

## **Report 2012**

### **Myanmar/Burma: Change for the better?**

As Western governments, media, and business representatives praise Myanmar's opening and the move towards democracy the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya people in the west continues and the grim war with the Kachin in the north escalated with the use of helicopter gunships and fighter jets. While I do not want to spoil the hope for Burma's bright future I want to add a dose of skepticism into the uniformly positive outlook of the Burmese path to democracy.

During 2012 Myanmar changed dramatically. World leaders, including President Obama, celebrities, and business men stood in line to shake hands with President Thein Sein and Nobel Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi. Journalists, business representatives, and tourists flocked into Myanmar as sanctions were suspended or abolished and a visit to the former dictatorship is considered morally safe. They all paint a uniformly positive picture of progress and freedom. In the urban areas prices for land and accommodation skyrocket, mobile phones prices decrease, internet access is unrestricted and more affordable, and the domestic press is more open and audacious. Simultaneously, civil society groups emerge and public protests against corporate and governmental exploitation grow.

But appearances can be deceptive; the government is interested in preserving its power and wants to exploit the country's abundant natural resources with the help of the international business community. Most of the repressive laws and regulations are still in place and have not been annulled or repealed. The government still uses draconian force to break up dissenting protests as at the Letpadaung copper mine (JV between China and the Burmese Army) in December where the riot police cleared a peaceful protest and injured nearly 100 Buddhist monks using tear gas, water cannons, and incendiary devices.

The international community and the media solely report about the positive steps on the path to democracy and the negatives are overlooked or withheld. The abuses and human rights violations continue and go mostly unnoticed as tourists and journalists tour at most 20% of the vast country. And about 1/3 of the total country is off-limits for foreigners anyway, some parts are totally sealed off and many areas are solely accessible with a travel permit of the Ministry of Defense.

In Rakhine State the Buddhist majority started a systematic persecution of the Muslim Rohingyas in 2012. The Rohingyas have been denied citizen rights for long and they are despised by most of the Burmese. The racist riots have been verbally defended by the Rakhine Buddhists, "pro-democracy" activists, the Burmese President, and even by Buddhist monks across the country.

Since June 2011 the Burmese army fights the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) ending a ceasefire which held since 1994. The Kachin want to gain autonomy in a federal union while the government insists on the current centralized structure. Of all days, the Burmese army started to attack the area around the KIA headquarter with helicopter gunships and fighter jets on Christmas evening; the majority of the Kachins are Christians in Buddhist dominated Myanmar. The continuing fighting has displaced about 100,000 civilians, mostly women and children. They have taken refuge in camps in the mountainous region in Northern Myanmar, close to the border with China. Most of the refugees

stay in the KIA-controlled area without support by the UN or international NGOs as the Burmese government does not permit access.

In January 2012, we had asked Aung San Suu Kyi for a message of compassion and sympathy for the displaced Kachins. She gave us video message for the suffering refugees. To our disappointment, the message was very general and rather weak. After discussing with persons close to Aung San Suu Kyi we could not help thinking that she has an informal understanding with the government to stay away from ethnic issues. Unfortunately, she has never spoken up against the abuses and atrocities in Kachin State or Rakine State although she has the power to stop the fighting.

## **Our Activities in 2012**

### **1. Refugee crisis in Kachin State**

In June 2011 the Myanmar army attacked the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) breaking a 17 year-old ceasefire agreement. The Myanmar army burned down villages, destroyed the harvest, and drove the villagers away. The number of refugees - mostly women and children – is estimated to have grown to about 100,000. The displaced persons found refuge in church compounds, in refugee camps in the mountains and jungles of Kachin State, and across the border in China. Food and water are scarce and the refugees rely mostly on the support by local NGOs and the Christian churches. The international NGOs and the UN are still not allowed by the government to provide aid to the camps in the KIO controlled areas. On Christmas eve fighting escalated as the Burmese Army employed for the first time helicopter gunships and fighter jets against the predominantly Christian Kachin. In view of an international donor conference in Yangon the Myanmar President declared a unilateral ceasefire on January 18, 2013. However, the ceasefire was broken immediately and the attack by the Burmese army continued as it did with earlier presidential orders to stop the fighting.

People In Need (PIN) continues to help displaced Kachin civilians who fled the war. Jointly with Danmission, a Danish NGO, PIN financed refugee shelters, and supported educational, health, and trauma-healing activities. The refugee camps are there to stay; a return of the victims of the civil war to their home villages is highly unlikely as both parties use landmines and have laid mines in the villages and the fields.



Refugees in a Church compound in Waimaw



Refugee Camp in Bhamo

## 2. Earthquake damages the boarding house for girls in Mandalay

A strong earthquake measuring 6.8 on the Richter scale struck Myanmar's Mandalay region in November 2012. The epicenter lay about 130 kilometers north of Mandalay, the second biggest city in Myanmar. The earthquake killed several people and injured about a 100 others.

In Mandalay, the earthquake damaged the boarding house for high-school girls of the Good Shepherd Sisters. We had just extended the boarding house by a second floor in 2011. Here about 40 girls live under the supervision of the Good Shepherd Sisters and receive private tuition in addition to their high-school education. After the earthquake the walls showed cracks and the water tank was damaged. Structurally, it was not safe to let the girls stay on the second floor. PIN started the repair and restoration of the building already.

