

Project No. 1

COVID-19 and Military Coup Relief Activities

Myanmar

Country Overview and Jesuit History

Myanmar's 56 million people suffered over six decades of the "Burmese Way to Socialism", a long period of darkness which left a legacy of widespread poverty, ignorance of basic rights, displacement of indigenous people and under-resourced healthcare and education systems.

In November 2020 elections, the Myanmar civilian government won a landslide victory and the people were tentatively optimistic about a more democratic future for their young people. But the coup d'état of 1 February 2021 shocked everyone and thrust the country back into the darkness of military rule.

The coup provoked a massive rejection by the people. The consequent "Spring Revolution" and Civil Disobedience Movement introduced a pivotal moment in Myanmar's history. This history is still being written. Protests and strikes across the country have been met with a brutal and bloody crackdown by the military. Over 1,000 have died and thousands have been detained. Human Rights Watch has described the military's actions as crimes against humanity.

Before the coup, many poor families were already struggling with reduced incomes due to COVID-19. Lost harvests and rising food prices meant that thousands of vulnerable families, especially those living in urban slums and rural areas faced hunger. The coup and its aftermath have plunged Myanmar into deeper crisis; widespread unrest, paralysis of the banking system, government workers on strike, massive unemployment and the threat of civil war mean millions now face destitution.

More recently, large scale fighting has intensified between ethnic forces and the Myanmar military in Chin, Shan and Kayah States. Entire villages have been destroyed, and hundreds of thousands have been displaced. The UN has warned that an additional 3.4 million people will go hungry, particularly in urban centres, over and above the 2.8 million people considered to be food insecure in Myanmar before the military takeover. For the poor in Myanmar there are no safety nets. Families have been pushed to the edge, skipping meals, eating less nutritious food and taking on debt to feed themselves.

Against this backdrop, a third wave of COVID-19 has taken hold in the country and is spreading rapidly. With the public health system destroyed since the coup and no vaccine programme in place, already the death toll has been devastating.

Myanmar Jesuit Region, (MJR) which started 20 years ago, has communities and works in four places in Myanmar: Yangon, Taunggyi (Shan State), Myitkyina and Nan Hlaing (Kachin State). For over ten years, the Jesuits have accompanied Myanmar's youth to help open up opportunities which will transform their futures.



About the project

In the new circumstances, much has changed. The social outreach activities of Myanmar Jesuits have grown and now reach some of the poorest communities in Myanmar.

Myanmar Jesuit Region (MJR) teams distribute food, medicines and relief items to undocumented people living in slums. As thousands flee violence in the border regions, the new needs are for food and shelter for the displaced as well as increased need of medical support. The new surge of COVID-19 infections continues to escalate and there is a desperate need for personal protective equipment (PPE), oxygen supplies and medicines. Over 30,000 vulnerable people have benefited from the MJR outreach programs since the start of 2021.

The challenges are immense, and the Myanmar Jesuits recognise what they can do is limited compared to the desperate needs, yet they are reaching out to the communities through partnerships with local groups, local Caritas offices and religious congregations who are working on the frontlines of the emergency. MJR projects are in areas of need where the Jesuits already know the communities and have reliable networks.

12 – 18 Month Plan

This will be a prolonged crisis and it is difficult to predict what the long-term effects will be in Myanmar. The Myanmar Jesuits have made preparations for 12-18 months of disruption to programs, greater demand for resources, and greater accompaniment of poor communities to ease suffering. It is difficult to estimate the number of beneficiaries but so far in 2021 the Myanmar Jesuits have helped over 30,000 people.

Goals

- To ensure that human suffering is reduced and to mitigate the most severe economic effects of the military coup and COVID-19 for the most vulnerable people in the areas where the Jesuits can gain access or where they have trusted partners on the ground.
- To support the local religious in their initiatives to assist those without resources.
- To ensure, where possible, that the most affected groups have access to immediate food needs.

Objectives

- To deliver food parcels, medicines and hygiene items (face masks, hand sanitiser, personal protective equipment) to vulnerable groups and communities in Yangon, Taunggyi and in IDP camps in Kachin State, Kayah State, Shan State and Chin State.
- To support the local church, especially in areas of conflict or heavily impacted by COVID-19.
- To support the regeneration of livelihoods affected by the crisis.
- To maintain links with students in all MJR schools using online teaching where possible and sustain educational programs to ensure that the projects are able weather the crisis and reopen as soon as it is deemed safe to do so.



