

About Myanmar

Republic of the Union of Myanmar¹



¹ <http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/myanmar.htm>

Myanmar is in South East Asia, also known as Burma and has been called the Golden Land. With an area of 676,578 km² the country is almost twice the size of Germany or slightly smaller than the US state of Texas. Myanmar is bordered in north and north east by China, in the east by Laos and Thailand, in the south by the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal and in the west by Bangladesh and India.

With 5,881m (19,295 ft) Mount Hkakabo Razi in Kachin state on the border tri-point with China and India is the highest elevation in Myanmar and South East Asia's highest mountain. Main rivers are the Chindwin and the Irrawaddy (Ayeyarwady) river.

Myanmar has a population of 52 million people (2014 census). Largest city, former capital, and the economic centre of Myanmar is Yangon, the new capital since 2005 is Naypyidaw. Spoken languages are Burmese.

Taken all together, minorities comprise about 40% of the population of 52 million and most feel disadvantaged to some degree.

Background information

The BBC has excellent background and a [Myanmar Country Profile](#) on their website which goes into great detail about the history, politics and difficult times Myanmar has undergone while under the rule of an oppressive military junta from 1962 to 2011.

In summary, the generals who ran the country suppressed almost all dissent - symbolised by the house arrest of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi - and stood accused of gross human rights abuses, prompting international condemnation and sanctions. A gradual liberalisation process has been under way since 2010. The country is expected to see a major shift after the government changed hands early in 2016. But the dominance of the largest ethnic group, the Burman or Bamar people, over the country's many minorities has been fuelling a series of long-running rebellions, although a gradual peace process yielded a draft ceasefire deal in 2015.

Htin Kyaw was sworn in as president in March 2016, ushering in the first democratically elected government after decades of military rule. Rightfully, the job belonged to Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been the face of the pro-democracy movement and who endured decades of house arrest and harassment by military rulers without ever giving up on her non-violent campaign to unseat them.

But Suu Kyi was barred by the constitution from becoming president and she made it clear that whoever sits in that chair will be her proxy. She has said repeatedly she will run the government from behind the scenes. Htin Kyaw will be remembered by history as the first civilian president for Myanmar and the head of its first government to be elected in free and fair polls. But the military retains considerable amount of power in the government and parliament controlling over 25% of the seats. Regardless, Myanmar faces acute problems of poverty and child malnourishment, ramshackle education and healthcare systems and a chronic lack of modern infrastructure.

Facts for discerning travellers to be aware of as they tour the country. If you only spend a few days in Myanmar, travelling the cities by aeroplane or in a luxury coach shuttling among new high-rises and bars before retreating to your boutique hotel, you can almost believe that after decades of isolation, Myanmar is now on the road to prosperity. Spend more a few days however, travel with the people on the buses and ancient trains, stay in the non tourist areas and the cracks start showing: continuous and prolonged daily power cuts, ancient sewage systems, insufficient housing and inadequate, fragile and vulnerable shelters for an influx of migrants from the countryside and you will rarely find much of what is on the menu available.

The situation is worse in rural Myanmar, where we spent much of our time. Here the majority of the population lives not just in extreme poverty, but also mired in debt. Bad roads make it costly to get goods to market and impede investment. Around three-quarters of the country's children live in homes that lack electricity.

We saw first hand the poverty in rural areas: the barren stark bright orange soil, due to years of imposed mono culture - a lack of crop rotation - which has left the soil lifeless, exhausted and unable to sustain much growth.



According to a report by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the [United Nations](#) 2009, Myanmar lost 7,445,000 hectares (28,750 sq mi) of forest between 1990 and 2010. With forests covering as much as 70% of Burma at the time of independence, there is currently only a little above 40% forest cover left. ² Losing 0.3% of its forest cover annually, deforestation in Myanmar remains an important environmental issue. ³

Barked is stripped for kindling and we were shocked to find no birds, butterflies, insects,

ants, flies, lizards or any any form of life that traditionally lives in the leaf clutter under trees in this forested area near Kalaw.

The only crops which flourished are artificially irrigated with long plastic pipes and concentrated in tight squares amidst a sea of barren land.

Only here will you find butterflies.... Patches of bright and verdant green vegetables, life and hope.



² Myanmar Forest Information and Data. Mongabay.com. Retrieved 2 May 2014

³ Leimgruber, Peter; Daniel S. Kelly; Marc K. Steininger; Jake Brunner; Thomas Müller; Melissa Songer (September 2005). "Forest cover change patterns in Myanmar (Burma) 1990–2000". *Environmental Conservation* **34** (4): 356–364.



