

Myanmar

GEOGRAPHY

Myanmar is the largest country in mainland Southeast Asia. It shares borders with Thailand, Laos, China, India and Bangladesh, and has a coastline on the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal. The climate is tropical, with monsoonal rains making flooding and landslides common during the rainy season (June to September). Forests cover almost half the country, making forestry a major source of export earnings. However, excessive logging has resulted in deforestation in both rural and urban areas.

PEOPLE

More than a third of the population live in rural areas. Yangon (or Rangoon), with over 4.5 million people, is the capital and largest city. Myanmar possesses a great diversity of ethnic groups, comprising Burmans, Shans, Karens, Rakhines, Mons, Chins and Kachins. Buddhism remains the major religion, with Christianity and Islam also practised. Most people speak Burmese, with a small number of communities speaking indigenous languages.

HISTORY

Myanmar has experienced periods of difficulty since achieving independence in 1948. Following a military coup in 1962, General Ne Win embarked on the "Burmese Way to Socialism", lasting 26 years. During this time he



Map courtesy of The General Libraries
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World Vision helps to provide shelter and education to orphaned and vulnerable children in Myanmar's capital, Yangon.

nationalised key sectors of the economy, introduced a single party system and held tight restrictions on the press. In 1988, widespread civil and violent demonstrations resulted in his resignation. Subsequently, the State Law and Order Restoration Council was established, led by Senior General Than Shwe. The government was later reshuffled and renamed the State Peace and Development Council. Elections were held in 1990 when the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) won more than 85 percent of the vote. However, the military government refused to hand over power. NLD leader and Nobel Peace Prize recipient Aung San Suu Kyi was detained under house arrest and jailed for periods of time for the next 20 years. In November 2010, elections were held for the first time since 1990 and San Suu Kyi was released. Most of the international community, however, dismissed the legality of the elections, with the state-backed Union and Solidarity Party remaining firmly in power.

ECONOMY

In 1962, when Ne Win took control, Myanmar was one of Asia's most prosperous countries. However, strict state control and decreasing export prices forced the economy into disarray. Since 1988, the military government has been unable to improve the country's financial management, resulting in immense economic instability. Falling export prices continue to put pressure on the country's commodity exports: wood products, rice, pulses and fish. The drop in world prices has been accompanied by shrinking markets and a smaller volume of sales. Myanmar is endowed with exceptionally fertile land, and has a wealth of mineral resources, including gas and oil. Despite such potential, most citizens are living in poverty. The economy is heavily dependent on the agricultural sector, which generates 60 percent of the country's GDP and provides employment for 70 percent of the workforce.

LIVING CONDITIONS

For most people living in Myanmar, life is a struggle. As the country's economic situation continues to deteriorate, "breadwinners" of the family are increasingly unable to support their family and their children must enter the workforce. Trafficking people for labour and sexual exploitation occurs internally and from Myanmar to neighbouring countries such as Thailand, China, Malaysia and Pakistan. Most trafficking from Myanmar begins as migration. People are forced to leave their homes because they cannot earn a steady income due to insufficient jobs, or salaries which are too low. Traffickers prey on migrants, promising them regular, paid employment and assistance to cross borders. Upon arrival at their destination, migrants find themselves manipulated and trapped into exploitative situations, such as prostitution or unpaid work. The government is taking action against traffickers. Poverty is rife and access to basic services such as healthcare and adequate sanitation is extremely limited for most of the population. This causes major complications for the large



Boats enable students to transport themselves to and from school as part of World Vision's Cyclone Nargis Recovery Program.

Comparatively speaking...

CATEGORY	MYANMAR	AUSTRALIA
Population	50.5 million	21.5 million
Urban population	33.7%	89.1 %
GNI per capita (US\$ PPP)	\$1,596	\$38,692
Population with an improved water source	71%	100%
Adult literacy rate	91.9%	99%
Under-5 mortality rate (deaths per 1,000 live births)	98	6
Life expectancy at birth	62.7 years	81.9 years

Source: Human Development Report 2010
United Nations Development Programme

rural population and people living in border areas, where there is a high prevalence of malaria. HIV and AIDS is becoming a serious problem nationwide. The government, the United Nations, and international and local NGOs are working cooperatively to combat the spread of the disease.

In 2008, Cyclone Nargis caused widespread destruction and devastation in the capital Yangon and the Ayeyarwaddy Delta region. The cyclone left 138,000 people dead or missing and the homes and livelihoods of some 2.4 million people were severely affected.

EDUCATION

As a result of widespread poverty, only a small percentage of children continue their formal education after primary school. Many schools are under-resourced, lacking essential equipment such as desks and chairs. During the devastating Cyclone Nargis, more than 4,000 schools were either damaged or completely destroyed, further limiting access to education for many children.

WORLD VISION AUSTRALIA IN MYANMAR

- assists children, their families and communities with better access to healthcare, education, food production, income-generating activities and other basic needs;
- assists street children and other children at risk, providing them with medical services and encouraging social activities in major urban areas;
- provides training in innovative agricultural methods to introduce new crops, increase yields and help farmers grow crops in inhospitable terrains;
- supports recovery and rehabilitation activities in communities affected by Cyclone Nargis;
- helps community-based organisations provide their citizens with opportunities for active involvement in their economic and social development.

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