

Mongolia

GEOGRAPHY

Mongolia is a landlocked country bordered on the north by Russia and on the east, south and west by China. It is almost the same size as Queensland. Rocky desert and grassy semi-arid steppe cover most of the land. Mongolia is home to the Gobi, the coldest and most northern of the world's deserts. Forests cover about seven percent of the land.

Mongolia has an extreme climate, with a wide range of temperatures. Droughts and unusually cold and snowy winters (-30° Celsius) have decimated livestock and destroyed the livelihoods of thousands of families. At the same time, due to its elevation and inland location, Mongolia averages 257 cloudless days each year and is known as the "Land of Blue Sky".



Map courtesy of The General Libraries,
The University of Texas at Austin

PEOPLE

A third of Mongolia's 2.7 million people live in the capital city of Ulaanbaatar while half of the population herd livestock in the countryside. It is a sparsely inhabited country. Mongols make up 95 percent of the population. Sunni Muslim Turkic Kazakhs are the largest ethnic minority (5%) and live in the western provinces.

Mongolian is the official language. Tibetan Buddhism is the traditional faith in Mongolia (50%), although Communist oppression restricted religious expression in the 1960s-1980s. Since the withdrawal of Russia in 1990, and the political and social reforms, there is renewed interest and freedom in spirituality and religious expression.

HISTORY

In the 13th century, under the leadership of Genghis Khan, the Mongols conquered a large Eurasian empire. However, after his death, the empire fragmented and eventually became a province of China known as Outer Mongolia.



Getting the best start in life; children at a World Vision-supported kindergarten in Mongolia.

In 1921, Mongolia won independence with the support and backing of Russia. In 1924, a communist regime was installed and Mongolia continued to operate with significant Soviet influence and assistance until 1990. With the political and economic reforms of the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, the withdrawal of Soviet troops, and the disintegration of the communist Soviet Union in 1991, Mongolia entered a new era.

Since then, a new democratic constitution has been adopted and economic reforms have seen the extensive privatisation of the formerly state-run economy. Mongolia has greatly expanded its political and financial ties with the US, Japan and the European Union, but continues to remain heavily dependent on its Russian and Chinese neighbours for economic and trade developments.

ECONOMY

In the decade of transition from a centrally-planned economy to free market economics and privatisation, the Mongolian economy struggled with increased inflation and unemployment. Severe winters and summer droughts in 2000-2002 resulted in massive loss of livestock and zero or negative economic growth. This also generated widespread opposition to privatisation and rapid economic reform.

Economic activity has traditionally been based on herding and agriculture and this sector continues to employ 42 percent of the labour force. The main areas of employment include wheat, barley, vegetables, goats, sheep, cattle and horses.

Mongolia also has extensive mineral deposits. Coal, copper, tin and gold account for a large part of industrial production.

Significant economic growth in 2004-5 has been largely due to high copper prices and new gold production. However, Mongolia's economy continues to be heavily dependent on Russia and China. For example, Mongolia purchases 80 percent of its petroleum products and a large amount of its electric power from Russia, leaving it vulnerable to sudden price increases.

Remittances from Mongolians living abroad are also a significant source of revenue for the country.

LIVING CONDITIONS

In the past decade Mongolia has made important progress in promoting the rights of children and women. The national parliament has passed a law on child protection, the eradication of polio has been virtually achieved and there have been no deaths from measles since 1994. At the same time, there is an ongoing need to build a protective environment against the abuse and exploitation of children.

The extremes of the Mongolian natural environment, especially the cold and snowstorms of winter, cause major hardships for rural families. The loss of livestock leads to food shortages and insufficient intake of nutritious food.

Consequently, children are at high risk of fatigue, malnutrition and general deterioration of health. These problems are increased by the lack of health services in remote regions.

EDUCATION

With the support of the Soviet Union, Mongolia has given priority to education, and most adults are able to read and write. However, since 1990, enrolment rates have dropped for both girls and boys at primary and secondary levels. Approximately 17 percent of children do not complete a basic education (years 1-8) and the majority of these children live in rural areas or are nomadic. Schools in remote areas struggle to function during winter because of the extreme cold, and a significant portion of the government's education budget needs to be spent on heating. Current emphases in Mongolian education include English as a second language, and improved computer and distance education.

Comparatively speaking...

CATEGORY	MONGOLIA	AUSTRALIA
Population	2.7 million	21.5 million
Urban population (as % of total)	62%	89.1%
GNI per capita (US\$ PPP)	\$3,619	\$38,692
Population with sustainable access to an improved water source	76%	100%
Population living on less than US\$1.25 (PPP) a day	2.2%	0%
Adult literacy rate	97.3%	99%
Life expectancy at birth	67.3 years	81.9 years
Under-five mortality rate (per 1,000 live births)	41	6

Source: United Nations Development Programme
Human Development Report 2010

WORLD VISION AUSTRALIA IN MONGOLIA

- assists children, their families and communities with needs such as nutrition, clean water, healthcare and education
- provides training and small loans to enable women and men to increase their food production
- assists with income-generating skills
- cares for street children and victims of domestic violence
- assists families affected by extreme weather conditions
- addresses environmental degradation through reforestation activities



Erkajan's (far right) whole family has benefited from his World Vision sponsorship.

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