Nurses & sisters providing assistance to COVID-19 patients



Food deliveries for vulnerable communities

Activities

- **Livelihood Programs in Yangon Slums:** This is an attempt both at community building and building sustainable activities for the families. At present about 200 families in seven slum communities have received a loan – average of \$100 per loan. Especially vulnerable families are selected first, such as single parents. This helps them start a small business, such as collecting garbage, selling vegetables, sewing etc.
- **Humanitarian Relief for Internally Displaced People:** With attacks on a huge scale in minority areas such as in Mindat in the Chin Hills and Kayah State, thousands have fled homes and have taken refuge in forests and in Church compounds. Through contacts in these areas, food and medicines are distributed to the displaced populations.
- **Emergency Education Programs:** Myanmar's young people have lost almost two years of education and many suffer from isolation and trauma. Though government schools remain closed, the education programs of the Myanmar Jesuit Region have accompanied students, and encouraged them to continue their studies through online learning. Staff have trained in online teaching approaches and they are determined to accompany students through the crisis. The Jesuits plan to introduce emergency education programs in vulnerable communities for children whose studies have been interrupted.
- **COVID-19 Relief Activities:** The Myanmar Jesuits have received urgent requests from contacts in areas where COVID-19 is prevalent and death rates are rising, and endeavour to deliver medicines, oxygen supplies and personal protective equipment to these areas.



Food distribution



Assisting internally displaced persons (IDPs)

Expected Results

- Vulnerable groups in the programs in Kachin State, Shan State and Yangon will be supported through the crisis, and suffering will be relieved.
- Networks of mutual support will be developed among the populations and trust built with the local authorities.
- Links and partnerships with local NGOs will be strengthened.
- Students will be supported through online learning methods where possible and schools will re-open as soon as viable and safe.

Challenges

Distribution of relief items and food is getting more urgent, but the obstacles are increasing. Many towns are completely cut off from humanitarian assistance. Frequently, food and medicines are being destroyed and prevented from reaching displaced people.

Those involved in development and humanitarian activities are targeted and the risks to personnel are increasing. The Jesuits, with strong partnerships in vulnerable areas, have found ways to overcome challenges in cash liquidity and access to vulnerable communities, and their teams persist in their efforts and find ways to give relief.

Partnerships and collaboration

The Myanmar Jesuits work in close collaboration with KMSS (the local Caritas), the Bishops Conference of Myanmar (CBCM), local NGOs, local religious congregations and community-based organisations and volunteers.

As many international aid workers have left Myanmar, the local NGOs are doing impressive work and make resourceful partners on the ground. An important element in the Myanmar Jesuits' approach is to empower local religious congregations and communities in their many and varied initiatives.

Budget

The Myanmar Jesuits have set out a target to raise an emergency fund of USD360,000 through 2021 - 2022 which will be used to assist the most vulnerable people in the communities with whom they work.

The budget covers the food security program (50%), medical and PPE supplies (30%), IDP shelter (10%), livelihood program (3%) and administration and advocacy (2%). Pilgrims 100 is invited to contribute towards the overall need of this important project.

Potential for Pilgrims 100 members to visit

It is unlikely that Myanmar will be safe enough or open to visitors in the next year. However, as an alternative, the Myanmar Jesuits would welcome the opportunity to set up a Zoom meeting with some of the teams and beneficiaries for Pilgrims 100 members.

Testimonies from people who received assistance during 2021

No. 1

"I live with my wife and my son. I am a bricklayer, but now I am able to work only a few days on and off. Sometimes I worked as a cleaner at the factory but it is now closed. Without a regular income I had to get a loan from moneylenders with a high interest rate. It is very hard to pay rent and food. I am so happy with the food donation, which is enough rice for my family for 20 days. This saves us in this tough time, so I would like to give thanks."

No. 2

"My husband died a few years ago and I live with my three children. Five years ago, I had a car accident and I lost the use of my left hand so I can't work anymore. My children have to look after me now. Due to the pandemic, and the coup they cannot work, and we are having a hard time. I am so thankful to the donors for this kind help to us, especially in this difficult time. Now we don't need to worry about food for some days."

No. 3

"I live with my daughter, son-in-law, and three grandchildren. My daughter has a betel nut shop near home and she earns money for the household expenses. Her husband is a carpenter, but he had to stop working during this crisis. With only one income from my daughter's shop, and low sales during these days we can hardly buy food. The food distribution gives us great support, and I can finally feel calm."