

## **Burma**

We have all seen Myanmar in the news a lot over the past few weeks, so maybe it would be good to share a bit about what is happening inside the country. Burma won its independence from the British Empire in 1948 after having been a bloody battlefield during World War II. In fact, during this recent visit, I had the opportunity to stop briefly at the cemetery where many American, British, Indian, and other Allied forces lie interred. In 1962, a coupe led by General Ne Win took over the country and set up a socialist military government termed a junta. From that time onward, the people of the country lived under severe hardship and repression. Eventually, the masses took to the streets to protest the abusiveness of the government in 1988. The result was a bloodbath in which at least three thousand lost their lives. In an attempt to separate from the historic roots of the country, the nation was renamed Myanmar, the capital renamed Yangon, and the ruling party took the name State Peace and Development Council. The pro-democratic opposition forces leader Aung San Suu Kyi was detained by the government in 1989 and has remained under house arrest until now except for a period from 1995 to 2000 and again from 2002 until 2003. When the United Nations sent Peruvian diplomat Alvara de Soto to Burma in attempt to break the deadlock between the junta and the democratic forces, the foreign minister responded that the incentives offered by the UN and the World Bank were like “offering a banana to a monkey and asking it to dance.” The pro-democratic party was actually elected into power by a landslide vote in 1990 but the representatives were never allowed to take office. In 1991 Ms. Suu Kyi was named the Nobel Peace Laureate.

In 2005, the administrative capital was relocated--reportedly under the direction of a message from a soothsayer to one of the generals--some 250 miles north to Nay Pyi Taw where the junta officials live in luxury under fortress-like security. While the populace lives in poverty, the military regime is supported by foreign investments, the nation's oil reserves, and an estimated \$60 million income from the sell of gems (known as “blood rubies” by those who are promoting an international boycott on the trade) which are mined in the country. While only one percent of the nation's budget goes into education, forty percent is designated for the 450,000-member-strong military, which is the largest army in Southeast Asia and which reportedly forcibly recruits boys as young as ten years old to serve. While many nations--significantly spearheaded by the US with special interest being shown by First Lady Laura Bush--are currently sanctioning Myanmar's brutal government, some countries, notably China and India and to a lesser degree Singapore, are still active trade partners with the country. Myanmar has recently purchased \$1.4 billion in arms from neighboring China.

Recently, government restrictions placed on Burmese believers have been increasing. Many house churches are being closed down by the authorities. There have been many restrictions levied against Christian meetings. On previous visits, we were not granted permits to hold the conferences until the last minute, effectively prohibiting us from properly announcing the meetings and essentially blocking those we were inviting from being able to make plans to attend. The Bible school and church we work with there have been told to limit the amount of singing and number of meetings else they will be cited for disturbing the peace. As repression of the ethnic minorities (some of whom are largely Christian) has escalated, more and more Burmese are looking for ways out of the country. The United States, for example, saw an eight-hundred-percent increase in the number of refugees last year (from 1,612 in 2006 to 13,896 this year) with five thousand arriving in the month of September alone.

The recent unrest in the country was a result of the government's suppression of peaceful protests initiated by Buddhist monks when the government imposed a dramatic hike in fuel prices which seriously jeopardized the budgets of the common citizen. When the protest marches grew to over one hundred thousand strong within just a few days, the government responded with riot control and live fire. Though the government reported only ten deaths and 2,100 taken into custody, the civilian estimate that there were two hundred casualties and six thousand arrests could be more likely accurate. Arms were reportedly uncovered when the Buddhist monasteries were searched, precipitating in even more sanctions against the monks and the general population. Curfews were imposed, journalists were banned, and almost all contact with the outside world was cut off.

In spite of all that was going on in the country, we felt led to go ahead with our plans to hold a pastors' conference in Myanmar even during this time of upheaval and unrest. This was my fourth visit to Myanmar, so I was no stranger to the feeling of life in a totally regulated society; I had experienced seeing people arrested and hauled off to the police station for such minor offenses as jaywalking; I had been told that I couldn't be seen in public with certain leaders else they would come under scrutiny because of their association with Westerners; and I had been made to walk several blocks to snap a photo because the driver was afraid to stop his car too near certain government buildings. This time, there were numerous telltale signs indicating the tenseness of the present condition: the television in the hotel room had all the news channels blocked out; the only newspaper available was The New Light of Myanmar, a very pro-regime publication which carried lengthy articles trying to discredit the protests and their connection to the pro-democratic movement of 1988; we were not permitted to hold the seminar in the church, but were forced to move it to a public location such as a downtown hotel; we had to limit the number of pastors who were permitted to attend the seminar; we were not allowed to use microphones or tape record the teachings; and the pastor in charge of the meetings closed the curtains halfway through our seminar commenting that there were people watching us from outside. The most obvious indication of the situation was the absence of monks in the city and even in the Buddhist temple. I saw only very few monks and a handful of Buddhist nuns where I was accustomed to seeing them almost everywhere in the city. We could only wonder if they were under arrest, in hiding, locked in the monasteries, escaped from the country, or defrocked. One really powerful discovery I made while in Burma was that the monk who had spearheaded the recent protests had escaped to Thailand dressed in civilian clothes and wearing a crucifix as a disguise. I was amazed that even though he had no comprehension of what he was doing, he was affirming the saving power of the cross!