Background: The Burmese education system is under-developed and in the rural areas students have difficulties to find high-schools close to their home villages. As a consequence, many students are forced to attend high-schools in the bigger cities and stay away from home in boarding houses. Of course, girls are most vulnerable and it is hard to find a safe house for the three years of high-school study. In Mandalay the demand is exceptionally high. Here the Good Shepherd Sisters have operated a boarding house for girls since 2004. As the Sisters take an active role in education, supervise learning and homework, and organize tuition classes the success rate in the final exams is high and the waiting list for new boarders is long.



Mandalay: Boarding house for girls



Repairing earthquake damages

## 3. Nursery for poor children in Yangon still in high demand

Since 2006 PIN runs a nursery in Downtown Yangon for 70 children with the help of the Catholic Good Shepherd Sisters. Mostly, the children come from the poorest Yangon neighborhoods: Dala Township across the Yangon River and from Yangon Downtown. The children are between 3 and 6 years old and are taken care of by four trained and licensed nursery teachers and one cook and maid. The children are mostly from Buddhist and Hindu families, only a few children have a Christian or a Muslim background. Most of the parents work as unskilled workers in the Yangon General Hospital opposite of the nursery, some sell beetle nuts, others run small food stalls; they drop the children at the nursery in the morning and pick them up after work. All the parents earn less than \$2 a day and



we offer the nursery for free and we provide a free lunch and clothing for the children.



Yangon Nursery: Play and education,



having lunch,



brushing teeth,



and sleeping

In December 2012 we celebrated our annual Christmas Party for the nursery children, their brothers and sisters, and their parents. All nursery children received T-shirts, hats, snacks, and toys as Christmas gifts. The children presented songs, dances and a Christmas play. The parents were very proud and happy to see the performance of their children. The Christmas celebration ended with free food and drinks for everybody.

#### **4. The vocational training and leadership program for young women enters its seventh year**

For the 7<sup>th</sup> year PIN runs a vocational training program for 17 young women from all across Myanmar. The program is managed by the Good Shepherd Sisters in Yangon and lasts twelve months. The girls attend professional training courses of nurse aid and pharmacology, nursery teacher or dressmaking and sewing. All receive English and computer training lessons and participate in ethics education and leadership formation classes.

For the girls we rented a house in the secure compound of the Convent; here the girls are responsible for all aspects of their daily life, including shopping, cooking, laundry, and cleaning. During day-time

they attend professional training courses; in the evenings and on weekends the Sisters provide additional lessons on ethics, diseases, human trafficking, nutrition, and personality and leadership skills. During their free time and during holidays the girls participate in exposure and outreach programs to help the poor, sick and marginalized people in hospitals and townships around Yangon. After graduation from the one year program the girls return to their home villages and towns and engage in social work for NGOs or for the community's ministries.

In August 2011 we finished Batch #6 of the leadership program. After the graduation ceremony the girls returned to their home towns. In September 2012, 17 girls joined Batch #7 of the leadership program; the girls are from Kachin State in the North of Myanmar (3), from Sagaing Division (Central, 1), from Kayah State (East, 3), from Chin State (West, 2), from Mon State (South, 1), from the Irrawaddy Delta (Southwest, 6), and from Yangon Division (1).



Graduation ceremony Batch #6: August 2012



Sewing Course

## 5. The Buddhist Ye Lai Monastery in Yangon cares for HIV-patients

PIN constructed two buildings for HIV/AIDS-patients at the Buddhist Ye Lai Monastery in Yangon in 2009. Shortly after the opening of the new buildings Special Branch Intelligence and the Ministry of Health prohibited the monastery to continue its humanitarian activities because of alleged political activities; the resident HIV-patients were evicted. During 2011 the situation improved steadily. In 2012 on average 60 HIV-patients and relatives could stay at the monastery, receiving food and shelter; a government hospital and international NGOs provide the ARV-medicines.

Traditionally, the monks of the monastery collect alms in the neighborhood each morning. However, the collection is rarely enough to feed all monks and patients and PIN regularly donates food to the monastery.





Young monks with alms bowls



Junior monks at lunch



HIV-Patients at the monastery



Ye Lai Monastery Abbot with HIV-child

### **Vegetable garden at the monastery**

To improve the scarce food supply PIN filled up barren swamp land in the monastery compound for use as a garden in early 2012. The experiment was very successful and monks and patients were enthusiastic about the positive results. The new garden supplements the daily menu, gives some meaningful work for the HIV-patients, and contributes to their mental well-being. By the end of 2012 we filled up another piece of swamp land with garden soil to double the vegetable growing capacity.



The first garden plot after the monsoon rain



Preparing the second garden plot

## 6. Consulting, educational support, and other activities

As in previous years PIN continues to advice local organizations in formulating development plans, writing project proposals, approaching international donors and sourcing financings. Opportunistically, PIN arranges medical treatments and supports poor children with scholarships.



Primary-school girl with Meningocoele before surgery



PIN supports university and high-school students



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