A MULTI-ETHNIC, MULTI-FAITH MELTING POT

Myanmar is a country in South-East Asia with an estimated population of 55 million people, made up of 135 disparate ethnic groups. These groups have been divided into major "national ethnic races." These are:

- Burman (majority, 69% of the population);
- Shan (8.5% of the population);
- Karen (6.2% of the population);
- Rakhine (4.5% of the population);
- Mon (2.4 % of the population);
- Chin (2.2 % of the population);
- Kachin (1.4 % of the population);
- Wa (1% of the population).

These ethnic groups hold a number of religious beliefs:

- 89% are Buddhist (predominantly Theravada);
- 6.3% are Christian (predominantly Protestant, and also Roman-Catholic);
- 4.3% are Muslim (predominantly Sunni);
- 0.8% are animist.



THE MILITARY COUP OF FEBRUARY 2021

Myanmar has regularly made news headlines this year because of a military coup that began on 1 February. The military, known as the Tatmadaw, seized political control of the country, imposing full military rule over Myanmar after alleging fraudulent election results at the November 2020 election. The moment was incidentally caught in the background of an aerobics instructor's video. They declared a national emergency, detaining leaders from the elected party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), after their second consecutive election win. After coming into power in 2015, led by State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, the NLD had been instigating some promising democratic reform in the country after decades of military rule.



Since February, the people of Myanmar have taken to the streets, engaging in protests, civil disobedience and general strikes, calling for the reinstatement of democracy. This is not the first pro-democracy demonstration to take place in Myanmar, with largescale protests having taken place in defiance of military rule in 1988 and 2007 also.

Young protestors have engaged in many thousands of passionate and creative demonstrations across the country and in diaspora communities, including banging of pots and pans, protesting bodybuilders, demonstrations in ballgowns, an adaptation of the Hunger Games' three-finger salute, as well as marches at ancient Buddhist temples. The world is able to stay abreast of events on the ground through their use of social media. When Facebook was banned by the military, they quickly switched to Twitter.



Protestors have been met with brutal reprisals by the Tatmadaw, who have inflicted violent attacks, conducted arrests of political dissidents, writers/journalists and activists, carried out internet and phone shutdowns, and closed the banks. For simply engaging in peaceful protest or trying to report on these events, thousands have been inflicted with injury. At the time of writing, 1013 have been killed, 5821 arrested, including journalists, and 1984 have gone into hiding because they have been charged with a warrant. These statistics are predominantly made up by youth. Up-to-date details can be found [here](#).

Amidst this turmoil, the country is now facing a massive surge in COVID-19 cases. Ongoing medical worker strikes, as part of the broader Civil Disobedience Movement, has left many hospitals empty. The military has also repeatedly attacked healthcare professionals and facilities and occupied hospitals, and the resultant limited infrastructure and supplies is incapable of meeting demands.



Know Their Names

According to the UN Child Rights Committee, among those killed since the coup began are at least 75 children. See an interactive tribute to those children [here](#). You may wish to include these children in your prayers by name.

We live in a country where hundreds of mothers live with inconsolable tears and their hearts wounded, like our Mother Mary, with the sight of their sons and daughters tortured and killed. To all those mothers and all of you directly involved, we pray with grace flowing from the heart of Jesus. ~ Cardinal Bo, Archbishop of Yangon, Divine Mercy Sunday Homily 2021

ETHNIC MINORITIES UNDER ATTACK

Myanmar's ethnic minorities are also facing armed attacks and air strikes from the Tatmadaw. Since independence was declared in Burma in 1948, after colonial British rule, the elitist military have sought to enact a "Burmanization policy," whereby they have repressed the political, economic, social, cultural and religious rights of the ethnic minorities, attempting to enforce a monoculture. One example of military control was the change of name of the country from Burma to Myanmar in 1989, one year after the ruling military had brutally suppressed a pro-democracy uprising.

The Tatmadaw have also enacted many decades of systematic human rights abuses against ethnic minorities, including inflicting tens of thousands of deaths, sexual violence, torture and forced recruitment. Millions have been forced to flee their village homes to seek refuge in the forests or in refugee camps in neighbouring countries. These atrocities continue on through the current coup and according to United Nations estimates, some 230,000 people have been newly displaced since February.

The Tatmadaw have cut off humanitarian assistance to those in conflict-ridden regions, and have shelled displacement camps and attacked churches, mosques and temples of refuge. Four people were killed and at least eight injured when heavy artillery struck a Catholic church in Loikaw township on May 24, where more than 300 local Karenni villagers had been seeking refuge. On May 29, the Tatmadaw raided and looted a Catholic seminary in Loikaw and a Catholic parish house and convent in Demoso. On June 6, Queen of Peace Catholic Church in Demoso, despite having donned a white flag of peace, was hit by artillery fire. Religious leaders, including Priests and Christian Pastors, have been kidnapped by the Tatmadaw and armed resistance groups for aiding civilians. The Tatmadaw have sought to justify its attacks on religious buildings by claiming that they have been harbouring "local rebels."

“We bring to the notice of all, that the places of worship as a cultural property of a community, is covered by International Protocols. Churches, hospitals and schools are protected during conflict through the Hague Conventions. Apart from all Protocols, let us remember the blood that is spilled is not some enemy’s blood; those who died and those who were wounded are the citizens of this country. They were not armed; they were inside the church to protect their families. Every heart in this country weeps for the death of the innocent people. Now, hundreds die; thousands become refugees and displaced.” ~ Cardinal Bo, Facebook and Twitter appeal, May 2021.

THE REFUGEE SITUATION

At the end of 2018, the UN High Commission for Refugees estimated that there were 1.1 million refugees from Myanmar globally, making it the fourth-largest refugee population in the world. At the end of 2019, there were also an estimated 457,000 Internally Displaced Persons. This figure has likely been exacerbated by current events.

Most Myanmar refugees live in refugee camps in Thailand, Bangladesh, or Malaysia. Many of these people are not protected by domestic laws in these countries, lacking access to work, education and healthcare:

- Thailand: Nearly 100,000 refugees, predominantly Karen nationals, live in camps along the border, many for decades.
- Bangladesh: Over 900,000 Rohingya refugees live in refugee camps, including Cox’s Bazaar.
- Malaysia: Holds 154,460 refugees and people seeking asylum, mostly Rohingya and Chin nationals.

An estimated 35,480 people from Myanmar are living in Australia, most having come through Australia’s Refugee and Humanitarian Program. Myanmar is one of the top three countries of origin for Australia’s refugee intake.

In recent years, there has been criticism of the government for taking in only a small number of Rohingya refugees, following the Tatmadaw’s attempted genocide in 2017. A positive is that in May of 2021, the government extended visas for Myanmar people currently in Australia on temporary visas, and they won’t be forced to return home as long as it’s unsafe to do so.

WHAT CAN YOU DO

- You can keep abreast of the news in Myanmar by following Cardinal Bo, Archbishop of Yangon, Myanmar, [on Twitter](#).
- With the Tatmadaw blocking Humanitarian access to many areas of Myanmar, it can be hard to know if your donations are reaching those in need. A number of our Religious Institutes have ministries in Myanmar and are able to transfer funds to religious on the ground. Secure donations can be made to CRA members:
 - [Will Matthews SDB](#), Salesians of Don Bosco Australia-Pacific.
 - [Catherine Brabender RNDM](#), Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions.



- You can sign [this letter](#), drafted by Jamie Parker MP’s Office, calling on the Australian Foreign Minister to take an active role in pressuring the Myanmar military to stand down and return democratic rule.