The first thing on the agenda in Yangon was the Sunday service at the church pastored by one of the graduates from the Bible college where I used to teach in Indiana. The Lord moved powerfully in the service with many receiving ministry and one first-time salvation. The next couple days were dedicated to teaching in the conference with forty-four pastors and leaders from nineteen different churches (seven independent churches, one fundamental church, six Baptist churches, three Assembly of God churches, and one Pentecostal church) and three para-church ministries. The attendees were greatly encouraged that we came to them even in these troubled times. They all were renewed in their calling to bring the gospel to this Buddhist land where only four percent of the population acknowledge Jesus as Lord.

## Nepal

My next stop was Nepal, where I was honored to be able to take part in the Golden Jubilee Celebration commemorating fifty years of Christian presence in the country. We honored those who planted the first seeds of the gospel in this Hindu land and who nurtured the church through its many years of underground ministry and into recent days of harvest. In the 1950s there were no Christians in Nepal. By the 1960s there were a handful of Christians, but in the 70s and 80s, there was explosive growth. At the present moment, the number of Christians in Nepal is unknown, but is likely approaching one million. Nestled in the mountains between China and India, this small Himalayan kingdom is a bright spot where the church is growing faster than in any other nation. The Nepali Christians have faced all kinds of abuse and isolation through the years. Many paid the ultimate price for their faith. The old saying, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church," is true for Nepal. Yet great fruit has come from their sacrifice. It was truly mind-boggling to see the crowds gathered for the Jubilee Celebration. The event was held in the new building of Gyaneswor Church in Kathmandu, which was founded by Pastor Robert Karthak fifty years ago and is still under his active leadership. The new two-story church building, which was opened just in time for the celebration, was built totally with local funds. Although a few international ministries such as TAN did voluntarily contribute to the project, the church made a decision to raise all the funds themselves without asking for any outside assistance. According to the official estimate by the church elders, the building seats fifteen hundred in the lower level and twenty-five hundred in the upper level. From my personal observation, I'm sure that we had several hundred more than that estimate crammed into the facility for the celebration. In addition to the awesome celebration service, the congregation also provided a free meal to everyone who attended--an incredible feat in itself!

Before heading to eastern Nepal to lead a pastors' conference for the leaders in this region which I had not visited before, I ministered in a couple churches in Kathmandu. In the east, I was thrilled to meet more than one hundred and sixty of the young men and ladies who have answered the call to evangelize and pastor their region. The lessons from the life of King David spoke directly into their situations. My last stop before reporting to the airport as I headed home, was in the Bible college to teach the students.

## The Philippines

At the same time that I was in Burma and Nepal, Peggy was also on the same continent, but thousands of miles away. When she was initially invited to minister in the Philippines, she sadly declined the request due to the conflict with the Myanmar-Nepal mission; however, as time progressed she began to feel more and more that going to the Philippines was the Lord's direction for her for this year. One Saturday evening, we came to the conclusion that it would be better to go our separate ways this time so that she could accept the invitation. Remarkably, the next morning at church Peggy bumped into the lady who had extended the original offer. With seven thousand worshippers in the service, it was truly a needle-in-the-hay-stack experience to find someone in the service. The lady was especially elated when Peggy shared her decision, commenting that she had just prayed that she would get a chance to see Peggy to check with her if it might be possible that she had changed her mind. On this first visit to the Philippines, Peggy found the people warm and receptive as she shared the Word of God in two different leadership conferences. The lives of these pastors and leaders will forever be impacted by her teachings on the heart of a true minister. The reports that have come in after the conferences is that the meetings brought

**new life to the regions. Where there had been some mistrust and disharmony among the pastors, now the beauty of brethren living and working together in harmony and unity has revitalized the churches.**