Research undertaken by The World Bank⁴ shows that poverty in Myanmar is unequally concentrated in rural areas, where poor people are rely on agricultural and casual employment for their livelihoods. A large number of households also live near the poverty line. They toil and scratch a desperate living wielding massive hoes under the intense sun, little by little breaking clods of hardened earth to grow food to eat and sell.

Mostly due to the mismanagement by the country's ruling generals, the country's road network and rice storage facilities have fallen into disrepair and such things as fertilizer and credit for farmers is almost non existent. The world's top rice producer before World War II, Burma has in the past four decades seen its rice exports drop from nearly 4 million tons per year to only about 600,000 tons in 2007. The country's exports are very small these days.



4 <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/myanmar/overview>



Thomas Fuller wrote in the New York Times, “In colonial times, Myanmar's Irawaddy Delta was so productive it fed large parts of the British Empire. Today it is a measure of the country's dysfunctional economy that Myanmar can no longer produce and distribute enough rice to feed its own people. Farmers have no effective means of borrowing money for seed and equipment, and the rice that is produced is not distributed to remote areas because of bad or non-existent roads. The contrast with Thailand, the world's leading rice exporter, is stark. 84% of people in rural Myanmar have no electricity connection, making it hard for children to study at night, access Internet and remote courses, there is no air conditioning or refrigeration in temperatures in excess of 40 degrees, they cannot use TVs, mobile phones, computers and other modern communication systems and it is unsafe walking on dark, unlit roads. Life is very hard.

Among ASEAN⁵ countries, Myanmar has the lowest life expectancy and the second-highest rate of infant and child mortality. Road density remains low at 219.8 kilometres per 1,000 square kilometres of land area. With the liberalisation of the telecommunications sector in 2013, mobile and internet penetration has increased significantly from less than 20% and 10% in 2014, to 60% and 25% respectively. But frequent power cuts hold such technology hostage.

⁵ The Association of South East Asian Nations, or ASEAN, was established on 8 August 1967 in Bangkok, Thailand, with the signing of the [ASEAN Declaration](#) (Bangkok Declaration) by the Founding Fathers of ASEAN, namely Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. Brunei Darussalam then joined on 7 January 1984, Viet Nam on 28 July 1995, Lao PDR and Myanmar on 23 July 1997, and Cambodia on 30 April 1999, making up what is today the ten Member States of ASEAN

UNICEF research shows⁶ Myanmar also suffers from structural poverty. 32 % of the population lives below the poverty line and the Gross National Product (GIP) per inhabitant is only \$1,246. This prevents children from enjoying their most fundamental rights, with children from rural areas the hardest hit.

Lack of equipment and competent personnel has a considerable effect on the health of children, particularly those from poor families. In effect, around 70% of Myanmar's children die before the age of 5. 25% of the population are under the age of 14.



Other alarming health indicators include such things as dietary deficiencies (often present from birth) and AIDS which is often passed from mother to infant. 65 % of births are not officially reported in Myanmar, consequently, many children do not officially exist in the eyes of society.

Education is free and obligatory in principle up to the age of 10—which is well short of the international average. But it is estimated that 20% of Myanmar's children have no schooling as the government provides no real funds for education and parents are not always able to finance their children's studies.

The children of Myanmar are regularly the victims of violence: physical, sexual, psychological, etc. Children from poor families are the principal victims of child labour. In effect, many of them are obliged to find work in order to support the needs of their families. Often, they are forced to work in mines, on construction sites, or as domestic help. These forms of work are dangerous for their [health](#) and has a negative effect on both their physical and psychological development.

Economic difficulties and armed conflict have caused more than 500,000 people to flee their homes. The situation is alarming as more than a third of those are children. Witnesses to atrocities and sometimes victims of violence themselves, these children lead intensely stressful daily lives. Deprived of shelter, of access to an education and the most basic social services, they are in dire need of protection.



6 <http://www.humanium.org/en/asia-pacific/myanmar/>

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The minimum age for enrolment in the army is 18; nevertheless, children as young as 14 are often kidnapped and forced to fight against ethnic rebels. These children pass their days in training camps where conditions are very bad and include violence, filth, lack of food. Some desert the camps but they do so at their own peril.



So there is far more to Myanmar than meets the ordinary tourists' eye. If get out into the rural areas you will see life as it really is for the majority of the population.



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